

Baseball, in some form, has been played in the United States as early as the American Revolution. Early games required little more than a ball, a stick, and one or more bases, frequently made by the players themselves. A decisive turning point came in 1842 and 1843, when a group of young clerks, storekeepers, professional men, and assorted “gentlemen” in New York City began playing a bat and ball game at the corner of 27th and Fourth Avenue in Manhattan. In 1845, these young men formed a club that came to be known as the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club. In the mid-1850s, a baseball mania swept through the New York metropolitan area. By the summer of 1861, 200 teams were playing in metropolitan New York and northern New Jersey. Some were organized social clubs, others were simply groups of tradesmen who formed teams of their own. During the Civil War, boredom in military camps spawned countless baseball games. As a result, thousands of men, North and South alike, were exposed to the game. By 1868, the National Association of Base Ball Players had delegates from 91 clubs located in 10 states.

The decades following the Civil War marked a new era in Base Ball, one increasingly dominated by professional teams. In 1862, the first enclosed park was organized, allowing enterprising Brooklynite William Cammeyer the opportunity to charge fans to watch baseball, as well as imbibe from a saloon built onsite. The ensuing “enclosure movement” marked the beginnings of professional baseball, as teams were organized as for-profit enterprises. Fans came to identify with teams, as teams provided a sense of belonging to in increasingly mobile society. Teams gave neighborhoods, ethnic and occupational groups, and cities new and deeper emotional existences. In 1870 the NABBP folded, as early team owners possessed no grand plan for winning public favor or maximizing the income of its member clubs.

In 1876, representatives from six eastern teams organized the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs, hoping to promote the mutual interests of the teams. By the end of the year, games attracted more than 3,000 fans. Umpires who policed the entire field held unenviable positions, with game fixing and gambling mocking Victorian values. Although the NL had its greatest participation from “Western” (in reality, mid-western) teams, dozens of pro clubs continued to operate independent of the NL.

The American Association of Base Ball Clubs, commonly referred to as the Beer Ball League (as brewery owners sat on the boards of directors of six of the clubs in the new association), was organized in 1881. Seeking to capitalize upon a largely immigrant base ball fan base that wanted to consume alcohol at games and even play on Sundays, the American Association soon had teams in St. Louis, Baltimore, Louisville, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh.

In the fall of 1883 clubs from the two leagues played 58 exhibition games against each other, with the first “world championship” being played 3 years later. The NL’s Chicago White Stockings were defeated by the AA’s St. Louis Browns, 4 games to 3. Although the leagues continued to compete against each other, the character of players in the two leagues was markedly different. The AA not only aggressively sought the patronage of ethnics and workingmen, but fielded black players on its teams. Between 1883 and 1898 more than 54 black athletes played on racially-integrated teams.

Although a form of baseball may have been played in Texas by the U.S. Army as early as 1845, the first specific mention of the sport was made by Colonel Abner Doubleday, the alleged inventor of the game, in 1871. Commanding elements of the 24th Infantry at Fort McKavett, Doubleday requested from Adjutant General E.D. Townsend, “baseball implements for the amusement of the men,” noting that the company fund was “ample” adding that “I think these expenditures would add to the happiness of the men.” It was not uncommon to find teams organized at frontier military posts, as officers frequently had experience with the game as a product of their time in service during the Civil War.

Baseball had certainly made its way to rural West Texas by 1909, as evidenced by the photo of the Audra Community Base Ball Team. The Buffalo Gap Vintage Base Ball Club fields two teams that play in a style not unlike what would have been played in the area during the last quarter of the 19th century. The Buffalo Gap “Chips” represent the south side of the Taylor county, depicting farm boys and ranchers of the area who play ball, though lack uniforms that distinguish them as ball players. In contrast, the Abilene “407s” appear as nattily-dressed city folk in uniforms of red, white and blue. Taking their name from the T&P Railroad mile marker that designated the location for the “future great” city of Abilene, they have a much more cosmopolitan tone and appearance than do their country cousins.



When the two teams take the field, they play by 1883 rules, and in actuality bring two struggles to the diamond. First, they play for the honor of their team and the rural or urban tradition they represent. Second, 1883 was a critical year in the history of Taylor County, as in October of that year a vote was held to determine where the county seat would be: Buffalo Gap, home to the courthouse since 1881, or in Abilene, which was established when cattle interests in the area were unable to secure property rights near Buffalo Gap that launch a ranching empire. When these two teams appear on their circa. 1883 ballfields, this tenuous issue is as yet undecided. Its contentiousness adds to the friendly catcalls and comments that are tossed back and forth between the two teams, much in the same manner that the hurler fires a pitch at the batsman.