The Evangeline Baseball League, 1934-1948: the Story of a Class D Circuit

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THE EVANGELINE BASEBALL LEAGUE, 1934-1948:
THE STORY OF A CLASS D CIRCUIT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by
Brian Joseph Altobello
Louisiana State University
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MANUSCRIPT THESES

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PREFACE

Jacques Barzun, Director of Graduate Studies at Columbia University, once said: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball...." While perhaps an overstatement, this aphorism is the central theme throughout this study. No attempt has been made here to record the statistical history of the Evangeline League, although such a work would be welcome to many. Rather, this thesis offers a profile of the engaging people who resided in the French parishes of south Louisiana during the Great Depression and into the Forties. It is the story of their intense pride and their unrelenting loyalty. But mostly it is a story of their passion.

I would like to acknowledge my debt to the Louisiana State University Library for its unexcelled collection of Louisiana newspapers, an essential source of information for this thesis. These newspapers also provided the names of players, owners, managers, fans, and others connected with the League who were interviewed for this paper. I would be remiss if I did not mention baseball historian Arthur Schott, of New Orleans, Louisiana, for allowing me access to his magnificent baseball library. It was here that I was able to collect information from the rare Spink's Baseball Guide and Record Book, Spalding's Official Baseball Guide, and Heilbroner's Blue Book. These annuals included statistical information, particularly attendance figures, which otherwise would have been lost to this study. The National Association of Professional Baseball League's Director of Research, Don Avery, was most helpful in the early stages of my research. Finally, a warm thank you is extended to all the men who were kind enough to share
remembrance of the "Pepper Sauce" League with me. Of those inter-
viewed, I am particularly indebted to former league president Judge
A. Wilmot Dalferes of Lafayette, Louisiana, who fortunately had the
foresight to maintain some of the documents of his administration
in the Evangeline League.
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ABSTRACT

In six chapters, numbering 163 pages, the history of the Evangeline Baseball League is related, covering the years 1934 to 1948. Included in this account is a description of the relationship between the citizens of the small towns which sponsored the teams and the management and players of the clubs, fan participation, and the economic and sociological impact of the League on the area. Emphasis is ultimately placed upon characterization of the residents of the region as the League evolved. A bibliography is included which indicates that the research performed was heavily influenced by newspapers and personal interviews. Finally, the thesis concludes that the Evangeline League, a thoroughly indigenous operation, reflected the temper and style of the people who lived in south Louisiana during and after the Great Depression.
CHAPTER ONE
"...THE DEMAND WAS SO GREAT"

The lush back country of south Louisiana in the early 1930's was in many ways typical of the rest of the rural South. Primarily it was poor—poorer than any other region of the state. President Franklin D. Roosevelt named the South the nation's number one economic problem in 1938, and of course south Louisiana was included in the remark.

But unlike the rest of the South, Louisiana below the Red River was a land of distinctiveness—it was the land of the French-American Cajuns. And this made the area significantly different from the rest of the southern countryside. Not only was their culture—their language, religion and lifestyle—very different, hedonistic some would say, but also Louisianans were blessed (or cursed) with a passion that was uncharacteristic of their neighbors in rural north Louisiana. This passion displayed itself continually in all of their activities, whether it be their fighting or farming or their drinking (Louisiana was the only deep south state to vote against the 18th Amendment), gambling, music, or food. Even in simple conversation their gestures and mannerisms betrayed a soul which had never been tempered by the spirit of "The American Gothic."

So it was to be a most interesting affair when professional baseball was introduced to this vigorous region, a game that was capable of inspiring fury in even the most stolid of men. The chemistry that this mixture inspired is worth exploring, for the Evangeline League was much more than merely a very minor baseball
operation. It was a large part of many of these Louisiana's lives during the period of the Depression and into the decade that followed. Soon after the league began in 1934, new freshly painted grandstands would appear in the rich land that grew rice and sugar cane so abundantly, and for many of the men who worked those fields, the game provided a most welcome escape from the uncertainty of economic hardship.

Baseball was not new to south Louisiana. Baton Rouge, Lake Charles, Opelousas, and Alexandria all had been members of the Cotton States League off and on since 1902. A thriving semi-pro organization called the Louisiana League existed in 1933 in Lafayette, Alexandria, Jeanerette, Opelousas, and Rayne. Rivalries flourished and good-sized crowds of spectators came to watch every Sunday, the only day their contests were scheduled.

Herbert Schilling, an old ballplayer from Shreveport, was the organizer of the Lafayette semi-pro team. Schilling was impressed by the large crowds and was easily able to pay the players' salaries--$35.00 a man per game. One of the reasons for the success of the Lafayette team was the performance of a local boy who pitched for Schilling--T. Paul Leblanc.

During spring training in 1933, a game was organized between Lafayette and manager Larry Gilbert's New Orleans Pelicans, the Southern Association (Class AA) champions. Schilling recalled that, "About the fourth inning, Larry Gilbert walked over to me and said 'You know, I don't think we can beat this boy Leblanc.' Beat
The response in Lafayette was tremendous. A hat was passed immediately after the game and $200.00 was collected for Leblanc. The pitcher graciously split the donation with his catcher.

Schilling decided to take a chance and organize a pro league. He mailed a letter to the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, the governing body of all minor leagues in the United States, requesting help. J. Walter Morris, the southern division promotional director of the National Association, responded by coming to Lafayette and meeting with Schilling in the summer of 1933. Morris was pleased with what he saw as an area of great potential, and explained to Schilling that he would suggest to President William Bramham that south Louisiana was ripe for a class D league—the lowest classification of professional leagues at that time. A decision would not be forthcoming until after the association's winter meeting.

At this point Schilling enlisted the support of other prominent businessmen and baseball fans in the area. Two of them, particularly important in the league's birth, were Larry Gilbert and a former professional baseball player and umpire, Hank Doty from Rayne. Gilbert was interested in a league, thinking of course that it would help the Pelicans in their search for talent. Hank Doty, who in 1933 was the player-manager of Rayne's semi-pro outfit, went to different towns in south Louisiana looking for support with businessman "Hooky" Irwin. Enthusiasm for the idea was abundant.2

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1Herbert Schilling, interview, June 6, 1974.
2R.C. Irwin, interview, July 20, 1974.
At the close of the 1933 season, Larry Gilbert began to take direction of the activity surrounding the formation of the league. Each of the six towns that had semi-pro teams in 1933 in south Louisiana seemed to have serious supporters waiting to generate interest and money for a league in 1934. The next step was to select a president. He would have to be a man who was well known and respected for his knowledge of the game. He probably would have to be an outsider--one not from Lafayette or Jeanerette, or any of the other towns in the budding league. Rivalries were too keen. It was finally decided that William T. Daly, a former football and baseball coach at Springhill College in Mobile, would be offered the position as the league's president.

Daly would certainly be fit for the job. He knew the area well, was a former manager of a semi-pro team in and around Opelousas, was well known throughout the area, and was well respected both as a man and as a coach. Gilbert approached Daly with the offer in late 1933, but Daly, now a New Orleans insurance agent for the Protective Life Insurance Company, was at first non-committal. But an agent of Daly's from Opelousas, Milton Delmas, who was in New Orleans for the 1934 Sugar Bowl, saw him and suggested to him that he thought it would help him in his business. Daly agreed and was willing to accept the position in early 1934 if the National Association granted the league a permit to operate.

On February 4, 1934, Walter Morris of the National Association was in Monroe for a meeting of the Dixie League. There he announced

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that plans for a Class D league for south Louisiana were in the making with the blessing of the National Association. A week later Morris was in Lafayette looking for commitments from interested towns. Lake Charles, Lafayette, Opelousas, Franklin, Rayne, and New Iberia were represented, mostly to hear generalities from Morris, who was disappointed that Larry Gilbert, the most respected baseball man in Louisiana, was not present. It was decided at the close of the gathering that another organizational meeting would be held in Rayne on Sunday, February 18. But the Rayne meeting was postponed a week because again Gilbert was unable to attend. Finally, on February 25 at the Rayne City Hall five teams tentatively agreed to enter the loop: Lafayette, Alexandria, Rayne, and Opelousas immediately, and New Iberia in a few weeks. Daly officially agreed to be the league's president "in the event the circuit was organized." A definite decision would be made on March 4 at New Iberia. Apparently, the only roadblock was money. In 1934, rural Louisiana was hard pressed for fluid capital. But whatever was lacking in finances was made up for in enthusiasm. These proud men were determined to get professional baseball for their small towns.

Present at the Rayne meeting were an interesting assortment of men who wanted baseball for their town for varying reasons, though the lure of personal financial gain affected each of them. There was Lozen Leger, a wealthy but close-fisted rice farmer from Rayne who knew little about baseball but happened to be the most prestigious man in that tiny town. Leger, who could neither read nor write,  

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4William T. Daly, interview, June 6, 1974.
was urged to accept responsibility for Rayne's franchise bid by Hooky Irwin, A.C. Chappuis, Mayor Joseph Gossen, and Henry Leblanc. These were baseball lovers and small businessmen who hoped that Rayne, a close neighbor of Lafayette, would profit financially from the out-of-town crowds that would visit Rayne during the season.

From Lafayette, the "hub city" of this predominantly Cajun-French region, came Herbert Schilling whose dream it was one day to play major league ball, though he never had the talent. Along with Schilling, who must be given credit as one of the originators of the league, came two rather prominent "money men" in town--Morgan A. Rodemacher and Frem F. Boustany, a Syrian whose department store sponsored the Lafayette semi-pro team.

Charles Schilling, Herbert's brother and, in time, his rival in the loop, represented Lake Charles. Mayor Dave Hollier and other wide-eyed businessmen from Opelousas were there along with representatives from Alexandria, whose entourage included a newspaper man to report the proceedings.5

The Lafayette meeting on February 25th was the first which seriously discussed details of the league structure. Larry Gilbert was Morris' appointed replacement at the gathering, and he led the group in its decision to play three games a week, two on weekdays and one on Sunday. It was also decided that each club would retain all the proceeds from its home games. A salary limit and the number of players on the roster would be imposed, as in any other professional league, but the specific limits would not be decided until

5"Plans for Baseball League are Discussed at Meeting Held Here," Lafayette Daily Advertiser, February 12, 1934, p. 6.
a scheduled meeting on March 4 in New Iberia. A "reserve clause" would also be in effect, committing each player to his own team unless sold or traded.6

On March 4th, as scheduled, New Iberia's Elk's Home provided the facility for the next meeting which some journalists have said marked the birth of the league. Others claim with equally convincing arguments that it was Rayne or Lafayette which held the important meeting. Whichever the case, the New Iberia meeting was a significant step in the league's development. It was here that the league received its name the "Evangeline League." Here again various people have claimed credit for naming the circuit, but it seems that Art Phelan, an ex-minor leaguer from Alexandria who would first manage his city's club, deserves credit for the name, for it was he who suggested it at the New Iberia conclave.7

Morris of the National Association was at the Elks Club and his presence made a difference. Instead of the previously agreed to three games a week, it would be five. A thirteen-man roster limit and a $780 a month salary limit for each club (not counting the manager's salary) would be enforced. Additionally, each team would have to carry at least nine rookies. Ticket prices would be uniform throughout the circuit—$40 for grandstand and $30 for bleacher seats.8


7"Fifth Annual Evangeline League Race Scheduled to Open," New Orleans Times Picayune, April 3, 1934, p. 5.

So the Evangeline League was ready after a year of promotion. Support from President William Bramham of the National Association was certainly important in bringing about origination of the circuit. He was determined to expand lower classification professional leagues. Said Bramham, the night the Evangeline League was officially recognized by his office, "Stress is being laid upon the revival of class D circuits, offering opportunity to boys of the country who have ambitions to become professionals." But probably the most salient reason for the league's creation was given by the league's first president, Bill Daly: "Because the demand for the game in the area was so great."10

The excitement over having a professional baseball league was evident everywhere in Cajun country, especially in the smaller towns in the newly formed loop. Lozen Leger, the ball club owner whose town was the smallest of the six with a population of 3,710 in 1930, solicited funds for the team by offering "free" space on the park billboards for a $25.00 donation. In order to attract as many fans as possible, he hired "Dutch" Bernsen, a former star in the Texas League, as Rayne's first manager. The old ball park on Highway 90 near the Catholic church was to be the home of the "Rice Birds," the name of the town's old semi-pro team. So with $800.00 in their coffers, Leger and Hooky Irwin began their venture.

On opening day, April 13, 1934, Mayor Joseph Gossen announced a town holiday, in an effort to make the game "one of the biggest

9"Evangeline Loop Recognized by National Association," The Lake Charles American Press, April 13, 1934, p. 11.
10William T. Daly, interview.
events of the year." A full page was purchased in The Rayne Tribune for an official proclamation. It read:

Whereas, the official Baseball Season will be opened in the city of Rayne on the afternoon of Friday, April 13th, 1934, and

Whereas, it is a decided advantage to the city of Rayne to support a baseball team: Therefore, I Joseph Gossens, Jr., Mayor of the City of Rayne, do hereby proclaim a partial holiday in the city of Rayne on Friday, April 13th, 1934, from the hours of 3:30 P.M. until 6:00 P.M.; and all business houses are requested to close during the time stated and the citizens of Rayne are likewise requested to be present at the opening game of the season.

Witness my hand and the official seal of the city of Rayne, Louisiana, on this 12th day of April, A.D., 1934.11

Joseph Gossen Jr.
Mayor

Five hundred fans came out to witness the first game against the Lake Charles Skippers.

In Opelousas a Board of Directors conducted the affairs of the club. David Hollier, the mayor and a sports enthusiast, was president and owner, along with Clayton Guilbeau, who was a Shell Oil representative, Antoine Manouvrier, and Louis Poulet. Pat Flaherty, a former major league pitching star and scout for the Chicago Cubs, was named manager. The directors were most pleased to acquire the services of a man of such "high caliber."

Opelousas had seen professional baseball before in 1907 as a member of the Cotton States League. But the effort to raise money for the Indians, as they would be called, was new to these men. Hollier, Guilbeau, and Manouvrier canvassed the business district to raise $1,500.00, a sum they believed adequate for initial expenses.

11"Rayne Baseball Fans," The Rayne Tribune, April 13, 1934, p. 3.
They thought that the team, once organized, should pay for itself. Some of the money was taken in from stock sales, some from season tickets, and some from billboard advertisings.\(^\text{12}\)

His optimism growing, Mayor Hollier suggested that an award be presented to the team with the best attendance for the opening game. Daly liked the idea, and the "Kop the Kup" movement in Opelousas was launched. An invitation to attend opening day ceremonies in Opelousas was mailed out to the mayors of all St. Landry Parish towns. Both the Indians and their first opponents, the Alexandria Aces, paraded through the little town alongside business organizations that supported the team. The parade ended at Elementary Park, the home for this Evangeline League member. Opelousas was always considered a good baseball town, and the mayor and his assistants were confident of a good solid attendance.

On March 27th, the Lafayette promoters held their own organizational meeting at the courthouse. The Y.M.B.C. Band played several numbers before the opening of the meeting. It was called to order by the president of the Y.M.B.C. who then appointed an "executive committee" of five members to "lead in preparations for a large attendance at the opening game" with New Iberia. Each member on the committee served as chairman of groups of workers to handle different phases of the program, such as school ticket sales, the parade, and the closing of local businesses.\(^\text{13}\) Thereafter, the

\(^{12}\)"Baseball for Opelousas is Over in Drive," The Opelousas Clarion-News, March 15, 1934, p. 1.

\(^{13}\)The Daily Advertiser, March 28, 1934, p. 8.
team would be known as the White Sox, and their home would be Parkdale, one of the best parks in the league with a 375-foot center field fence, and 273 and 300 feet down the right and left field lines.

Lafayette also marked opening day with a parade headed by the YMBC band and autos carrying ball players, fans, city officials, and YMBC members. Mayor Mouton pitched the first ball to open the game. Similar events took place in other towns throughout the league. In New Iberia businesses were closed, too, and manager Hank Doty was presented with a floral horseshoe as a token of good luck, since it was Friday the 13th. A turnout of over 2000, despite the cold temperature, blessed the opening game in New Iberia, and the Cardinals won the first Evangeline League "Kop the Kup" award.

In Lake Charles, Charles Schilling, the brother of Herbert Schilling of the Lafayette White Sox, owned the ball club. He had lived in Lafayette like his brother, but when Herbert acquired the White Sox, Charles wanting his own club, left Lafayette for Lake Charles. He knew the town would be a good place for a club for he had played semi-pro ball there. By selling fence and program ads, he finally raised enough money to begin operation. A natural rivalry thus ensued between the two towns. The nucleus of the club was formed by left-over rookies of the Fort Worth Cats of the class A Texas League that took spring training in Lake Charles. Schilling's manager, Don McShane, announced that "local talent will

14 The Daily Advertiser, April 14, 1934, p. 8.
he given an opportunity to develop and all boys from Lake Charles who feel they can play baseball are invited to come out for the team."\(^{15}\)

American Legion Park would be the home of the Skippers. A rigorous rebuilding project under the direction of Schilling was launched including the borrowing of high school bleachers to expand the seating capacity to 2,000.\(^{16}\)

J. Walter Morris personally succeeded in enlisting the support of Alexandria in the Evangeline, thinking it was a good baseball town. Promoters in town were interested, but at first it was thought it would be more attractive to become part of a newly formed Dixie League which would have two divisions—east and west. But Alexandria would have been placed in the eastern sector with teams as far away as Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Jackson, Mississippi. So it was estimated that operating expenses would be halved if they joined a southwest Louisiana league.\(^{17}\) Confidence in making money was lacking in those early days in Alexandria, however. As the local newspaper expressed it: "A corporation proposed to take over the local club is not going into the business to make money, but rather to give Alexandria clean, wholesome sport and considerable national publicity."\(^{18}\) But Morris was more confident. He was "positive that... under strict economy Alexandria will be greatly surprised by making

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\(^{15}\)"Don McShane Manager of Lake Charles Baseball Club," The Lake Charles American Press, March 19, 1934, p. 4.


\(^{17}\)"Negotions for City to Enter League are Opened," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk, February 14, 1934, p. 7.

\(^{18}\)Ibid.
a profit and this profit can be used next year in enlarging the park and grandstand and putting the city into the Dixie League. It is not surprising that skepticism was more prevalent here than in the other cities, for promoters of the old Alexandria Reds of the Cotton States League had lost $50,000 in five and a half years of operation in the 1920's.

Baseball interests in Alexandria suggested to Morris that they would be interested in joining the Evangeline League if he could find a manager who would be willing to invest $500.00 in a $1000.00 corporation, thereby owning half the team. Morris went looking. Frequently he telegraphed Ralph Brewer of the Town Talk during February keeping him informed of his progress. Finally, the old promoter found Art Phelan, the former manager of the Shreveport Texas League team. He would be willing to put up the $500.00 along with Cecil Coombs, a local businessman. Thus Alexandria was a bit more reluctant to join the new loop, but when it did its manager would surely try his best to be a winner.

With a new manager hired, invitations were sent out to all amateurs and semi-pro teams in Louisiana in the hope of attracting players. Also, Phelan invited individuals from the Fort Worth, Dallas, and Beaumont camps to try out. Twenty-five candidates appeared, and finally, after two weeks of practice, Phelan found thirteen who could play ball. A new park was built--Bringhurst

19 Ibid.

Park—named after the commissioner of streets and parks who built it. It was 325 feet down both lines and 400 feet to dead center. Over 1,000 fans could be seated in the grandstand, the Daily Town Talk boasted: 252 in the forty-two box seats, 576 in the "white" bleachers along the 3rd base line, and 372 in the "colored" bleachers along 1st base.

To arouse fan interest, a name contest was sponsored by the newspaper, and Coombs offered a free season ticket to the winner. One entry proposed the name "NRA" for "New Reds of Alexandria." Wrote the contributor, "Hasn't the president given us a New Deal? Isn't the ball club a New Deal?" Among the names that made the finals were "Reds," "Blue Eagles," "Smart Alexs," "Hubs," and "Aces." Sentiment was strong in favor of changing the name from the old "Reds" name. Of the ninety-three names suggested, only six contained "red" in the title. So the judges ruled against it. Besides, uniforms had already been ordered trimmed in blue. Finally, "Aces" became the winning name.

Each team in the league had what was called "working agreements" with a major league club. This meant that the players were virtually owned by the parent organization. This was the scourge of any minor league club because the best players would be lost through promotion. But it was also a source of talent and sometimes revenue for the lower classification club, although there was no obligation

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on the part of the big league club to shore up a class D outfit that was in the red. Opelousas, for example, had a working agreement with the Cleveland Indians and thus with the New Orleans Pelicans of the Southern Association, the Indians' primary farm club. This was arranged because of the close friendship between Larry Gilbert and Clayton Guilbeau. Lake Charles was in the Detroit system via the Beaumont Exporters (Class A, Texas League). But as the years went by, certain maverick owners of Evangeline League clubs refused to agree to a working agreement with anyone, mostly out of the frustration that occurred when they did not have control over their players--something these tempestuous people found difficult to accept.

It was certainly better to play on a team with a working agreement. Not only would a player be more closely watched, but if he was a "class man," or non-rookie, he would very likely receive a stipend from the big league club in addition to a regular salary from his Evangeline League Club owner. This procedure was not made public, but it existed. Occasionally, even the local club owner was unaware of this "double salary" deal.23 The Evangeline owners themselves would often pay players higher salaries than their contracts called for. The league's rule on a salary ceiling was ignored, for the most part, by the owners. This of course was the reason why many clubs got into financial difficulty and was certainly the reason the league imposed a salary limit. But as Ben Segrest, a former Evangeline League player from Rayne explained,

"I wouldn't have played in the league for $135.00 a month when I was making $35.00 a game in semi-pro ball. You just had to give more money. I know for a fact that some players in 1935 were getting $400.00 a month." Larry Jones, a player for Abbeville in 1946, admitted that he received $175.00 from Abbeville and $175.00 from Cincinnati. "The money from Cincinnati was mailed to my home town in Texas." And even in Rayne, while the depression was still severe, some players received from $500.00 to $600.00 a month, a very excellent salary for the period.

It seems certain that Bill Daly would have acted had he known the salary ceiling was being violated. But Daly's office was in New Orleans, and he was not a full-time president. He was mostly concerned with his insurance agency. Only occasionally would he visit the Evangeline League area. Actually, the league president was not nearly as significant an individual as the team owner. Daly merely collected team dues, approved the schedule, oversaw trades and sales, and hired umpires.

It was the owners, of course, who were as interested in money as were the players and perhaps more so, for most Class D ball players were playing with the expectation of being brought up to a higher classification. So all energy was directed to keep attendance as high as could possibly be expected. Promotional gimmicks would mostly come later in the Thirties, but a few clubs tried a

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24 Ibid.
26 R.C. Irwin interview.
few standard ploys. "Ladies Day" became popular in the league, and in Lake Charles, to boost attendance, Schilling decided to allow ladies into the ballpark free every day except Sunday, which was universally the best day for a crowd. Opelousas had a "Eunice Day" during the initial season, and all Eunice residents were allowed in free to see the game against New Iberia. The event was a disappointment, however, for the Cardinals failed to show for the game because of poor weather conditions. In Rayne local merchants began offering inducements to the players to increase run-production and fan interest. One offered a shirt to any player who hit a home run. Another offered a week's free pass to his theater for a home run. These few examples are indicative of the support most teams received from their home towns. Most of the support was genuine with little else but the players' interest in mind.

Not all the news was good that inaugural year for the little Evangeline League. Opelousas was having early attendance problems. One hundred and fifty fans was a large crowd there, whereas Alexandria was drawing about 2,000 a game. This continued throughout the first half of the season despite the good showing of the Indians. In May, manager Flaherty resigned and Clayton Guilbeau, the oil man, replaced him. Guilbeau was the "guiding spirit of the baseball team," explains Frankie Deitlein, the road secretary for the Indians through the pre-war period. "He put up the money himself

27"Cardinals Fail to Show Up for Opelousas Tilt," The Lake Charles American Press, June 7, 1934, p. 8.

originally. The cars, for instance, used to get the players to and from games, were his cars—personal cars!" Deitlein recalls that Guilbeau would burn 500 gallons of gas on the playing field after a rain to dry the field. Again, it was his gas—he owned a gas station. He just loved the game. 29

Rumors that Franklin, Louisiana, would take over the Opelousas franchise developed in May, and a meeting of all interested parties in Opelousas was called. New plans to solicit friends from the business community were made in order to hold down the deficit. 30 It was here, during this May meeting, that the decision was made to use slot machine revenue to help support the team. One dollar a week was collected from the more than 100 machines in town. The district attorney of Opelousas was Austin Fontenot, the team secretary. And he directed that these collections be made! This, according to Milton Delmas, an Opelousas player, "is how the team stayed alive." 31 The fact is that only Lafayette, Alexandria, and Lake Charles, the larger towns in the league, had no slot machines. But in the battle for good attendance, nothing brought the fans out like a good brawl over an umpire's call, or a colorful ballplayer's antics. The Evangeline League quickly acquired the reputation for vociferous, easily excitable fans and eccentric players. At an April game in Parkdale between Lafayette and Rayne,

29 Frankie Deitlein, interview, June 28, 1974.
31 Milton Delmas, interview, June 28, 1974.
the White Sox's catcher Walter Stephenson punched umpire Mabry after a disputed call. Stephenson was fined $100.00 and indefinitely suspended by the umpire. Stephenson was an excellent receiver, and later in July moved up to the Chicago Cubs. But he had difficulty controlling his temper. His nickname, "Tarzan," gives one a hint of his rather unorthodox behavior on the field. After a home run or a particularly important base hit, Stephenson would let out with a "Tarzan-type" yell and beat his chest wildly, all of which greatly amused the fans. Occasionally before the game began, "Tarzan" would scramble up the backstop and scream out his patented yell to stir up the team and the crowd, which he always succeeded in doing. When Umpire Mabry suspended Stephenson, the management of the White Sox protested the action and announced from the field's public address system that a telegram was being sent to President Daly. The Sox, in the telegram, "threatened to withdraw from the league if Mabry continued umpiring in this loop." At the completion of the game, members of the Lafayette team and some of the fans were "swarming" around the umpire, according to the account in the Daily Advertiser. Police had to escort Mabry off the field.

Ben Segrest, a pitcher for Rayne in 1934, related another amusing story of "Tarzan" Stephenson:

"We were in Lafayette one day and batting early in the ball game. Harry Kirshner was up and getting brushed back by their pitcher. The game was tense anyway..., because we were playing Lafayette, and they were our rivals—and everybody else's, too. So when Kirshner got brushed back, he charged the pitcher. Stephenson saw what was happening and took

off his mask and chest protector and walked to the mound. 'Nobody's doing nothing to my pitcher.' Kirshner was a one-time wrestler, so manager McShane told the team to let them go and fight, thinking Stephenson would get whipped. Well, in one punch it was over, and Stephenson jumped from the mound and ran to the screen on the grandstand, climbed up and let out with his Zarzan yell. The fans loved it.33

In June of that stormy first year, during a game between Rayne's Rice Birds and New Iberia's Cardinals at New Iberia, Umpire Scott ordered manager Doty of the Cardinals out of the game for arguing the change of a close call at second base. Trouble erupted. Police officers, who were always on duty at these games, rushed on the field to guard the umpire who was "threatened by the crowd several times." At the end of the game, four policemen escorted him off the diamond and drove him out of the city limits for his protection.34

Lake Charles gives us the story of Frank Martelli, the Skippers' first baseman from Marshall, Texas. Martelli was having trouble with his baseball shoes during a game with New Iberia and asked the umpire permission in the third inning to take them off. He did so and hit safely his next four times at bat while ingratiating himself with the Lake Charles rooters.35

Tragedy struck Charles Schilling's Lake Charles franchise in

33Ben Segrest, interview.
May in what was probably the biggest event in the Evangeline League's debut year. On May 6, fire swept through the grandstand, destroying most of that area, the ticket booth, and some fencing. Much of the club's equipment, including some uniforms and balls, was destroyed. Unfortunately, there was no fire insurance for the stadium, and the loss was estimated at $2,000.00. The stadium was owned by the American Legion, and Schilling was leasing it from the local Legion post. So although the Skippers' only financial loss was the equipment, there was no other facility in town where they could play ball.

The fire occurred just a few days before the team's "Booster Day" which was scheduled to be a tribute to businesses who were particularly helpful in their support of the club. The fire, however, failed to stymie the promoters. Bleachers were obtained from Lake Charles High and a majority of the stores in town (over seventy) agreed to close for the game with Lafayette. Lafayette legionaires sent a challenge to the Lake Charles post maintaining that they would keep their record of having more Lafayette people in attendance at the game than Lake Charles supporters.

"Booster Day" was a mild success, but with no ticket booth and a burned-down fence, major repairs had to be made quickly. Daly drove into Lake Charles on Schilling's request to help generate donations from city merchants to help in the rebuilding effort and to "get the club on its feet again." Daly warned Schilling of the existing danger of losing his team. He revealed that Franklin,

Louisiana, the town that had earlier been interested in the Opelousas franchise, was "very anxious" to acquire a team and had already made a bid for the Lake Charles charter.37

Schilling went to work. He pleaded to the mayor for government aid in rebuilding the grandstand, for the park was a public facility. After a convincing argument, an advisory committee was formed made up of thirty city businessmen who toured the city in order to raise funds for the club.38 Meanwhile, Schilling went to Jeanerette, Louisiana, a small town of 2,200 but with a strong following of baseball fans. There he was promised that if he brought the club to Jeanerette, the town would support the team with slot machines.39 Schilling knew many of the other towns in the loop were benefiting from this practice, and so the decision was made to move, mid-season, to Jeanerette where the team would be called the "Blues." Schilling claimed that the move was only temporary—until the grandstand at American Legion Park was rebuilt. (Mayor Sidney Bourgeois of Jeanerette immediately offered to donate $1,000.00 to the Blues' organization if the team captured the pennant.) But the shrewd owner would not return if there was a profit to be made in Jeanerette with the slots.

Despite the setback of a mid-season franchise move, W.T. Daly's


39Charles Schilling, interview, June 6, 1974.
Evangeline League seemed to be growing in popularity as the 1934 season came to an end. An all-star team was chosen, and a successful championship playoff series (best of seven) was played between Opelousas, the second-round champion, and Lafayette, winners of the first round. All seven games were necessary as the site of the series shifted back and forth from Opelousas to Lafayette. The first game in Opelousas drew over 2,000 fans, according to the Daily Advertiser, and in the third game at Lafayette, 2,700 rooters paid admission, the largest crowd, according to the Lafayette paper, ever to attend a baseball game in southwest Louisiana. The Lafayette club prevailed and after winning the first pennant, Herbert Schilling, Frem Boustany, and Morgan Rodemacher published the following statement:

The White Sox have won the championship, the fans have been given a season of interesting entertainment, and we believe the public, as a whole, is satisfied. Lafayette, in its first year in professional baseball, has won a pennant, and this news is recorded in baseball circles throughout the country.

The season was over for everyone but Daly. In November, negotiations between the league president and officials from Abbeville, Louisiana, revealed that the league was interested in expanding from six to eight teams. In Abbeville an athletic association was formed headed by Mayor Fred Schlesinger for the purpose of constructing a grandstand on the grounds of Abbeville High and to sell Abbeville as

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41 Appreciation is Stated by Sox Owners," The Daily Advertiser, September 14, 1934, p. 10.
a baseball town to Daly and the league's owners. At least four towns were interested in franchises, but at the December conclave in Lafayette, the league officials voted unanimously to accept Abbeville as the seventh team. Other changes were made at the league meeting. The men agreed to adopt the Texas League's Shaughnessy playoff system as a means of taking in additional revenue. The system made eligible four, instead of two, teams for the play-offs. At the end of the season, the first place finisher would be matched against the fourth place club in a best of three-game series, while the second and third place clubs would vie. The survivors of the semi-final round would then play a best of seven series for the league pennant. In addition, the National Association raised the salary limit for class D teams to $900.00 and increased the player limit for each team to fourteen members, including the manager. Every manager was a player-manager, a money-saving move that was common in the minor leagues. Ten of the players were required to be rookies, the other four being class men. Finally, the league voted to adopt the double umpire system for every game.42

In January, 1935, Daly called another meeting in Lafayette for the purpose of selecting an eighth city to be represented in the league. Lake Charles had the edge. A new grandstand had been built for Legion Park, and a working agreement with the Cincinnati Reds was promised the new president, Leo Gros. When the park burned down in 1934, a group of interested citizens in Lake Charles got together

42"Abbeville is Voted in as League Member," The Daily Advertiser, December 17, 1934, p. 6.
and formed a corporation to raise money for a franchise bid in 1935. About $2,000.00 was raised, enough money to convince the league that Lake Charles was again ready for baseball. Bids by Houma and Franklin were turned down and again Lake Charles, after a brief period, was back in the Evangeline League. In one other major point of business, the league moguls modified the gate receipt rule. Home clubs would again keep 100% of the receipts from regular season games (except for Sunday games when the home team would keep only sixty percent), but visiting clubs to Opelousas would receive $10.00 for expenses when playing night games there.

The decision to bring night baseball to Opelousas was an important step forward for the little circuit. Twelve poles were installed and Athletic Park was enlarged, too. Each home game was scheduled to be played under the lights except on Sundays and holidays. The decision was clearly a gamble, requiring the investment of thousands of dollars in a club just one year old. But the gamble paid off and night baseball was a great success with the fans. (The players didn't like it, however; the lights were too dim.) Many came from surrounding cities in southwest Louisiana for the night contests. Opelousas' success with night baseball was not overlooked by the other clubs. Soon every Evangeline ball park would have lights. 

Night baseball was first introduced in the minor leagues when

43Ben Segrest, interview.

E. Lee Keyser, owner of the Class B Des Moines, Iowa, Club of the Western League, announced that he was installing a lighting system in the club's park in 1930. Colleges had been playing night games for some time with success. Why not, he thought, try night baseball? Keyser was the target of much ribbing because of his unconventional proposal. But after the first night contest drew over 8,000 fans, his critics were convinced that his plan would succeed. Night baseball proliferated in the minor leagues in the early 1930's after Keyser's experiment, but the major leagues resisted the innovation until 1935 when Cincinnati's general manager Larry MacPhail won grudging approval of a short seven-game schedule of night games. 20,422 spectators braved the chilly weather in Crosley Field to witness the historic first game. The press was almost universally against the starlight contests, citing the expense ($250-$300.00 a game for the electricity), the difficulty the players had with seeing the ball, and other annoyances. But eventually the experiment won overwhelming acceptance by the fans. Night baseball in the majors would thereafter expand at a swift rate, and along with it attendance would increase until the war years interrupted the advances made in the late 1930's.

Opelousas was able to install lights in their ball park because of a fairly rewarding season in 1934. Gate receipts totaled $5,000.00--an amount which was more than the salaries paid to the players. But the installation of lights was an expensive proposition, and so the management, under the direction again of Mayor

Hollier and Clayton Guilbeau, launched a campaign in February to sell stock in order to raise $5,000.00 in capital. The result of this campaign is unknown. The sale of pitcher Roy Weatherly, however, to the New Orleans Pelicans insured the owners that the lights could be purchased.

46"Stock Sold in Opelousas League Team," The Daily Advertiser, February 8, 1925, p. 10.
CHAPTER TWO

SPICE IN THE "PEPPER SAUCE" LEAGUE

The focus of attention centered on Abbeville in early 1935. The beautiful little town of 4,400, located on the Vermillion River about twenty miles southwest of Lafayette, was excited about its new franchise. The Abbeville Athletic Association had convinced the league that their community would be good for the circuit. Now they set out to prove it. To provide funds for the franchise, the AAA sponsored a bazaar, and to generate interest in the team, a name contest was begun by the Abbeville Meridional. The winners received the usual $24.00 season ticket. Out of the sixty names that were submitted to the newspaper, the name "Athletics" was chosen. In February the owners purchased two sets of uniforms and a bus with the money they had raised.\(^1\) Arrangements were made with the Nashville Baseball Club of the Class A Southern Association for a working agreement. (Nashville was then part of the New York Giants' system.) The "Volunteers" would later furnish Mayor Schlessinger's club with eight players and "contribute financially" also.\(^2\)

Most of the Evangeline League players, then, were castoffs from other leagues in other states. Only occasionally did a local boy play in the loop in its early years. In fact, the players not only came from all over the country, but two in 1935 were from

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\(^1\)"Athletics is Chosen for New Ball Team," The Abbeville Meridional, February 16, 1935, p. 1.

foreign countries—Danny DeLeon Escobar, a Lake Charles outfielder, was from Portugal, and from Poland came shortstop Stanley Kravis who played for three different clubs in the loop. One of Lafayette's team members, Zenon Ochoa, was Mexican and could speak no English. When he got on base his interpreter became the base coach.

Surprisingly, considering their reputation for xenophobia, the Cajuns accepted these non-Louisianians readily. Abbeville's Nashville castoffs were "highly pleased" with the hospitality extended them by the citizens of Abbeville and Vermillion Parish. "Never before," they explained, "had they found such hospitable citizenry," adding that there were more baseball fans in Abbeville in proportion to the population than in any other section they had visited.\(^3\)

If these boys from Tennessee had never heard of the rabid enthusiasm which infected many of these French baseball fans, they were soon to be introduced to their zeal. In a pre-season exhibition game between the Rayne team and the Athletics in Rayne, a scuffle erupted when umpire Sidney Frederick called a strike on a Rayne batter who had turned his back on the pitcher when he delivered the pitch. The Rayne bench emptied onto the field in protest followed closely by a group of enraged fans. And as the argument became more heated, Frederick was struck in the eye by one of Rayne's players. The Abbeville team than came to his support. It took "several policemen to stop what was described as "the brawl."\(^4\)


Opening day ceremonies throughout the league in 1935 were similar with parades, presentations, and holidays marking the occasion. In Rayne 1,000 fans attended the first regular season game with Opelousas, an encouraging turnout for Lozen Leger. Rayne's entry in the league in 1935 had been in doubt because of financial problems. Local merchants and a weekly allowance from the town's slot machines kept the franchise above water. A new ball park was built near Southside School which seated 1,000 in the grandstand and 100 in the bleachers. However, the park was still below par and the teams in the league disliked playing there. The right field fence was unusually short (just over 220 feet), and a ball hit over the fence was ruled a ground-rule double. But Leger was assured by the loyal fans from Crowley who travelled eight miles up La. 90 to see the Rice Birds play toward the end of the '34 season and by the new working agreement with the Dallas Steers of the Texas League. For opening day in Rayne, prizes were given away by local merchants—"a good suit of clothes" for the first home run, a "free cleaning job or a $3.00 deposit on a new suit" for the first triple, "two delicious dinners (chicken or frog)" for the first stolen base, "a week's pass to the Opera House" for the first hit, and "a complete Shinola outfit" for the first player to beat out a bunt.5 The attendance award for opening day, presented on a proportional basis according to population, was won by Abbeville which turned out 1,463 fans for the first contest.

The whole league experienced greater financial success in 1935, especially Opelousas and its night baseball. Jeanerette easily won the regular season by 11 1/2 games, never relinquishing its lead after taking over early in the season. The Blues beat Opelousas four straight games in the first Shaughnessy playoff, then took Lafayette in four of six games for the pennant after Lafayette had eliminated Alexandria. The last game between Lafayette and Jeanerette drew 4,000 fans at Parkdale, a record crowd. It was agreed earlier in the season that seventy-five percent of the playoff gate receipts would be split among the four teams in the playoff. Twenty-five percent would go to all eight clubs in the league. So the whole circuit benefited from the Shaughnessy system. Incidentally, the September playoffs took place in the wake of Governor Huey P. Long's death, and fans spent a moment of silence before the games in recollection of their beloved Huey.

In one of the more unusual occurrences of the playoff games between the Jeanerette and Lafayette clubs, Ben Segrest, the player-manager for Rayne, was in the stands watching one of the games when suddenly he was called upon to pitch. The White Sox pitcher, at bat, was hit with a pitched ball "that couldn't have broken an egg," explained Segrest. Nonetheless, the pitcher "faked a bad rib injury." Lafayette's manager, knowing Segrest was in the stands, asked President Daly who was also watching the game that Segrest replace his injured pitcher. Segrest had done well against

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the powerful Jeanerette club during the season, and apparently the injury was planned. Daly granted permission for the unusual request, and in a few minutes Segrest was out pitching for Lafayette. Jeanerette eventually won the game, anyway.7

Fan participation on the field and angry debates with the umpires continued during the league's second year, lending to its growing reputation as the "Hot Sauce" League. In a game between the Lake Charles Skippers and the Lafayette club, fans charged umpire Doty after a close call at first. The city marshall personally led Doty off the field until the trouble simmered down. But as more and more fans flooded the field to surround the umpire, the mayor of Lake Charles, J.A. Trotti, was forced to come from the grandstand and onto the field to restore order.8 After a particularly difficult game in Opelousas one hot night in July, umpires Nixon and Lamereaux were at a pool hall in Opelousas relaxing. Nixon explained what happened: "We hadn't been standing there long when some guy comes in and spotting us, he walks over, and without any ceremony at all, hauls off and socks Lamereaux." Unfortunately for Lamereaux, the irate fan thought he was umpire Crowley. Nixon punched the perpetrator and a "regular brawl" began. "Me and Lamereaux were having a busy time trying to take care of ourselves in the scramble."9

Mayor Schlessinger, president of the Abbeville Athletic Association,

7 Ben Segrest, interview.


issued a formal apology to the city of Lafayette for an incident which followed the game on May 12. An Abbeville fan barged into the White Sox dressing room after the game and punched shortstop Stanley Sonnier for allegedly spiking Abbeville shortstop Larry Fisher. The fan was arrested, charged $5.00 and given a twenty-day suspended sentence.\textsuperscript{10} An argument over a close and important play at first base broke out in a game in Opelousas in July. The umpire called the runner out when apparently the first baseman dropped the throw. The crowd was so upset that it took "the services of several police and a number of fans to escort the umpires from the field."\textsuperscript{11} In another incident, manager Art Phelan of the Aces started throwing bats on the infield in a fit of anger over a call by the umpire. Lafayette was awarded a forfeit over the action.\textsuperscript{12}

The Evangeline League's "color" was not the only reason for its increasing notoriety. It soon became respected throughout the baseball world as a loop with good talent. J. Walter Morris predicted in July of 1934 that the Evangeline and Arkansas State League were going to sell more promising players than any other two leagues in the National Association.\textsuperscript{13} At the pennant raising ceremony in Lafayette on June 13, 1935, Daly, in ceremonies honoring the first pennant winners, said that the year old league "has already gained outstanding success."

Standing on the pitcher's mound in the center of Parkdale's new grass


\textsuperscript{12}"Game Here with Alex Aces Forfeited," \textit{The Daily Advertiser}, June 11, 1935, p. 10.
infield, Daly went on to boast that the league "yields to no other organization of its kind in the United States." New Orleans began to take notice, too, and in Harry Martinez's column, "From the Crows Nest" in the New Orleans States, he reported that the Evangeline League was the best Class D league around. He explained that two of its 1934 products had already broken into the big leagues, and others had made successful transitions to AA clubs. "Bruce Hayes, Pat Flaherty, Tom Zoller and several other major league scouts declare the Evangeline League is the best Class D organization in baseball and players that can make the grade in this progressive loop can make the grade in leagues of higher classification."

None of this was a misrepresentation, for nineteen Evangeline League players were called up to higher classifications at the end of the 1935 season, including William "Red" Dowie who was sold to Dallas. A Lafayette pitcher whose record was 25-7, Dowie pitched four consecutive games for the White Sox in the semi-final series with Alexandria and won all four games. Cecil "Dynamite" Dunn, outfielder for Lake Charles, led the league with forty-six home runs, including an unbelievable five homers in the game on April 29, 1935. (His sixth hit of that contest was a line drive double off the left field wall.) Probably no other single event is talked about more in the history of the circuit than this great feat of Dunn's. The output resulted in twelve runs batted in and an accumulation of twenty-one

14 "White Sox Defeat Rayne in Pennant Raising Game, 4-3," The Daily Advertiser, June 14, 1935, p. 8.

total bases in a single contest! Hitting five home runs in one game has never been accomplished in the majors, but has been matched several times in minor league history. It certainly stands as the greatest batting performance ever witnessed by Louisiana baseball fans. Dunn toured the minor circuits for several seasons, but never played in the majors. Mention must be made of the outstanding pitcher for the champion Blues, Clausen Vines, who was sold to the Chicago Cubs at the end of the season. Vines, who was a "cinch" to make the majors according to at least one veteran player, ruined his arm during the playoffs when his manager let him pitch with a heavy wet ball on a rainy day. Ivy Griffin, the Jeanerette manager, explained that there were too many fans in the stands to let down.16

Shortly after the end of the 1935 season, Bill Daly announced that he would retire as league president. The decision was not a difficult one for him. Daly considered leaving after the first season, when Springhill College offered him the position of head football coach. But Daly was persuaded to stay on for another year. The tough New Orleanian later explained his reasoning in simple terms—money. In 1934 Daly was paid $100.00 a month by each club. This was not a salary, but a stipend for all league expenses including umpire salaries. Each umpire earned $85.00 a month, leaving little money for anything else. In 1935 the teams were required to pay $200.00 a month to the league office, but this was not nearly enough. Daly was forced to spend his own money—something he was willing to do as long as he could see the league benefited his insurance business. But he

16Ben Segrest, interview.
was convinced that the presidency did not help publicize his agency, and the owners were demanding more and more meetings which required a long, tiresome 160-mile journey to Lafayette. So when Springhill again offered Daly the coaching job, Daly decided to step down as league president. A wire was sent to the National Association about the resignation. Upon hearing the news, J. Walter Morris was immediately interested. He had been impressed with the quick success of the little circuit, expressed his aspiration to replace Daly to the league moguls at the first winter meeting, and was offered the position almost immediately. Morris' experience would be good for the young loop, though like Daly he had other commitments. Besides being a promotional director for the National Association, Morris was also currently the president of both the Cotton States and East Texas Leagues.

There was good reason for the Evangeline to look forward to its third year of operation. Attendance was up in 1935 throughout the minor leagues, and much of the credit was given to night baseball which was widely successful. Of the twenty-one leagues in existence, none failed. Two new leagues were given charters for the 1936 season, and all indications pointed to another good year. Judge Bramham admitted that his only worry for 1936 was that it was an election year, "notoriously bad for minor league clubs. Perhaps too many fans will be out working for the election rather than paying attention to baseball.

17William T. Daly, interview.
18"Says Indications are Pointing to Another Good Year for the Minors," The Daily Advertiser, January 11, 1936, p. 8.
But I think they will be found a good many times sitting in the bleachers or the grandstands around the country.\textsuperscript{19}

The Evangeline communities were beginning to appreciate the business that professional baseball generated also. R. F. Cisco, president of the Lake Charles Association of Commerce, outlined the benefits of the Class D circuit. The games brought good crowds to the city, sponsored clean sports for the community, and opened a source of money to merchants that would otherwise be lacking.\textsuperscript{20} As an editorial in the Opelousas \textit{Clarion-News} noted: "All during the season the city was filled nightly with fans from other towns. Every visitor left a few dollars in Opelousas. Particularly restaurants and filling stations profited. The cash found its way to the banks and in turn into other lines of trade."\textsuperscript{21} Thus a franchise in the Evangeline League was a desirable business venture, as well as a source of pride to the town in having a professional baseball team. It came as no surprise, then, that several towns in south Louisiana signified their desire to join the league at the winter meetings, in the event a vacancy would appear before the season opened.

During those sessions the league gave evidence of its growing maturity when the owners voted on a hefty 170 game schedule. (In 1934 and 1935 the schedule called for 126 and 140 games respectively.)


\textsuperscript{20}"Many Improvements in American Legion Park," \textit{The Lake Charles American Press}, April 2, 1936, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{21}"Baseball Virtue," \textit{The Clarion-News}, September 17, 1936, p. 4.
Lafayette's owners Boustany and Schilling announced that their club's home, Parkdale, would install lights, a move inspired by the success of Opelousas the previous season. Lafayette would also expand seating capacity to 2,500. Boustany justified the progress: "In making these extensive improvements, involving a considerable expenditure, we are doing so in the belief that the present great interest in baseball here and throughout the Evangeline League will steadily increase."22 Ceremonies for Lafayette's first night baseball game were typically festive. A parade preceding the game displayed a queen, who happened to be the mayor's daughter, and fourteen maids in a colorful exhibition of pomp. It was an event the owners hoped would be memorable, and every public official in the parish was invited. Twenty-six hundred fans, however, were present at the evening contest. Even the bishop of Lafayette was there to bless the diamond and the fans, and he delivered the most memorable comments. "Next to the church and family," the Reverend Jeanmard declared, "I would rather see our people in this grandstand, watching this interesting sport, than anywhere else."23

Mayor Hollier, Clayton Guilbeau, and Frankie Deitlein from Opelousas announced to Morris and the owners that they planned to build a new park for the 1937 season with a seating capacity between 2,000 and 2,500. Their foresight was accurate, for in 1936 the Indians would draw over 60,000 fans, a higher figure than many clubs

22"Night Games to be Staged at Parkdale Diamond," The Daily Advertiser, March 27, 1936, p. 8.

in much larger towns could ever hope to draw. "Lafayette, New Iberia, Abbeville and other Evangeline League spots have such fine baseball parks," the Mayor pointed out, "that Opelousas is determined not to be outside. Baseball here has been so successful that Opelousas people have made up their mind that their baseball heroes will be as well taken care of as any others." 24

Physical improvements at American Legion Park in Lake Charles introduced another intriguing phenomenon into Evangeline League baseball—the unexpected interest shown in the games by the black communities in the loop's towns. To provide for the growing number of Negro fans who patronized the Skippers' games, Negro bleachers were built (no black patrons were ever found in the covered grandstand). In addition, the owners built a ladies restroom, box seats, and a club house. Opelousas and Abbeville also constructed bleachers to accommodate "colored patrons" in 1936. The same was true in most of the league's towns. One player from Rayne acknowledged that between 100 and 125 blacks attended Rice Bird games in the early years of the league. 25 There were thirty to forty regular paying black customers in Elementary Park for the Indians' games. 26 And in 1938 Alexandria doubled the seating capacity for black spectators. Virtually every town in the league enjoyed the support of black fans who generally paid less for their tickets but were just as vocal and fervent as their white counterparts in the grandstand or in the white bleachers.

24"Newspaper Writer Thinks Highly of City, Ball Team," The Opelousas Herald, September 1, 1936, p. 1.

25Ben Segrest, interview.

26Frankie Deitlein, interview.
across the diamond from them. At Bringhurst Field in Alexandria, for instance, the ticket price for blacks was 15¢ but was 55¢ for all others. Black semi-pro leagues did exist in the area, and games were played on Sundays after the white leagues were finished with the diamond. But many black fans began to desert these well played but unsophisticated Sunday games to pay admission and see the Evangeline games. The lure of daily, professional baseball was stronger. Their attendance at these all-white Evangeline contests is not insignificant, for it demonstrates their community pride in a way that would be difficult to detect otherwise. It was not until after the war that these fans could cheer for someone of their race in the Evangeline circuit.

Spring training for 1936 officially opened on March 22nd with most of the clubs holding tryouts on home diamonds for aspiring rookies. Since the bulk of the league's players would come from the castoffs of upper echelon leagues, the Evangeline managers, out scouting for these players, were seldom at home in early spring. Gradually, however, their team would take shape and would begin practicing as a unit by early April, a few weeks before the season opener. In the meantime, teams like the Beaumont Exporters of the Texas League or even the Pelicans from New Orleans would play exhibition games to large paying crowds before the season commenced. This was the league's way of introducing the players to the local fans who were bombarded with new faces not only every spring but throughout the season because of necessary trades or player promotions. It was not uncommon for a fourteen-man roster to see a turnover of two or three men per position during the 170-game season.
In one extraordinary case, the Abbeville Athletics had over fifty different players on their roster during the 1936 season alone.\(^{27}\) It was hardly surprising then that the Abbeville club finished next to last in the league standings.

Besides the standard fare of exhibition games against league clubs during the spring, Evangeline fans were treated to an occasional match with the unorthodox House of David team made up of long-haired, bearded players who traveled throughout the country and in Mexico and Canada playing exhibition ball games with any club they could find, whether it be professional or semi-pro, black or white. They travelled by bus, covering approximately twenty-five to thirty thousand miles a year. They always drew a handsome crowd not only because of their irregular appearance but also because they offered good competition. In 1934, for example, the House of David played 198 games, won 142, lost forty-one, and was tied in the remaining fifteen games. In 1935 they played 198 games and won 145, lost fifty, and tied two.\(^{28}\) It was quite a spectacle when these fellows took the field in their ruffled uniforms, their hair flowing wildly from beneath their caps.

Pre-season ticket sales in Opelousas in 1936 were good. In a few days, forty-eight season tickets were sold at a cost of $15.00 each, or about 22 1/2 cents a game, a savings of 18¢ or so a game. The club offered sixty season tickets for sale and expected them all to go in a week. In Abbeville, President Morris persuaded Mayor Schlessinger to

\(^{27}\)"Indians Defeat Aces 6-3," The Opelousas Herald, September 8, 1936, p. 1.

continue his ownership of the Athletics, a club which did not draw nearly as well as anticipated while finishing near the bottom of the 1935 standings. In a drive to raise funds the Abbeville Athletic Association pushed the sale of season tickets, charging $25.00 for those in box seats, $17.30 for a man's season ticket with no reserved seat, $10.00 for a lady's season ticket, and $4.00 for a student pass. Fans throughout Vermillion Parish contributed in the promotion in order to make the Athletics a financially viable club. The advance sale of season tickets was encouraging to management, and season box seat tickets were all sold in three days.

Promotions of one kind or another became more popular around the league as the season progressed. Rayne's Lozen Leger managed to arrange a Sunday morning donkey baseball game to be played before the regularly scheduled contest. And in recognition of the excellent following the Rice Birds had from Crowley, Leger held a "Crowley Day" at Rayne Baseball Park. "Fans from Crowley are every bit as loyal as those from Rayne," The Rayne Tribune reported. A new car was given away in July to a lucky patron after a game in Lafayette, a promotion that was so successful in attracting paying fans that Schilling and Boustany made the event an annual affair. A similar give away was sponsored in Opelousas. The winning number there was held by a sixteen-year old black girl. "A loud roar from the Negro bleachers


30"First Ball Game is Set for April 1," The Abbeville Meridional March 28, 1936, p. 1.

pointed out the winner," reported the Clarion News. The elated young girl sold the Plymouth soon, however, and received $750.00 cash for it.32

Probably the biggest spectacle of the season was Lafayette's "Police Department Night" at Parkdale, an event staged to raise funds for new police uniforms. Several rounds of boxing were planned before the baseball game. But it wasn't a typical sparring match. A half dozen of "the blackest, scrappiest negroes" were "rounded up" for the exhibition33 in which six of them donned boxing gloves and punched each other at random. Five of them were to be blindfolded. The Daily Advertiser reported that the battle royal would "probably steal the show, as the negroes have been told to shoot the works."34

In a move inspired by the new league president, the 1936 all-star selections were made not by sportswriters, but by the fans, who used ballots conveniently located in all the circuit's ballparks to vote for their favorite players. The all-star team would play the club which was leading the league at the time of the game--sometime in mid-June.

The rule which required a minimum of two umpires at a game did nothing to quell the excitable "Hot Sauce" league fans. On a July night in Lafayette that year, after a close play at third base late


33Francis Guchereau, "White Sox Set League Hit Record in Defeating Skippers 25-0," The Daily Advertiser, August 10, 1936, p.8.

34"Big Parkdale Program Tonight for Police Department Uniform Fund," The Daily Advertiser, August 11, 1936, p. 8.
in the game, practically all of the White Sox swarmed around umpire Harris "protesting heatedly." At the conclusion of the game White Sox supporters "rushed onto the field and commenced crowding Umpire Harris "who was being escorted off the field by a contingent of beefy policemen. The Daily Advertiser reported that Harris was taken quickly to a police car, and with a "clamoring group encircling the auto, was driven away." A large crowd from Rayne was in attendance at the game with their arch-rivals from Lafayette which helped, according to the newspaper account, "to enliven the proceedings."35 Other umpires were intimidated in Lake Charles when the Skippers' star hitter Dan Pavloire was thrown out of the game in the first inning. Lake Charles lost the contest 10-4, and angry home fans "thronged around umpire Yoakum and threatened umpire Orefice when he attempted to come to his mate's aid." The officials were "saved" by Lake Charles manager Tatum who hastily opened the clubhouse door, "offering them the safety of its well barricaded walls."36 In one of the most serious incidents in the league, two umpires were assaulted by the fans after a game in Rayne. An investigation was conducted by the league, and an affidavit written by both umpires involved in the affair was filed with the National Association. The statement of umpire O. L. Dowty explains what happened:

As the umpires approached the players' bench several fans just behind the bench started cursing umpire Montelbano. Umpire Dowty asked Umpire Montelbano the name of the man who seemed to be


36 "M. C. Tatum Back as Manager of Skippers," The Lake Charles American Press, June 16, 1936, p. 6.
doing much of the cursing and threatening. At this, this man (who was found to be a Mr. Besse) began cursing Umpire Dowty. They told Montelbano that if he came out that way that they were going to beat the hell out of him and used other unprintable language. At this time Montelbano was hit with a pop bottle thrown from over in the crowd. A second or two later after Montelbano was hit a second time Umpire Dowty...told Montelbano to come on with him, and turned to the crowd and told them not to touch him. About this time someone from behind hit me with something (witnesses said a bat)knocking me unconscious. I quickly regained consciousness and ran toward the gate trying to catch this person but was unable to.37

Although it would be foolish to condone these fans' assaults on Evangeline League umpires, it is easy to understand why their tempers were ignited so frequently. Most of the umpires used in the league were trained, coming from the Barr School of Umpires in Hot Springs, Arkansas. These men came to the league office looking for work--there was no need to recruit them in the early 1930's.38 Unfortunately for Daly and Morris, few had any experience in professional baseball, and none were ready for the excitable fans they were to encounter in south Louisiana. Occasionally a good umpire would be discovered, but he many times would find his way to a higher classification league in much the same way as a player would advance. So the Class D leagues were abundant with sub-par umpires who really did not want to be where they were, anyway. None of these men were professionals. They were merely umpiring either to supplement their meager income or, if


38William T. Daly, interview.
otherwise unemployed, to make a small income during the baseball season. Thus the umpiring in the Evangeline League left a good deal to be desired. A vivid example of the frustration experienced by a club over the incompetency of the loop's officials appears in The Abbeville Meridional's editorial comment in May of 1936:

We were deeply disappointed in last Wednesday's game here when Lafayette played the Abbeville Athletics. We were subjected to bad decisions ...[despite being] the underdogs of the league at present. Many...expressed their disgust... and we feel that these decisions by these incompetent umpires were not only disheartening to the players but demoralizing to the team as a whole. We sincerely suggest that the inefficient umpires be realased by more experienced men even though it should mean an additional cost to the Evangeline.39

Umpiring complaints were increasing in minor leagues throughout the country. Judge Bramham accepted the suggestion that the National Association conduct a pre-season school for all non-trained or ill-trained umpires in B, C, and D leagues in 1939. The National Association agreed to pay for the instruction if the leagues would agree to pay for the umpire trainees' expenses. But apparently some leagues refused to pay the required expenses, even though the Evangeline League was willing, and the project never materialized.40

It was not an easy life for the umpires either. Their salaries were predictably low--$58.00 a month in the 1930's, gradually rising to $200.00 a month just after the war. In 1939 substitute umpires, those hired because the regular umpire was unable to officiate, received $2.50 a game. These figures would rise for those with more

39 "Baseball Notes," The Abbeville Meridional, May 9, 1936, p. 5.
40 William Bramham, letter to J. Wilmot Dalferes, March 21, 1939.
experience. With this salary, however, came no expense account, so the official was forced to pay for his own travel expenses and equipment with this money. Lloyd Harrington, a league umpire in 1939-1940 and former Evangeline player in 1936, explained that someone usually had a car, and since the umpires worked in pairs it wasn't too difficult to find a ride to the games. Occasionally, however, they were forced to travel with a team in their bus or auto caravan, a situation which created obvious complications. (Harry Chozen, a Lake Charles player in 1935, told the story of one such incident which got the team and the umpires into trouble. The team was travelling back from one of its games in the team cars, a Peerless and a Packard. Umpire "Monk" Mollazzo was with the team in one of the autos. They passed a watermelon patch and Mollazzo ordered the driver to stop. As the hungry umpire crawled under the barbed wire fence, a man with a shotgun came out of his house and began firing rock salt at the car. Mollazzo was almost stranded on the road, for the car was quickly on its way again.) All umpires worked out of Lafayette, their "office" being the Gem Restaurant on Johnston Street. Harrington says they used to meet there for breakfast where they would receive their monthly assignments from the umpire-in-chief, the man held accountable for making these assignments and acting as spokesman for the umpires. The umpire-in-chief had the same number of games to officiate in as did the others but made a few

41 J. Wilmot Dalferes, letter to league directors, May 25, 1939.
42 Harry Chozen, interview, June 11, 1974.
43 Lloyd Harrington, interview, June 11, 1974.
dollars a month more for his added responsibilities.

The ballparks in a few of the Evangeline towns were in many cases unfit for good baseball, adding an extra burden for the lowly umpire. In Jeanerette, where conditions were particularly poor, a big outfielder named Casey Kimble chased a fly ball in left field, hit the wall without breaking stride, and cracked through the rotted fence tearing up Kimble's pants. The dazed outfielder came back into the park with his pants half off, waving the ball wildly in his hand.44 Jeanerette also had the distinction of having an 8 x 10 tin pumphouse in the middle of right center field which couldn't be removed because it was owned by the school which in turn owned the ballpark. The ground rules made the umpiring in Jeanerette difficult, for if a ball hit the pumphouse, the official had to determine if it could have been caught or if it would have been a legitimate base hit. In Rayne the intimate little park was sometimes grim for the lonely home plate umpire. There was almost no room behind him and the catcher, and he was virtually up against the grandstand screen. Fans would put cigarettes in his collar from the stands whenever the action slowed down.45 And in the left and right field foul territories in Abbeville, telephone wires were strung. If a ball hit the wire and was deflected, it still was in play and could be caught for an out.

Much has been said about the abuse the arbiters received from the fans. But the players and managers were sources of mistreatment too.

The common remedy for the umpires' problem was throwing a player (or

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44Carl Gilmore, interview, July 9, 1974.

45Sam Tarleton, interview, July 11, 1974.
manager) out of the game, fining him or both. More and more fining incidents accompanied the increasingly tumultuous state of affairs in the little circuit, especially in games involving teams vying for a playoff berth near the end of the season. Carl Gilmore, a pitcher in the league in 1936, told this story: "Once the umpires came to a game without masks. The plate umpire had to umpire behind me (the pitcher). After he kept calling a lot of bad calls, I would spit in the air after each "ball" he called when I thought it should be a strike. The wind was blowing in hard that day from home plate, and after the third spraying, the umpire fined me $5.00."\[46\]

Joe Bratcher of Lake Charles, who was normally reserved and was seldom disciplined by an umpire, did have his moments on occasion. After an unusually close call, Bratcher walked calmly to the umpire and said: "I understand you had a tooth pulled. Well, I'm laughing about it, see? I wish they'd pull 'um all except one, and leave that one for you to have the tooth ache in." He was quickly fined.\[47\] In a more serious disturbance at New Iberia, player-manager Jimmie Sanders, known throughout the league for his temper, was fined $25.00 for intimidating and later threatening umpire K. P. Douglas. Douglas was disturbed by the threat and complained to the league office about Sanders in a letter that related the incident in detail. Douglas had called a New Iberia base runner out when he was picked off by the opposing pitcher.

\[46\]Carl Gilmore, interview.

\[47\]Elliot Chaze, "But Really...," The Lake Charles American Press, July 23, 1936, p. 10.
"Sanders...came to me at the plate and approaching me, said: 'You G-- D--- S-- of a B---- that pitcher balked.' My reply was, 'Jimmie, I saw no balk and I fine you $5.00.' His reply was, You S-- of a B---- he did balk.' My reply was, 'Your fine is $10.00 and I warn you to cool off and talk differently.' His reply was, 'You G-- D--- Dirty Son of a B---- you better not fine me.' My reply was, 'Jimmie it's now $15.00 and you're making an ugly report for me to turn in.' His reply was, 'You B------.' I've got a notion to punch you in your G-- D--- nose.' My reply was, 'Your fine is now $20.00 and you haven't the guts to punch me in the nose.' His reply was, 'You S-- of a B---- if you turn in a fine on me I'll take a bat and knock your G-- D--- brains out.' My reply was 'Jimmie, your fine is now $25.00 and I know you want me to put you out of the game, but I'm going to take more of your money instead if you don't get away from here.' At this point he left, but repeatedly cursed me during the game and at one time left his playing position in left field and ran all the way to me at home plate and asked, 'Where was that last pitch' on a batter who had been walked and was on second base at the moment...? As we were leaving the park...he followed along beside us and again called me a S-- of a B---- in the presence of his ball players and fans...saying if you turn in a fine on me I'll kill you.'

The league later reprimanded Sanders, but the incident exemplifies the restraint that many of the league's officials were required to display in the volatile league.

The best year yet for attendance at the playoffs was 1936, the second year the Shaughnessy system was in effect. Alexandria finished the season on top, followed by Opelousas, Rayne, and Jeanerette. Mayor Hollier of Opelousas had ticket requests from "every section of south

Louisiana and many sections of Texas," bragged the Clarion-News.49 As many as 500 Opelousas fans travelled forty-eight miles to Rayne to enjoy the semi-final series. Many supporters from Church Point and Eunice also made the journey. The Opelousas Indians were a young team; a different crew from the previous year's club which lost quickly to the powerful Jeanerette nine. They were as excited about the playoffs as the fans. There was no bus for the team. They had travelled all season long in two old Packard touring cars, carrying oil with them wherever they went, for someone "had to fill it about every mile" according to one player.50 The fans followed closely behind with their horns and cowbells, determined to make as much noise for the home team as possible. Austin Fontenot promised the team that if they beat Alexandria after eliminating Rayne in the semi-final series, he would give them each a month's salary from the slush fund accumulated by the slot machines. Fontenot had a reputation for extravagance, often giving a player $10.00 before he came to bat and telling him to go hit a home run.51

Rayne was defeated in four of six games, and the Alexandria Aces erased Jeanerette from the pennant picture in six games also. Some 1,500 extra folding chairs were set up along the foul lines to accommodate the expected large crowds in Opelousas for the showdown. These were soon taken, however, and fans lined up about eight deep on both lines. "We did everything in our power to take care of the crowd

50Tom Savage, interview, July 1, 1974.
51Ibid.
Sunday night," said Clayton Guilbeau. "We certainly appreciate the attendance and invite the baseball public back to see the game tomorrow night...." (4,500 to 5,000 fans showed up to watch the exciting contest in the second and third games, including 1,500 or so from Alexandria) But fan support was not enough, for Alexandria took home the third Evangeline League pennant. Thirteen out of fourteen of the '36 Aces were called up to Class A or better, a Class D record. Eight of these played with the Beaumont Exporters in 1937, the Texas League champion.

The close proximity of the towns in the league was an important factor in the success of the circuit. Although not all towns fared well in attendance, most were able to play upon the fierce territorial pride that each town held for their community, a pride made even more intense because of the short distances between the ball clubs' homes. Only Alexandria and Lake Charles were an appreciable distance from the other six towns, all of which were in a very tight geographical neighborhood. Even this did not deter some fans from Opelousas and even Alexandria from traveling as far away as Lake Charles to see the games. The most hated rival in the league was Lafayette, the unofficial capital of French south Louisiana. Other rivalries existed, as between Jeanerette and New Iberia, New Iberia and Abbeville, and Opelousas and Alexandria. But everyone's antagonist was the White Sox crew from Lafayette. The big city in Cajun land had the best ballpark, the coldest beer, and the newest team travelling bus. That was where the money was in the league, and Schilling and Boustany

52"Game Tonight," The Opelousas Herald, September 8, 1936, p. 1.
always kept their club financially sound. It was no wonder then that the natural jealousies of the poor little town vs. the big city developed and continued throughout the league's existence. It was a healthy competition and the circuit benefited from these struggles.

The league drew over 200,000 fans in 1936, an incredible figure given that the combined population of the league towns was only 78,047. Jeanerette, a town of 2,700, drew 25,000 in 1936. Opelousas drew a solid 50,000 spectators, half as many as the Pelicans drew in New Orleans. The Evangeline was now mostly a night league, a major reason why attendance soared. Only Jeanerette, Alexandria, Lake Charles, and Abbeville were without lights in 1937, and before long only Lake Charles would have no night action at its park. Leo Gross, the Skippers' owner, was a baseball purist who didn't believe the game should be played at night. League president Morris was enthusiastic about the attendance. Writing to Bill Keefe, the respected sportswriter for the *Times Picayune*, Morris had this to say as the 1937 season opened: "Having looked over the Evangeline League situation I have no hesitancy in predicting the Evangeline League will give any minor league outfit under Class A something to shoot at in attendance this year." Southwest Louisiana "is booming in a business way and all the folks out there are baseball mad. The parks have all been improved and the teams strengthened. It should be the greatest pennant fight in the history of that league."


There was no question that the league was making good progress in improving its ballparks. Partly because of the financial success enjoyed by most of the clubs, improvements were made everywhere in the circuit. Lafayette's Parkdale was expanded to 3,000 seats. Alexandria's Brinthurst Field now held 2,000 under the covered grandstand, and 1,000 more could be seated in the bleachers. Rayne's puny ballpark was replaced by a new stadium which seated 2,000 Ricebird rooters. The Indians were honored for their fine finish in 1936 with a new home in Opelousas. Over 4,000 fans were in attendance at the dedication of Athletic Park to listen to the state attorney general representing Governor Richard Leche, various mayors from southwest Louisiana cities, and J. Walter Morris who admitted to the fans that the Evangeline League was "the apple of my eye."\(^{55}\) The new $7,500.00 park was an excellent facility, with one of the best infields in the minors and a sophisticated seating arrangement which provided a special cage for children. Abbeville not only got a set of expensive lights, ($8,000, the costliest system in the loop)\(^{56}\) and a new ball park called "Westside," but also got a new owner—I. M. Goldberg, a local contractor, business leader and town councilman.

The change in ownership in Abbeville was not a difficult one. Schlessinger and Goldberg were related by marriage, and Goldberg had observed the Abbeville Athletic Association and its operation for three years. Despite good attendance, the franchise was always in


arrears financially. Goldberg wanted to change that. His first step was to build a new park, with excellent lighting facilities. He next dissolved the AAA, an association he never had much confidence in. But more important than all else, he believed, the new owner would not allow his club to make a working agreement with any higher baseball organization. His reason was simple—the club was receiving neither financial assistance nor talented ballplayers from the bigger leagues.
CHAPTER THREE

THE TURBULENT 1937 AND 1938 SEASONS

Spring training was witnessed in 1937 by Arthur Felt, a *Times Picayune* sportswriter. Each team in the league was covered in a separate article by the New Orleans paper, an indication that fans from the city were taking notice of this fast league. Previous to this only league standings were printed in the big daily. The Pelicans even travelled to Opelousas to play the Indians in exhibition on April 8th, a week before the season opened. While the Indians were beating their older cousins from New Orleans, the Opelousas management hounded Larry Gilbert for players.

Talk of Baton Rouge's desire to enter the Evangeline drifted around the league. Perhaps a franchise in the state's capital would replace the Lake Charles club which was rumored to be interested in selling out because of poor attendance. But nothing in this regard materialized. Baton Rouge would eventually enter the league, but not until 1946.

Salary limits were raised for the 1937 season. It was now permissible to dole out $1,000.00 exclusive of the manager's salary, a far cry from the meager $350.00 limit required three years earlier.¹

On April 11th the new team made their 1937 debut. New Iberia won the opening-day attendance award, the "Kop the Kup" trophy, with a crowd of 2,240. Neither the Class C Cotton States nor the East Texas League, Morris' other two circuits, could do better than New

Iberia, the "Pepper Sauce" city on Bayou Concodrie. Lake Charles had the poorest crowd. Opelousas drew 1,179, Rayne boasted 1,200, Lafayette had 1,256 paid customers, and Jeanerette welcomed 1,050. Alexandria's attendance figures for opening day exemplifies the general growth of interest throughout the league. In 1934 the Aces drew 515 for their first home game, in 1935 the crowd grew to 735, and in 1936 it dropped to 725. But after winning the pennant, the Aces drew 1,652 for opening day in 1937, second best in the loop.

It was to be the best season yet for attendance, and contributing most to this was the extremely tight race that continued throughout the season. As of mid-July, the last place team was only 8 1/2 games out of first place. Lafayette, the first place finisher, ended the season with only a .545 winning percentage. Every team in the loop won sixty-one games or more. Francis Guchereau reported in his column, "Evangeline Chatter Box" in the Daily Advertiser, that it was the tightest race in the country's fifty or more baseball leagues.

By mid-August the league was drawing 500,000 paying customers, wrote Bill Keefe in August, who began what was to be a long love affair with the Evangeline circuit. "There is," he proclaimed, "no town in America Rayne's size that can come close to Rayne in attendance or interest in


3"Evangeline Opener Here Draws 1642," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk, April 12, 1937, p. 11.

baseball. It probably is the best baseball town the American pastime can boast of in its history.⁵ Two days later he continued his exultation: "If New Orleans drew as much in a baseball way as Rayne and Abbeville do according to population, the Pelicans at this time would have an attendance of fourteen million instead of 105,000."⁶ (Both attracted 65,000 fans or so.) Opelousas drew 100,000 fans during the 1937 season, almost as good a figure on a proportional basis as Rayne and Abbeville with populations of about 4,500 each. An Opelousas attorney was so happy with the success of the Indians that he put on a chicken and lamb barbeque for the team and some supporters. "No league in baseball with towns so close together," Keefe claimed, "can hold a candle to the Evangeline League."⁷ New Iberia, despite a last-place finish, lured 45,000 spectators. Lafayette broke its own attendance record by drawing over 60,000 paying fans. The Associated Press even carried a story on the phenomenon, explaining that the more than half million Evangeline fans broke an all time Class C or D attendance record. The reason for the great fan interest according to the AP story was the "bitter rivalry between the towns."⁸ The folks in the Evangeline country "won't be satisfied

⁵Bill Keefe, "Viewing the News," The Times Picayune, August 18, 1937, p. 30.


⁷Ibid.

⁸"500,000 Fans Pay to See Evangeline Games," The Lake Charles American Press, August 17, 1937, p. 10.
with a bad team," Bill Keefe pointed out. "They get behind the
management of the teams and demand good ball players." In a later
article, Keefe offered a further explanation: "Baseball in the
Evangeline country has just about got a monopoly on sporting affairs
for the summer and, with fine roads connecting all the cities,
almost every game played in every town holds interest for every other
town in the circuit." 10

Sometimes this enthusiasm turned to violence. Because of the
closeness of the race, fans were even more maniacal than in previous
years. There were more and more incidents of rock and bottle throwing
during the games, making the umpires increasingly uneasy. In a
startling move in June of 1937, the loop's umpires resigned en masse.
They wired President Morris and explained that they were leaving
because of "existing conditions in the league." For two days the
teams' bench warmers became temporary umpires. Quickly Morris
travelled to Lafayette, met with the disgruntled men, and promised
them more police protection.

The incident that had angered most of the umpires took place in
a game between Lafayette and Abbeville at the Athletic's home diamond.
During an argument between the fans and the umpires—a shouting
match developed, and some Abbeville fans spewed out into the field in
pursuit of the umpires. The White Sox team was forced to protect the
umpires from the Abbeville fans, receiving little assistance from the

9 Bill Keefe, "Viewing the News," The Times Picayune, July 1,

10 Ibid., July 17, 1937, p. 9.
police guards assigned to the game. The umpires implored the mayor to give them more protection at the games. But the Abbeville official refused, himself angered at the incident in his ball park. Blaming the umpires for starting the near riot, he replied that he would not guarantee protection to umpires who "would not treat the fans in a gentlemanly manner." President Boustany of the White Sox would not permit his team to travel to Abbeville for the next regularly scheduled game unless the mayor would agree to provide state militia protection for his team and the umpires. Mayor Nelson Hollier refused to be moved, however, and Lafayette forfeited the game and was fined $100.00 by Morris, who sent the money to Abbeville in compensation for lost revenue. Boustany later explained that he refused to allow the White Sox to go to Abbeville "in order to let the people of Abbeville know all the facts so as to come to some agreement that would benefit all concerned." Eventually the umpires were satisfied that there would be adequate police protection at all the games, including the ones in Abbeville, and they resumed their duties. But the "umpires' strike" was well publicized throughout the region. Bill Keefe reported in his column that the fans of the Evangeline country occasionally "show a desire to carve an umpire, but the cities and the league officials have reached an accord.... Our Cajun cousins have learned to curb themselves when they lose. But it would be ridiculous never to expect to see a group of Evangeline League fans


lose and like it.\textsuperscript{13}

In one of the more unusual contests of the 1937 season, a contest between the Rayne Rice Birds and the Lake Charles club in Rayne's new home field ended in a 4-4 tie. In the ninth inning, one of the Lake Charles players smacked a home run with a man on base to put his team ahead by two runs. Hal Funk, Rayne's manager, protested to the umpire that the blow was a foul ball. Rayne's players and fans rallied behind Funk in the vocal attack upon the umpire who, in an extraordinary move, reversed his decision and called the ball foul. Immediately, some two hundred enraged Lake Charles fans who had travelled to Rayne to watch the Skippers play rushed onto the field to defend what they believed was a serious mistake. Lake Charles manager Joe Bratcher, fearing a riot, then called his players off the field and into the team bus to head home. The game was called and it went into the record books as a half game loss for both clubs.\textsuperscript{14}

These spontaneous incidents of disorder were certainly healthy for the league's attendance, if not for the umpires. But scheduled events were also successful in making 1937 a profitable year for the three-year old league. Al Schacht, the famous baseball comic, appeared at Lake Charles for a pre-game performance. Once a minor leaguer himself, Schacht travelled from league to league around the country using a slapstick routine which was universally popular. His reputation was already fixed in the Evangeline League, and wherever he played he drew

\textsuperscript{13}Bill Keefe, "Viewing the News," \textit{The Times Picayune}, July 18, 1937, p. 10.

a larger than normal crowd. And, of course, there was Lafayette's automobile drawing at Parkdale. Francis Guchereau of the *Daily Advertiser* described the scene before the giveaway:

6:00 - Doors open. Many fans waiting to get in.  
6:15 - steady stream of fans now selecting their choice seats in the grandstand.  
6:45 - A steady stream of cars approach Parkdale. Practically all fans who walked to the ball park are taking it easy in their selected spot in the grandstand.  
7:00 - A rush now at the box office and at the gate. Grandstand seats are scarce.  
7:15 - The lines at the two ticket offices which are being handled by 3 ticket sellers are getting large. 'Handy Andy' the announcer is telling everyone to hold on to their tickets for the car drawing. The stream of cars is growing. Fans are seeking good seats in the outfield bleachers and chairs.  
7:30 - The reserved seat customers are coming in.  
7:45 - Very few vacant spots are seen in the outfield bleachers and chairs. A few kids are climbing the left field fence where they sit and give the 'bird' to the fans nearby who call out 'You can't do that.'

Besides its annual automobile give-away, Lafayette was the scene of a marriage at Parkdale's home plate between White Sox player Truett Richardson and his bride, a local girl. The couple walked through a guard of honor formed by Truett's White Sox teammates and the visiting Opelousas Indians, who formed an arch of crossed bats. (It was not the first such wedding. Dizzy Dean was married at home plate when he pitched for the Houston Buffalos before his great career with the St. Louis Cardinals began.) Richardson incidentally pitched a no-hitter for Lafayette the very next day.

This and other such stories brought a Life magazine photographer to Opelousas, where he took over 1,500 photos of the Indians and their park for a pictoral expose in the national magazine. But the photographer was looking for more—a story about how the slot machines in Opelousas supported the team. Frankie Deitlein, the Indians' road secretary, slot machine collector, and general helper, was given the assignment to escort the photographer around town. But Guilbeau told Deitlein to keep him away from the machines. Ignoring Guilbeau's warning, Deitlein grandly entertained the Life representative, who spent three days playing the slots and even visiting the local brothel. He took pictures of the machines (he could hardly have avoided seeing them). But "I gave him such a good time," the eccentric Opelousan explained, "that he told me he wouldn't use the pictures." The photographer kept his word. The magazine never carried the story.

Slot machines, like other forms of gambling, were illegal, of course, but in rural south Louisiana there was hardly an arrest made for these improprieties. Inevitably a poker game could be found in the back room of the local bar with five or six Cajuns speaking strictly French. Little attempt was made to conceal these games. And it was not unusual for the wives and children of the players to stand behind the men with casual curiosity, for they were seldom off limits in the bar. It was a place of recreation and amusement, where women as well as men could meet their friends and enjoy a conversation. The atmosphere was open and honest. Even bookies operated with virtual impunity. It was no secret where the town gaming joint was, and the police paid no attention.

17Frankie Deitlein, interview.
Nowhere was the gambling so open and unpretentious as in Opelousas. A sign plainly stated on each slot machine where the patron's lost money was going: "THIS SLOT MACHINE OPERATED FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE OPELOUSAS BASEBALL CLUB." The notice was not altogether accurate, however. According to Sam Tarleton, veteran sportswriter in the Evangeline, only about one-third of the receipts went to the ball club. Another third went to the machines' owner, and the remainder went to the proprietor who kept the slots. Tarleton also was convinced that some of the money went for politics. Austin Fontenot, the town's district attorney and a strong supporter of the Long family, was undoubtedly the man Tarleton suspected, for it was he who controlled the devices in Opelousas.

1937 was a banner year for all but two clubs—Lake Charles and Rayne. After a pair of last place finishes, the Skippers finally won a bid for the 1937 playoffs by finishing fourth. But attendance was embarrassingly low; Lake Charles was outdrawn by towns of much smaller populations. The town also had trouble with the players. Early in the season the Skippers looked unusually lackluster and indifferent in their style of play and attitude. Errors were frequent—it was not uncommon for the team to commit as many as eight errors a game. Some fans declared this due to the team's drinking habits. Manager Joe Bratcher, a tough minded ex-ballplayer himself, got wind of the rumors and furiously threatened to fire the whole team. As the season moved into July, the problem had not been resolved. One of Bratcher's players, catcher Jimmy Lawrence, became drunk one night in a Lake Charles night

18Sam Tarleton, interview.
spot after a game and apparently started a fight with another patron at the bar. Others joined in the melee. When it was over, Lawrence had been "beaten over the head and stabbed several times." He later recovered to find out that Morris had suspended him indefinitely. 19 Bratcher was more concerned than usual with the incident, for he had bought the club from Leo Gross before the season began and had promised the fans a "new deal" team. They would have to wait only one more year, for in 1938 Lake Charles would win its first pennant.

No one in 1937 anticipated anything but another exciting season for the Rice Birds, who made the playoffs in 1936 and who were now housed in their new stadium. A new intimacy held the city to their team. The players' nicknames were printed in the local paper ("Carrots," "Mud," "Snake" and "Ace" to name a few), and the town's shop owners responded to opening day ceremonies by offering everything from crayfish bisque and a free drink for the first RBI to a half dozen frog legs for the first homer and an electric fan to the player who struck out first! 20 Lozen Leger, the penurious owner of the colorful club, even occasionally opened up a game to the public free of charge. Later in the season in an uncharacteristic display of generosity, he purchased a new fire truck for the town. Few knew how Leger was able to afford the expensive new vehicle. Hooky Irwin, the man mostly responsible for bringing the Evangeline League to Rayne and who originally urged Leger to appropriate his money for the venture, told the story thirty-five years later.


A mysterious fire destroyed Rayne's new grandstand on July 29th, 1937. Because storage facilities were built into the grandstand, the fire also ruined the soundspeaker system and destroyed the players' uniforms, gloves, shoes, balls, bats, and other equipment essential for the maintenance of the team and the park. Newspaper accounts of the fire submitted as a possible explanation of the fire the carelessness of a fan who may have dropped a cigarette into the seat cushions sold at the gate and stored under the grandstands. A great effort was made by the townspeople to replenish the team's losses. Donations were solicited and construction began almost immediately on new stands. In the meantime, temporary seating was installed and only one game was lost in the schedule. The Longview, Texas, Cannibals graciously sent extra uniforms to the beleaguered club. While they had to play for a while with "CANNIBALS" printed on their jerseys, the Ricebirds appreciated the help received from their sister Class A club. Some fans brought their own chairs to the games while others sat on the ground or in the bleachers. A report in the Lafayette Daily Advertiser indicated how disaster could prompt a shift in social mores. A half dozen supporters from Opelousas apparently compromised with a few local black fans and sat most happily with them on the first row of the colored bleachers, not an insignificant happening in 1937.

Although the ball park was insured for $12,000, losses were estimated at about $5,000. But Leger was able to continue operation with


the help of the community. The spirit of help was most gratifying, motivating Francis Guchereau of the *Daily Advertiser* to philosophize in his "Evangeline Chatter Box:" "The cooperation given by other clubs in the circuit, and the valuable financial assistance given the boys by fans in providing funds to replace their personal property losses, will never be forgotten, and in times such as these we realize more than ever that we are living in God's country among God's people."²³

According to Irwin, there was a connection between the fire and the slot machine activity in town. Rayne was in baseball only because the machines were able to supply adequate revenue for the club's expenses. A good deal of money was being taken in. But at the same time the Chicago White Sox, who had a working agreement with Rayne, were footing many of the bills for the club. According to the agreement, any deficit shown at the end of the season was paid off by the Chicago organization. The White Sox even sent $500.00 to Leger after the fire to help cover expenses. Chicago found out about the slot machine fund through a Rayne player who was released from Chicago and sent down to Rayne. The parent organization decided to send representatives to the little town and investigate the allegations. Irwin said that Leger, knowing the investigation was coming, had the grandstand burned because all of the club's financial records were kept in the clubhouse beneath the grandstand. Without the club's records the investigation would be futile. No investigation took place and Leger was protected for the moment. Money continued to come in from Chicago, while Leger ran the team on his slush fund. According to

Irwin, Leger pocketed the money sent by the Chicago office.

The $500.00 sent to help buy equipment after the fire was never seen. Irwin suggested that it went in Leger's account along with the other Chicago gratuities.\(^{24}\)

In 1940, the Chicago White Sox dropped their working agreement with Rayne. They never did prove that their money was being funneled into the personal accounts of Rayne's unscrupulous owner, but they did document two other incidents which convinced them that their Class D club was a real liability. In 1939 the Internal Revenue Service demanded that Leger pay taxes on the $17,000.00 in slot machine money that he collected over the years, money that Chicago never could prove existed for the sustenance of the club. The second incident did not involve money but possibly something worse—the manipulation of players in order to influence the result of a game.

In 1937 Rayne led the league much of the season, although it was a very tight race. The Lafayette club was one game behind Rayne with one game to go in the season—a game against Rayne. The team that won, would finish the season in first place and be pitted against the fourth place club in the Shaughnessy playoff system. The second and third place finishers would play each other. Winners of the two series would compete for the championship. Rayne had beaten the third place club, Opelousas, regularly all season. Lafayette had had little trouble with Lake Charles, the fourth place finisher. In a meeting the night before the important Rayne-Lafayette game, Rayne owner Leger told manager Hal Funk to start his poorest pitcher against

\(^{24}\)Hooky Irwin, interview.
Lafayette. This would insure Lafayette's first place finish. They would probably beat Lake Charles in the semi-final series, and Rayne surely would defeat Opelousas in the other semi-final match. A meeting would therefore be insured between Lafayette and Rayne for the championship. This would be a lucrative match-up because the intense rivalry between the two clubs would generate attendance from throughout the area. Lafayette beat Rayne in the important contest, but the Rice Bird players, angered at Leger and Funk, left town the next day and together travelled down to Franklin, Louisiana, threatening to boycott the playoff series. At about 3:00 A.M. they were found in a barroom in Franklin by manager Funk, and after a few minutes were persuaded to play in the scheduled series.  

Leger's plans did not materialize, however, for neither Rayne nor Lafayette got past their semi-final opponents. Opelousas defeated the disenchanted Rice Birds in four straight contests, while Lafayette was eliminated by Joe Bratcher's Lake Charles club in seven games. Because of the short Rayne-Opelousas series, many Indian fans came to watch Lafayette play Lake Charles. Remarked one fan, "We ran out of baseball" in Rayne. Opelousas eventually won the 1937 pennant in a thrilling seven-game series with Lake Charles. Over 17,000 paying spectators watched the championship games. (Seventy-five percent of the gate receipts was split between the two clubs, while the other

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25 Ibid.

26 Francis Guchereau, "Evangeline Chatter Box," The Daily Advertiser, September 8, 1937, p. 10.
twenty-five percent went to the league.)\(^{27}\) Included in that number was Judge William Bramham, who toured the Evangeline country during the playoff series. The judge's visit was his first to a Class D circuit, and he evidently enjoyed his stay as he was treated to a crayfish bisque dinner at St. Martinsville by Morris and the owners.\(^{28}\)

Before the seventh and deciding game Louisiana Governor Richard Leche, an avowed baseball fan, presented a beautiful $500.00 trophy to representatives of the 1936 championship team from Alexandria. Leche was the first state official to witness an Evangeline game. Future governor Earl K. Long was also present as the crowd of 4,000 listened to the presentation. "We are particularly proud of the Evangeline League," Governor Leche said, "because it is a wholly Louisiana league, represented by thriving cities in southwest and central Louisiana."\(^{29}\) Leche also thanked Morris and the club owners for helping to bring the Philadelphia Athletics and the New York Giants to Lake Charles and Baton Rouge, respectively, for spring training in 1938. Undoubtedly the league's success was instrumental in landing these two major league clubs for the spring. It was excellent publicity for the state.

There was jubilation in Opelousas after the pennant was won. A parade through the city was arranged for the players and management of the Indians. Each player also received $100.00 in cash from "parish and city officials," and stores in town donated shirts and

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\(^{27}\) "Plans Perfected for Playoff Series," The Daily Advertiser, August 26, 1937, p. 10.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., September 8, 1937, p. 10.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., August 2, 1937, p. 10.
gift certificates to the players. "Indian Night" was also held in honor of the champions at the Cedar Lane Club. Gifts were presented at the testimonial, but the highlight of the affair was the unveiling of a mammoth cake with the names of all the Opelousas players and even the line score for the championship game imprinted in the icing.  

In 1933 there were only two Class D baseball leagues in the United States. By 1937 the number had grown to twenty. Now there was talk of creating a lower classification system of leagues, Class E, because of the growing popularity of small-time professional baseball during the depression years. "The new leagues," said Judge Bramham, "would be authorized to take care of an instant demand on the part of youth for a place in the baseball sun." They would be the "virtual kindergardens of the professional game." Salaries would be modest, but there would be the opportunity for unemployed boys and young men to earn a living. "The heavy influx of inquiries" convinced Judge Bramham that "there has not been so much interest in years."  

Only one Class E league was created, however. Called the Twin Ports League, it lasted only a few seasons.

In December, 1937, at the annual meeting of the Evangeline League, J. Walter Morris was perfunctorily elected president of the league for the third time. The loop had experienced a significant period of prosperity while the old Texan had been president, and there was no question that he would continue to oversee the Evangeline in 1938.

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Morris was even able to spend more time in the area now, for he no longer presided over the East Texas League. It was announced at the meeting that the National Association had raised the salary limit to $1,200.00 a year and the player roster to fifteen instead of fourteen.  

Discussion eventually drifted to the spring training preparations for the major league clubs that were coming to the area. The Philadelphia Athletics had chosen Lake Charles for two reasons—the climate and the facilities. Although the clubhouse was inadequate, local baseball promoters promised the Athletics that improvements would be made according to their specifications before spring training began. And since Philadelphia had a working agreement with Lake Charles, it was only logical that they occasionally help their associated clubs with a spring visit. The New Jersey Giants (Class AA) went to Lafayette, the New York Giants travelled to Baton Rouge, the Toledo Mud Hens (Class AA) worked in Alexandria, and New Orleans hosted its parent club, the Cleveland Indians. So the area was well saturated with fine baseball talent—a double bonus for the Evangeline League. The prestige of the Class D loop would increase, and the free publicity created by the presence of these major baseball clubs would create excitement for the Evangeline's own season opening in the local area. Too, the host cities were paid by the visitors for the use of their facilities, a fact that never went unnoticed. Exhibition games between the big league clubs and the Evangeline teams drew well. (And in at least one pre-season game, the Lafayette White Sox

played the local Civilian Conservation Corps baseball team.)

The usual park improvements were made throughout the league in preparation for the 1938 season. Alexandria, averaging over 1,000 fans a game at the end of the 1937 season, was forced to build more seats especially for the "colored" fans who followed the team. Jeanerette decided to install lights as a measure to increase attendance. In a letter to the Lake Charles American Press, a Jeanerette official explained the move: "It has been proven for four seasons that daytime baseball cannot pay its way here. Each season has seen the club finish in the red, and while slot machines have helped some, it has been decided by the management that we cannot count on this source of revenue to keep the team going."33

The Blues also were organized into a stock company allowing for more than one owner, although Walter Lejeune remained the principle owner and president of the club. Joe Bratcher was pleased with American Legion Park's improvements for the 1938 season. He had been influential in bringing the Philadelphia club to Lake Charles, and his hard-hitting personality attracted a following in the season, too.

The popular manager had converted an indifferent ball club into a pennant contender in 1937, and he was determined to do even better in 1938. At the end of the 1935 season, Bratcher bought the club for $2,000.00 from the citizens' group which owned the franchise that year. (The stockholders were paid off 75¢ on the dollar after the

33Sylvan Prater, "In This Corner," The Lake Charles American Press, January 21, 1938, p. 6.
sale.) Now the sole owner of the club, Bratcher travelled all season long to improve his team's players, buying and trading wherever he could and keeping a mental record of aspiring high school talent. Bratcher refused to tolerate the night life habits of his 1937 club. In June he suspended Jack Suydam, one of his best hitters, for "playing around at night" at a few "honky tonk" spots. "If you're going to win in this league," he lectured, "you have to be in tip-top shape, and you can't do that by getting drunk." Bratcher even promised the players $150.00 of his own money to be added to the $350.00 bonus from the league if they won the pennant. His intensity and total commitment to winning succeeded, for the Skippers won the 1938 banner for Lake Charles. Even though they won the pennant and drew well, Bratcher admitted in 1938 that the team was in the red. Self-reliant and obstinate, he refused to accept donations from the city.

It was difficult to make money owning a Class D team, even if it was a winner. It took an attendance of 20,000 to 40,000 a season just to break even. While Jeanerette would draw 30,000 in 1938, the club had expenses that made the stockholders consider selling out. In January of 1938, well before the season opened, rumors circulated in Lake Charles among baseball men that the Blues would be sold to Baton Rouge or Crowley. The American Press suggested that Jennings

34 Bob House, interview, July 9, 1974.  
35 Sylvan Prater, "In This Corner," The Lake Charles American Press, June 2, 1938, p. 8.  
36 Ibid., August 17, 1938, p. 8.  
37 Ibid., August 29, 1938, p. 6.
would be an attractive replacement for Jeanerette. Baton Rouge was not a good site because of competition with LSU and because it was located too far from the other clubs. Crowley already had loyalties with Rayne and Lafayette.  

In August, an extraordinary solution to their growing financial problems was reluctantly agreed to by the unhappy Jennings' stockholders. Because of poor attendance at home (the Blues, far behind the leaders of the league, were in last place), the league officials gave Jeanerette permission to play its remaining home games in the opponents' home parks. The host club would pay $100.00 to the Blues for each of these games.  

Actually, 40,000 paying customers was excellent for a town the size of Jeanerette (2,228), the smallest town in the league, especially considering the team's poor showing. But it was not enough to pay for the new lights and other expenses incurred since 1934. More woes beset the club when in late August manager Lee Head was suspended 120 days for charging an umpire in a game. Jeanerette would finish the 1938 season and stumble through 1939, even making the playoffs. But that was to be her last year in the Evangeline League.  

Because of its small size Rayne was also the object of speculation in 1938. Many close observers of the situation believed that the team would move to Baton Rouge, especially after the fire of 1937. These rumors were vehemently denied by Rayne residents. The

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38Ibid., August 20, 1938, p. 4.  
39Ibid., August 17, 1938, p. 8.  
40Ibid., August 27, 1938, p. 4.
whole town, it seemed, reacted strongly to the suggestion that it could not support the club. In the Alexandria Daily Town Talk, sportswriter E. J. Ganel's response was representative: "If there is any place baseball is taken seriously, that place is Rayne. They might abandon the post office at Rayne, they might burn up the courthouse, they might move the parish seat, they might tear up the railroad, but sell the franchise to Baton Rouge?—No, No, a thousand times no." Lozen Leger mailed an angry letter to the Lake Charles American Press in response to the rumors of an impending sale. In it he claimed that the club was in good financial condition, that the new grandstand and lighting was paid for, and that he had no intention of selling the club. Leger concluded by saying that Rayne was the birthplace of the Evangeline League, referring to one of the early organizational meetings held in 1934 in Rayne, and that there was a great deal of community pride associated with the town's baseball tradition.

Despite these continued denials the stories continued to surface. A news item out of Baton Rouge was featured in Bill Keefe's column in the Times Picayune. It reported that Leger was interested in selling the Rice Birds to Bill Terry, the owner of the New York Giants. Terry, in turn, would keep the Class D club in Baton Rouge, a town he was most fond of. Again Leger retorted, for the story created a furor in Rayne. Leger immediately sent a sarcastic telegram to Keefe:


42Sylvan Prater, "In This Corner," The Lake Charles American Press, March 10, 1938, p. 6.
"We suggest you start a movement moving the Pelican franchise to Baton Rouge as our team is better supported than they are. We may have our troubles and have to dig in our pockets occasionally, but sell our franchise—never as long as the good red Creole blood runs through our veins." Keefe, who supported the idea of Baton Rouge entering the Evangeline, seemed happy with the thought of Terry purchasing Leger's club. The capital city had good roads connecting it with the other clubs in the league and had a baseball tradition, since it was once in the old Cotton States League. But Keefe's honest remarks were taken to heart by Leger and his proud little town. Surely Keefe was not arguing against the Rayne franchise but rather in favor of Baton Rouge's bid. Keefe had often complimented the smaller towns in the loop for their amazing devotion to their teams—his affection for these little south Louisiana towns was evident. But Leger's rebuttal was inevitable, and Keefe was gracious enough to print it in his column.

Even close observers of the Evangeline League were surprised when it was announced in July without forewarning that J. Walter Morris was fired as president of the league by the club owners. No explanation as to why Morris was relieved from his duties was ever printed, and fans everywhere were befuddled. A hastily called meeting of the club owners had been convened by Fren Boustany who was the league's vice president, a position which demanded little but the duty to stand in place of the president in his absence.

Boustany's meeting was attended by all but two of the owners—Alexandria's Phelan, and Bratcher from Lake Charles, both of whom were managers and busy with their games. Boustany reported that Morris was charging teams in both the Evangeline and Cotton States League with bills for expenses that did not exist. When the teams mailed in the checks, Morris was pocketing the money. Boustany had evidence of the wrong doing and displayed the proof to the surprised team monguls. Boustany had suspected Morris for months and had closely audited the league's books himself. There could be no doubt that the Lafayette businessman, a practiced bookkeeper, was correct. There was only one thing to do and that was to ask Morris to resign. A telegram asking for his resignation was sent to the Shreveport resident almost immediately, signed by each of the men who attended the meeting except Rayne's Leger, who refused to go along with the others. But five votes constituted a majority, and gave the owners authority to dispose of their league's president. When Morris refused to resign, he was fired. Since Boustany was the vice president, he took Morris' place and became interim league president. Walter LeJeune was selected as vice president. Because of the conflict in interest created by his promotion, Boustany agreed to temporarily resign as Lafayette's president while he served the league.

There was little in the newspapers about the firing,

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44From Boustany, interview, June 12, 1974.

perhaps because the press suspected a scandal of some sort and was reluctant to investigate it. Sports reporting in Louisiana in the Thirties was neither inquisitive nor critical, and Morris, in any case, had a good reputation. He had been given a raise by the owners at their winter meeting in December, 1937. The league appeared to be doing well in the current season. Morris himself had made no controversial decisions—none that could possibly provoke a meeting of the league owners. Other than reporting his firing, the press did nothing except to print an innocuous telegram sent to the league by a Lake Charles fan, who protested the removal of Morris. 46

Morris, resisting the owners' move, contended that the league meeting was not legal because it was not officially called. He protested to Judge Bramham, but the crusty minor league baseball czar refused to get involved in internal league disputes of any type. Still angry about his abrupt dismissal, Morris refused to release the league records to Boustany until the season was completed and demanded his salary for the full 1938 season. Although the owners were angry with his decision to retain the records, no one refused to pay him his full salary. 47 Morris was made business manager of the Shreveport Sports of the Texas League in 1938 and retained his post as president of the Cotton States League.

Boustany became the Evangeline's third president just in time for the 1938 all-star game. In previous years the annual game had


been between the current all-star players and the previous year's pennant winner. But Francis Guchereau of the *Daily Advertiser* persuaded Boustany to allow for a North vs. South all-star game in which the best players from Alexandria, Lafayette, Rayne, and Opelousas would play the standout performers from the four "southern" towns. The suggestion was popular with the fans, who selected the players themselves. Votes for Evangeline all-star came into the league office in Lafayette from New Orleans and Covington, Louisiana, from Beaumont, Texas, and even from Colorado Springs, Colorado. The latter ballot was sent air mail, and printed boldly on the outside of the envelope was the phrase: "Please rush--Terribly Important Ballot." Several voters had listed Dizzy Dean as their choice for pitcher. Another ballot was evidently from a black fan who had written "Mr." before the names of each of his selections.

Although it was the fans who determined the all-stars for 1938, the circuit's sportswriters also selected their "paper" all-star team. In Lake Charles, Lafayette, and Alexandria, the only towns with dailies, there were now regular daily columns with comments almost totally about Evangeline League happenings. Stories about the games were page-one news in most of the weekly papers. The *Times Picayune* began sending a reporter to the league during spring training to cover each team for a growing New Orleans audience. Even the Associated Press began occasionally to print a report on the league. Sportswriters, now present at


every game, had come to be an important part of the league and pur-
veyous of its reputation. Never critical of the players or managers,
they were always optimistic and encouraging even in the face of a
disastrous season. There was occasional criticism of the officiating,
however. In one case the author of the criticism was physically as-
saulted in retaliation for his outburst. The Opelousas Clarion-News
published an article in which Sam Tarleton called the umpiring in the
league "lousy." Three umpires took exception to Tarleton's analysis,
cornered the surprised sportswriter soon afterward in an Opelousas
barroom, and threatened to "punch him in the nose" unless he publicaly
retracted his statements. "Why you Class D baseball writer," said
one umpire to him, "if you ever as much as mention the umpires in your
paper again I'll fix it so you'll be sorry." Tarleton, a career
newspaperman with Opelousas and later with the Beaumont Enterprise,
ever again mentioned the officials in his column.

At the end of the season in August, 1938, Lake Charles was in
first place, followed very closely by Abbeville, the most improved
club in the league. Alexandria and Rayne finished third and forth
respectively. For the first time in the league's history, Opelousas
failed to make the post-season series, finishing sixth. But it was
playoff time in the Evangeline and everyone, including Opelousas
fans, eagerly looked forward to an exciting series. In appreciation,
I. M. Goldberg of Abbeville gave a cash bonus to each player on the
team reaching the playoffs, and Alexandria's Mayor V. V. Lamkin spon-
sored a drive to collect $650.00 to be split between the players. It

50"Rayne Ricebirds To Meet Cardinals Tonight at 8 P.M.,” The
was Abbeville's first playoff, and pennant fever hit hardest in the little Vermillion parish community. Four thousand fans turned out to see the Athletics beat Alexandria's Aces 10-5 in Abbeville's first playoff game. After two more losses at the hands of the scrappy crew from Abbeville, an Alexandria merchant in desperation offered $5.00 to any Alexandria player getting a hit in the next game. The Aces scored five runs in the ninth inning to win, 10-9. It cost the merchant $95.00, including $10.00 to the winning pitcher. Abbeville won the series, however, finally losing the pennant to Joe Bratcher's Lake Charles club. "What really counts is hustle. "Fight," said Bratcher, who theorized that seldom did the best team win. "For the most part, bushers are fellows who are lucky to grab their toothbrush on second bounce."良好的

Playoff attendance in 1938 exceeded 1937's record-breaking figure by 10,000. League president Boustany was exultant. There was even talk that the Evangeline League would become a Class C division league in 1939. But these were just unfounded rumors, normal from these baseball-mad Frenchmen who were prone to such hyperbole late in the season. But no one could refute the attendance figures published by the league statistician in January of 1939: 415,000 fans attended

51 "Aces Lose First Game to Abbeville, 10-5," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk, September 1, 1938, p. 8.
53 Elliot Chaze, "But Really...," The Lake Charles American Press, March 6, 1942, p. 10.
regular season games in 1938 and 45,000 more witnessed the nineteen playoff series games. Alexandria drew 70,000 fans, Lafayette, Abbeville and New Iberia each drew approximately 60,000 spectators, Opelousas, Rayne, and Lake Charles welcomed 45,000 fans in each of their parks, and 30,000 loyal Blues fans came to Jeanerette's park in 1938.55

The reason for this good attendance have already been alluded to. Certainly the lack of other nighttime entertainment in these towns, the inter-community rivalries, and the geographical makeup of the league were important in rousing the fans! fervor and enthusiasm for their team. Some observers said that it was man's need to identify with celebrities that attracted the fan to the ball park. Another pointed out that the spectator was merely escaping the boredom of rural life or looking for social interaction in the grandstand. But one must not overlook the real basic love affair between the players and the fans when searching for an explanation. While the players hardly ever considered themselves much else but baseball players trying to prove themselves, they were nonetheless objects of hero worshiping in each town in the "Pepper Sauce" League. The examples are numerous, but each indicates an affection that ran deep.

"Passing the hat" was a tradition that was nowhere stronger than in the Evangeline League. It was customary after a game-winning hit, a home run, or a well-pitched game for someone to pass his hat around the grandstand to collect money for the player. Tophy Ashy, a player

55Sylvan Prater, "In This Corner," The Lake Charles American Press, January 25, 1939, p. 4.
for Lafayette, once received $200.00 when the hat was passed for him after he hit a home run to win the game. The night before his first son was born, Shep Baron, shortstop for the Aces, hit a home run in the ninth inning to win the game 6-5. Jesse Couvillion, the loyal Alexandria Aces fan who serviced the team's cars began passing the hat. Someone else did, too, and Baron received over $200.00 to apply to maternity fees, though the happy ball player owed only $150.00 for his new baby. There were other bonuses for playing well in Alexandria. If a player hit a homer, the business establishment with an ad on the fence near the spot where the ball sailed over would always agree to give that player something. The local bank's ad was in center field, and a ball hit over the wall there would get the player $25.00 in cash. Sometimes the hat would be passed for reasons of a personal nature. Emmitt Fullenwider was given $96.35 when a hat was passed for him at a game in Lake Charles—-he and his wife had just lost a baby at birth. "It was a beautiful relationship," recalled Tom Patton, a Lafayette resident who would be the team's radio broadcaster after the war.

A player need not be a local boy to be popular. Joe Turk, a Wisconsin-born outfielder who played for Lafayette and who decided to stay in town when his career was over, claimed that the fans adopted

56 Tophy Ashy, interview, June 27, 1974.
57 Shep Baron, interview, June 12, 1974.
58 Sylvan Prater, "In This Corner," The Lake Charles American Press, August 26, 1938, p. 10.
him immediately: "If I took up everybody on all their dinner and barbeque invitations, hell, I wouldn't have been able to run. Many times when I was eating at a restaurant, I would go to pay for the meal and the waitress would say that someone already took care of it." In Opelousas, Tom Savage had to stay indoors most of the day: "People would want to pick us up and drive us around because we were ballplayers. They didn't have the entertainment things they have today," Savage explains. "Baseball was an outlet for them." The home fans were even good to the opposing players. They were rabid but harmless. The game allowed a man to forget the trials of a lost job or a mortgage that he was having difficulty paying. Their acrimonious gestures and outbursts were never meant to be personal. Larry Jones, an Abbeville pitcher, tells this story:

I was pitching against New Iberia. They had a fellow in Abbeville called "Pop" Newell. Every time I'd pitch, boy, he'd call me everything in the book. He was at the New Iberia game. There was a New Iberia fan in the stands riding me too. And Pop was in a box seat, and this New Iberia fellow was in the bleachers. Pop walked out there and told that fellow: 'Shut up your damned mouth.' The other fellow said--'Why are you telling me that? You're riding him too!' Pop said, 'Sure, but he's a friend of mine.'

"It was a happening," observes Tom Patton. People went to the games and were totally involved. They weren't spectators. They were part of it. The guy going up to bat was leaning against the wire... talking with somebody in the grandstand. You rode the other ball

60 Tom Savage, interview, July 1, 1974.
players. Sure, that was part of the game. But you loved them nonetheless.\footnote{Tom Patton, interview.} Art "Hose Nose" Visconti, one of the most colorful players ever to play ball in the Evangeline, received a great deal of hazing from fans because of his antics. But he enjoyed the response he got from the spectators. "When we went down to Cajun country, we caught hell. They were real, good, warm people. In fact, playing in the French country--I wouldn't have had it any other way. I'd ride them back when they'd ride me--a small, aggressive man. I'd yell 'How are you coonies doing tonight?' They'd yell--'maan you're goin t' lose tonight, ya!'\footnote{Art Visconti, interview, June 12, 1974.}
CHAPTER FOUR
THE DALFERES ADMINISTRATION BEGINS

As the 1938 season closed, Boustany was busy looking for a president so he could return to the business of his department store and the Lafayette White Sox. The man had to have certain qualifications. He must be honest and respectable. He must have the time to devote attention to the business of this increasingly complex league, and he should be a baseball fan. Boustany found his man in the person of Judge A. Wilmot Dalferes of Lafayette's juvenile court. The decision was not unlike the action of the major leagues years ago when, after the Black Sox scandal of 1919, they selected the tough-minded Judge Kennisaw "Mountain" Landis for their commissioner. Bill Daly was interested in his insurance business more than he was baseball, and Morris, of course, was caught with his hands in the till. Judge Dalferes would have neither liability, and the owners were pleased when the young judge accepted the position. Dalferes had always been interested in baseball and was an excellent athlete himself while at Southwestern Louisiana College.¹

By tradition, the pennant winners' home town hosted the league's annual winter meeting. So it was in Lake Charles, at the Charleston Hotel on January 22, 1939, where Judge Dalferes was installed as the league's fourth president. This was no routine meeting but rather an event that manifested the robust optimism and ever clearer identity of the league. Dalferes sensed that the league needed to better

¹J. Wilmot Dalferes, interview.
publicize its activities during the coming season, especially since 1939 was to be baseball's centennial anniversary and the whole nation would be celebrating the event. The owners decided to distribute posters showing Uncle Sam wielding a bat against the background of a large baseball, with a caption that read: "His game for 100 years." Also, the players in the league would wear centennial patches on their uniforms.

Since the Lake Charles gathering was the judge's inaugural meeting with the league directors, Dalferes invited a number of south and central Louisiana and east Texas baseball newspapermen to the meeting. The meeting turned into a banquet with south Louisiana food on the menu, all paid for by Dalferes himself. Dalferes brought his own chefs—Bafayette chief of police Ledell Sonnier and two others of considerable local fame. They cooked a memorable feast, the highlight being a guinea-fowl gumbo which sent the sportswriters home wondering why they weren't visiting the Evangeline area more often. Cecil Coombs, business manager of the Fort Worth Cats, sat across from Bill Keefe of the Picayune. After an encore of the gumbo, "he shook his head and chuckled: 'You know, you people in this part of the country seem to devote so much time to enjoying life that I wonder how you get any work done.'"  

Keefe, a man who appreciated the amenities of good creole food, was overwhelmed with the banquet. The affair would become for him a standard Evangeline League story.

His guests well fed and satisfied, Dalferes took the center stage

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and addressed the audience. The new president promised to make communities near the league's towns more baseball conscious. And the judge had his own ideas about how this could be done. He would sponsor an essay contest for high school students. The topic would be "What Baseball Means to the Community." In another move which reflected his great interest in youth, Dalferes proposed that the Evangeline League sponsor an instructional summer league for the kids of the area. Players from each team would provide volunteer services while the league would secure grounds and equipment. The judge said he'd rather see a boy in a ball park than in a court. Next he reminded the owners that he had already established a new, tighter budget for the league. And he assured the audience that Jeanerette would be in the league in 1939. (A large representation from Jeanerette was at the banquet in hopes of impressing Dalferes, for rumors had continued about the possibility of the franchise being replaced.) For the first time a publicity director, Francis Guchereau of the Daily Advertiser, was appointed to give added exposure to the feisty circuit. In a voice vote, a rule was adopted to standardize admission prices which were beginning to fluctuate from town to town. For white men it could not be less than 40¢ for a grandstand seat and 30¢ for the bleachers. Prices for ladies and children would be


optional, but the minimum price for a seat in the colored bleachers was to be 15¢.\(^6\) Truck owners in Lake Charles ignored these rules. They put mattresses on the flatboards of their vehicles, went into black neighborhoods to pick up a load of fans, and parked outside the outfield fence so they could peer over it. The drivers' usual charge for this was a dime. An extra four feet of boards was added to the outfield wall later in the year to discourage the practice.

Night baseball in the Evangeline League came to Lake Charles in 1939. Now the league was almost totally under the lights with the exception of the Sunday afternoon match-ups. Joe Bratcher was against the idea, but he began to hedge when attendance in Lake Charles dropped early in 1939. Bratcher had not lost money in 1937 or in 1938, but neither had he turned a significant profit, despite his 1938 pennant-winning team. Now claiming that he needed money, if he was to install lights, he suggested that a fund-raising drive be initiated in the town. Lake Charles responded to the distressed owner. A sports committee of the Chamber of Commerce, Mayor J. H. Handley, and a group of the town's most important business leaders set out to raise $6,000. Their plan was to sell sixty bonds at $100.00 each. The money would be advanced to Bratcher in the form of a load, allowing him to pay back the balance with 25% of the gate receipts. The owner-manager would not even be required to pay interest.\(^7\) After the first day of the

\(^6\)"Abbeville is Represented at Lake Charles Meeting," The Abbeville Meridional, January 28, 1939, p. 1.

\(^7\)"Lake Charles Starts Drive," The Lake Charles American Press, May 10, 1939, p. 10.
bond sales, $2,500.00 was pledged and by June 12, approximately one month after Bratcher made his request, the Skippers played their first evening home game in American Legion Park. No one had believed the lights would be installed before the 1940 season, but the community's support again made the difference. Bratcher was only to be disappointed again, however, for not only did his Skippers finish next to last in the standings, but, despite the lights, the season's attendance was below the 45,000 mark of 1938.

The Lake Charles franchise came back strong in 1940 (it finished at the top of the standings). Two other clubs did not. Nineteen thirty-nine would be Jeanerette's last year of competition in professional baseball, and her neighbor Abbeville, too, would drop out of the Evangeline until 1946, when the league resumed operation after the war. The Jeanerette problem was simply one of finances. Charles Schilling, who had taken the franchise to Jeanerette from Lake Charles five years earlier after the grandstand fire in American Legion Park, left Jeanerette "because the team couldn't make it without the slots." Schilling had been operating on a marginal basis since 1934, and although the Blues drew well, it was a small town. And the slot machine factor was a variable— one couldn't always be guaranteed a regular income from them. At the end of the 1939 season, Schilling sold the club's interests to a group of the city's big sugar men, including L.C. Lempo and Walter Lejeune. They were not able to continue

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8Sylvan Prater, "In This Corner," The Lake Charles American Press, May 12, 1939, p. 10.

9Charles Schilling, interview, June 6, 1974.
operation, however, and the Jeanerette club became the first casualty of the Evangeline League. Herbert Schilling, still part owner of the Lafayette White Sox, consulted with his brother about his intentions near the end of the season. They decided to form a partnership and develop a new franchise in Port Arthur, Texas, a town they both were most familiar with. Both had played semi-pro ball there and were impressed with the town's interest in baseball. The town of 51,000 even drew better than the Beaumont Exporters of the Texas League! "The weather there was bad," said Schilling, "but we knew they had a lot of French people living there and it was a good town." So Herbert sold his interest in the White Sox to Sheldon Blue and Boustany and travelled to Texas with his brother in September in an adventure that would most certainly come to fruition for the Schillings.

Abbeville's problems were more complex. A new sheriff was elected in 1939 who was an enemy of I.M. Goldberg, the club owner. The sheriff ordered all the town's proprietors who kept slot machines to stop all payoffs to Goldberg. This was not an insignificant move, for there were approximately 150 of the devices in Abbeville, and each machine was docked $2.00 a week in support of the Athletics. That totalled approximately $9,000.00, a figure that even the wealthy Goldberg could not ignore. That alone, however, would not have discouraged Goldberg, for the Abbeville fans were some of the best in the league, and attendance had always been high throughout the years. The crucial incident involved a decision made by the new president, Judge Dalferes, involving

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10 Herbert Schilling, interview, June 6, 1974.
a rule violation.

Louis "Nootsie" Jennaro, president and part owner of the New Iberia Cardinals, protested to the league office that Abbeville's roster listed five, rather than the required four, class men. Dalferes conducted a thorough investigation of the charges, "running it like a court case," he explained, with witnesses and testimonies. Richard Morrison, a pitcher from Vicksburg, Mississippi, was supposed to be a rookie, that is, a professional less than thirty days in any previous year of play. The investigation discovered that he had been on Vicksburg's roster for forty-five days, making him a class man. Somehow the Vicksburg club had listed him as a rookie when he was traded, so Abbeville was unaware that Morrison was a class man. Unfortunately for the Athletics, a New Iberia Cardinal recognized Morrison and vowed that he was veteran. So Jennaro filed the protest in August, a few weeks before the end of the season. Dalferes' decision would determine if Abbeville would be eligible for the playoffs, for the club was in second place near the end of the season. New Iberia was in fifth place, and if the protest was sustained, the Cardinals would become the fourth-place club in the standings and would therefore be eligible for their first playoff berth since entering the league.

Dalferes refused to be influenced by the possibility of a shake-up in the league standings. Whether or not Abbeville knew of Morrison's status was not the question at hand. Morrison was a class man, and

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12 J. Wilmot Dalferes, interview.

13 Ibid.
Abbeville therefore had broken the rules. Dalferes sustained the New Iberia protest. Seven Abbeville victories in August were nullified, plunging the Athletics down in the standings to sixth place. New Iberia was now in the post-season Shaughnessy.

Abbeville was enraged at the decision. Dalferes had announced the decision to the owners by telegram, but the angry Goldberg refused to accept his wire and it was returned to Dalferes in Lafayette. The town argued that Morrison was really a liability to the team, not an asset. He was only an occasional relief pitcher who had a poor earned run average. That was good evidence, fans believed, to show that the Abbeville management was honest in the belief that he was not a class man. Dalferes was really under fire from the furious community. One fan wrote sarcastically: "We are wondering what attitude President Dalferes would have taken had the identical circumstances affected the Lafayette club." Another fan lamented the whole affair and felt that good sportsmanship should have demanded that Dalferes "belittle the president of the mediocre Iberia team for having the nerve to use such tactics to get into the playoff with a team that has only played around .500 baseball through the season...." That Dalferes was a Lafayette resident only exasperated the unpleasant situation, for the White Sox, who were already in the playoff, were now matched against the Jeanerette club, a weaker team than Abbeville's nine. To some observers it seemed

14 J. Wilmot Dalferes, telegram to I. M. Goldberg, September 6, 1939.


16 Ibid.
that Dalferes was interested in seeing his home team play a relatively easy foe.

While these criticisms were totally unjust, the letters of protest continued to come in to the Abbeville Meridional. Wrote one fan: "President Dalferes has certainly injured a fine bunch of hustling young ball players with an apparent prejudiced decision, but after all, the chances of the Lafayette club have been strengthened by the lousy decision which avoids the necessity of a series playoff with a team that could knock their ears back in most any old ball park!" Another fan declared he was bothered less by the loss of money than by the injustice to the loyal fans. One correspondent noted that New Iberia did not file the protest until it seemed that they were out of the playoffs. An editorial in the Abbeville weekly declared that club officials in the league (except those from Lafayette and New Iberia) were reported to have recommended to Dalferes that the protest be thrown out before he made his decision. The paper pointed out a precedent in an Alabama baseball league in which similar circumstances prompted a protest, but one that was overruled. "Baseball is typically an American sport based fundamentally on sportsmanship," the editorial continued. "If baseball is to be wrapped up into a mess of legal technicalities, then it would be better to give it up." There were, the editor added, even reports that New Iberia and Lafayette businessmen were displeased with the method used by New Iberia to gain entrance into

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
the playoff. Fans everywhere agreed that had the protest been lodged against a star pitcher, it would be justified. "As far as the local baseball fans are concerned," concluded the Meridional, "the 1939 Evangeline League pennant should belong to Abbeville." Everyone was angry except the Abbeville players or so it seemed. News of the decision reached them during their last regular season game. While bitter at first, the players took the bad news in stride and enjoyed themselves by playing different positions on the field. The scorekeeper left the game.

Dalferes had expected the negative reaction. His introduction to the Evangeline League fans was not a happy one, but he was one of them and would have been surprised if they had acquiesced. His decision was a proper one and he was convinced of it. He would not be shaken. His only disappointment would be the response of Goldberg who refused to do business thereafter with the league as long as Dalferes was president. At the league's winter meeting in December, Abbeville was represented but not by Goldberg. The directors of the league gave Dalferes a vote of confidence, but a new location for the Abbeville Athletics was needed. It was an unfortunate disruption of one of the most exciting franchises in the league's history.

The playoffs of 1939 were a surprise to most observers of the league. Lafayette eliminated Jeanerette quickly in five games, as expected. But New Iberia defeated the Alexandria Aces who had finished first in the league. In the finals Lafayette became the first club to

19Ibid.

win two pennants in the league when they beat New Iberia's "accidental" club in seven games. For the first time since the Shaughnessy playoff system was adopted, there was vocal criticism of it in Alexandria. The favorites were a healthy seven games ahead of second-place Lafayette at the end of the season, but they lost quickly to New Iberia in the post-season series, a team that finished fifth in the standings. Many of the fans now wondered what it was worth to finish the season first. Only the players were compensated, receiving $350.00 from the league office for their achievement.

Umpiring had always been a headache to the owners, players and fans alike in the Evangeline, and in 1939 Dalferes was under pressure to do something about the poor umpiring and the continual abuse that the officials withstood. An inordinate number of umpires began to quit early in the 1939 season (eight by June). The plight of the Evangeline League umpire was the subject of a story in the Kansas City Star that described the situation and included a quote from former umpire Ed Draper, the latest umpire to resign: "I thought that Ban Johnson's league [the American League] was hardboiled at times, but it's nothing to the Evangeline League. Downthere they blot out umpires like Vesuvius wiped out Pompeii." Dalferes acted quickly to remedy the shortage. He drove to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to the Barr Umpire School, so he could himself choose the best umpires and hire them on the spot.

All of these problems facing Judge Dalferes early in his tenure ultimately worked out for the benefit of the league. Each administrative}

problem that he confronted he resolved in his methodical, dispassionate manner, adding to the strength of the loop. For instance, he created simple forms for the teams to allow them to keep records of players, including their status. This would eliminate the possibility of another episode like the one Abbeville experienced. Although the league office would keep copies of these player status forms, Dalferes felt their administration should be even more centralized. Meeting with Judge Bramham in Cincinnati after the 1939 season, he tried to convince the minor league czar that there was a great need for a depository of player information in his office. But Bramham refused to consider it, citing the enormous expense in man-hours and the increased paper work load it would require.  

Dalferes was shocked at the chaotic record-keeping by the league and its clubs. "When I started," he recalled, "there were men who would write the players' list [roster] than night on a torn Chesterfield pack of cigarettes." So he had another form printed which provided a space for the eligible players, for those on reserve, and for other categories. Each night, the lineup for the game was submitted to the umpire, who was obliged to mail a copy to Dalferes' office in Lafayette. Dalferes' secretary would check the lineup card against the current roster to see if a man was playing who was supposed to be on reserve or was suspended. This procedure prevented a club from dropping a man to make room for a new player, who, after a few days trial, would be dropped in order to bring back the original player. This practice was common and had gone unnoticed by the league office since the league's

22J. Wilmot Dalferes, interview.
Inception. In order to keep the records in order, a league statistician was hired (the first was Louis J. Ries of Lafayette) at a salary of $75.00 a month. He was to compile and keep current, accurate information on the players and the clubs. Statistics were thereafter sent annually to The Sporting News and the Heilbroner Baseball Bureau. The statistician was also made responsible for turning out averages twice a month and then mailing the information to newspapers.

Under the Dalferes administration relations between the Evangeline League and the National Association were much improved. Although the minor leagues operated with little interference from Bramham and his office in Durham, North Carolina, there was one important link that could not be avoided. A deposit was required from each league by the National Association before each season began. If this deposit was not sent, the league franchise would be dissolved. Dalferes made sure that the Evangeline's check was mailed after the league's annual meeting in December. The deposit was a guarantee in case the league had outstanding debts accrued at the end of the season. If there were none, the deposit would be sent back in full. Each Class D league was assessed $60.00. The league would then collect an equal payment from its clubs totaling this amount. Before the money was returned, a form letter had to be filled out and mailed to Judge Bramham, signed by club officials, guaranteeing that "all players' salaries and all other baseball lien claims...including claims for transportation, board and lodging furnished players for which the club is liable, have been paid and

23Ibid.
satisfied by all."24 Usually the deposit was returned after the winter meeting of the National Association in December. But Bramham was sensitive to the financial plight of many of the league. Although there had not been a league failure since 1933, Bramham began returning the deposits in September in deference to many of the circuits which were operating on a very sensitive budget.

While most of the clubs in the Evangeline were financially sound, the league itself was beginning to feel the effects of the tighter 1939 budget imposed by Dalferes early in the year. Evidence of this is shown in a letter sent by the president to George Bienvenu, the individual who drafted the league schedule. The letter also suggests the importance of the playoff to the league which received twenty-five percent of the revenue. Bienvenu was to be paid $50.00 for his service, but by September had yet to be paid. After an inquiry by Bienvenu, Dalferes mailed him the check. "We regret the delayed payment of this account," apologized the judge, "but under the budget arrangement, revenues were only received in sufficient amounts to pay umpires and current expenses. The bulk of our receipts came in through the playoffs. I trust that this delay has not inconvenienced you."25

There was really little provision for the league to make a profit. Each club was annually assessed approximately $600 to $700, depending on the year, by the league. Since this amount was in partial payment of the league's National Association deposit, some of it was returned to the clubs. The league used the remainder for its increasingly heavy

24 William Bramham, letter to all clubs, September 17, 1939.
25 J. Wilmot Dalferes, letter to George Bienvenu, September 20, 1939.
operating expenses. The largest part of the budget was allotted to umpires' salaries, which amounted to $3,900 in 1939, well over one-third of the $9,000 budget. Dalferes received a salary of $1,000, or $200.00 more than Morris received in 1937 but $500.00 less than Morris and Boustany's 1938 salary. Other league expenses accrued from medical treatment for injured ball players, baseballs (500 or so were ordered from New Orleans' A. J. Spalding and Brothers at the beginning of each season at $2.00 each), the $350.00 bonus to the first-place team, and smaller salaries for the statistician, schedule drafter, publicity director, and bookkeeper. Dalferes was not provided an office (he used his own at his own expense), nor was he allowed any paid secretarial help in the budget--the Judge's law secretary helped him with the correspondence and paper work. In addition to club assessments and a percentage of the post-season playoff gate receipts (which amounted to a net total of $2,171.91 in 1939), the league also counted heavily on the all-star game for revenue. While the Evangeline League was not necessarily in fiscal jeopardy, it needed a budget-conscious, record-keeping president who could oversee the operation with a strong hand and a level head. Judge Dalferes was that man. In 1942, Dalferes' last year as president of the loop, the Evangeline was able to boast a solid $6,895.12 in total assets, an increase of $5,438.58 over the 1939 figure.

At the winter meeting in December, 1939, the most important order


of business was the selection of a replacement for Jeanerette and Abbeville, whose owners refused to remain in the Evangeline while Dalferes was its president. Goldberg officially surrendered the Abbeville club shortly after the meeting but promised that he would cooperate with other interested parties in Abbeville if any decided to take over the franchise. (In 1941 Goldberg would buy the Vicksburg franchise of the Cotton States League.) Carlos Moore, the latest manager of the Athletics and former New Orleans Pelican and Cleveland Indian, was meanwhile looking for a new owner so that the franchise could be kept in Abbeville, and he implored the owners to allow him time to see if he could attract anyone's interest. The league monguls allowed him a few more weeks. They, too, were unhappy about losing the franchise and sincerely hoped Moore would be successful.

It would be no problem to replace the clubs. Several communities wanted a berth in the loop, including Jennings, Houma, Eunice, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, as well as Port Arthur, Texas, and Natchez, Mississippi. The Schilling brothers had no trouble persuading Dalferes and the owners that Port Arthur was more than suitable as a replacement for the Jeanerette club. The town had just built a new 4,000 seat grandstand with lights at its park, and the two brothers did an excellent job convincing the owners that the townsfolk were excited about the prospect of professional ball. Besides, the Shillings were financially sound. On March 31st the league gave its official approval for the entrance of the Port Arthur Tarpons into the Evangeline League, the first non-Louisiana club in the league and the first new franchise since the league expanded to eight teams in 1935.
Port Allen was intrinsically a Louisiana city, so it was not difficult for the other clubs to accept the Schillings' new home. Five players on the first Tarpon team were from New Orleans, and the town even celebrated the victory of gubernatorial candidate Sam Jones who was from neighboring Lake Charles. Fans in the port city maintained the reputation that the Evangeline League fans had created over the years. On "Display Night," an event put on in the Port Arthur ballpark to merely introduce the players to the fans, 4,000 cheering citizens attended and sat in a grandstand that wasn't even finished.28

But what would be the fate of the Abbeville franchise? Meeting in the town courthouse with Carlos Moore, the leading citizens of the community, including Mayor J. E. Kibbe, discussed the possibility of retaining the club locally. Moore bluntly declared that it would take $8,000 to finance the club and purchase equipment.29 In two weeks, $5,000 in pledges were collected, and Frank A. Godchaux, Jr., a leader of the citizens' group, agreed to take over responsibility for the franchise and its debts. But while all of these business negotiations were being conducted, no attempt had been made to secure players, and the season was less than a month away. Mayor Kibbe asked Dalferes for an extension of time so that players could be sought. But Dalferes could wait no longer. He gave Kibbe no answer to the extension request and went on negotiating with interests in Baton Rouge and

28Bill Keege, "Viewing the News," The Times Picayune, April 12, 1940, p. 18.

29"Meet Monday to Raise Funds for Ball Club," The Abbeville Meridional, March 2, 1940, p. 1.
Houma, two of the leading prospects. On March 19th, Houma was officially awarded the contract for a franchise, although the document was "held open" for several days so that Dalferes could give Abbeville one last chance. He had been fair with the community. And while there was a moral obligation to allow Abbeville a place in the league, Dalferes was under pressure to permit other towns to enter the loop, especially those that had been persistent. Houma was the most relentless applicant and, as well, met all the other criteria. Houma was large enough (6,531 in 1930), had good enough roads connecting it to other towns (about as far away from Lafayette as was Lake Charles) had a good ball park, and most of all had seemingly strong financial backing in the Houma Baseball Association. The men who formed this group would control the club for this growing town in Terrebonne Parish.

Ownership changed hands in two of the established clubs in 1940. Former Mayor Dave Hollier and Austin Fontenot, two men who had been instrumental in bringing professional baseball to Opelousas, sold their interests in the Indians to Clayton Guilbeau, who had been close to the team since 1934 and who was just recently elected state representative. Of more significance was the ownership change in Rayne, where the unprincipled Lozen Leger was under investigation not only from the Chicago White Sox but also from the Internal Revenue Service and later Judge Bramham, who found out about the slot machine operation and was most displeased with it. (Dalferes claimed that he had

no knowledge of the slot machines.)\textsuperscript{31} Leger sold out to Hooky Irwin, a loyal baseball supporter who was happy to see the old rice farmer go. There was absolutely no money in the treasury when Irwin took control. "No one was supposed to be making money," laughed Irwin, "but they surely did!" Under its working agreement with Chicago, Rayne received $3,000 in 1940 from the parent club. According to Irwin, "Chicago would not have had to pay a penny if the funds hadn't been stolen."\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} J. Wilmot Dalferes, interview.

\textsuperscript{32} Hooky Irwin, interview.
A few important changes affected the Evangeline in 1940. Each team was allowed to carry fifteen players, or sixteen if the manager was not a player-manager. The fifteen could include not more than four class men. A player would be classified as a rookie if he had played forty-five days or less, not thirty days as the old rule dictated.1 Interestingly, if Judge Bramham had invoked this new stipulation a year earlier, it would have prevented the clash between Dalferes and Mr. Goldberg from Abbeville.

It became almost a cliche for sportswriters to observe that the Evangeline League was optimistic as the season opened. But it nonetheless could not be denied. And nowhere was the buoyancy greater than in Port Arthur in 1940. Some 4,700 boisterous opening-day spectators came to watch the Schilling brothers' club. One of the bleachers collapsed under the weight of all the people.2 A new rivalry developed in 1940 between Alexandria, a team which sported two players from the local CCC team, and New Iberia who had defeated the Aces in the playoffs after their protest had been sustained. It was bean balls and brawls for almost the full five-month season when these two clubs faced each other. In May Art Phelan, long-time manager of the Aces, turned over his managerial duties to a senior player. Phelan had been with the Alexandria club as the owner-player


manager for five years, and it was quite a shock to the whole league when he announced that he would be leaving the playing field. Nearly forty now, Phelan decided it was time to retire after a long career in baseball, including a stint with the Detroit Tigers in the American League. Dalferes announced that the All-Star game would be played in his honor.

Trouble almost spoiled his tribute. A few days before the All-Star battle Alexandria lost a hard-fought, extra-inning game to New Iberia. Don Motlow, a veteran Evangeline League umpire, was working at home plate. He made a few close calls, and the Alexandria fans, players, and Phelan held Motlow responsible for the loss. The fans threatened to boycott future games which he umpired, and many did for the rest of the season. Unfortunately, Motlow, who had been in the league several years, was Dalferes' selection for the All-Star game. (It was perhaps for the very reason that the much maligned official had umpired so long in the area that he became unpopular. No umpire could last more than one season in the Evangeline without creating scores of enemies. Motlow evidently had hundreds of critics.) When Phelan discovered that Motlow would umpire the game, he announced to the press that if his selection was rescinded there would be "several hundred" more fans in the crowd. And Ralph Brewer reported in the Daily Town Talk that the city would not be responsible for the safety of Dan Motlow. Dalferes acted quickly. Although he was a good friend of Phelan, the judge wrote a letter declaring that he

3"4,000 Expected Tonight At Alexandria All Star Game," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk, August 5, 1940, p. 1.
would hold Phelan and the Aces team personally responsible for any injury to any man or any disruption or rioting at the game. The determined judge then mailed a copy of the letter to Judge Bramham and even to Commissioner Landis. Phelan, no doubt, was impressed by the order, for the game was played without incident with the possible exception of the loud booing that occurred when Motlow scurried on the diamond. "I had a policeman standing behind me," Dalferes recalled, "and they had policemen all around the field."\(^4\)

The Tarpons of Port Arthur wasted little time building fame as a team with great fan allegiance and ardor. (The Tarpons drew 68,000 fans in their initial year in the league.)\(^5\) While the club finished fifth in 1940, twenty-two games out of first place, it was always an important contest when the league-leading Alexandria Aces were in town, even late in August. Such was the situation when in a game at Port Arthur the umpire changed a call in favor of Alexandria. The Port Arthur third baseman apparently dropped the ball on a tag, but the Aces' runner was called out. The umpire's view was blocked, however, and he appealed to the other umpire who reversed the decision and called the runner safe at third base. Louis "Babe" Viau, Port Arthur's manager, rushed out of the dugout and protested heatedly with the officials. During the debate someone turned the lights out, plunging the entire field into darkness, and fans began running on the field. When the lights were turned on again, the fans ran back to

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\(^4\)J. Wilmot Dalferes, interview.

their seats, but Viau didn't. Finally the umpire threw the angry manager out of the game. When Viau refused to go, the game was forfeited to Alexandria.⁶

A major protest was also lodged by Port Arthur in 1940, similar to the famous 1939 protest which disqualified Abbeville. The object of the protest was New Iberia, which was allegedly guilty of playing two men as rookies who were actually veterans. Thorough and legalistic as always, Dalferes called an investigation. Each questioning session conducted by the judge was recorded by a stenographer to insure that an accurate account of the proceedings was kept. After numerous telegrams from the Schilling brothers to the National Association, the Port Arthur owners were unable to uncover evidence on the past history of the two New Iberia players in question. Dalferes, therefore, made his decision in the form of an "Opinion." In a manner reminiscent of his experience on the bench, the judge declared: "It is clearly the duty of the protesting club to establish 'due proof' in support of said protest. From the entire record and particularly the telegram of Judge Bramham, 'Exhibit V,' this office fails to see what due proof has been established that player Edwin J. Gore was under contract for 45 days or more during the playing season 1929. The protest of the Port Arthur Club is therefore denied."⁷

Judge Dalferes had two major problems to face in 1940: a hurricane and a foundering franchise. The new club in Houma was in

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⁷J. Wilmot Dalferes, letter to club owners, August, 1940.
financial trouble from the very beginning. The Houma Baseball Association was dismantled early in April as the season was about to open, and the club was left without any management or capital. The association had been too hasty in bidding for a club and did not realize the expense involved in such an operation nor the trouble they would have collecting pledges from the town's businesses. The city of Houma had planned to eventually take over ownership of the club, but poor attendance and disappointing pledges scared away the proponents of the idea. The planned construction of ball park lights had never taken place, and by the middle of June the players were not getting paid. Under the strict dictates of the National Association, any team that failed to pay its players would quickly lose its franchise rights. Dalferes wrote to Judge Bramham and received permission to incorporate the Houma franchise and place the stock in his charge until a suitable replacement could be found. For all practical purposes, Houma was no longer possessor of the club, even though the team continued to play there. Dalferes would act as president, and the board of directors would be formed by the owners of the other clubs in the league.

Search for Houma's replacement began. Without hesitation Carlos Moore called on leading baseball promoters in Natchez, Mississippi, a town that had received considerable attention from Dalferes when a replacement for Abbeville was needed months before. Natchez had a good ball park and promised to install lights at no cost to the club (the city would pay the expenses). On June 26th Natchez was officially awarded the Houma franchise, the first time the town had had professional
baseball since their 1906 Gulf Coast League team. Carlos Moore, who had been in Abbeville and then Houma, went to Natchez to manage the new club. "I just can't quit the game," he said. "I love it...."
The Evangeline League went into its seventh championship series in September a three-state league.

More complications arose preceding that series. In August, after a cold, late-breaking spring followed by a particularly wet and rainy June and July, a hurricane hit the French parishes and disrupted the Evangeline schedule. Already attendance was down because of the weather. "We haven't had three decent baseball days this season," commented one official. The storm hit west of New Orleans. Hardest hit were Port Arthur, Lafayette, and Rayne, which was entirely engulfed in flood waters. Every team had already scheduled accumulated double headers to make up rainouts. After the hurricane disrupted even more games, Dalferes and the owners reluctantly decided that the schedule must be abbreviated or else the season would push well into September.

This meant lost revenue for every club, something that everyone tried to avoid. No club was hurt more by the bad weather than little Rayne. Already weakened by years of Leger's underhanded practices, the club now had to replace the 100 or so lamps on the ball park's

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9"Elliot Chaze, "But Really...," The Lake Charles American Press, July 20, 1940, p. 4.
light poles, all of which were destroyed by the high winds. Each lamp cost $6.50 apiece, and Hooky Irwin was despondent.\(^{11}\) He was able to finish the season, but in an embarrassing manner. The Ricebirds finished last in the league, 47 1/2 games out of first place with a winning percentage of only .280. Rayne would not complete the 1941 season. It was the beginning of an ignominious end for a town which had always boasted that it was the birthplace of the Evangeline League.

There were happier stories in 1940. The end of the season found Lake Charles in first place. Art Phelan had taken his team from the cellar a year before to the top, the first and only time that happened in the league's history. Alexandria followed the Aces by 3 1/2 games, and Lafayette and New Iberia were third and fourth.

It was New Iberia's second experience in the playoffs, the club having been placed in the top four in 1939 by virtue of the Abbeville disqualifications, and the town was enormously proud of its team's accomplishment. Lake Charles came into the playoff with the Cardinals confident of a relatively easy series. But with the series tied one to one, New Iberia swept three straight games from the league leaders to qualify for the final playoff with Alexandria, who eliminated Lafayette in six games. The crowds at the final three games in New Iberia were jubilant. Before each game the local scoreboard operator placed a zero in Alexandria's first-inning square on the score board. Straw hat collections were taken "any time a Cardinal even looked as though he were capable of slamming a homer." One dollar was promised

\(^{11}\)Elliot Chaze, But Really..., The Lake Charles American Press, August 15, 1940, p. 8.
any New Iberia player who hit safely in the series. Pop vendors sat and watched the game. And with a fourteen-run lead in the fifth and deciding game, the fans "yelled hideously" over a close foul-line decision. The crowd's reactions prompted Elliot Chaze of the Lake Charles American Press to make this analysis: "Over there the fans don't buy soda water to drink. They buy it so's to have bottle gavels for pep poundings. Silver-haired matrons can tell you why Benish (a player) isn't batting his weight in cigar coupons--and little tykes fresh from the cookie jars can keep box scores in their heads without using erasers during the tougher situations." But the Cardinals didn't win the pennant. They lost four straight games to Alexandria.

Nineteen-forty was a year of transition for the league. Houma took Abbeville's place in the loop. Jeanerette gave way to Port Arthur. Then Houma's franchise was replaced by Natchez. By the end of the season, Lozen Leger and Dave Hollier were gone, both veteran owners of the six-year league. The towns now in the league were farther apart, requiring longer and more frequent home stands. The intimacy and stability of the league were gone, though its owners argued that the league had never been stronger because the weak links were done away with. Each club stressed at the winter meeting in December that they were financially sound. Attendance in 1940 had been high throughout the league. But there was beginning to be talk that the war in Europe would eventually affect the league adversely. Baseball talent had become increasingly scarce by mid-1940 because of the

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12 Ibid., September 10, 1940, p. 4.
13 Ibid., September 7, 1940, p. 4.
ordered buildup of the American military force to 1,200,000 men. The problem became more acute when the Selective Service Act of September, 1940, authorized the first peacetime induction of civilians into the armed services in the nation's history. The Evangeline, like every other baseball league, was worried about 1941.

There was at least one thing to be happy about at the end of the sixth season. Radio had come to the "Pepper Sauce" League, adding another colorful dimension to the zestful Evangeline. The consent to broadcast a team's games came from the league president's office, and the stations were obliged to pay the league a small fee (between $50.00 to $80.00 depending on the year) for the right to broadcast. The club had the right to veto the request, though that was never done. Although the clubs received no direct compensation from the radio station, they all welcomed the publicity. And the announcer, who came to be a celebrity of sorts in town, was employed by the station, not the club.

The first radio broadcast of an Evangeline League game was in 1937 out of Alexandria's KALB. In 1938 KVOL in Lafayette and KPCL in Lake Charles started carrying some of the more important games. After the war every town that had a radio station broadcast the games, for they were profitable ventures. The larger and more wealthy stations broadcast both home and away games while the smaller stations did something called "wire reports" for the road contests. In this system the announcer would stay in the studio and, with the help of a

14"Comparative Statement of Receipts and Disbursements For the Years 1937 and 1938 and Proposed 1939 Budget," C. G. Simon.
Western Union telegraph terminal, recreate the action for the fans. The studios were equipped with sound effects like crowd noises and the sound of a bat hitting a ball to make the simulation more believable. It was difficult to stage these games, but some announcers like the popular Tom Patton of Lafayette were adept at the art. The fans were never fooled, but somehow it didn't matter and they listened to these programs as if the announcer were present at the game.

An announcer's job was a difficult one no matter what station he worked for. "You worked every night and your life was as rigorous as a players. You had to like the work or you wouldn't have done it," admitted Tom Patton. Working conditions were far from excellent. The pressbox was usually built on the top row of the grandstand with no isolation from the fans whatsoever. "Your biggest problem [was] kids. They'd sit right beneath you and stick their heads up every now and then and yell something in the mike." Interviews were common, but there was no "color man" to help. The announcer did his own interviews without a remote mike. The player would have to come up to the announcer and sit with him. And there was no expense account for the road trips, many of which were made on the bus with the team. But the operation was successful. KVOL made nearly $100.00 a game from commercial spots and the broadcasts helped attendance even at the home games.16

By early 1941 it appeared that the United States might soon be drawn into full participation in the war in Europe. The National

15 Tom Patton, interview.

16 Ibid.
Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, with its eye on the increasingly tenuous situation, allowed Class D organizations a maximum of three rookies for the 1941 season. The rest would have to be veterans. The order suggested the difficult position professional baseball was in. Younger men were being drafted into the military service, leaving only a nominal crop of rookies left to invigorate the game. Thus veterans who would normally have been replaced by talented youngsters were retained throughout the country. Particularly affected were Class D baseball leagues, for there would be fewer and fewer players sent down to them from the big leagues.

There was also apprehension of another sort. Opelousas' owner Dave Thistlewaite was having financial difficulty with his club and expressed his desire to sell if he couldn't secure any help. In 1941 between twelve and fourteen thousand dollars was required to operate a club in the Evangeline. Thistlewaite was short about four thousand. He agreed to underwrite the club by asking at least 100 local businessmen and civic leaders to pledge not more than $10.00 a month during the season; in return they would receive season tickets. A front-page editorial in the Clarion-News appealed for assistance for the beleaguered Indians, and the town responded with predictable generosity. One hundred citizens donated $50 each for Thistlewaite, and he was able to continue operation for at least the 1941 season. 17 Meantime, in Rayne, Hooky Irwin sounded pessimistic. His grandstand had been heavily damaged by last season's hurricane, and it would be difficult

17"White Sox Meet the Opelousas Indians at Parkdale Thursday," The Daily Advertiser, April 2, 1941, p. 10.
to recover the loss of revenue that resulted from the numerous rainouts.

After the short spring training session, all eight clubs were ready for the league's eighth season. The weather refused to cooperate, however. While the rain was not as disruptive as it had been in 1940, rainouts were commonplace throughout the league. In Lake Charles, for example, there were nine rainouts and fifteen threatened rainouts by July 10th out of thirty-six scheduled home games. Joe Bratcher had to burn thirty or forty gallons of gasoline before each of the threatened rainouts, an expense that was hard to bear in 1941. By July, Rayne's Ricebirds were in real trouble. The club was thirty-six full games out of first place with a lowly win percentage of .225, a virtual repetition of the Ricebirds miserable 1940 showing. Attendance plunged along with the team's fortunes, and in a desperate move to attract more fans, Irwin lowered the admission price to 10¢ a game for a bleacher seat. Doing its best to assist Irwin in his troubles, the league permitted the Ricebirds to play their remaining scheduled home games against Lake Charles, Port Arthur, and Alexandria in Parkdale and other near-by parks. Perhaps the Ricebirds would draw better crowds in Lafayette, Opelousas, and Abbeville than they would at home. Rayne would be allowed to keep the total receipts of these games just as if they were playing at home. Only lighting expenses were subtracted. But while these extraordinary measures seemed to help, they were not enough. Soon the Ricebirds' players began to complain about not being paid. Irwin simply did not have the money to meet the bi-monthly payroll. On July 22, after utilizing a number of
embarrassing efforts to keep the club in operation, including putting the club up for sale, Irwin liquidated the Rayne franchise. After the club's last game, a 12-5 loss to Lake Charles, Rayne's players were declared free agents, and a few were picked up by other teams still in the league.

It was a sad day in the history of the feisty league. Rayne had always thought of itself as the birthplace of the Evangeline, and when the club folded, no one was applauding. The little town had always been a showcase for the league because of its size and its strong support of the Ricebirds. While Rayne had not won a pennant, it had placed a club in the post-season playoffs three times in seven years. Judge Dalferes realized the importance of the Rayne franchise to the loop and decided to finish the season as a seven-club league without looking for a replacement. (Besides, no one would be interested in assuming a franchise with such a poor win percentage as late as July.) It was hoped that Rayne would perhaps return in 1942, in which case the town could fill the vacant slot. But no one could be sure that would occur. "Things won't be the same anymore...not having a game against our Acadia Parish neighbors...," commented Sam Tarleton of Opelousas. "It'll be like going swimming with your overcoat on...." The Rayne Tribune could only look forward to 1942. Baseball was "too much a part of the life of the town.... Rayne needs baseball, and any effort to achieve this end will be given all possible backing."

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The league office was also suffering from financial woes, finding it difficult to pay even its official scorers. One of the reasons for this was Dalferes' conciliatory policy of collecting club assessments. Several clubs had requested that their assessments be paid in installments. The judge agreed, understanding how much the weather had hurt some of the clubs in 1940. Every idea to cut expenses was considered, no matter how minor it may have seemed. Telephone calls replaced telegrams when the results of the all-star ballots were made known to the league office. Dalferes considered revising the schedule to eliminate as many long road trips as possible to save fuel.

New Iberia won its first pennant in 1941, leading the league all season after defeating the New Orleans Pelicans 2-0 during pre-season play. After the deciding playoff game with Lake Charles, a series that drew disappointing crowds again because of the poor weather, the Skippers' manager Joe Bratcher answered an inquisitive reporter as he stood in mud up to his watch pocket: "Well, kid, that's baseball. It's a big gamble. A guy has to have more guts than a burgler in this business." He smiled, watching the fans slush out of the park.

Bratcher's cynicism was justified. It had not been a good year for the league. Not only was Rayne's failure demoralizing, but the league's financial structure was shaky. The weather was surely to blame, but there were other factors. Working agreements with major league clubs had become more and more unpopular. (Only Lafayette,}

\[20\]Elliott Chaze, "But Really...," The Lake Charles American Press, July 12, 1941, p. 4.

\[21\]Ibid., February 26, 1942, p. 8.
Opelousas and Lake Charles continued the practice in 1941.) The big league clubs were getting the best players from the minors, but there was no reciprocation—there simply was no surplus of players, and the parent clubs had no one to send down. In addition, the salaries paid by newly opened positions in war industries were generally better than Class D salaries. The lack of good ball players hurt the quality of the league and the fans could not be fooled. They stayed away from the ball park not only in the Evangeline but throughout all of baseball. Finally a more impalpable explanation must be observed. The Evangeline League had certainly lost some of its flavor at the close of 1941. Abbeville, Jeanerette, and now Rayne were no longer in the loop, and there was an undercurrent of feeling among many of the people that Natchez and Port Arthur were "outsiders" in Evangeline country. For seven solid seasons the Evangeline League had prospered as a strictly south Louisiana circuit, and these French Cajuns were proud of its reputation. "It just wasn't the same now," some said. It had lost some of its attraction.

At the end of the season, Thistlewaite reluctantly announced that all of the Opelousas club's equipment was for sale. Unless someone in town was willing to take over its operation, Opelousas would be without baseball in 1942. A sincere effort was made to resurrect the Indians in early 1942 when Sam Guilbeau, Clayton's son, and several other baseball promoters called on Milton Delmas, a former Evangeline player who was in the construction business in

22"The Curtain Falls..." The Rayne Tribune, August 1, 1941, p. 2.
Opelousas. A deal was made whereby Delmas would manage the club and become part owner if he would secure a certain park in town and make improvements on it. Delmas agreed, but complications arose and he eventually was unable to make the arrangements. The scheme did not materialize.\(^23\) Opelousas, a charter member of the 1934 Evangeline League, had completed its last year of competition in professional baseball. A two-time pennant winner, the town had contributed much to the rich history of the league. Opelousas was an innovator (the Indians were the first club to have lights in their home park) and a major contributor for Mayor Hollier, Clayton Guilbeau, Sam Tarleton, Lawrence Thistlewaite, Austin Fontenot, Frankie Deitlein and others had much to do with the origin and progress of the league. Judge Dalferes now was president of a six-club loop.

Few people thought of much besides war immediately after the sudden Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941. But after the initial shock baseball men had to confront the possibility of suspending operation. Judge Bramham professed that there would be baseball in the minors "unless the government finds it necessary to ask for a full suspension when we will be able to answer any call which may be sounded. We must avoid any mistakes of World War I. What the government needs from our ranks in the way of manpower will be called," he vowed, "and we will carry on as best we can with what the nation can spare us."\(^24\) The Associated Press printed Bramham's words:

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\(^23\) Milton Delmas, interview.

\(^24\) The National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, ed. The Story of Minor League Baseball (Columbus, Ohio, 1953), p. 44.
letter to Ross Edgeman of the Appalachian League concerning his position. In it the judge made clear that there would be no attempt to resist any directives from Washington even if it meant the indefinite interruption of play. "Baseball ever has been and ever will be ready to respond immediately to the wishes of the government, but we believe [that] by keeping our clubs and leagues intact, we will render a real service...." Clark Griffith, baseball's unofficial ambassador to Washington, promised that "baseball will do what the country wants. We're all ready. Why, by sin at my age I'm ready too if they want me." Many congressmen came out publicly in favor of continuing the national pastime. Congressman Joseph Martin (R-Mass.) explained that the game was important for the morale of the homefront. Edward A. Kelley (D-Ill.) agreed: "It's a matter of morale and recreation. And by keeping pro ball going, we encourage amateur baseball, which in turn builds up bodies of our youngsters." And Republican James Wadsworth from New York endorsed his colleagues' remarks: "I don't believe in draping the country in black. Certainly professional baseball should be continued during the war. It encourages sports, helps preserve morale, and provides outdoor recreation for thousands." President Roosevelt apparently agreed. A great fan himself, FDR


approved of the efforts to keep the game going and commended it as having an important role in the war effort in his famous "green light" letter of 1942. The letter, considered to be baseball's "Magna Carta" in 1942, was in response to Baseball Commissioner Judge Landis' letter asking the president for direction. Roosevelt ordered Landis to "carry on to the fullest extent consistent with the primary purpose of winning the war."\(^{28}\) Landis, a political enemy of the president, was elated with the directive. The game, however, would be considered a "non-essential industry" and would get no special consideration in transportation allocations or in draft deferments.

Despite the approval from the White House, some minor leagues elected to suspend operation for the duration of the war. Others merely disbanded. But thirty-one leagues resolved to continue operation, including the Evangeline League. The decision to proceed with the 1942 season was certainly a poor one for the Louisiana loop, for Dalferes would have nothing but trouble to contend with.

In January, Frem Boustany and Sheldon Blue announced that their businesses demanded that they give up the ownership of the White Sox. They hoped, though, that some interested citizen group would replace them and continue the franchise. In a four day drive, over fifty Lafayette residents bought stock in the club. Six thousand dollars were raised and a corporation called the Lafayette Baseball Club, Inc. was born. (The corporation did create some confusion, for some fans apparently thought that they became stock holders with the purchase of

After the 1941 season, Joe Bratcher contemplated selling the Skippers. A new working agreement with Tulsa of the Texas League brought him new hope, but by February the leathery old baseball man needed $2,350.00 to pay off deferred debts. A citizens committee of ten men sponsored a drive to help Bratcher and the club. By February 23, the committee had not raised the required amount, and the deadline for mailing out player contracts was five days away. To add to his woes, Bratcher was late with his club assessment to the league office. Dalferes wired to Bratcher on the 28th and reluctantly told the manager that he would have to produce the necessary cash. It was a duty that Dalferes was loath to do, for he knew that if Lake Charles dropped from his league the six-team schedule already drawn up would be made useless. Besides, Joe Bratcher was a good friend. "As President I must protect investments of other club holders," he explained. "Baseball is no longer an individually owned industry that can fight its own battles like a grocery store." It would be an "immense civic handicap" were Lake Charles to lose baseball now that recreation was so sorely needed.

Lake Charles was granted a one-week extension to raise money. When the week was up Dalferes personally drove to Lake Charles, in deference to Bratcher, who sadly informed him that he would be forced to relinquish the franchise. Only $1,325 had been raised for the

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five-year veteran owner of the Skippers. One of the leaders of the fund-raising committee, Harold Trotter, asked Dalferes for three more days to raise the money. Again the league president hedged, granting the final extension. "Our organization," he said "will take no drastic action to supplant Lake Charles until the fans indicate they are unwilling to step in and save the ship." In those last few days the committee succeeded in raising the thousand dollars needed to continue the franchise.

The complexion of the league changed after the war began. Instead of giving away automobiles, Lafayette and Opelousas staged "Aluminum Nights," admitting free anyone bringing some article of aluminum to the park to donate in conjunction with the national drive to collect the metal for the national defense. At Alexandria, a unit from Camp Claiborne, a training center in nearby Pineville, drilled before a game. But certainly the most distinct change in the appearance of the league was the dramatic drop in attendance to about 150 fans a game throughout the struggling circuit. "Fan famine" was infecting every franchise. In May, New Iberia's "Nootsie" Jennaro announced that he might have to suspend operations because of poor crowd support. Monroe, Leesville, and Orange, Texas, were mentioned as possible replacements.

Confirmation that the Cardinals' franchise was folding was made on May 21 at a meeting of the league directors in Lafayette. There

31 Ibid., "Evangeline Directors To Meet With Fans Here," March 6, 1942, p. 11.

was talk at that point that the league should disband, but after con-
siderable debate it was decided to continue as a four-team league.
Five teams would confuse the schedule designed for an even number of
clubs. One of the remaining clubs had to bow out. Representatives
from Lafayette volunteered to do so. Not only was attendance parti-
cularly poor there, but it seemed to them that the other four towns
--Alexandria, Port Arthur, Natchez, and Lake Charles--had a better
chance of maintaining their clubs. The towns, "because of certain
defense industries in their vicinity, are in a better position to
finance their club operations," concluded the Lafayette spokesman.

The league owners, under the direction of Judge Dalferes, agreed to
oust Lafayette. The won-loss slate of the four-club league was
erased for the six weeks of play that had already elapsed. The
league would begin anew, with Alexandria the only club left in the
league from the original group of 1934.

The "second season" idea was futile. One week after the crucial
Lafayette meeting, Lake Charles made known that it was dropping out
of league competition. Natchez quickly followed suit on May 31. Ef-
forts to keep the clubs alive by selling bonds and taking contributions
from businesses failed. Still struggling to maintain operation,
Dalferes attempted to move the Natchez club to Orange, Texas, a town
which had previously shown interest in a franchise. But Bill Terry,
the general manager of the New York Giants, parent club of the Natchez
team, had already directed that all of the players from Natchez be

33"Sox Defeat Aces in Final Tilt," The Daily Advertiser, May 23,
1942, p. 10.
traded away. Art Phelan of Alexandria, the only owner who had weathered the financial crisis successfully, offered aid to Lake Charles and Natchez in order to continue league play. But it was too late.

There was nothing more Dalferes could do. It was a slow torturous death for the proud Evangeline, finally reached with the Lake Charles and Natchez declaration. Forever confident and optimistic, Judge Dalferes claimed that the May break-up was only a suspension and that after the war the league would most certainly be re-organized: "We are saying au revoir and not goodbye, because after the war is over you'll find the Evangeline League, about the finest little league, back in baseball." 34

The war had a most telling effect on the minor leagues. Gas rationing made bus travel to and from road games virtually impossible. Railroad transportation for civilians was curtailed, although this had little effect on the Evangeline League. One such restriction did radically alter the Evangeline and contributed much to its downfall in 1942. The curfew on night baseball along the coastal areas of the country forced the league to play its last season during the daylight hours. The night spectacle of a baseball game had proved an efficient and exciting variation on the traditional baseball setting, drawing better crowds in many cases than the Sunday afternoon contests. Cajun farmers, trappers, fishermen, and oil field workers had been able to come to the night games after a hard day's work. Dalferes and the

owners must have known that the curfew foretold the deathknell of the league.

Judge Dalferes remained in office as president, caretaker of the Evangeline throughout the war, during which time he kept open communication with the National Association in order to facilitate an easy revival of the league when conditions permitted. Dalferes would, however, elect not to assume his position in 1945, choosing instead a career in politics. In one of his last official acts as Evangeline president, the judge contacted the Department of Revenue in Lafayette and asked that they remit all corporation taxes on the non-functioning franchises. This would help insure that the clubs could continue league membership in a skeleton form by encouraging the owners to keep alive the franchise structure. Class D baseball, Dalferes argued, operated ninety percent of the time by "succorance and public contribution. We feel that the department could, recognizing the mode of financing these corporations by popular subscription disguised as stock subscription, forego the Corporation Tax during our voluntary disbanding and thereby contribute materially to an easier establishment of the Evangeline League which has furnished wholesome and substantial pastime to thousands of citizens of Southwest and Central Louisiana." There is no evidence that the Department of Revenue bowed to the request, and each of the franchises dissolved.

Throughout the years of the war, Art Phelan was deprived of his principal means of livelihood--baseball. He alone had been willing to

35 J. Wilmot Dalferes, letter to Fred Falgout, Department of Revenues, Lafayette, August 23, 1944.
continue the league's operation in the troublesome summer months of 1942. As owner of the Alexandria Aces, he had funneled all of his energy and money into the club and had no intention of abandoning his investment. So just five weeks after the Japanese surrender, Phelan anxiously called an organizational meeting in Alexandria for the purpose of piecing together a brand new circuit, perhaps from the remains of the pre-war Evangeline League. Representatives from eight towns were present at the September 30th meeting, all expressing a desire to be a part of the move to bring professional baseball back to south Louisiana in 1946. Abbeville, Lake Charles, Port Arthur, and Alexandria already had funds to begin operation. The other towns—Lafayette, Orange, Texas, New Iberia and Opelousas—were all "expected to qualify," meaning that they would likely have enough cash to meet the guarantee deposit shortly. There was speculation that the new league might be a Class C league, but that would depend on which cities would finally agree to enter. (The minimum accumulated population for a Class C league was 150,000. There was no minimum for Class D certification.) Finally, J. H. Trotter, the individual who chaired the committee hurriedly formed to retain the Lake Charles franchise in 1942, was elected temporary president until a more willing replacement was found.36

Phelan immediately set out to find a permanent president. After consulting with several baseball men in the area, he decided to call upon the services of J. Walter Morris, the one-time Evangeline League head who had been relieved in 1936 for his unsavory bookkeeping habits.

36 "Evangeline Reorganized With 4 Clubs or Members," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk, October 1, 1945, p. 9.
Phelan's rationale in approaching Morris is not clear. Perhaps the nine years that had elapsed since the incident had obscured the seriousness of Morris' actions. Or perhaps Phelan believed that Morris would hardly attempt to falsify the league's accounts a second time. Whatever the reason, Phelan obviously respected the life-long baseball veteran and needed his expertise in the initial steps of forming a baseball circuit. Besides, most of the club owners who had voted him out in 1936 were no longer a part of the reorganization plan. Morris accepted Phelan's offer enthusiastically and was present at the second organizational meeting in Lafayette on October 11. There Morris was elected temporary president and Dave Hollier, the former Opelousas mayor, was elected league secretary.

A suggestion that the new league be called the "Louisiana Teche League" was dropped, and the men agreed in closing to hold their next meeting two weeks later in Opelousas.

By November the serious business of selecting the towns for the Evangeline was in progress. At the Opelousas meeting there had been strong support for an all-Louisiana league, for it seemed to several of the men that when Natchez and Port Arthur had entered the league before the war, the circuit began to experience trouble. Additionally, the distance between the heart of the Evangeline country and Port Arthur and Orange, Texas, (the two current applicants) was too great. So it was decided that only Louisiana towns would be admitted into the league. Tentatively replacing Orange and Port Arthur were Baton Rouge and Crowley, two towns where interest in the Evangeline had always been intense.
Morris had travelled to Baton Rouge to personally confirm the establishment of a franchise there, a town he believed should always have been in the circuit. He immediately contacted John Paul Jones, an employee with Louisiana State University's operation and maintenance department. Jones had been a player for Morris in 1913 when Morris was the director of the Fort Worth Cats in the Texas League and had also managed two Class D teams in the 1920's. Morris persuaded Jones to head a committee of interested men in town to organize a franchise for Baton Rouge. The only obstacle seemed to be a good ball park. But arrangements were made with LSU to use their diamond for $2,000 a year. The only opposition that arose came from those who felt that the games might be a distraction to the students. But those favoring the idea described the game as a "wholesome" distraction.37

In a December meeting at Crowley, Morris was elected permanent president of the league along with J. Howard Trotter, the new vice president. Shortly thereafter Crowley and Lake Charles withdrew their applications and decided against joining. In Crowley the stumbling block was money. Not enough could be raised to build lighting facilities for the town's park. Lake Charles had a similar problem. The lease agreement between the American Legion (who owned the park) and the Skippers expired in July and the Legion refused to renew the lease. A new park would have to be built, and the city did not have adequate time to construct a new grandstand for the season opener. On

January 21, at a league conclave in Opelousas, Lafayette's representative Bill Daly, the league's first president, conceded that his town would have to surrender its franchise bid because there was no suitable spot for a park. This announcement left three openings during the increasingly complex process of confirming eight stable franchise sites.

Morris asked John Paul Jones for assistance, for Jones had made numerous contacts in Louisiana during his long career in baseball. Early in January Jones approached the mayor of Hammond, Louisiana, a good friend, and R. F. Ring who was the auto parts manager at the town's Chevrolet dealership. These two local men generated what was to become the Hammond Berries Baseball club, filling the slot left open by the vacancy created by Lake Charles. John Paul then travelled down to Thibodaux in order to see his long-time companion Bill Howell, a well known attorney in town. Howell was willing to try to arrange a franchise and called a meeting in the city court room the following day. Howell introduced Jones at the meeting and spoke to the interested citizens for about twenty minutes, explaining in plain talk how much money would be required to establish a club. "At the end of the talk," Jones reminisced, "over half of the money and pledges were on the table in front of me." Several of the more prominent men in attendance gave Jones a few names of other possible investors in town. Another meeting, scheduled with Howell's assistance, found 400 fans in attendance. The full amount of money was quickly pledged and a

38John Paul Jones, interview, July 22, 1974.
corporation was formed. The Crowley vacancy had been filled.

Meanwhile, Morris had succeeded in convincing the league directors that it would be foolish to prohibit the membership of a club merely because it was not based in south Louisiana. The Shreveport resident had no sympathy for the vote at the November meeting to exclude Natchez, which seemed to him to be an excellent location for a franchise. Natchez had made a commendable showing in 1940 and 1941, he reminded them. So Lafayette's franchise was awarded to Jake Atz, Jr. Inclusion of the west Mississippi border town of Natchez, Morris hoped, completed the search for eight steady franchises.

As the 1946 season opener on April 14th approached, the league ostensibly seemed ready. I. M. Goldberg, the former Abbeville club owner, was back in business in the Evangeline since Judge Dalferes made public his intention of giving up his presidency. He built a new 2,500 seat grandstand on a new site in the middle of a rice field for his new club and named it Abbeville Memorial Park. Just a few miles away the New Iberia Cardinals had recently compacted a working agreement with the New Orleans Pelicans. Hammond's director Fred Ring sold $15,000 worth of stock to the public and with it built a new park on Southeastern Louisiana College's property called Southeastern Park. The Thibodaux "Giants," as they would be called, collected an inspiring $20,850 by offering to sell to townspeople shares of stock worth $25.00 each. A twenty-float parade was being planned to highlight the festivities of opening day there.

There would be one more last minute maneuver before the season

39Ibid.
opener. Milton Delmas, the man who was behind the Opelousas franchise in 1946, was unable to receive the necessary lumber before the government closed down on construction of amusement centers in favor of housing projects. It was clearly the fault of Delmas because the lumber could certainly have been secured earlier. (Hammond and Abbeville had built new parks.) John Paul Jones, upon hearing of the Opelousas cancellation, promoted the idea of Houma as a replacement and acted as the conduit between Morris and business leaders in Houma. Jones was most concerned with the Opelousas failure because it could affect the entry of the Baton Rouge club. It was already the first week of April, and if a replacement for Opelousas was not found, Baton Rouge, a late entry in the Evangeline, might be asked to drop from the league to allow for a six-team circuit. A six-man committee headed by Leo Furber raised $5,000 in cash in one week in Houma's elated community, and Morris awarded the franchise to the town personally on April 8 at Legion Hall. Gibson J. Austin Sr., was elected president of the new club. A prominent civic leader and successful businessman in the meat packing business. Austin was able to arrange for a lease with the American Legion for the use of the organization's baseball park, with rental fee paid off with a percentage of the gate receipts. Stock was also issued. But Austin insured that the club would be a community investment by restricting individual owners to $2,000 worth of stock. Eventually 200 Houma citizens would

40 Milton Delmas, interview.

41 Billy Gates, "Opelousas Quit..." The Morning Advocate, April 5, 1946, p. 14-A.
become stockholders in the "Indians."^42 (The town had no real chance to name their club, for Delmas had sold to Houma the new uniforms the Opelousas Indians were to wear.)

The activities in Thibodaux and her natural Lafourche Parish rival, Houma, were a reflection of the genuine ebullience in the two new league entries. (Houma had briefly made an appearance in the league in 1940.) Ray Lee, a staff writer for the Alexandria Daily Town Talk, visited Houma shortly after it received the Opelousas franchise and found the rapture there "almost unbelievable." "You go to a service station for gas and oil. All you hear from the attendants is baseball," he wrote. "The manager, recognizing you as an out of townie, says 'You know we are going to have a pro ball club here this year. I invested my money in it.'" Lee continued his experience: "Sitting in the shade on the city square, you see several young ballplayers loafing around, waiting for the go sign.... You go to an oyster bar and cafe for some seafood and find the doors open but the place empty. 'He's closed today,' the cop on the corner tells you. 'He's out working on the baseball drive. We are going to have a club here this year, you know.'"^43

What made the enthusiasm run so high was the thought of playing Thibodaux, less than twenty miles away. The rivalry was instantaneous and inevitable. J. Walter Morris explained the phenomenon in this fashion: "There is more rivalry here than any place in the


state. When one place has something, the other tries to get one just a little better. And they don't mind spending their money to do it, either." 44

Morris's remark proved later to be an accurate appraisal, for in June Thibodaux offered $3,000.00 to Zeke Bonura, the former big league player with the Chicago White Sox, Washington Senators, and New York Giants, to become its player-manager. Bonura was retired from the majors, but the offer, which amounted to $1,000.00 a month, was too appealing to refuse. (In 1946 the $1,800.00 salary limit was for players only.) It was a homecoming for Bonura, the New Orleans native who once played semi-pro ball in Thibodaux while still a high school student.

The little town was jubilant when Bonura was hired, for not only was he a celebrity, but Bonura was also an exceptional personality with a singularity that was known throughout the region. He was cocky and audacious even on the big league diamonds. How would Zeke fit in the Evangeline? The mystery would quickly end, for Bonura made his presence felt in his league debut. Showing his contempt for the umpires by calling balls and strikes from his first-base coaching position, Bonura was a spectacle. The Alexandria Daily Town Talk reported that Bonura left the coach's box at first on several occasions "to laugh largely in the plate umpire's face." It took the services of two policemen to remove him from the field when he was thrown out of the game. On the way out he pushed the umpire and was

44 Ibid.
fined heavily for his actions. At a game in Hammond, Bonura missed a throw while playing his usual first base. The spectators ridiculed the sensitive star, provoking his quick temper, and in a fit he threw the fumbled ball into the grandstand and hit a woman. A scuffle between Bonura and a male fan soon followed, but was broken up by the umpires. After the marred contest, a Hammond supporter punched Thibodaux player Don Jameson through an open window in the Giants' bus. A crowd gathered and another fight ensued. "Bonura got his men to the Hammond hotel only to have the crowd follow the team and threaten them."

The hiring of Bonura was a desperate attempt by the Thibodaux directors to revive their club, especially considering the runaway performance of their arch-enemies in Houma. The Indians had been playing .700 baseball all season, the best showing of any Evangeline League club since the 1935 Jeanerette Blues. Near the end of the season, speculation that the players on Houma's team were getting larger salaries than was legally allowed crept into baseball circles. Houma's business manager, Babe Benning, refused to answer questions concerning players' salaries.


Few bothered to pay much attention to these queries for as the 1946 season came to a close, league attendance was 575,000, the best of the seventeen Class D leagues in the nation and higher than six leagues of higher classification. New Iberia led the league with an average of 1,610 per game, even more surprising because of the fifth-place finish of the town's beloved Cardinals. Alexandria was next with 1,558 per contest. Hammond had the poorest figure with an average of 331 per game. Houma ended the season with a 6 1/2 game lead over second-place Natchez, an accomplishment which touched the entire town. An editorial in The Houma Courier best illustrates the sentiment: "The effect of Houma's first year in baseball is nothing short of magic. In looking back over the past season, it all seems like a dream...too good to be true.... The tremendous publicity, the spirit of working together for the common good...all these and many other benefits have resulted from Houma's first year in organized baseball."


50"Record Crowds Here Help Baseball Team," The Lafourche Comet, June 13, 1946, p. 1.

51"Baseball Builds a Better Community," The Houma Courier, September 12, 1946, p. 3.
CHAPTER SIX

THE EVANGELINE SCANDAL

Heavily favored, Houma swept the championship series of 1946 with Abbeville in five quick games and brought the tiny community its first pennant ever. But the celebration was quickly tempered when President Morris called a meeting of all league directors for October 23 in Baton Rouge, overstating that it would be the "most important meeting any league ever held in the history of baseball." It had been rumored that some of the Houma players were gambling on games, but no one could be sure if that was what the meeting was about.

There was evidence that a scandal was about to be uncovered in the Evangeline. In May a letter from Judge Bramham to the Baton Rouge Baseball Club was revealed to the press. It warned all Evangeline League clubs that gamblers in parks should be ejected and permission denied to them to attend any further games. Bramham stated clearly that a report had reached him that there was "open and promiscuous gambling in the parks and grandstands of the clubs in the Evangeline League." A week later The New Orleans States discovered that there was an investigation being conducted in the Evangeline concerning

a) the shift of early season veterans from upper division minor leagues to the low-salaried Evangeline (Houma had three former AA pitchers),
b) allegations that players were receiving financial aid through "on the side" jobs for gambling interests, c) player fraternization with Ray Lee, "Once Over Lightly," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk October 17, 1946, p. 17.

known New Orleans bookies, and d) players performing with New Orleans' semi-pro teams (operated by gamblers) when their Evangeline League game was rained out.\(^3\)

A contingent of sportswriters from all over the state converged on Baton Rouge to play witness to Morris' conclave. The first part of the meeting's agenda was taken up with routine matters. Opelousas and Lake Charles submitted new applications for league membership. Tom Price, mayor of Lake Charles and a strong supporter of baseball, promised the directors that a ball park was ready in his town, and John Owens of Opelousas apologized to the league for his town's last minute decision to drop out in April, leaving the league "in a hole." He assured the group that Opelousas was ready for 1947 with funds and facilities. Both applications were unanimously approved, making the Evangeline League a ten club circuit. It was also suggested that perhaps Lafayette and Port Arthur could be accepted into the league at a later date, making the league a unique twelve team association. Lastly, Houma moved that the Evangeline should become a Class C organization in 1948. The motion was quickly seconded by Baton Rouge, but was defeated soundly 8-2. The consensus was that a move to a higher classification, while offering more talented play, would also mean added expenses for the owners, especially in higher salaries for the players.

But then something unexpected happened. Morris asked all representatives of the press to leave the meeting room. All but the owners

were barred from the second part of the meeting. The president promised the press that he would make a statement immediately following the meeting. Reporters and other interested parties waited impatiently for the appearance of the Evangeline directors for over an hour. Finally the men filed out of the room, sober and tight-lipped. Morris had avoided the newsmen and disappeared through a back exit. It was learned, however, that certain unspecified violations were brought into the open, and that at least one team president was really lambasted. 4

There was confusion amidst the controversy. Some said that Judge Bramham was going to outlaw the league. Others claimed that the larger towns in the league were planning to break off and form a separate league. Who was guilty? Everyone was accusing everyone else. But what exactly had anyone done?

The silence was broken by I. M. Goldberg a week after the Baton Rouge summit. The Houma and Abbeville clubs were under investigation for gambling. Apparently, players on both clubs were not only betting heavily at the race track in New Orleans, a practice clearly outlawed by professional sports, but were also accused of throwing games for money. Goldberg had been informed of these accusations early in the season and immediately contacted Morris about the charges. After a face to face discussion with the Abbeville owner, Morris telephoned Bramham who authorized three New Orleans undercover detectives at a

cost of $2,000 to make the investigation,\(^5\) the one referred to in the May New Orleans States article. The result was a twenty-seven page report which was sent to Morris from Bramham which named players and cited specific instances of illegalities. Morris, meanwhile, conducted his own investigation and was able to corroborate the findings of the detectives.

In December it was learned that the fourth semi-final playoff game between Houma and Alexandria was under scrutiny. Alexandria won the contest 5-4, scoring three runs in the final inning with the help of five suspicious Houma errors. It was Alexandria's only playoff win. (Copeland Goss, an Alexandria pitcher, told Morris before the game in the president's hotel room that the game was fixed. But Morris did not believe him. Neither did Stanley Guilbeau of Opelousas, owner of the Brass Rail, an outlet for prostitution and gambling. Guilbeau took a bet from an Alexandria man who wagered that the Aces would beat Houma in the fourth game. Guilbeau took the bet, only to find out at the game that it was fixed.) On January 23, 1947, the names of the accused players were made public. There were five in all, and four were from Houma's championship squad: player-manager Paul Fugit, 3rd baseman Alvin Kaiser, center-fielder Leonard Pecou, and pitching sensation William C. Thomas, who was 35-7. Don Vetorel of Abbeville was the fifth player accused by the National Association.

Bramham followed up the investigators' report by summoning interested parties to his office in Durham, North Carolina. Some of the accused players failed to appear, knowing full well the extent of

their guilt. Paul Fugit, although not present at Durham, admitted in the report that he had "three or four players on his club that drove back and forth from New Orleans to Houma to play ball; that they have always worked in 'bookie places;' that it is a fact that if the mayor hadn't closed up these placed in New Orleans they would not have played ball with Houma in 1946 as they said they could make more money working in 'bookies' than in playing ball." Kaiser and Pecou were singled out for betting on the horses and even related an incident about how they had fixed a bookie's clock in New Orleans and won $185.00 from him. But Kaiser could not understand how this had anything to do with baseball. The players were accused of passing money frequently from the bench to the stands during games, although they denied this. Vetorel and Thomas were also cited for approaching gamblers with schemes to throw games. Bramham concluded that not only was the fourth Alexandria-Houma semi-final playoff game thrown, but also the fourth game of the Abbeville-Houma finals playoff, Abbeville's lone victory in the series. Both games were "manipulated for the benefit of players and their gambling friends." Finally, Bramham charged that the five not only gambled but acted as part-time bookmakers themselves. According to the report, Kaiser and Pecou were former New Orleans bookmakers. The result was that all five men were thrown out of baseball indefinitely.

6 Sam Tarleton, interview.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
It was one of Bramham's last important acts as minor league czar, for he was about to retire because of poor health. Bramham had been president of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues since 1933 when the minors were suffering badly from the country's depression and were in danger of total collapse. In 1929, a total of twenty-five minor leagues completed the season. Two years later the number had dropped to sixteen. By 1932 only eleven leagues survived. Six more failed in 1933. It was then that William Bramham took over, taking the drastic steps that seemed necessary if Branch Rickey's farm system idea was to endure. The judge (a nickname given to him by his schoolmates for his stoic, dispassionate personality) began to require a guarantee deposit from every club under his jurisdiction, amounting to one-half of that club's payroll for a month and to be paid through the league's office. This would eliminate what Bramham called the "shoe-string" operator who began with little capital, stumbled through half a season, and then folded up and left town in debt. Other strict measures were initiated by Bramham, a protege of Judge Kennisaw "Mountain" Landis, the big league czar, including tough restrictions on club salary limits and the prohibition of bonuses. "No business can continue to operate," he once said, "when it continues to spend more than it takes in."10 His stringent laws worked well, for in 1934 fourteen minor leagues were either revived or newly formed, including the Evangeline League. And by 1938 there were thirty-seven leagues under Bramham's rule, supplying ball players

for the majors and providing employment for hundreds of aspiring young men. The judge brought stability to a system that was on the verge of extinction.

The scandal was not a surprise to some. Before the season began an Alexandria resident had told Ray Lee, the Town Talk's sportswriter, that Houma would win the pennant. Lee paid little regard to the informant's prediction. It was not until after the news of the scandal broke that Lee recalled the incident. Were gambling interests in the state in that much control over the outcome of the league? Were legitimate interests in the league unaware of what was taking place? The players knew of the improprieties. Othel Page, a player with the 1946 Red Sticks, could see that the Houma club was throwing games all season long. Writing for The Morning Advocate, Lee commented that if he ever wanted to find out who the next day's pitcher was, he could always find either the manager or some of the players in the book joints in town.

The owners were also to blame. Although there is no evidence that they had any knowledge of gambling activities as it affected their clubs, they did as a group disregard the heretofore sacrosanct laws governing player salary limits. The league built the unenviable reputation as the "Outlaw League" of baseball, a name given to it by


12Othel Page, interview, July 14, 1974.

13Dan Hardesty, "Sports from the Press Box," The Baton Rouge Morning Advocate, January 30, 1947, p. 6-B.
ball players of other loops because of the practice of paying players more money "under the counter." The money paid could be very good, depending of course on the skill of the player.\(^{14}\) Paul Bruno, one of the finest pitchers in the post-war Evangeline, refused, for example, an offer by the Dallas Steers (AA) to play because he was making more money in the Evangeline League.\(^{15}\) Unofficial meetings were even held among the owners to discuss how much they would violate the salary ceiling. Then all eight clubs would agree on a sum.\(^{16}\) The money was received in cash in plain envelopes every month along with the regular payroll check. And the amount never fluctuated, for each player had made a pre-season verbal agreement with his owner on the total monthly figure.\(^{17}\) This abandonment of National Association policy by the club directors contributed to the general disregard some of the players came to have for the principles that had always governed the play of professional baseball. And, too, the widespread practice of collecting slot machine revenue for the benefit of the club enhanced the players' indiscretion. The devices did not disappear after the war but rather flourished. In Thibodaux each machine, all of them owned by the booster club, was even "assigned" to individual ball players.\(^{18}\)

One could easily accuse the fans of helping to create an atmosphere

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\(^{14}\)Billy Barrett, interview, June 27, 1947.


\(^{16}\)Malcolm Bollinger, interview, June 30, 1974.

\(^{17}\)Bill Vega, interview, July 13, 1974.

\(^{18}\)Billy Barrett, interview.
conducive for the scandal, for they gambled on the games regularly. Larry Jones, an Abbeville pitcher, once walked out of the park in Alexandria after defeating the Aces 1-0. An Alexandria fan approached him and gave him $50 and told him to use it to buy steaks for his whole team since the fan had just won $500 on the game.\(^{19}\) Clayton Guilbeau, the former owner of the Opelousas Indians, never watched a game without placing a bet on it.\(^{20}\) "It was a way of life down here," Tom Patton of Lafayette explained.\(^{21}\)

J. Walter Morris blamed Louisiana bookies for the scandal. (They no doubt were culpable. Some gamblers even followed the teams around on roadtrips.)\(^{22}\) He vowed that the probe was far from complete and that the axe might fall again. "I'm not going to let up until this thing is cleared up once and for all."\(^{23}\) But there were no more than five players punished, despite evidence that several other players had committed various other infractions. In Abbeville, for example, at least two players regularly received results of the races there from bookies in New Orleans before the results reached the Western Union station in Abbeville.\(^{24}\) This, of course, allowed them to place

\(^{19}\)Larry Jones, interview.

\(^{20}\)Frankie Deitlein, interview.

\(^{21}\)Tom Patton, interview.

\(^{22}\)Clyde Shroeder, interview, July 13, 1974.


\(^{24}\)Sam Tarleton, interview.
their bets with local bookies before even the professionals knew who the winners were.

The Evangeline League was not alone in its infamy. That same year middleweight boxer Rocky Graziano testified to a grand jury that he had been offered $100,000 to throw a fight against Ruben Shank of Denver. Pro-footballers Merle Hapes and Frankie Filchock of the New York Giants were bribed by a man named Alvin Paris who was later convicted of the crime. And in New York the threat of a basketball fix had colleges there so concerned that players actually were closeted in a hotel room on game days and were denied use of the telephone. The mounting disgrace of professional and amateur sports prompted Congressman F. Edward Hebert of New Orleans to introduce a bill in the House prescribing heavy penalties (ten years and a $10,000 fine) for bribing athletes and sports officials.

At the next league gathering in Opelousas on January 30, the scandal remained the major topic, and Houma's owner L. E. Lapeyrouse, who would resign as club president in July of 1947, was in the limelight. Was he aware that these activities were taking place on his club? Lapeyrouse firmly replied that neither he nor any of the other league directors knew anything about the gambling, adding that he was surprised and angered that only one Abbeville player was indicted.


28"Houma Reveals...," The Morning Advocate, Jan. 26, 1947, p. 6-B.
Club owners and managers saw their businesses threatened by the disgrace and took the lead from New Iberia owner Aaron Ward. The former New York Yankee suggested that all club managers get together with the players before the 1947 season and "lay down the law." "The whole doggone league is liable to be run out of baseball and we all know it," he admitted. The meeting closed with the firm remarks of J. Walter Morris who ordered his directors to "clean up or close up."  

More routine matters were deliberated on February 23 at the New Iberia meeting of the league directors. Plans to expand the circuit to ten teams were quashed when Lake Charles' representatives announced to the disappointed officials that they would have to withdraw their membership application. Not only were the promoters there plagued with financial trouble, they were also unable to obtain a lease for a new park. This unexpected news left no choice to the owners except to ask Opelousas to drop out of the league, for a nine-team race would be impractical. A suggestion was made that perhaps Lafayette might replace Lake Charles, but it was thought that they would have little time to build a park before the season opener.  

The Lake Charles announcement irritated Morris and the directors. A year earlier the league had experienced the same difficulty when franchise bids, disavowed at the last moment, placed the league in the predicament of deciding on a last-minute replacement. As a result the men approved the adoption of a rule requiring that the current deposit of $20.00 of all league applicants be raised to $2,500 with

the stipulation that the money would be returned thirty days after
the opening of play.30 The rule proved to be a most positive step,
but the business of approving league franchise bids remained shoddy.
No investigation of the new applicants was ever conducted. When
representatives from a town expressed interest in joining the loop,
the league simply approved their application without proof of finan-
cial stability. But the new deposit fee idea worked well, and never
again did the league have a repetition of the 1946 pre-season debacle
when three towns withdrew franchise applications after January 1 and
another (Opelousas) dropped out of the league days before the season
opened.

By the end of February Morris was satisfied that his investiga-
tion was finished, and he happily looked forward to a fresh, new
season. The only embarrassment left was a visit to Baton Rouge by
the new National Association president, George "Red" Trautman, Judge
Bramham's successor. Trautman's stay in Evangeline country was offi-
cially classified as a routine call, but most understood it to be
necessitated by the scandal. It was Trautman's turn to personally
admonish Morris and his unruly league, and perhaps he would announce
further indictments.

When sportswriter Sam Tarleton, now with the Beaumont Enterprise,
learned of Trautman's scheduled meeting with the league, he made
plans to disgrace J. Walter Morris who had not obliged the good-natured
journalist when he had requested information concerning the scandal.

30 "Lafayette May Enter...," The Alexandria Daily Town Talk,
February 24, 1947, p. 15.
Tarleton sent telegrams to press personnel throughout the state remarking that at the Trautman meeting he would expose several irregularities by Morris.31 The telegrams created a furor, setting the stage for a potentially disastrous gathering. If Lefty Tarleton could implicate Morris in a scandal, the tremors would likely be felt everywhere in the baseball world, and the Evangeline League could possible not hope to survive the trauma.

On March 2 at 10:00 A.M. the meeting was opened by President Morris. A crowd of newspaper men, radio broadcasters, and interested baseball men throughout the state were in attendance, and when Trautman was introduced all attention was focused on him. The new minor league czar declared the Evangeline League investigation over, relieving the anxieties of the league directors. Trautman added, however, that he knew others were involved in the gambling activities, but he was unable to gather sufficient evidence. "You've got to be closer...to your players...." What they do off the field "is our business," he instructed. "We are the guardians of a public trust and let us guard it well."32 He then opened up the floor to questions. Tarleton raised his hand and was acknowledged. Bud Montet of the Morning Advocate tells what happened: "After all these admonitions about keeping the sport clean, Sam asked: 'What if you've got a league president who bets on horses?' That took Mr. Trautman by surprise and he asked Tarleton to explain. Sam said: 'Well, J.

31Malcolm Bollinger, interview.

Walter Morris bet on horses at Opelousas when I played there.' Trautman asked how he knew. Sam said: 'I was behind the betting cage taking the bets.' The bets were in the 50¢ category, and Trautman dismissed them as mere entertainment. Tarleton did manage to lend a bit of levity to the otherwise somber atmosphere of the meeting.

The league rebounded in quick fashion from the previous year's scandal. New Iberia, Opelousas, Hammond, Houma, and Alexandria all made extensive renovation to their parks. Western Union telegraph terminals were installed in each of the league's grandstands. And an Evangeline League Press and Radio Association was established by Sam Tarleton in order to offer better coverage of the league to its rather large audience. The record league attendance of 634,221 set in 1946 was broken in 1947 when 690,292 fans witnessed the contests. Three towns topped the 100,000 mark—Alexandria, which led the league with 149,899 paying spectators, Thibodaux, and Houma.

Surprising everyone, the Hammond Berries won the pennant, a team which finished the 1946 season in last place, 48 1/2 games behind Houma. The Berries had finished the 1947 season fourth, but defeated Alexandria and then Thibodaux in the post-season playoff series. They were led all season by New Orleanian pitcher Paul Bruno who compiled a 25-5 record for the champions.

In spite of the Berries' good showing in 1947, Hammond citizens were not supporting their team well. Only a few more than 59,000

33Bud Montet, interview.

watched the Berries play during their pennant-clinching season. But there were occasionally attempts to increase the attendance. Paul Bruno, who also managed the club, devised a scheme with friend Art Visconti, the off-beat showman who played second base for Art Phelan's Aces. Bruno suggested between innings in a Hammond-Alexandria match-up that two players get embroiled in a fight later in the game. (Visconti was worried about paying the fine, but Bruno promised to pay any penalty.) So during the fourth inning of the contest, the two began to yell loudly at each other. Bruno, who was pitching, came off the mound and started after Visconti who was on second base after a clean double. "The fans really started yelling," Visconti remembered. Both players were thrown out of the game. Bruno invited Visconti to his house for dinner that night, sending a cab to pick up his friend so no one would recognize his car in front of Bruno's home. They planned to charge each other the next night during the game, but agreed not to throw any punches. When the Aces bus, the "Green Hornet," drove up to the ball park the next night, fans were already lined up outside the gate. "Bruno's going to get you, Art," they yelled. Visconti retorted: "I'm going to kill him."

About 5,000 fans were at the second contest between the two clubs, an increase of well over 4,000 from the previous night. Before the game began Bruno and Visconti traded diatribes from the dugouts. "You cross that foul line and I'll kill you," Visconti screamed out. Hammond's team restrained Bruno as he ran up to the foul line, satisfying the fans. When the Berries came to Alexandria for their next scheduled game, approximately 3,000 fans showed up to
Bruno, who refused an offer by the Dallas Steers (AA) to play because the money was better playing for Hammond, was associated with another incident which gladdened the hearts of Evangeline League rooters. Hammond was playing Thibodaux in a late season contest when umpire Joe Angel called a ninth-inning Berry hitter out when an inside pitch nicked the bat and the catcher caught the ball. Bruno rushed out of the dugout and squeezed the batter's forearm "very hard with his fingers," causing a red mark to appear on the player's arm. Bruno claimed that the ball hit the batter and displayed the reddened area to the umpire, but the arbiter refused to change his decision. "There was a lot of hollering and threatening" from the Hammond fans, and the base umpire Paul Negri stated that he was punched from behind at least once. As the threatening remarks increased, the chief of police, a few policemen, and some of the players surrounded the umpires and escorted them to their car after the game was completed. The Houma radio announcer, Dick Walsh of KCIL, was assaulted by a few spectators. They grabbed the microphone from him and yelled: "We was robbed" and yelled various obscenities into the mike. The control operator in Houma cut the program off the air at that point.  

Hammond's club also contributed to the Evangeline's history by being party to one of the most memorable stories to come from the

35 Art Visconti, interview.

36 Dan Hardesty, "Sports From the Press Box," The Morning Advocate, August 31, 1947, p. 8-B.
league. Art Phelan's Aces were at Hammond when one of Bruno's players hit a line drive down the third base line for what looked to be a run-scoring double. Phelan scrambled out of his dugout arguing that the ball was foul. After a long, heated debate the umpire refused to call the ball fair or foul, admitting that he had not seen the play. Phelan, a veteran baseball man, knew the game had to continue one way or another. "Dammit, take a nickel out of your pocket and flip it," he suggested. The umpire did just that. Bruno called it and won the flip.³⁷ It was perhaps the only RBI ever made on the flip of a coin in the history of the game.

Two winter meetings prefaced the 1948 season. The first was held, appropriately, at Lafayette's Evangeline Hotel. The site of the meeting may have given a hint as to the primary order of business. The town of Lafayette had been, for various reasons, without a league franchise for the 1946 and 1947 seasons. The Evangeline League was not really the Evangeline League, many believed, without the "queen city" of French south Louisiana. It had always been the unofficial capital of the loop, and geographically was the most centrally located. During its formative years, the league's offices were housed in Lafayette under the able direction of Lafayette resident J. Wilmot Dalferes. It was only logical, then, that efforts be made to get Lafayette back into the circuit.

The opportunity came when the Natchez owners informed Morris in September that they were about to re-enter their old loop, the Cotton

³⁷Bud Montet, interview.
States League. The little Mississippi town had had its first professional ball club in that league in 1902. The reason for the change was simple. Travel expenses, while not lethal to the franchise, were nonetheless inordinate. It was seventy-three miles to Alexandria, the nearest city in the league. The other road games required that the team spend the night in its opponent's town. So the chance to play in the Cotton States League, made up of towns much closer to Natchez, was welcomed by the management. The position was immediately awarded to Lafayette at the meeting, although Crowley, Morgan City, and Lake Charles had placed bids. The new Lafayette franchise would be a corporation headed by Alcide Dominique, the extroverted stockyard owner who, like most of the club directors, hoped the presidency would publicize his business. Arranging for a working agreement with Little Rock of the Southern Association, Dominique mailed the $2,500 surety deposit to Morris and proclaimed that the new club would be called the "Brahman Bulls" after his prized animals.

Significant changes were in store for the Evangeline at the second off-season meeting of the directors in Hammond. The owners adopted the "bonus rule" for the 1948 season. According to this stipulation, each club would contribute $200.00 to the league at the end of the season. Nine hundred dollars of the money would be split between the players of the club which finished first, while the remaining $700.00 would be awarded to the pennant winners. The rule was a reaction to the demands of Art Phelan whose club finished the 1947 season in first place but lost the pennant to fourth-place finisher Hammond. A new salary limit was approved providing for
a $2,600 payroll ceiling per club, a far cry from the meager salaries of the 1934 players. It was agreed that the fans would select the all stars in 1948, a method that had been dropped in 1940. Lastly, an additional player would be allowed on the club rosters, bringing the total of sixteen--four class men, six limited service men (those who had less than two years but more than forty-five days playing experience), and six rookies.

There had been talk of raising the Evangeline League to the higher Class C division since 1936, but now the talk turned into substance. Art Phelan, whose opinion was the most highly regarded in the group, came out in favor of changing the league's status. Previously Phelan had been against the move, citing increased expenses as the major discouragement. But now Phelan had changed his mind. He had seen the league mature since before the war and was ready to initiate a vote. Phelan's motion was endorsed by Abbeville and Baton Rouge, but the other five clubs voted the motion down. It would be different next year, for in 1949 the Evangeline League would graduate into a Class C outfit.

Lafayette, New Iberia, and Alexandria all boasted new parks for the 1948 season, all of them more spacious than in previous years. When George Trautman announced that he was going to be present at the dedication of Alexandria's new stadium, speculation arose that he might be investigating the league's inflated salaries. It was well known that several players had given up offers to play in double-A ball so as to remain in the Evangeline. It had only been less than two years, after all, since Trautman's last sojourn into Louisiana.
Morris and Trautman were both at the dedication, but there is no evidence that they spoke about any irregularities.

Nineteen-forty-eight was a typically atypical year for the "Hot Sauce" circuit. Paul Bruno returned to play and manage with the defending league champions. In response to criticism that he was getting too old to pitch well, he rented a wheel-chair and, in relief of a beleaguered pitcher, was wheeled out to the mound to pitch the last inning of a game against New Iberia. After striking out the side, the comical manager was wheeled back to the dugout to the great delight of the fans. Art Visconti had a subtle method of criticizing the poor lighting in his new home diamond in Alexandria. Batting against Houma fastballer Gene Thompson one night, the wag lit a match next to his head and yelled: "Hey, don't throw it over here." And Thibodaux's Giants were the objects of humor in 1948 when they lost 14-13 in a road game to New Iberia, after leading 13-0 in the ninth inning. The Giants' manager was so angry that he ordered his club to dress out in uniform when they returned to Thibodaux. The team began practice at 2:00 A.M., but after a short while the police visited them and demanded that they go home—the lights expended too much of the city's electric power.

Nineteen-forty-eight was about on par with 1947's record-breaking

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39 Art Visconti, interview.

40 Billy Barrett, interview.
attendance season until September and the playoff series came into view. Houma, which finished the season in first place with a .598 winning percentage, defeated Baton Rouge in its first semi-final game on September 8th. Thibodaux, the third-place club, beat Hammond on that same day for her first playoff win. But then the rains came. The games scheduled for September 9 and 10 were postponed because of the inclement weather. Thibodaux and Hammond managed to play two damp games on the 11th and 12th, but the Baton Rouge-Houma contest was rained out until the 15th when the Red Sticks dropped Houma, evening the series between them 1-1. It was the first game they had been able to play in seven days. Contests scheduled between the four clubs were rained out again on the 16th and 17th, bringing the total to fourteen games that were postponed in only ten days. Fan interest had waned, and attendance was disappointingly poor. As a result, representatives from the four clubs met in Thibodaux on September 17 and decided to cancel the playoffs, giving as their reason the high cost of going ahead with the series. (The players had to be paid whether the games were postponed or not.) After the meeting the men telephoned Morris who approved their decision. Houma would be awarded the pennant by virtue of its first-place finish. But when Trautman heard about the cancellation, he remarked that he'd never before heard of such a thing.41 The decision was without precedent, but by now Trautman had come to accept the Evangeline League for what it had always been--unorthodox.

41 "Vangy League Playoffs Cancelled," The State Times, Sept. 18, 1948, p. 6-A.
The directors' meeting prior to the 1949 season was an eventful one for the Evangeline, for Art Phelan would succeed in persuading the others to make the move to Class C baseball: "We can gain advantages by moving up into C ball. We can have more players, and we can get the benefit of options and the draft. But Class C ball is big business," he reminded them.\(^\text{42}\) The owners were confident of their league, of their financial base, and of themselves. They were willing for the first time to forge ahead in what was for them a big time venture. But the aging J. Walter Morris could not go along. He felt it was a mistake to change classifications and resigned as president at the end of the 1948 season.

Morris' resignation signalled not only the end of an era but a change in the character of the league. The Class D philosophy had always been to allow a young ball player a place to begin—-it was a rookie's league. But after the war there seemed to be more emphasis placed on acquiring the washed-up veteran in order to win a pennant. Salary limits were ignored so as to attract these former big leaguers. And it was they the fans came to see. The rookie was no longer the instrument of pride that he had been in the 1930's. He had become almost a liability. And now the league was moving into the Class C bracket where only two or three rookies were allowed on the roster.

Other distractions beset the Evangeline by 1949. Little league baseball had made its debut, and fans would begin staying away from the Evangeline contests in order to see their children play.

Television, the nemesis of the minor leagues, would soon begin regular broadcasts of major league games and cripple Evangeline League attendance along with the air conditioner and the intrusion of black and Hispanic ball players into the league. All these factors contributed significantly to the rapid decline in attendance which, by 1953, had dropped to 368,405, a far cry from the over 600,000 fans who paid to see the games in 1947. And by 1957, the last year the league operated, only 132,822 came out to the ball parks.43

The impact of the league on major league baseball was no doubt meaningful. Each town of the pre-war Evangeline could point with pride to at least one graduate on nine of sixteen big league clubs. Art Phelan alone sent six players to the majors, including Hal Newhouser, the American League MVP in 1944 and 1945, and Virgil "Fire" Trucks of the Detroit Tigers. Eddie Lopat, a Chicago Cub, was with Jeanerette in 1937-1939. The left-hander won 12 of the club's 45 games in 1938, a feat which earned him the consideration of the Chicago scouts. New Iberia sold three fine pitchers to the St. Louis Cardinals—Howard Pollet, George Munger, and Ken Burkhart. Lafayette's Jack Kramer broke into the big leagues with the St. Louis Browns. Opelousas contributed fireballing Al Jurisch to the Phillies, and Abbeville nurtured Johnny Beazley, who won two World Series games for the St. Louis Cardinals in 1942.

Every position on the field could be impressively filled with big leaguers who spent time in the Evangeline. In 1935 a young

43J. G. Taylor Spink, Baseball Guide and Record Book (St. Louis, 1950), p. 68.
sixteen-year old catcher named Clyde McCullough asked the Lafayette White Sox for a chance to play. He won the receiving job and caught 130 games that year, later to do the same with the Chicago Cubs. Jerry Witte, who easily made the Evangeline's 1939 all star team as a Lafayette player by leading the league in hitting and RBI's, became a star first baseman for the St. Louis Browns. At second base another Art Phelan product, Emil Verban, played for the Philadelphia ball club. He covered the middle bag for Newhouser and Trucks on the Aces' 1939 roster. Don Kolloway, a third baseman for the Chicago White Sox, played for Rayne in 1938. The Washington Senators acquired the services of shortstop Mark Christman who played for Alexandria in 1934, the Evangeline's inaugural year. Pat Mullin played for Lake Charles in 1937 before slugging for the Detroit Tigers. Mullin lost the Evangeline batting crown by one point with a .383 average that year. Abbeville produced Thurman Tucker who advanced to the Chicago White Sox outfield. Another Alexandria graduate, Danny Litwhiler, impressed his fellow big leaguers by playing nearly two full seasons with the Phillies without committing an error.44

Many others could be mentioned, including Zeke Bonura, Al Zarilla, Pete Reiser (who played but a few innings with New Iberia in 1937), and Paul Bruno. But the Evangeline League was much more than a proving ground for baseball players. It was an important part of the social history and culture of the people of south Louisiana, bringing to them a real sense of pride, self-reliance, and

44Sam Tarleton, "Evangeline League Graduates Would Form Own Major League All Star Club," The Beaumont Enterprise, June 22, 1947, p. 3-B.
healthy competition that remained in the area long after the gray
days of the depression when the Evangeline was born.
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George Thomas  Bill Boustany  Billy Barrett
Larry Jones  Art Visconti  Bill Vega
Clyde Shroeder  Sam Tarleton  Micky Owens
Sheldon Blue  Tom Patton  E. C. Hunt
Shep Baron  Leo Gross  Tom Savage
Joe Turk  Bud Montet  Milton Dalmas
T. Paul Leblanc  Ben Segrest  E. C. "Hooky" Irwin
Carl Gilmore  Red Gooche  R. C. "Hooky" Irwin
Alton Broussard  Bob House Luke Langlinais  Frankie Deitlein
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## APPENDIX

### Team Standings

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*Pennant won in playoff between first and second half season winners.

**Shaughnessy playoff pennant winner

***Season ended without a pennant winner May 30 due to war.

****Pennant winner. No playoff due to inclement weather.
VITA

The author of "The Evangeline Baseball League" completed his B.S. in Secondary Education in 1970 at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He is currently a member of the faculty of DeLaSalle Senior High School, New Orleans, Louisiana, and teaches U. S. History. Mr. Altobello is a member of the American Historical Association.
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Candidate: Brian Joseph Altobello

Major Field: History


Approved:

[Signature]
Major Professor and Chairman

[Signature]
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signature]

[Signature]

Date of Examination:

November 8, 1976