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## Baseball in Hill City & Graham County

Our thanks to Mr. Scott Parker for allowing us to use the following excerpt from his book, "Hill City Athletics: A Decade of Baseball, 1950-1960." From: Graham County Library, Hill City.

Hill City, Kansas, "town team" baseball began in the late 1800's. The Western Cyclone, a Nicodemus newspaper documented games between Hill City and Millbrook and Nicodemus in 1887.

According to Arden "Whitey" Wallace, the business manager of the Hill City Athletics throughout the 1950's, town team baseball was very popular in Hill City during the 1920's. The Hill City baseball field, at that time, was located in McVey's Pasture north of where Ringneck Stadium is now. .... "People in the area enjoyed baseball because it was something on which to gamble," Wallace recalled of the 1920's. "Hill City's main rivals were Moreland, WaKeeney, and Norton. Stockton and Lenora also had teams."

Most Hill City town team players, according to Wallace, were former World War I veterans. These players were not paid. However, it was not out of the ordinary for town teams, including Hill City, to occasionally pay a player, usually a pitcher during a tournament. This was done throughout Hill City's team and semi-pro baseball history.

Wallace recalled that Hill City had an excellent town team in 1934. This was due in large part to be paid pitcher from Kansas State named Freeman who "overpowered batters."

Sometime between 1934 and the start of World War II, the ball diamond was moved. Harold Critchfield, who played for the Hill City town team and was later an Army-post baseball teammate of New York Yankee Whitey Ford, recalls having played baseball on a diamond in McVey's Pasture before the war. .... Following WWII, Hill City victories included games with scores of 11-6 and 19-14 versus Nicodemus, 12-11 against Logan Cities Services, and 22-13 versus Palco. One of the team's losses was 18-16 at the hands of Penokee. In 1947, the Hill City town team finished second in the tournament. Nicodemus beat Hill City in the championship game of the Graham County Wheat Festival All-County Baseball Tournament to win that crown.

One of western Kansas's most memorable games of 1950 was played in front of 1,200 fans at the Hill City Ball Park on September 2. The WCKL All-Stars faced the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro American League. The Monarchs were one of the dominant teams in baseball, winning a number of pennants and two Negro World Series championships during their existence from 1920 through 1955. ...In the lineup for Kansas City on this barnstorming trip was Ernest "Ernie" Banks. Banks eventually played in the National League with Chicago, beginning in 1953.

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The starting pitcher for the WCKL was Herb Settles of Loretta. Settles went the first four innings, striking out five Monarchs. Athletic Frank Dockins went the next four innings for the All-Stars, and teammate Jack Harmon was on the mound in the ninth inning. The three hurlers combined to hold Kansas City to six hits. Hill Citian Dale Billups led the All-Stars offensively. Getting a triple and a single, off of the Monarch's Walker, to go two for four at the plate. Hill City's Dockins and Olen Smrcka of Plainville each pounded a double. Other A's in the contest were catcher Dave Dennis, third baseman Wayne Welty, and second baseman earl Grindle, who hit a single. Even with Walker's nine strikeouts performance, it was not enough for Kansas City. The WCKL All Stars edged the powerful Monarch's, 3-2.

The big game of the tourney, though, was on August 11 when the Tournament All-Stars faced Kansas City Monarchs. Hill City A's hurler, Jack Harmon, was the winning pitcher as the All-Stars edged the Monarchs 2-1. Other Hill City All-Star players were Jack Ward, Glen Dean, Wayne Welty, Earl Grindle, Bill Korb, Galen Christiansen and Frank Dockins. Rex Welty was the manager that evening. Whitney Wallace remembered, "The Monarchs were always a big draw for us. The Monarch's (manager) Buck O'Neil and I would count the money after the ball game. Kansas City had a 60% split, Hill City, 40%."

Wallace often had a hard time finding black teams a place to stay when they came to play the A's. He recalled, "Things were different during that time, not like they are today. It was hard since black players weren't allowed to stay in motels or eat in restaurants. I remember one time I asked a restaurant manager if a visiting black team could eat there, and he said that they could. But, when the players came into town, they had to eat back in the kitchen. Also I had made previous arrangements for the players to stay at what is now the Western Hills Motel. When they arrived, the motel manager would not let them stay. They ended up having to stay in Hoxie." The black teams were able to suit up in what was then the Pratt Implement building at the intersection of U.S. Highways 24 and 283. Albert Pratt, a member of the Hill City Athletic Association, owned Pratt Implement. The building, which is now part of Money Chevrolet and houses the classic car collection, had a shower for the players.

