

Keystone Little League

In early February of 1965 an exploratory meeting was held at Boyd Elementary to see if there was interest in creating a little league in northwest suburban Omaha. Don Mullins and Dave Fulkerson kicked around the idea earlier because they felt their boys needed more than pick-up games on Boyd's field or on the corner of Templeton Drive and Fort Street. They wanted to create an opportunity for their boys to play organized ball like was being done at Hillside, Westgate, and Suburban fields. They knew there was a need; they just didn't know if there was enough support in the Keystone neighborhood.

Over twenty fathers showed up at the first meeting. The interest was strong, but it was apparent that a plan was essential to success. Fathers eagerly volunteered for the tasks necessary to make it happen not the following year, but that very same summer. Don was elected to be the first president of the new league. He and Dave filled out the necessary paperwork, but a site was needed to build the field.

The field at Boyd would not suffice and the Templeton Drive field was to remain a neighborhood park. One of the fathers, Morry Hansen, had connections in the rural community to the north of the Keystone area. He owned a service station and International Harvester Implement in Irvington until his health forced him to close the business. Unused land along a branch of the Papio creek, once a pony ranch and a golf driving range, was available -- but only for a short time. The Katherine O'Brien estate knew that within a few years the state was going to build a new highway through the property, so a temporary lease at a nominal fee was negotiated.

As soon as papers were signed a group of fathers organized a construction plan. John Burg and Russ Watts took the leadership in building the field. Dick Grell, an employee of Dugdale construction, assisted. With borrowed machinery and a limited budget for materials the volunteers created the first ball diamond just north of the corner of 90th and Military.

Dave Fulkerson organized a committee to find sponsors and donors, without complete knowledge of how many boys would sign up and how many teams would need uniforms. The first businesses to fully sponsor teams were Baker's Supermarket, Leo A. Daly Company, First Westside Bank, Markel Motors, R.L.White Company, and Wilson Concrete.

Tom Wilson agreed to run the first tryouts. The league would include students not only from Boyd, but also Adams, West Maple, and St. Pius X. The league boundaries were from 72nd to 90th, and Blondo to Military. Ninety boys signed up. The boys were tested in throwing, hitting, fielding, and running while their future coaches watched and took notes. Six coaches

were then assigned the task of dividing up the players in the form of a draft. The draft was held secretly so that no one would know who was chosen first and who was the last one picked. The first coaches were Dick Haskins (Baker's), Dick Kerns (Daly), Dick White (First Westside), John Burg (Markel), Chuck Blanchard (White), and Fred Thomas (Wilson). The coaches then notified the players and organized their own practice sessions. The competition would start in June.

Morry Hansen suggested that there would only be one chance to create a first image of the new league. He thought a parade was necessary. A few phone calls and some minor arm twisting yielded a parade with equipment from the Irvington Volunteer Fire Department, the Union Pacific Railroad marching band, Benson High School's ROTC Color Guard, a clown band, an equestrian parade unit from area 4-H groups, floats, and the Shriner's clown and motorcycle group.

To help fund the organization it was determined that concessions should be sold. A shack left from the days when the property was used as a golf driving range would be cleaned up and used as the first concession stand. Morry and his wife Mabel, having had experience selling food at Christ Lutheran Church of Irvington's food stand at the Douglas County Fair in Waterloo, took the lead in this effort. The church loaned the league the large grill used during the fair so that burgers and hotdogs could be offered. And while they were cleaning the shack and setting up, a vendor passed by amazed at the transformation from mediocre driving range to first class baseball facility. He suggested that the concessionaires needed to sell popcorn. He agreed to loan a popper if they agreed to buy supplies from his company.

Morry, with his involvement with the County Fair, had one more suggestion to raise funds. He created the Keystone County Karnival with game booths like at an amusement park. And to complete the affair, he brought in the Omaha Show Wagon, a traveling stage that would move around Omaha for amateur entertainment at places like Elmwood, Fontenelle, and Benson Parks.

With the teams prepared for competition, opening day was slated for Sunday, June 6. At 1:00 pm the players and coaches in uniform met at the top of Templeton hill where it intersected Military Avenue for a march through the community. The only disagreement was who was going to follow the horses. Fire trucks, bands, floats, clowns, and horses were interspersed with the six teams as they made their way down Templeton, turning left on Fort Street, and heading north on 90th to the field.

Once they arrived at the field the Opening Day Ceremony began with introductions and a first pitch being delivered by a representative of Mayor A. V. Sorensen. Two-inning exhibition

games followed. Dozens of volunteers manned the concession booth, the carnival, and entertained on the show stage.

The following Monday at 6 pm competition officially began. Games were also held on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and double-headers on Saturdays. There was only one field for 90 players. John Burg and Russ Watts made up the grounds crew along with occasional volunteers, usually the day's opposing coaches and players.

The 1965 season ended with a closing day extravaganza on Labor day. All-stars were chosen to play each other in one final game. The 4-H Band played to open the day and sky divers landed on the field. The day closed with encore appearance of the Show Wagon and a fireworks display.

The league was so successful that the State Little League awarded Keystone the site of the 1966 State Tournament. Dave Fulkerson spearheaded that effort as the league's second president. The league also created a buzz within the community and more parents wanted their children involved. So the volunteers created two more fields for a minor league (boys 9 and 10 years old) and a senior league (boys 13 to 15).

The league was met with a major challenge the following year. They were informed that the state would begin construction of Highway 133 now known as the Blair High Road. At a January 1967 meeting new sites were discussed: 90th and Crown Point, 78th and Crown Point, 90th Street north of Irvington (current location of Gladiator Park), and the northeast corner of 120th and Fort Street (the MUD site). At a later meeting Dave Fulkerson announced that farmland on 120th street (present location) was available. He negotiated with farmers Herman and Irene Neuhaus to purchase 13 acres at \$1900 per acres. Mr. Neuhaus would finance the arrangement requiring \$2500 down at 5% interest.

Once the Board decided to make the purchase, a benefactor stepped forward -- I.B.Zigman, owner of the Ranch Bowl, agreed to pay the down payment in return for some advertisement on the new field. For the 1968 season, that meant more construction and more volunteers. Once again John Burg and Russ Watts took the lead. Dick Grell with some assistance from Dugdale Construction created 4 diamonds with real dugouts at the new site.

The opening day ceremonies that were duplicated in 1966 and 1967 were altered. Morry Hansen knew that a march through Keystone to the 120th Street site was impossible. Sponsor Markel Ford provided convertibles for parade. In addition, a float was decorated to transport the league's first king and queen.

Other Founding Fathers: Don Steinacher, Jack Elet, Dave Smith, Les Christensen, Pat Carl, Bob McGuane.

