Players from local farm teams hold reunion in Crowley

Dickie Barras, who played on teams in Crowley, New Iberia and Lake Charles in the 1950s, gets ready to hit a ball during the Old Timers' game at Miller Stadium in Crowley. Above, the stadium is shown in the 1950s.

They came from around the United States to southwest Louisiana. Young baseball players from places like New York and Chicago, Albuquerque and Atlanta migrated south to play for the Lafayette Bulls and the Crowley Millers, the New Iberia Pelicans and the Houma Indians.

Those teams and others were all part of the 17-city Evangeline League, just one of a large network of minor leagues that, in the middle part of the 20th century, gave young men the opportunity to play professional baseball and possibly work their way up to the majors.

In those days, there were many more farm teams than today in leagues ranked from D at the lower end to AAA at the top, cultivating talent for only about 16 teams of the National League and the American League. Louisiana also had other leagues, the Gulf Coast League and the Southern League. Like many of the minor leagues, the Evangeline League folded in the mid-1950s — 1957, to be exact. But the players still have fond memories of those times.

Together again

Many of them again migrated south July 24 for a reunion in Crowley that lasted through the weekend. This was the third reunion held there, partly through the efforts of Richard Pizzolatto, known to all as "Coach Piz," a retired Crowley high school coach who now works for the Crowley Parks and Recreation Department, and former ball players like Tony Mele and Mike Scivoletti both of New York.

But the effort to bring the former ball players together again began in Thibodaux with Paul Leslie, a professor of American history at Nicholls State University, where the reunions were first held, beginning in the 1980s.
Baseball

Leslie’s interest in the league began as a research project together with his friend, Charlie Saharrin, and culminated in an exhibit of Evangeline League memorabilia that is on display at Nicholls through mid-August.

Popular form of entertainment

“Around 15 million people attended the Evangeline League games during its lifetime,” Leslie said, referring to the time span from the 1930s to the mid-'50s. “In the 1950s, Lafayette had some of the best coverage of the game. Up until 1939, The Advertiser had a column every day on what was going on in the League.”

Before television, live minor league games were one of the few forms of family entertainment available.

“We only charged 25 cents to get in. The ball parks were downtown. They facilitated people walking to the parks. They didn’t have to drive out beyond the city limits,”

Pizzolatto, who was in middle school in the 1950s, said his interest in the Evangeline League stems from his memories as a member of the Knobhole Gang, a loosely-knit group of children who attended the games faithfully.

“Lafayette Bulls
Lafayette White Sox
Opelousas Indians
Alexandria Aces
Inverness Aces
Abbeville Athletics
New Iberia Pelicans
New Iberia Cardinals
Baton Rouge Red Sticks
Hammond Berries
Port Arthur Sea Hawks
Rayne Rice Birds
Houma Indians
Houma Buccaneers
Thibodaux Giants
Lake Charles Stevedores
Jeanerette Blues
Crowley Miller’s
Texas City Texans

The 1952 Crowley Miller's won that year's league championship.

A different ball game

In the days of the Evangeline League, more was expected of players, in some ways.

“You went out there as a pitcher and started the game and you were expected to finish the game,” said New Iberia resident Terry Fox, a Chicago native and 1954-'55 New Iberia Pelicans team member. In those days, there were no designated relief pitchers.

After Fox left the Pelicans, he went on to the major leagues, playing for the Milwaukee Braves and pitched Roger Maris’ 58th home run during that ballplayer's legendary winning streak. He also played for the Detroit Tigers and the Philadelphia Phillies.

Multi-million dollar paychecks were still decades away back then. The average major league player made about $5,000 a year.

A rookie in the Evangeline League started at about $175; a veteran player pulled down a salary of about $500 to $400 a month.

For more information on the Evangeline League, log on to www.nicholls.edu/baseball or visit the exhibit on display through mid-August at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux. (985) 446-4621.

Billy Barrett and Nita Jeffroy get married on home plate on Aug. 5, 1951, in Thibodaux’s Stark Field. Barrett played for the Thibodaux Giants.

The guy that owned Veron’s Meat Market, every time somebody hit a home run, he’d go through the crowd with a cowboy hat and pick up the money for the one that hit the home run.

I hit a home run one night, and he picked up $350 for me.