

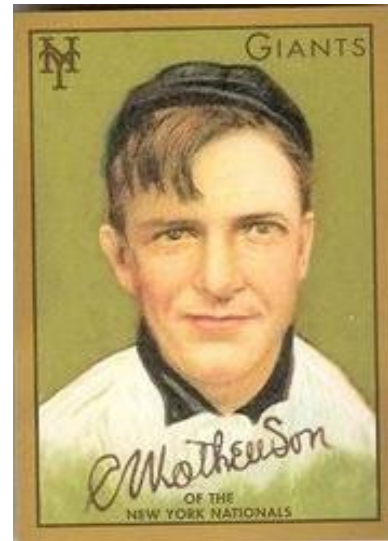
When Baseball Greats Played for Rockville

By Jean Luddy

Baseball, the “national pastime,” was more than a spectator sport in the late 19th and early 20th century. In addition to the regional or big city teams, fans could follow or participate in local amateur or semi-professional teams. Local business leaders or mill owners often provided funding for a local team. Rivalries between adjoining towns added to the intensity of the games. The tremendous rivalry that grew between the local baseball teams in Rockville and Manchester was typical of the period. Games were well attended with the crowds fervently rooting for their hometown. Betting on the games, while discreet, added another level of interest to the games. Each local team scoured the schools and factories of their town for the best talent. During this era two future members of the Baseball Hall of Fame played for the Rockville team against their rival baseball team from Manchester.

Colonial era laws in the state of Massachusetts had an unintentional impact on baseball games in Connecticut. The Massachusetts “Blue Laws” banned commerce on Sundays. This prohibition included professional baseball games. Players whose teams were scheduled to play in Boston over a weekend were allowed to play for a non-professional team on Sunday. Until the state of Massachusetts changed the Blue Laws in 1929, many pro-ball players traveled to cities and towns in other New England states to earn some extra money on Sundays. Players from the resident Boston Red Sox and Boston Braves, and their opponents in scheduled matches, thrilled fans when they played in local games.

Christy Mathewson, the leading pitcher of the New York Giants team, was hired to play for Rockville in the game scheduled for August 13, 1904. When Mathewson’s participation in the game was confirmed, fans from both towns flocked to the ball park in Rockville. The mills closed early. Extra trolley cars were added for the Manchester to Rockville route. The usual number of ballgame attendees rose from 4,000 to 7,000. An article from a local newspaper related that, “A fellow named Pliny Roy, in charge of ticket sales for the Rockville Club, would later report that by game time, 2,800 more tickets were sold. And, he said bitterly, a couple more hundred persons had managed to sneak in.”



Christy Mathewson’s baseball card

Mathewson gave the crowds a game to remember. After arriving at the Hartford railroad station, he was driven to Rockville. He stopped at the Rockville Hotel to change into the team uniform before heading to the ball park. During the game, Jimmy O’Rourke, a professional ballplayer who was playing for Manchester hit a triple to the left centerfield, but Mathewson struck out the next three batters. In control of the game, Mathewson demonstrated his superior pitching skill. Manchester was only able to score twice. Rockville scored 5 runs and won the game.

Mathewson had initially been promised \$100 for the game. Local backers sweetened the deal, increasing the offer to \$250. Mathewson collected his fee, rejoined the Giants, and went on to greater heights in his pro baseball career.

According to Manchester Herald sportswriter Earl Yost, “In 1904, Mathewson was in the midst of winning 30, that’s correct, 30 games, when he was lured to trade uniforms for a day and join Rockville. The big right-hander won 30 or more games four times, 30 in 1903, 33 in ’04, 31 in ’05 and 37 in ’08. For a dozen straight years he won 20 games and four World Series games,

three of which were shutouts in 1905. Twice he hurled no-hitters during a 16-year career in which he won 373 games, averaging better than 23 wins a season.... His best pitch, tabbed a fadeaway, was later known as a screwball... Mathewson entered baseball's Hall of Fame in 1936, the year the shrine opened at Cooperstown, NY. He was the first pitcher selected. He died at 45 from poison gas inhaled in World War I, which damaged his lungs."

Another Future Hall of Fame athlete played in Rockville at the start of his career. In 1906, Eddie Collins was a student at Columbia University in New York City. He played football in college, but after Columbia discontinued the football program in 1904, he switched to baseball. He started playing shortstop, later moving to second base.



*Members of the 1906 Rockville team.
Eddie Collins on the bottom right*

In the summer of 1906, he played ball for team in Vermont. In early August, the team management could not pay Collins and his teammates. Manager Billy Lush heard that the Rockville baseball organization was willing to hire players. He brought Collins and several other players to Rockville in mid-August to play several games before the end of the summer. On August 25th, Collins started out strong with 3 hits when Rockville beat Manchester 8 to 3. In a game against a team from Fitchburg, Massachusetts, an impressive catch by Collins contributed to Rockville's victory. Collins was sidelined with tonsillitis for a game, but was well enough to participate in another Rockville win over Fitchburg. Rockville needed to win the three games played over the Labor Day holiday to pass Manchester in the local standings.

The rivalry between Rockville and Manchester had grown more heated during the summer of 1906. Earlier in the season, Rockville players accused the Manchester pitcher of soaking the ball in water to make it heavier and harder to hit. The Manchester team charged the Rockville team management with having more players on the team than was acceptable. Once the series began, the decision of Billy Lush, the Rockville manager to challenge the Manchester team's use of William Holland, an African-American pitcher caused the ill feelings between the teams to escalate to a higher level.

In his book, *Eddie Collins: A Baseball Biography*, author Rick Huhn describes the events that occurred during the three game series.

"Saturday's game had yet to start before the water boiled over. A stunned Manchester crowd of 3,000 looked on as Rockville drew the color line, and refused to play because Manchester secured pitcher William Holland of the Brooklyn royal Giants, colored, to occupy the box. Manager Lush of Rockville withdrew his team from the field.

The Manchester team and its management were furious. Quickly, they surveyed their options. They could stand on moral grounds, claim a forfeit and refund the admission fee, or they could continue the game with another pitcher. The lure of a big gate was too much. They substituted a white pitcher and lost, 11-3.

On Labor Day, Monday, September 3, the controversy continued. The morning game was played as scheduled in Rockville, with Manchester bringing in a pitcher from the New London team of the Connecticut State League to enhance its chances. It was to no avail. Rockville won again, 3-0...

The real trouble started in the afternoon tilt set for Manchester... The game would provide a season winner... At the end of five innings with Rockville up 3-2, Manchester's manager inserted the black pitcher Holland. As he did on Saturday, Billy Lush took his team, including Collins, off the field. This time neither team would budge. Manchester was awarded a forfeit. Its fans rushed on to the field and hoisted Holland on their shoulders."

In the midst of the controversy Collins played well, going 4 for 4 in the first game against Manchester. Collins continued to play for the Rockville team into the early fall. Huhn comments that "For his part, in discussing his summer in New England to various scribes over a number of years, Eddie Collins never uttered one word of this bleak incident."

As Collins was preparing to return to Columbia, he went to New York City to meet with Connie Mack the general manager of the Philadelphia Athletics. Scouts from the A's had seen Collins play during the summer in New England. The reports were favorable and Mack was prepared to offer Collins a place on the team. Collins agreed to join the team, playing in the minor leagues before becoming a full time player in 1909.

Collins played second base for the A's until 1914 when he was sold to the Chicago White Sox for \$50,000, the highest price paid for a player to that point. The Sox paid Collins a salary of \$15,000, making him the third highest paid player in the league. Collins was not implicated in the Black Sox scandal in 1919. He continued with the White Sox until 1924 when he became a player-manager for the team. He retired from baseball in 1930 and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1939. During his professional career, Collins' batting average was .333. He had 3,315 hits, 1,300 runs batted in, scored 1,821 runs and stole 744 bases.

The stories of these local visits by professional baseball players reveal the cultural significance that baseball had achieved in the United States by that time. A baseball team's importance to the economy of its home city was recognized by the late 19th century. Small town leaders understood the value of bringing in famous outside talent to boost their own team's record and the size of the gate for a game. The attitudes of baseball managers and players reflected the social attitudes and prejudices of their eras which often included restricting access to the game for talented players. As the 20th century progressed, baseball adapted to changes in the economic aspects of the game and the expansion of opportunities in society. Yet for all of the adjustments and revisions to the sport, there still remains the excitement experienced by fans when they have the chance to see their heroes up close. In spite of some tarnished spots, baseball still retains a special place in the American psyche which will hopefully endure as the sport moves through the 21st century. Play ball!

Bibliography:

"The day Christy Mathewson Pitched for Rockville." Vernon, CT: *Tri-Town Reporter*, 7/4/1976.

"Eddie Collins." Baseball Reference.com <http://www.baseball-reference.com/players/c/collied01.shtml>

Huhn, Rick. *Eddie Collins: a baseball biography*. North Carolina: McFarland, 2008.

Lane, F. C. "Collins the Great." *The Baseball Magazine*. LA 84 Foundation. 1915.

<http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/BBM/1915/bbm145p.pdf>

Yost, Earl. "When Christy Mathewson Pitched for Rockville." *The Manchester Herald*. 7/17/1997.

http://articles.courant.com/1997-07-17/news/9707160104_1_baseball-game-manchester-major-leagues