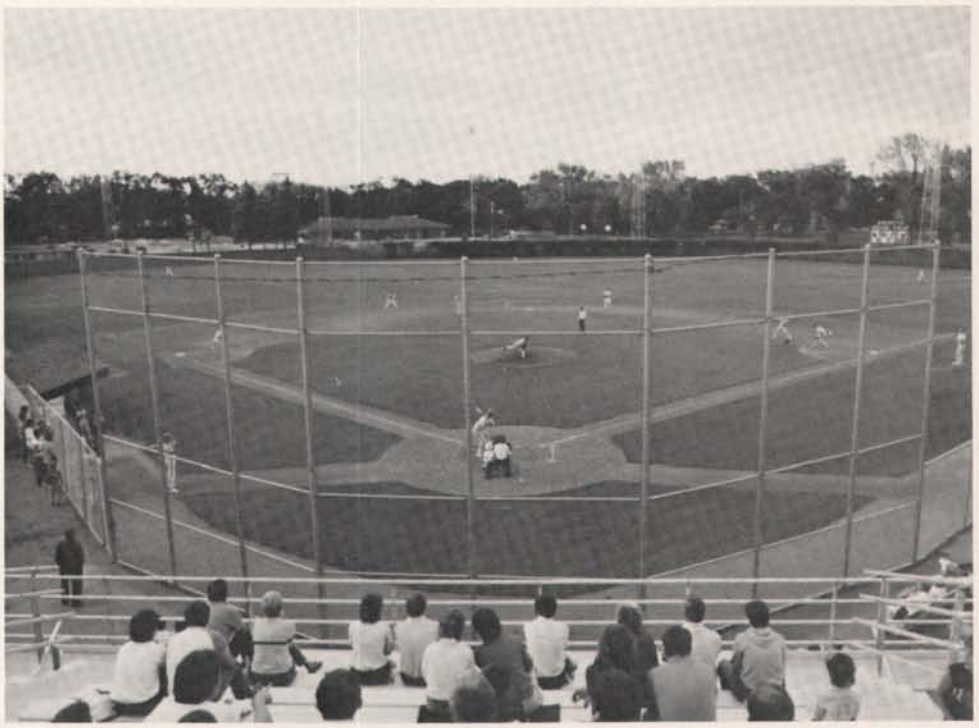
LEGION FIELD: Centerpiece of Town's 150-Year Baseball Tradition



More than 125 games are played on Legion Field during its seven month season.

The year was 1911. Model A automobiles had been rolling off Henry Ford's assembly line for three years. In another three years, a strong 19-year-old named George Herman Ruth would be signed by the then-minor-league Baltimore Orioles. And amateur baseball was played at Legion Field in the town of Marshall, MN.

Seventy-eight years pass and the year is 1989. Personal computers have have been produced by the Apple Corporation for 13 years. In 1989, a strong young man named Jim Abbott became a winning pitcher for the California Angels. And amateur baseball was still being played at Legion Field, winner of the 1989 Beam Clay Amateur Diamond of the Year Award in the Municipal Category.

Located 180 miles southwest of Minneapolis, Marshall has a population of approximately 12,000. Corn and soybean farming provides a living for many of its residents. Schwans Frozen Products, the city's largest single employer, provides jobs for 1,500 to 1,700 people. Southwest State University, located there, has a student body of 3,000.

But what binds the people of Marshall together, perhaps as much as the fact that many of its residents were raised there or in other small, nearby communities, is baseball. Marshall is a baseball town, and it has been for 150 years.

Legion Field was first established on the outskirts of Marshall in 1839. But as the town grew, its original outskirts became its center, which was far too important and valuable an area for a baseball diamond. So in 1911, the field was moved to the "new" outskirts of Marshall. Of course, the city continued to grow and the field was eventually absorbed back toward its center, where it remains.

On Sunday, July 23, 1939, Legion Field celebrated its centennial. The Marshall amateur baseball team squared off against the team from Granite Falls, an intense rivalry which had begun in the late 1800s.

Behind the strong pitching of Bud Nelson, Marshall entered the contest with a record of ten wins and three losses. In their previous meeting during the season, Marshall edged Granite Falls, 7-5. And on the day of Legion Field's centennial, Marshall won again, 1-0.

Lights were installed at Legion Field in 1948. Two thousand fans attended the first night game in Marshall, and baseball has been played there during warm, and occasionally chilly, nights ever since.

Chalking batter's box prior to game.

The mound is constructed of blue clay. Mats are buried underneath the mound and home plate to prevent players from creating deep holes.

Fifty years after Legion Field celebrated its centennial, it hosted the 1989 Minnesota Fall Classic Baseball Tournament, which is held every year at a different diamond in the state. For three weeks, beginning in mid-August and concluding in September on Labor Day, Minnesota's B- and C-class amateur baseball teams come to a designated field to compete for top honors.

Any person out of high school is eligible for B-class amateur baseball in Minnesota, including former and current college players. In the C-class, teams can have a maximum of four college players and no town with a population greater that 3,500 is allowed to compete in this category. However, smaller towns are allowed to enter or "play up to" the B-class. For many college baseball players in Minnesota, the B-class serves as a summer league.

Between Marshall's amateur teams, the Athletics and Giants, the VFW team, the high school varsity and junior varsity teams, and occasionally the Southwest University team, Legion Field hosts 110-125 baseball games each year. By removing a portion of the left-field wall, the field is extended for the ten football games it also hosts each year.

The field is jointly owned and operated by the city, the school district, and the Marshall Baseball Association. It has an annual operating budget of $15,000-$17,000. Funding for improvements, such as dugouts, scorebards, and the field's new horseshoe-shaped bleachers, is raised by the Baseball Association, which in turn donates these improvements to the city and school district.

Founded in the early 1970s, the Baseball Association is a group of individuals in the Marshall area who, according to their charter, have joined together "for the promotion of the great game of baseball." The group came into existence at roughly the same time Southwest State University opened in Marshall, and the timing is not necessarily coincidental. The university's baseball team helped renew the town's interest in the game.

"The Association ensures that our baseball facilities are in first-class condition," explained Harry Weilage, Marshall's Director of Parks, Recreation, and Community Education. "They are a local power structure. They came to the city and said, 'Look, this is our plan. We want to updgrade the field. Here's a list of what we want to do, and this is the money we have. We need a $40,000 no-interest loan from you to build a grandstand.' The Association will pay the loan off [two years of payment remain], and then turn the deed over to the city for a dollar."

The Fall Classic was scheduled to begin at the end of Legion Field's regular playing season. But after 78 seasons of steady use, even the most intensively maintained field can stand some polishing, and those charged with its care realized this.

"Getting the tournament took five years," Weilage revealed. "The bid process is much more complicated than submitting a few pieces of paper. The state board wants to know that you're a *baseball town*, and that you're committed to uphold the standards and tradition of the tournament. I think hosting the 1986 American Legion State Tournament helped. We wanted everything to be perfect."

When Weilage, Tom Polfliet, parks superintendent, and Jeff Mead, Legion Field manager, were notified in the summer of 1987 that the field had been selected to host the 1989 Fall Classic, they began to look for assistance to whip the already well-maintained field into pristine shape. Their search did not get beyond the city limits.

"They had kind of found out through the grapevine that I'm a specialist in soil fertility and turf, and I started consulting for the city's parks and recreation department," said Mark Altman, a 36-year-old soil consultant and analyst who lives in Marshall with his wife, Sandra, and their daughter. "I'm very low-key about what I do. They asked me if I'd be interested in helping to prepare the field, and I said I'd be more than glad to help."

"Mark was already involved as a consultant on our parks' surfaces—we have more than 120 acres of parks in Marshall," said Weilage. "Our problem was that we would play more than 100 ball games before the tournament was even scheduled to begin. We needed to come up with a comprehensive maintenance plan, taking everybody's viewpoint into account. Tom needed to say

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what his crew could do. Jeff needed to tell us what he needed. Mark served us very well in that capacity."

Born in Quebec, Canada, Altman was raised on a farm in Chalmers, IN. After graduating from Frontier High School, he studied agronomy at Purdue University and eventually returned to work with his father on his family's farm. They grew popcorn, a difficult and fragile crop, for the Orville Redenbacher Company.

His first exposure to Marshall was purely coincidental. During a business trip to the Marshall area, Altman met Sandra Peterson, a native of the town. They were married within a year, and they moved to the Altmans' farm in Chalmers.

For the next four years, they struggled to make the farm a success. After a few crop failures, the exhausting, daily battle of farm work began to wear on Altman. He decided that 13 years of farming was enough for him.

"It ceased to be fun, that's the best way I can describe it," he said. "I had always told my dad that I'd quit when it wasn't fun anymore."

Altman walked away from farming with more than memories of crop failures and lost dreams. Combined with his education at Purdue, his years on the farm had taught him about soil, its chemistry, and its importance in growing any crop. He had learned about soil science and analysis, and he wanted to make it his profession. In 1986, Sandra suggested that they try living in Marshall, and Altman agreed.

"My philosophy is that the turf or anything we have growing above the ground is only as good as the fertility and balance of the soil in which it is growing," said Altman.

He had heard of the Brookside Laboratories in New Knoxville, OH, which serves as an analytical service for independent soil consultants, specializing in everything from the growing of kiwi fruit to turf. After moving to Marshall, he applied to Brookside as an independent consultant. He was interviewed, and received additional training in soil science.

"A lot of older guys who've been consulting for years and years use Brookside for analytical work," said Altman. "Once in a while, they will see someone they think is sharp, suggest him, and then he'll be interviewed. But a lot of people don't get in. Your practical experience is as important as your educational background. They also provide ongoing training once you're accepted."

The lab is staffed by 45 technicians. They receive soil, tissue, and environmental samples from consultant "members" nationwide. Analytical fees are paid by each consultant. At the end of each fiscal year, after all of the operating expenses for the lab have been paid, the remaining profits are divided among the consultants.

Altman began consulting for parks, schools, municipalities, golf courses, and eventually for professional sports organizations. Among the venues on his current client list are the Denver Broncos training facilities and Mile High Stadium, Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego, CA, home of the Padres and Chargers, and the Broadmoor Hotel Golf Course in Colorado.

Marshall crew follows detailed schedule for care of bullpens.

"I don't sell any products like chemicals, fertilizers, and equipment," Altman stressed. "I'm simply an independent consultant. I make recommendations in these areas, but because I'm not a salesman, I think superintendents are more receptive to my suggestions."

Altman met with Weilage, Polfiliet, and Mead at the end of the summer of 1988, and began to run soil tests on Legion Field in the fall. Both the infield and outfield were tested. From there, a strategy was mapped out.

"We wanted the field to look good in August, not just in April. So our job was to implement a high-maintenance, high-wear program including good aeration and a good sound fertility approach, to give the grass the ability to withstand extra wear," said Altman. "We looked at the soil analysis and said these are dates we want the turf to look its best, and we went from there."

Altman uses the words "we" or "our" almost invariably in reference to his consulting work with superintendents. He believes that for their efforts to be successful, they need to work as a team. Yet he approaches each individual differently.

"If I'm working at a park or recreation area, I get into all areas of turf management, such as seed selection, equipment, and aeration schedules. But if I'm working at a professional venue, my work tends to be more geared toward soil analysis and recommendations," Altman revealed. "I am a firm believer in one-to-one contact. Each superintendent has his own problems, approaches, and level of expertise. The way Steve Wightman [Jack Murphy Stadium superintendent] operates is different from the way Ross Kurcab operates [Denver Broncos training facility superintendent]. Tom Lujan [Mile High Stadium field manager] faces a different set of problems because of the PAT system he has. So the way I operate with each of them is different."

Altman added, "The role of a consultant is not to 'know everything,' but to know where to go when problems arise. It's a two-way street. I learn as much from superintendents as they learn from me."

The fall soil analysis revealed that Legion Field was low on potassium and sulfur. The soil was amended with the deficient elements. Although the field was found to have a strong, healthy root system, the soil was compacted and required deep aeration. The field's equipment inventory did not include an aerator, so Altman arranged for a local distributor to demonstrate one on the field.

In the spring the soil was tested and aerated again. The infield was still low in potassium and the outfield was low on phosphate, which Altman said is not uncommon because the soil in these two areas is generally quite different. "Infields tend to be a media mix," he noted. "Outfields tend to be whatever was there before."

Altman explained further, "There is a balance between the microbial life within the soil and the chemical balance of the soil. We try to achieve this balance, to hit a happy medium, right down the middle. Each plant, in our case turfgrass, has a pH preference of 6.2 to 6.8. The most beneficial bacteria and earthworms are also found in the same pH range."

The infield and outfield areas were balanced with potassium and phosphate respectively, and then a light application of

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phosphate was used on the entire field for an early spring green-up. After that, phosphate was dropped from the feeding program, because of the high level of the element already present. The high-maintenance program included extra potassium, which tends to increase a plant's durability by thickening its cell wall, Altman added.

The fertilizer program for the remainder of the season included 30-percent slow-release nitrogen, six-percent in the form of IBDU, in a mix of 20-0-20, two percent iron, 1.4 percent manganese, and seven percent sulfur. Nitrogen was applied at a rate of 3/4 to one pound per 1,000 square feet per month. Potassium was used at a rate of one pound per 1,000 square feet per month.

"I normally sit with superintendents and discuss nitrogen rates in reference to high, medium, and low maintenance levels," said Altman. "But I normally don't 'write' nitrogen rates, because each superintendent already has nitrogen levels in mind for the field. However, we do sit down and discuss different nitrogen sources, such as sulfur-coated urea, IBDU, and natural organic sources."

Altman became involved with much of the hands-on work at Legion Field, which was originally 100-percent bluegrass. "We had to watch our nitrogen closely with this field, because of its age and the fact some of it was still old, common bluegrass," Altman revealed. "We had to watch out for leaf spots. When we did get a few, we cut back on nitrogen and water and they disappeared."

Because the field was on a high-wear program, overseeding figured heavily in the maintenance strategy. Delray ryegrass was used, as it had been in past seasons. "We knew we were going to have a lot of wear before August, so Tom had budgeted in overseeding," said Altman. "I suggested that we use a three-rye blend in the future, because you have less chance of losing it to winter kill or disease. My preference for athletic fields is 50-50, bluegrass-ryegrass—something wear-tolerant with good color."

A minimum of twice a year, Ferromac with manangese and zinc is applied to the field, and this practice meshes well with the program Altman prescribed. A fungicide, Daconil 2787, is also used on an "as needed" basis when problems arise. In the spring, Team was used to control crabgrass and was followed up by Acclaim in problem spots. In addition, Trimmec is sprayed to control broadleaf weeds, once or twice a year.

After the field's soil was balanced, maintenance procedures continued normally. These procedures were sound before Altman was contacted, so little was changed. A regular season of baseball still remained to be completed before the Fall Classic even began.

Using a Jacobsen triplex mower, both the infield and outfield are mowed three times per week. The outfield is cut to a height of 1¾ to two inches. The infield is cut at a 1¼- to 1½-inch height. To provide the field with a pattern, the mowing direction is alternated with each mowing. If on one day the field is mowed from foul pole to foul pole, the next mowing will be a straight line from home plate to center field, and so forth.

More than 2,000 Marshall residents fill the stands at Legion Field almost every weekend.

"If the clippings get too long we use our sweeper to pick them up," said Polfliet, who oversees the field's maintenance, as well as that of the city's parks. He was born in Marshall, and has worked for the parks and recreation department for 19 years.

Legion Field is irrigated using a nine-zone Toro Station controller. The infield is watered by Toro 600 heads and the outfield is watered by 640s. The field receives approximately 1½ inches of water each week. Normally, they would have applied approximately one inch of water per week, but the area experienced a drought and more was required.

Polfliet described the preparation of the field's skinned areas. "All the skinned areas are ag-lime, and we add to it every year in the places that need it," he said. "The areas around the bases are raked by hand. You just can't do a good enough job with a machine."

The mound is constructed of a blue clay. To prevent players from creating deep holes, Sure-Foot mats are buried underneath both the mound and home plate. "The blue clay is harder," said Polfliet. "It works really well for building mounds."

Mead, Legion Field's grounds manager, is the man who keeps an eye on things for Polfliet, who explained, "He knows pretty much what I want. "He's fussy, and strictly a hands-on guy."

As the tournament drew near, the field received what Altman called "window dressing." It was spoon-fed with Nutri-Culture, 28-8-18 with trace elements, at a rate of 25 pounds per 100,000 square feet. The fertilizer was used as a "kicker."

"It [Nutri-Culture] cleans and dresses whatever is out of balance," said Altman. "We used that and Ferromac with manganese and zinc to give the field its final kick of color."

He explained, "The manganese and zinc were added because of the high pH. The infield pH was 8.1 and the outfield was 7.7. At this high pH level, the trace elements become very important because they tend to get tied up by the calcium in the soil and become unavailable to the plant."

The Fall Classic was exactly that. Forty-eight teams, all Minnesota regional winners, came to take their cuts at glory, and many players commented on the high quality of Legion Field. Paid attendance for the tournament was more than 16,000.

When the final strike was called, the Miesville Mud Hens had slugged their way to the top of the 16-team, double-elimination B Division. The team from the town of Morris worked its way through 32-team, single-elimination competition to capture the C Division title.

Altman will continue consulting for his other clients as well as Legion Field, which will host the Fall Classic again in 1999. In his "spare moments," he also oversees the fields and grounds of Southwest State University. And in the spring, he will begin consulting on a diamond in Corvallis, OR, site of the 1990 American Legion World Series, to be held in August.

Naturally, he enjoys the big-league thrill of working on professional fields. But working on the diamond in his hometown, he said, was as satisfying as consulting with the pros.

"Sometimes I think I got more satisfaction out of working on Legion Field than I have working in big stadiums," said Altman. "To stand in the center of a 70,000-seat stadium and say 'I have at least a small part in this' is great, but there's also a lot of pride in doing the same thing in your own backyard and in bringing recognition to your community. I didn't win the Baseball Diamond of the Year Award. The community won it with their cooperation and pride in the field. It's been a team effort."

A team effort is exactly what one would expect from a baseball town with a legacy dating back to the beginnings of the game. And based on Marshall's history, chances are good that in another 150 years they'll still be swinging for the fences at Legion Field.