Torrid rivalries brought Evangeline reputation as the ‘hot pepper league’

The Evangeline Baseball League was organized in 1934 and fielded teams until 1957. During those years there were 34 franchises in 17 cities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. The season usually ran from mid-April through the Labor Day weekend.

It was always a lively league, especially in the early days when only one umpire (making the magnificent sum of $2.50 per game) was expected to call balls and strikes, monitor the bases, and keep tabs on the outfield.

As league historian Paul Leslie writes in an article in the journal of the Louisiana Historical Society, “The use of a single official produced serious problems: On close plays in the outfield, the distracted official lost sight of the base runners who often took shortcuts across the diamond to either third base or home plate.”

There were other reasons the league was called the Hot Pepper League. Leslie describes a not quite typical but illustrative incident in a 1946 game between the Alexandria Aces and Port Arthur Tarpons. The game was tied 14-14 in the bottom of the 11th inning when an Ace player tried to stretch a single into a double and was called out at second by umpire Carmen Conte.

“The Alexandria bench emptied in protest,” Leslie reports. Manager Harry Strohm and a number of his players charged out of the dugout and surrounded the official. “Everybody was yelling at the top of their voice,” Conte recalled.

When a couple of players bumped the ump, he asked, “Who’s the manager here?”

Strohm replied, “I don’t make no difference who is, you punk. We’re all managers.”

So Conte ejected the entire group from the game — six players and the manager.

That’s when trouble really started — because the ejections left Alexandria without the nine men needed to continue the game. Alexandria had to forfeit and Conte had to get a police escort to get out of town safely.

Or try this one: The date was July 4, 1937. The Lafayette White Sox beat the Abbeville Athletics 15-3 in a game played in Abbeville.

Leslie picks up the account: “Mayor Pro-Tem Nelson P. Holler... directed the crowd’s anger at the officials, who, he claimed, were directly responsible for Abbeville’s loss. Hearing the shouts and fearing for their personal safety, the officials abandoned their vehicle and sought the safety of the Sox team bus.

“Soon thereafter, Holler and his crowd arrived. Pushing Lafayette officials aside... Holler demanded that one of the men in blue leave the bus and fight him in a boxing match.”

Neither ump accepted the offer.

WHAT IS IT? “History Detective,” a new PBS series, is looking for Louisiana stories based upon that old something in your attic. The idea of the show is that historians and antiquities experts will try to answer questions about such things as family heirlooms whose history has been lost, historic homes and buildings with a rich past that may not be fully known, or artifacts that have recently found and nobody knows how old they are or what they are.

If you, a friend, or a neighbor have an artifact that you think fits this description, contact Jorge Aguirre at jorge@lentong.com. He might make you a star.

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THE DAILY ADVERTISER
LAFAYETTE, LA

Date: 7-13-05
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