

Play Ball!
Peg Ross, Greene Town Historian

Baseball has a long history in Greene. According to Mildred Folsom in *Echoes of the Past* there was a "Sheridan Baseball Club" as early as 1862 and a diamond was laid out on Cowles' Flat where the High School is presently. Large crowds attended and the scores were often very high.

In 1875 there was the "Resolute Baseball Club" that played on Gardner's Flat. That was behind the Episcopal Church because Daniel Gardner, whose house was removed when the church was built, owned the land to the river. It was also called Gardner's Grove. Mrs. Folsom relates a very amusing tale, taken from a *Chenango American* article of October 19, 1894, of a dog, Rover, who was the team mascot. Rover wore a light blanket with the name "Resolute B.B.Club" and as the baseball diamond was near the river, Rover retrieved every ball that went in and returned it, too, devotedly.

These two teams were the forerunners of the Green Town Team.

In 1906, the school bought Gardner's Grove for an athletic field and then bought land adjacent to it, so by 1925 there were 8 acres. This area became known as the Ball Flats. Before this time, the team had had to rent places to play. There was a grandstand built in 1920 and in 1936 a covered grandstand was built by the WPA. Now the Greene Town Team had a real home.

I met with Cliff Thomas, Don Excell, Wes Tallett and Ron Williamson, four of the retired Town Team baseball players, for coffee one morning and I was filled in on past players, memorable games, and all the good times that were had. They spoke for everyone who has ever played town team baseball.

Don Excell brought the photo that accompanies this article with him. It's not very clear because it was in a beautiful beveled-glass frame that could not be photographed well. He thinks it was taken in the 1920s and it has the following names on the back: Charles Gillette, Kelly Gillette(the child), Ralph Gillette, Milo Beebe, Roland Burnap, Ira Nichols, William Excell, Leon "Sanky" Gibson, Glenn Spencer, Ray Ingraham. This is the earliest photo of a Greene town team that is known. In the 1930s there were so many strong left-handed batters (Harry Blakeslee, Bill Henninge, Charlie Gillette, Slim Barrows, Sanky Gibson among them) hitting the balls up to North Chenango Street, that they changed the layout of the field to what it is now.

Every Sunday morning the team would rake the field after William Excell, Don's father who never missed a game, had brought his mower down from the farm and mowed it. The games were a highlight of the weekend; it was grand entertainment in Greene and a big deal. At times there were 800 people attending the games. The team never charged admission but passed the hat. This paid for gas and a little reserve for equipment. In 1950, bats cost \$50 a dozen and Brisben had its own baseball bat factory from 1953 to 1962.

The team played in the Midstate League which was comprised of Endicott, Bainbridge, Sons of Italy, Cortland, Norwich, Greene, Walton, Milford, Cooperstown and Stamford. Don Wiley and Percy Whitmarsh loved to play in Stamford because it took them two days to get back! In Endicott, Wilbur Rice was beamed so badly that he was taken to the hospital but he wasn't hurt seriously. He had gone to the game in his brand new car and his younger brother happily got to drive it home. The team played other towns as well. Willet and Richford always had tough teams and two other teams should be mentioned that barnstormed and the Town Team played occasionally: the House of David and the Colored Giants.

The Israelite House of David, a religious community, was established in 1903 in Michigan. One of its tenets was that the members must neither shave nor cut their hair. They had talented barnstorming baseball teams who raised money for the colony. They traveled all over the U.S., Mexico and Canada. The team was always an attraction with their long hair and beards. The

Colored Giants was a generic name for many barnstorming teams in the Negro Leagues before baseball was integrated. I wonder if Leroy "Satchell" Paige ever pitched in Greene! The guys seemed to think that the Colored Giants the Town Team played came out of Binghamton.

Don Excell played from 1943 to 1953. He was a talented catcher who said he couldn't run. He never got caught stealing a base because he never tried. He didn't get married Sunday afternoon because he had a game. The wedding was in the evening and he and June went to Yankee Stadium to a game during their honeymoon. I have the feeling that Don brought lots of merriment with him to the games.

Cliff Thomas played first base from 1947 to 1970. He is described in a wonderful 1998 Chenango American article written by Frank Keetz as "the most popular player on the team. He was a 5'8" all-lefty sure-handed first baseman. He hit singles and doubles and had a huge glove that seemed as big as his body. If "Horsey" can reach it, he'll catch it." Cliff added that he saw his first rattlesnake on a field while playing in Starrucca, PA. I guess that is something you would remember.

Wes Tallett pitched for 25 years, from 1950 to 1975, and he also was the manager for five more years. Wes is described in the same Chenango American article about the town teams from 1954-1956, as someone who "loved to play baseball. He was a thin, wiry right-hander.....he had a good curve and decent control. Sportswriters would describe him as "crafty." In 1980 Wes said that "the generation gap caught up with me" and he retired.

Ron Williamson played from 1960 to 1983 and remembers what fun it was. All the family came to the games. He laughingly said that in the 1974 season, seven out of the nine starting players' wives were pregnant. He also remembers with a smile the donnybrooks with other teams. Ron was a catcher and he also managed the teams.

Their won-and-loss records and statistics were all in the books that Wes brought with him. They mentioned their best season was 1974 when they had 17 wins and one loss. Two games were mentioned that evoked all their feelings- the excitement, the camaraderie, the thrill of winning and the sadness of losing a friend.

The first was played in Richford. Richford imported guys from Cornell University and Ithaca College and the team was tough and fun to beat. Harry Pollard, who was going on a trip with his wife Inez, said he would come and pitch before they left. It was the last game of the season. Cliff was playing first base and Ron was catching. Harry had a wicked sinker and they won the game 3-2.

The second was with Norwich in the 1950s. Norwich was a great rival. Ralph Gross was pitching for Greene and Bob Crittenden was pitching for Norwich. (Bob later came to Greene to live and taught business courses at the High School for many years.) The game went 17 innings. Bill Cluff, who was home on leave from the military, was playing center field. A fly ball went out there and they had a man on third. Bill threw a strike home right on the money and got the guy out. Greene won 1-0. What a game! After returning to duty, Bill Cluff was killed in Korea during the war.

The athlete who went the farthest as a player was Jack Ceplo who played AA ball in Montreal with a Dodger farm team. They were all very proud of that.

This all ended in the early 1990s. There were few town teams left and after it got down to three teams, the Greene Town Team disbanded. Television and perhaps golf were the demise of Sunday-afternoon town team baseball. But many men of Greene had the chance to continue playing the national pastime after their teenage years and will always remember the thrill of the game.

**GREENE BASEBALL TEAM
ABOUT 1920**

**Left to Right: Harry Rogers, Clarence Teetsel, Russell Gray,
Walt Nossler, Ira Nichols, Ralph Gillette, Ray Sweetland,
Wheeler Corbin, George Lauter, Jess Johnson, Charles Lauter,
Lansing Gainsway
In Front: Sam Fancher, Leon Gibson**

