

First game was in Canada ? The boys of summer ? The Doubleday myth

By Brian Lockhart

The crack of the bat and the distinctive way baseball players shout out to encourage their pitcher or the man at bat ? it's all part of the sounds heard at ball diamonds all summer long.

Tradition has it that baseball was the invention of a man named Abner Doubleday, who drew out the first map of a diamond and organized the first game around 1839.

Doubleday was, in fact, a well-known and respected career military man who was a general in the Union Army and played a major part in the American Civil war.

However, there is no evidence that Doubleday had anything to do with the evolution of the sport ? let alone having a claim to being the man who set the rules and created the base lines.

During his lifetime, no one ever heard him even mention the sport and his personal papers and memoirs made no such claim or even referenced baseball.

The myth was created in 1907, when a committee was formed to determine the origins of the game. How Doubleday's name became involved is a mystery. The committee had no evidence or historical facts to back up the claim.

What is apparent is that baseball at the time was a growing and popular sport in the U.S., and the committee ? composed of sporting goods entrepreneurs and former league executives ? wanted baseball to be known as an all-American sport, created in a quaint small town with no foreign involvement.

The truth about the start of baseball, as we know it, is somewhat shrouded in mystery. But we know that it began as a variation on the old English game of rounders, and the first game was not played ? as legend has it ? in Cooperstown, New York.

In fact, the first recorded game of baseball was played in Beachville, Ontario, June 4, 1838, the year before the game played in Cooperstown.

Beachville is a small town in southwest Oxford Township, east of London.

The game was documented in a letter to Sporting Life magazine by Dr. Adam E. Ford, detailing the rules and names of various players. In fact he claimed the game had a long history in the community and the rules for the June 1838 game were set out by two of the ?older gray haired players,? because they wanted to use the same rules that were used when they were boys.

That first game was played in a pasture between the Beachville Club and the Zoras, a team named after a local township. There is no record of who won that first match.

While this may have been the first recorded game, it was still quite a bit different from the modern version.

They didn't play on a diamond. It was more like a square with a short cut to first base. And there were four bases plus home plate in the original game.

While our American neighbours must be given credit for elevating the game to a ?national pastime,? and turning it into a professional, big time sport, the true origins of the game, and documented first time someone yelled ?batter up? took place in small town Ontario.

The Beachville District Museum is celebrating the game with the 175th anniversary of this event in May and June, with games being played just like they were back in the early 19th century.



Abner Doubleday