

BASEBALL DIGEST

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*By Abe J. Schear
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Perhaps no other Atlanta team has been more loved than The Crackers, Atlanta's only professional team until the mid-1960s. Playing in a wonderful ballpark replete with colorful billboards, nearby train tracks and a magnolia tree in the outfield, The Crackers were nurtured by their legendary general manager and, at one point, owner, Earl Mann. In Earl Mann's tenure, only the New York Yankees won more pennants. Mr. Mann understood his product and his city, a city much different than Atlanta is today. With readily available public transportation and many walking from the nearby Virginia Highlands neighborhood, with the massive Sears across the street, the park was a place to spend a few wonderful hours in an era before air conditioning, television and lake recreation took hold.

Earl Mann's son, Oreon, knows the secrets, the history, the significance of The Crackers, and his memories are both poignant and historical. In his love for his father, for Atlanta and for The Crackers, his memories give us great perspective on Atlanta's journey in the last 60 years.

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Oreon Mann

“Remembering The Crackers”

Abe: I'm here with Oreon Mann, who is the son of Earl Mann, the legendary, as I remember, general manager and owner of The Atlanta Crackers.

Oreon: Yes, he sold it to the Dodgers. I'll give you the history. My father was born in 1904, grew up in the City of Atlanta and went to the ballpark to sell peanuts and Cracker Jacks. My aunt who just died recently told me this story. She was younger than my father. He would be 14, she was 10, something like that, and she heard her parents talking about he had all this change and wanted to know what he was doing and this was at night. Her parents had gone to bed and my aunt heard them say “We're going to go out to the ballpark and see what he does. Don't tell him.” So, they went out to the ballpark and watched my father sell his stuff and talk to the ballplayers, talk to the fans and everything and came back. So, she went back the next night and said, “What a wonderful job for a boy to have” and he did that. He came to The Crackers and this would be '23-'24, and he was made Assistant Cashier. The Brooklyn Dodgers came to town and hired my father to go to Rocky Mountain, North Carolina and run the team. Then they moved him to Macon, Georgia to run the team and then he met my mother there.

He married my mother and took her to Hartford, Connecticut. Then the Yankees hired my father to go to Wheeling, West Virginia and my mother went with him and then he came to the Atlanta Crackers in 1933. My father was 29 and they hired him to come back to Atlanta to be

the Assistant General Manager. He was working for Wilbur Robinson, and both of them were working for the Coca-Cola Company. In 1933, before the season started, Robinson died and Hugh Spalding of King & Spalding, who was Coca-Cola's lawyer, wired Robert Woodruff in Paris and said “Robinson died. What do I do?” and Woodruff wired back and said “Take the job”. Spalding wired back “I can't, I gave it to Mann”. Woodruff wired back “He's too young” and Spalding wired back “I'm too old.” So that's how he got there. My dad was 29 years old.

Now, tell me, what are your first memories of baseball?

Oh, well, I was born in '41. I went to the ballpark a lot. When I was 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, I would leave school and I'd ride the bus, go down to my father's office and all during the school year if it was off season, we would eat down there and then come home. He was a single parent, and if there was a game, we stayed for the game, I worked my homework, I'd watch the ballgame, and the players. I was a bat boy and then I gave up being the bat boy and wanted to be just the traveling bat boy. That was more fun. I got to travel with the ball club. So, I did that for the last four years of the team - '55, '56, '57, '58.

Did you get to go practice with The Crackers?

Yes.

Did you have your own uniform? Did you get to go out there and chase fly balls?

Yes.

Now, exactly where did you grow up?

What neighborhood in Atlanta?

In Brookhaven, in the City of Atlanta after 1950, when the city was expanded, right at the edge of the city.

Did you follow the games in the newspaper, on the radio back then?

Yes.

Did you enjoy reading the paper or did you enjoy the announcers? Ernie Harwell was the announcer when you were really a young boy.

I'm sure I listened to Ernie, but I don't remember him. I remember that voice, but that's from later on.

What was it like to go see The Crackers play?

It was a wonderful ballpark. We had one of the better ballparks in the Southern League and I thought one of the better ballparks in the country until I saw some of the others. It was a big concrete and steel structure that had offices in the very back of it with my father having a picture window in his office so that he could watch the ballgame any time he wanted to and he put a box that hung off the roof where the press box and regular TV was and he had his own little box over there, with a glass window and a cooler in it. I used to go there and watch ballgames.

The ballpark was owned by whom?

The ballpark was owned by my father from – well, I have pictures that my father had in his office. This was a full newspaper sized picture and there's no place to keep it in my house. It was about – well, a full open newspaper and I gave all this stuff to the Baseball Hall of Fame and they gave him back copies of it. This is the certificate for 1,000 shares of the Atlanta Baseball Club owned by the Coca-Cola Company and this is the receipt he got in

out there. Why is the magnolia tree so legendary?

Well, it was in deep center field. It was in the field of play but it was on a – there was a platform, a grass hill and on there was a sewer main, a big concrete box that sat out there and the trees were - one of them was right at the edge of that and then one was higher on the hill and they're both still there and they're both behind the Home Depot across from City Hall East.

And there is a story, I mean, I guess the tree itself came into play when the ball was hit. The players would run around the tree?

Well, it was a long ways out there, so if you were very fast and it was a very, very high fly ball you could conceivably get out there near the tree and catch it. If it was a line drive, you picked it up off the ground. You couldn't beat that. You did have to run much deeper in center field than you played and then climb a hill and turn around and then the ball would still be in the air, which is hard to do unless you really practiced.

Who were your favorite Cracker players?

Country Brown, Bob Montag. I guess those were the two best baseball players. Chuck Tanner was a good player.

When Country Brown said that your dad was a player's owner, why would he have said that? What made your dad a player's owner?

Because my father was . . . He owned the ballpark. He really owned the team even when Coca-Cola owned it. He ran it. They gave him free rein. He bought and sold players. He had great teams because he took college and mill workers and some high school players and brought

playing on the team in the middle of April or in the middle of May after the season had started for two months. He would come in and be better than the rest of the players.

What are your memories of the barnstorming teams, the Major League teams that came to Atlanta on the way from spring training to start the season?

Well, some of those I remember. Most of those I've read about and are really famous. The best one was the Dodgers that came here in '49 and they had Campanella and, of course, they had Jackie Robinson. The Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan called my father at the ballpark and said "You will not have integrated baseball in the City of Atlanta and I am going to picket your ballpark and I will close you down" and my father asked him if he would repeat it and he handed the phone to the Chief of Police who was there for crowd control and not for race relations and he said "hello, hello" and nobody was there. They had a 14,000 seat ballpark and they put 16,000 people there on Friday night and 18,000 Saturday night and 25,221 Sunday. On Sunday, they had so many people in the stands that they had to usher them out into the outfield because it was overcrowded and it was overcrowded with both blacks and whites so they moved both grandstands out into the outfield irrespective of what color you were, so they had an integrated team (the Dodgers) playing a segregated team (The Crackers) in front of an integrated crowd.

And I know how historically significant that is. Your dad at the time really, I guess, wanted to see baseball. The Police Chief was Jenkins?

Yes, Herbert T. Jenkins. The Mayor for a long time was Hartsfield and Jenkins was his policeman.

Did you personally follow the American League or the National League?

Well, there were only eight teams in each league. It was easy to follow both of them. The ballplayers read The Sporting News and I read The Sporting News and they were praying that somebody would get hurt so they could come up and it took three or four people getting hurt before anybody in The Crackers team could go up, because we had three leagues of AAA

“We had one of the better ballparks in the Southern League...”

1949 when he bought them.

Then he sold the ballpark to whom?

To the Dodgers. He sold the team to the Dodgers in 1960. He sold the ballpark in 1968.

Tell me if you would - everybody has a love affair with The Crackers, but tell me about the magnolia tree that was

them to The Crackers and signed them to a contract for a great sum of money and if they were good enough to play for The Crackers, they played for The Crackers and did good. If they were not good enough to play for The Crackers, he sent them to one of the Minor Leagues. Every year there was somebody new playing on the team or

in front of us. Occasionally, they went up and most of them, they'd come down and buy the player and my father would sell several of them for \$60,000.00 and a couple of them for \$75,000.00 and Dick Donovan for \$100,000.00 in 1954 to the White Sox.

Do you remember the gambling that took place at the ballpark?

I never saw it. I wasn't the policeman there. I was the bat boy or sitting up in the box and couldn't see that. You knew it was going on. Folks would pray that the police would come out there and walk up into the stands because all these gamblers would throw their money down through the slats in the bleachers and it would fall on the ground and if you were there quick enough, you could get most of it because they were getting rid of evidence.

Did you collect a lot of stuff while you were a child from The Crackers or it was something you were just doing?

I should have, but I didn't and even though those uniforms . . . I did not have a 1959 uniform which was the last uniform and I had a '58 and, of course, when the '58 season got over, I just gave it back to them and didn't realize it was going to quit and never came back to get a full uniform.

I think your dad said in 1965 that progress must continue. I guess my question is what was gained when the Braves came and what was lost when the Braves came?

Well, my father thought that Atlanta ought to have Major League baseball. He said it to his detriment because some people said that if we quit coming to The Crackers, we will force Major League baseball to get us better baseball. That didn't prove to be true. It took another

were all AAA, International League, and that was another step up. And then they finished the stadium and they wouldn't let Milwaukee move here, so the Atlanta Crackers played in Fulton County Stadium in 1965 and Aaron hit the first home run in Fulton County Stadium but it wasn't Hank.

Well, Ivan was the Mayor in '60 and my father was still retired from baseball but he was still very much of a mover and shaker in Atlanta and Allen was the Mayor. He did run against Ivan Allen.

I know when your dad died there was a great relationship between your dad and Ponce de Leon Park. Will you talk

“...so they had an integrated team (the Dodgers) playing a segregated team (The Crackers) in front of an integrated crowd.”

It was Tommie.

It was Tommie.

That's a good trick question. I know your dad had some relationships with some really interesting folks and you probably knew them too. What was his relationship with Commissioner Landis?

Oh, well, he loved Commissioner Landis. He feared him. He was a Federal judge and my father knew that you didn't mess with Federal judges, but he made sure when Landis came to Atlanta, he took him out to Kennesaw Mountain. It meant something to the Commissioner.

And what about his relationship with Robert Woodruff and Coca-Cola?

Well, I mean, Robert Woodruff owned the team and trusted my father and let him run it. His lawyer, Spalding, was a Vice President, so he had fingers in it if anything happened, but Robert was a friend of my father's forever. When my father got out of baseball, Coca-Cola hired my father to be sort of an ambassador at the Olympic Games on Coca-Cola's dollar.

about that?

Well, he was cremated and my stepmother and I went over to the magnolia trees and dug a hole and put my father's ashes in that hole right at the base of the lower magnolia tree.

Do you ever go back over there and visit the park?

Yes.

What is your dad's legacy?

Well, he is remembered. I don't think I could change anything about the way my father is remembered. There are all sorts of people that really love my father and ballplayers who never played for my father seem to love my father. In Chattanooga, they've rededicated Engel Stadium. They brought back a couple of the players and I introduced myself and they said "Your father was a great man." They just knew that and they never played for The Crackers.

It's always seemed to me that, you know, we now have had lots of Major League teams in Atlanta and we've had other Major League teams that have come and gone, but The Crackers perhaps have the most romance to them and in many ways I think it's sort of Atlanta's favorite team to still talk about. Why do you think that is?

Like I said, we had those good players that were better than the AA ballplayers and we had those young players that were trying to be better than AA ballplayers and we finished 2nd, 3rd, 1st, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 1st, 1st and 1st. We won more pennants than any other team in organized baseball except the New York Yankees in the year 1901 to 1965. They

“There are all sorts of people that really love my father...”

team coming in there and then finally the Braves came. They had some good AAA teams that played after 1961. The 1961 teams were Southern League run by the Dodgers. They just competed in the Southern League but the '62, '63 and '64

Robert Woodruff and Coke were amazingly loyal and you were equally loyal to them, I think.

Yes.

And what about his relationship with Ivan Allen?

won 18 pennants and we won 17, until the Braves came here and won those 13 years.

Ernie Harwell told me a story once that when Ernie was a young announcer back in the 40's, your dad actually let him drive his car out on the field one day so that his father, who was very much confined to his house, could come watch the ball game. It's a beautiful story. Your dad just basically said "We'll just park the car out on the field and we'll just play around your car today." What other stories happened down at the ballpark that are like that, that people really don't know?

The ballplayers made sort of a minimum amount of money, so if the person hit the home run that drove in the winning run or pitched the shut out or pitched a save at the end of the game, he would let somebody tell them to wait for him after the ball game and he would come down this ramp from his office and he was a little bit above them and he would hand them \$50.00 or \$75.00 because that meant a big thing to somebody making \$500.00 a month and only making it for six months a year.

Most of the games were during the afternoon?

No, most of the games were not. Only on the weekends were there day games.

And did people get to the ballpark early? I mean, it was quite an event to go to the ballpark back then.

We had two different buses that came

to the park. One of them stopped at the ballpark and turned around, the other went by it, so there was always a way to get there and there was a big parking lot if you happened to have a car and there were a lot of people who lived near there, so there's a huge number of people who came until air conditioners came and Lake Lanier and Lake Allatoona came and second homes came and people were too busy at the lake or air conditioning at-home and they wanted to watch Major League baseball on the weekend and it was too far back into Atlanta.

I know there were actually two teams that were playing there. There were The Crackers and then there were the Black Crackers.

My father gave them the uniforms that we had from the last year, gave them access to the ballpark, gave them balls and bats.

So, they basically played very much rent free, I guess?

Yes, and they played and sat in the white grandstands and the white people came and sat in the black grandstands.

Essentially it was seven day a week baseball? If The Crackers weren't playing, the Black Crackers were playing, more or less?

Well, yes, maybe five days a week.

You know, The Crackers almost killed the Braves because everybody said the Braves aren't as good as The Crackers, let's bring back The Crackers! It took

them until the 90's to figure out how to do it.

And so the fellows, the Montags, your dad and the rest of that crew are exceedingly revered because they were Atlantans. Should Atlanta or the Braves do more to remember The Crackers?

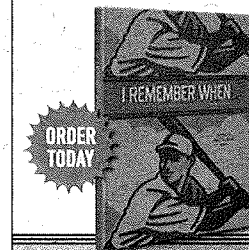
I think they should, but I mean there's nothing in there for them and a lot of those fans are almost dead because that was at least 45 years ago.

It seems like the memories are getting better.

That's true.

The memories are fabulous and certainly worth sharing and I surely thank you for your time.

I Remember When is a beautifully designed hardcover coffee table book, including the first 35 Baseball Digests. The book is \$19.95 (plus tax and shipping) and can be purchased at www.irememberwhen.org.



All profits will be donated to BAT ("Baseball Assistance Team")

**“Remembering The Crackers”
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***** 41ST EDITION ***
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