

# The People's Game: Uncovering Diversity in Baseball, Pottawatomie County and Humboldt, Kansas, 1911-1924



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This is a study of baseball in the early twentieth century and the diversity within town teams in Kansas. Research reveals that several Kansas towns housed African-American and women's teams. This paper is based on fieldwork, journals, books, and historical newspapers and photographs.

Baseball was the first all-American game that captured the hearts of the American people. The game got an early start in America, with games being reported in the early nineteenth century. From then on, the game has not changed much, except for just a few rules and technicalities. Baseball has changed in one important aspect, however: diversity. In the early days, baseball was primarily played by white men and military veterans. However, as time went on, more people began to play and the game became more diverse than ever. Kansas was no exception to this trend, and in fact, was extremely diverse in small towns. Several towns like, Wamego, Onaga, Iola, and Humboldt were home to African-American and women's teams. These teams were wildly popular and often a focal point of attractions and fairs. Through a closer look at rural culture and teams from the early twentieth century, a pattern of diversity and inclusion permeated the most popular game of the time.

### **A Rural Pastime**

Baseball is often cited as America's pastime and the very idea of baseball drums up images of guys playing in big stadiums with thousands of fans cheering in the stands. However, this was not always the case for the sport of baseball. It may be thought that baseball was a product of city folk and life, but that is just not the case. As early as the 1850s, baseball was rampant through rural towns as David Vaught, an historian, notes, "From the very beginning, whenever that was, rural people embraced the game every bit as much as city people..."<sup>1</sup> It was a part of the rural culture that permeated through towns like those in Kansas. Baseball was a way for people to escape the hard work that came along with agriculture. The game was so popular

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<sup>1</sup>David Vaught, "Abner Doubleday, Marc Bloch, and the Cultural Significance of Baseball in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 85, no. 1 (2011): 3.

throughout the country that, “Every small town in rural America that considered itself a progressive, modern place had its own baseball team.”<sup>2</sup> The ties to baseball ran deep through rural culture and seemingly every town, even in Kansas, boasted a baseball team. This is because baseball reinforced the ethics and values that many rural farmers inherited from their work on the farm. Some of these qualities were competitiveness, hard work, and cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Baseball was a perfect fit for many towns throughout Kansas.

Baseball in Kansas is an interesting story full of diversity. Baseball was reported in Kansas as early as 1867 with the founding of the Pioneer Baseball Club by Civil War veterans.<sup>4</sup> The game quickly took off, spreading throughout the state. In Kansas, the game was not just played by white men as one may assume. The state was a patchwork of diversity through the game of baseball. Both women and African-Americans joined the frenzy of rural baseball. These teams of women and African-Americans were excellent teams, often showing athleticism that created support throughout towns and the state. So much so, that men would sometimes play on women’s teams and the racial lines of the early twentieth century were blurred to accommodate games between races. The dynamic between rural culture, race, and diversity create an interesting image of baseball in Kansas.

### **Barnstorming Across Kansas**

In the 1920s baseball was both professional and semi-professional for some players. Several players in both the white and negro leagues had full-time jobs outside of the baseball

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<sup>2</sup> Vaught, “Abner Doubleday,” 11.

<sup>3</sup> David Vaught, *The Farmer’s Game*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), 48.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Evans, “Baseball in Kansas, 1867-1940,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1940): 175.

season. But for the players who wanted to continue playing in the offseason and between the regular schedule, teams would travel around and play local teams. This was called barnstorming. Kansas's towns were lucky enough to host the Kansas City Monarchs, an African-American team, through their barnstorming schedule. The Monarchs barnstormed across the state playing teams from all over the state. For the most part, the Monarchs dominated the Kansas teams beating the Iola Oilers five to zero in June of 1923.<sup>5</sup> They also played the teams from Eureka and Marysville, Kansas.<sup>6</sup> The 1920s Kansas City Monarchs are pictured below in Figure I.



Figure I: Photograph of the Kansas City Monarchs, circa 1924. SOURCE: National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

Perhaps one of the most interesting barnstorming games the Monarchs played was on August 18, 1923 when the Manhattan Tridents faced the Monarchs at Sarber's Grove.<sup>7</sup> The Tridents were an all-white team consisting of local boys from around the Manhattan area. Sarber's Grove was located about three miles east of Manhattan, Kansas just on the Big Blue River. It was a popular spot for all things recreational and town-related as it hosted fairs, barbeques, and sporting events for the Manhattan area for several years. The Monarchs played an

<sup>5</sup> "Monarchs Beat Iola," *The Iola Register*, June 16, 1923.

<sup>6</sup> "A Big Athletic Day," *The Eureka Herald*, April 5, 1923.; "Local Happenings Paragraphed," *The Marysville Advocate*, August 16, 1923.

<sup>7</sup> "Monarchs Defeat Tridents," *The Manhattan Republic*, August 23, 1923.

exceptional game with stolen bases and diving catches. The Monarchs pitcher struck out ten batters and the Tridents only struck out three batters. However, the teams were evenly matched in hits, errors, and at bats.<sup>8</sup> The Monarchs won by sheer athletic ability and dominance over the Tridents because the game was filled with “numerous thrilling plays...and the Monarchs could not be denied.”<sup>9</sup> In the end, the Monarchs won three to one. The Monarchs continued to travel across Kansas playing exhibition games against local teams and displaying remarkable athleticism and sportsmanship. It goes to show that baseball could be for anyone who put in the effort. Out of all the states the Monarchs could have barnstormed in, they chose Kansas. It might have been because of location but it also could have been because of the amount of teams that Kansas’s towns boast. The athleticism and pride ran deep throughout Kansas and made it a hotspot for baseball teams in the early 1900s. Even in a time of extreme racial tensions the Monarchs were able to play across Kansas and win the admiration of many Kansans.

### **A Hometown Phenom**

Humboldt, Kansas has the unique distinction of being the home to two prominent baseball players. As of 1895, the city of Humboldt and Humboldt Township had a population of only 1,948 people.<sup>10</sup> So producing two quality athletes at the same time was quite the feat for the tiny town. The first successful player was Walter Johnson, who would later become a National Baseball Hall of Fame caliber player. The second and lesser-known of the two, was George Sweatt, who was born in Humboldt, Kansas in 1893.<sup>11</sup> He gained several nicknames from his

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Monarchs Win 3 to 1,” *Manhattan Nationalist*, August 23, 1923.

<sup>10</sup> Kansas State Census, 1895.

<sup>11</sup> “George Sweatt” *Kansas Sports Hall of Fame*. <http://www.kshof.org/inductees/2-kansas-sports-hall-of-fame/inductees/388-sweatt-george.html>

playing career such as “Sharky,” “The Teacher,” and George “Never” Sweatt. He began playing sports when he was in school, picking up football and track first, and finally baseball at Humboldt High School.<sup>12</sup> During the summer, Sweatt would play for the local amateur team, the Iola Go Devils as a right fielder.<sup>13</sup> After leaving the Normal School at Emporia, Sweatt enrolled at Pittsburg State University where he became the first African American to letter in three sports: football, basketball, and track.<sup>14</sup> His athleticism was widely noted and lauded often being called the “star” or in one case people, “turned out enmasse to honor the former Allen County boy.”<sup>15</sup> Sweatt furthered his career after college when he tried out for the Kansas City Monarchs. George Sweatt is pictured in Figure II below.



Figure II: Photograph of George Sweatt wearing a Kansas City Monarchs Jersey, circa 1923.  
SOURCE: Kansas Sports Hall of Fame

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *The George Sweatt Story: His Life From Childhood thru His Later Years as Written in His Own Words*, Personal Recollection, anonymous Humboldt resident, privately printed, circa 1990s, Humboldt Museum and Historical Society, 18.

<sup>14</sup> “George Sweatt” *Kansas Sports Hall of Fame*.

<sup>15</sup> “Former Allen County Player Draws Big Gate,” *The Iola Register*, September 22, 1930.

George Sweatt was a multi-dimensional player often noted as being an excellent power hitter and an overall athlete. He was good enough to be recruited by the Kansas City Monarchs in 1921 and played third base.<sup>16</sup> Sweatt was unique in that he had a job outside of baseball; he was a teacher. He alternated playing in the summer and teaching at Cleveland School during the school year.<sup>17</sup> This may have held back his baseball career because he could not play a whole season in the spring and fall. But he certainly amassed the adoration of his hometown and the people in Kansas. Eventually, Sweatt helped lead the Monarchs to win the 1924 Negro World Series.<sup>18</sup> He was also present at the 1923 game at Sarber's Grove. George Sweatt retired from baseball in the late 1930s and continued to play occasionally but spent most of his time coaching Little League.<sup>19</sup> While Sweatt was not the typical 1920s baseball player to come out of a tiny town like Humboldt, Kansas he made a lasting impact on the town as shown through several memorials there.

### **Women on the Field**

Organized women's baseball teams were common throughout Kansas. In fact, Kansas was one of the few states to have civic teams.<sup>20</sup> These were teams affiliated with a specific town, and they were found in small and large towns across the state. One hotspot for women's baseball was Pottawatomie County. Pottawatomie County was home to three important Bloomer Girl teams: Onaga Bloomer Girls, Wamego Bloomer Girls, and the Westmoreland Bloomerites.

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<sup>16</sup> *The George Sweatt Story*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> *The George Sweatt Story*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *The George Sweatt Story*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Debra A. Shattuck, *Bloomer Girls: Women Baseball Pioneers* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), pg.

These three teams played each other throughout 1911, often fundraising, headlining a fair, or competing for a championship.

The first known record of Bloomer Girls in 1911 was a game between the single ladies Bloomer Girls team and the married ladies of Wamego, Kansas on July 13<sup>th</sup>. The game was quite the spectacle, as an estimated five hundred people showed up.<sup>21</sup> The married ladies “were supposed to wear skirts...the rest were attired in bloomers.”<sup>22</sup> The Bloomer Girls were a tough team, playing with no reservations, their coach was cited yelling “Never mind if your hair comes down!” to rally her team; it worked because the single ladies won the game thirteen to twelve.<sup>23</sup> Even though women were the players of this game, it was still normal baseball with few exceptions. The only changes to the rules were a lessened distance between the pitcher and catcher and shorter distances between bases.<sup>24</sup> The bloomer girls were coached by their pitcher, Beulah Axtell. This game proved that women played just as well as the men and were capable of drawing and entertaining a large crowd.

Onaga, Kansas also was home to a travelling bloomer girl team. This team travelled around Pottawatomie County, Kansas playing the teams from Wamego and Westmoreland, Kansas. The Onaga Bloomer Girls are pictured below in Figure III.

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<sup>21</sup> “Women Play Ball,” *The Onaga Herald*, July 13, 1911.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*





Figure III: Photograph of the Onaga Bloomer Girls baseball team in 1911. Top row: (l to r) Winifred Floberg, Edna Selbach, Ada Ingalsbe, Dessa Smith, Clara Knipp, Ola Hobbs; bottom row (l to r) Jennie McCabe, Garnett Day, Norma Miller, Ethel Hobbs, and Hazel Mount.  
SOURCE: Kansas Memory.

The first and biggest game of Onaga's 1911 Season was during the third annual stock show and carnival there. The girls were the feature game for the third day, September 8<sup>th</sup>, playing the Wamego Bloomer Girls.<sup>25</sup> The stock show and carnival was a massive event spanning three days and drawing people from all over Pottawatomie County. The 1911 stock show is pictured below in figures IV and V.

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<sup>25</sup> "Third Annual Stock Show and Carnival," *The Onaga Herald*, August 17, 1911.



Figures IV and V: Photographs of the 1911 Onaga Stock Show and Carnival. Source Onaga Historical Society.

The *Onaga Herald* reported the game as a success: “On Friday morning occurred the most interesting game of the series, and the most successful one in point of attendance.”<sup>26</sup> While the attendance is never specified, this is quite the accomplishment for the women’s teams, considering there were two other days when men’s teams played. The Wamego girls won the game with a score of thirteen to ten. The Onaga girls were not the only prominent Bloomer Girls team in the county, as Wamego was a noted rival.

Wamego, Kansas was home to one of the most travelled and best bloomer girl teams in the county. This team was comprised of all single young women. The team roster was as follows: Ethel Machin, short stop; Lera Thompson, first base; Della Hearn, catcher; Lea Holladay, center field; Junia Hill, left field; Beuhlah Axtell, pitcher/coach; Gale Parsons; right field; Ella Plesse,

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<sup>26</sup> “Ball Games,” *The Onaga Herald*, September 14, 1911.

third base; and Ivy Williams, second base.<sup>27</sup> As of August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1911 the Wamego Bloomer Girls were the undisputed champions of Pottawatomie County, Kansas defeating other teams from Westmoreland, Onaga, and St. George.<sup>28</sup> However, their success was short-lived as just a few weeks later, the Bloomer Girls played Westmoreland at Wamego City Park and lost the championship on August 24<sup>th</sup>. The game itself was a success and admission was ten cents per person.<sup>29</sup> The Wamego Bloomer Girls garnered plenty of support from the citizens of Wamego, the *Wamego Reporter*, stated, "...Wamego would go broke backing them against all comers."<sup>30</sup> The women were just as popular, if not more popular than the boys' baseball team from Wamego. For their last game of the season at the Fall Festival against the Onaga Bloomer Girls the Wamego girls were the main game of the tournament. The *Wamego Reporter* exclaimed "this game alone will be worth coming miles to see."<sup>31</sup> This implies the other four games that were played by men were not as entertaining as the Bloomer Girls'. The Wamego team proves that women were just as competitive and popular baseball players as the men during the 1910s. They paved the way for women to join the sports realm in the future as seen in Figure VI below.

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<sup>27</sup> "Wamego Bloomer Girls," *Wamego Reporter*, August 10, 1911.

<sup>28</sup> "Wamego Bloomer Girls," *Wamego Reporter*; "Wamegans are surprised..." *Wamego Reporter*, August 3, 1911.

<sup>29</sup> "Base Ball," *Wamego Reporter*, August 17, 1911; "A newspaper has a good many..." *Wamego Reporter*, August 24, 1911.

<sup>30</sup> "Wamegans are surprised..." *Wamego Reporter*, August 3, 1911.

<sup>31</sup> "Base Ball Tournament," *Wamego Reporter*, September 14, 1911.



Figure VI: Photograph of Esther and Elvena Jensen from Mayetta, Kansas. 1921. Note the uniform was consistent with men's jerseys/uniforms of the time. SOURCE: A Standard Atlas of Jackson County, Kansas.

Baseball in Kansas was bursting with diversity through teams of African-Americans and women. Kansas was proud of these teams as they were often cited as being athletic and entertaining. Diversity was a prominent factor for baseball in Kansas as it included everyone who could play. Perhaps this was because of the low population of a town, but it was most likely due to the competitive nature of rural people. The best people were needed for a team to win no matter their race or gender. The layout of Kansas's baseball proved to be an interesting mix of women, men, and African-Americans that allowed for talent to trickle through the tough social divisions of the time. The diversity in Kansas was just the beginning of a larger trend towards diversity and inclusion in baseball and other sports, which reached its peak in the 1940s with the integration of professional baseball.

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