

# **Oak Ridge's professional baseball teams – The Oak Ridge Bombers**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 12, 2009)**

This story comes to us courtesy of Jack Bailey. He brought the research to me and has a baseball museum in his home. He knows things about baseball that would amaze anyone. He has certainly amassed an amazing collection of information on baseball in Oak Ridge. Jack shared that information as the basis for this series on professional baseball in Oak Ridge.

Did you know that Oak Ridge has, on at least two occasions had professional baseball teams that were located here? Did you know that Carl Yearwood Park was first known as Oakwood Park? Are you aware that bringing a professional class "D" baseball team to Oak Ridge was met with some resistance from the amateur "plant" leagues? I wonder about that, but I am sure it made sense to them at the time.

As early as February 12, 1948, The Oak Ridge Journal carried an article stating, "A professional minor league baseball team for Oak Ridge this season is a possibility if present negotiations between the owners of a franchise in Knoxville and the Roane-Anderson Concessions Department come to a successful agreement, City Manager L. E. Dolan said today."

The article went on to state, "Bob Broome, Bill Luttrell and Ed Friar of Knoxville own a franchise for a team in the proposed Mountain States League, and are very anxious to bring a winning ball team to Oak Ridge, they told a group of city and industrial leaders of Oak Ridge last Friday." On February 16, 1948, at a special town meeting, Oak Ridge citizens voted two to one to bring a professional baseball team to Oak Ridge.

These negotiations were ultimately successful and the Oak Ridge Bombers franchise came to Oak Ridge on March 11, 1948. During the time between when discussions began regarding the possibility of a professional presence in Oak Ridge and the final decision, it seems some of the people who ran the amateur league began to question if there was enough fan support for both the their league and a professional team.

Jack Bailey gives some insight into the situation with baseball during the 1940's. He says, "In the months following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which led directly to America's involvement in World War II, questions began to arise whether major and minor league baseball should be suspended for the duration of the war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided that it would be in the best interest of our citizens from a morale standpoint to continue to play baseball. After all, baseball had been considered America's 'national pastime' since the 1870's."

Jack continues, "Baseball endured throughout World War II, even though the quality of play was greatly diminished because so many major leaguers were in uniform serving their country. After the war ended, baseball enjoyed a tremendous rise in popularity and attendance at major and minor league parks rose to record levels. With that rise in popularity, professional baseball came to Oak Ridge in 1948, in the form of the Oak Ridge Bombers."

It is interesting to note that the amateur league got bigger headlines in the May 6, 1948 Oak Ridge Journal than did the professional team. It even seems like the reporters were poking fun at the professionals.

Here is the write up on the opening game of the season between the Oak Ridge Bombers and the Harlan, Kentucky Smokies: "To say Oak Ridge's first pro baseball season started with a bang is putting it

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mildly...33 runs, 30 hits, and 13 errors, all in one ball game. Sounds more like an AEC softball game, but the fans can't say the Oak Ridge Bombers and the Harlan Smokies didn't give 'em their money's worth."

The reporter went on to compare how President Truman only threw out one ball to start the big leagues, but, "things are not so simple with us here in Oak Ridge. Do you think Bill "Glass Arm" Bonnet, deputy city manager, would settle for just one common old pitch? Oh, no, not Bonnet. He had to throw the ball no less than ten times. Subbing for City Manager Len Dolan, Bonnet was supposed to inaugurate things by tossing to Bill Britton, AEC's chief of Education, health and Welfare, who wielded the big stick."

He went on to describe the warm up pitches, strikes, pop foul and dodged pitch and finally a single before the crowd began to show a "sincere lack of appreciation for the detailed ceremonies."

Another unique aspect to this opening game was the delay the visiting team had to endure when trying to get into Oak Ridge. Remember, in 1948, Oak Ridge was still a closed city. It took one hour and twenty minutes for the team to get past the guards and the coach was said to be "fit to be tied" as his team did not even have time for batting practice before game time. Also, a visiting sports writer came to Elza Gate only to learn that his pass was set up for the Solway entrance. So, he too had to cool his heels while necessary arrangements were made to transfer his eligibility for entrance from Solway to Elza.

It is obvious from the newspaper coverage that the amateur league was given higher priority coverage than the fledgling professional team. On May 6, 1948, the large headline of the Oak Ridge Journal on Page 9, read, "*11 Leagues Underway as 112 Team Plan To Play*," while a smaller headline read, "*Bombers Open Season With Win*."

The article on the Bombers' begins, "Oak Ridge's Bombers, new professional team, opened their season in the Mountain State League last Saturday with a victory over Harlan, Kentucky, at Harlan 13-11. Their home opener wasn't as successful as Harlan came to Oak wood Park Sunday and won 17-16 in a befuzzled ball game, but the locals broke into the win column again Monday as they took an impotent Jenkins team, 11-6. Tuesday's game with Jenkins was rained out."

Ted Yakimchick, in his column, *SPEAKING of SPORTS*, made the following observation regarding both the perception of a certain Knoxville sports writer and also the debate regarding amateur versus professional baseball teams, "Those who made the mistake of reading, *From The Rear*, by Mr. Plural Athlete, alleged sports writer for a Knoxville publication, last Sunday were no doubt surprised to learn that our last week's column was referred to as a 'verbal shellacking.' The alleged sports writer said this author gave professional baseball in the Atomic City a fierce blasting...that he liked nothing about the Mountain States opener between Oak Ridge and Harlan."

"Yak" continues, "We were amused over the dubious honor we received by being mentioned in Mr. Athlete's column. Despite the alleged sports writer's critical review of our opening day write-up, he did say 'The whole fulmination was excellent reading'...for which we say 'Thank you, Buster. Come on out to Oak Ridge and we'll mix you up a contaminated (with radiation, of course) cocktail.'"

See the turmoil? Even at the start of the season, the Bombers were controversial subjects for sportswriters. We will continue "Yak's" article in the next *Historically Speaking* column and will see his admonition to the public regarding the Bombers.

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An Ed Westcott image in The Oak Ridge Journal records the decision to bring professional baseball to Oak Ridge. The original caption read: "HERE's HOME PLATE – Knee-deep in discussions of Oak Ridge's prospective entry in the Mountain states Baseball League are, left to right, standing, Temple R. Jarrell, Director of Recreation for AEC; Bill Luttrell, secretary-treasurer of the company that owns the franchise for the Oak Ridge team; Bob Broome, president of the company; and Clyde Brown, representative of the Roane-Anderson concessions department. Seated is William H. Britton, chief of the AEC's Department of Education, Health, and welfare. Talks such as this have led to a scheduled signing of the contract which will assure Oak Ridge of having the team.