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THE EAST TEXAS BASEBALL LEAGUE, 1916-1950

by Bill O'Neal

The East Texas League was born and nurtured during baseball's heyday in America. Later, while the Great Depression exerted desperate pressures on most minor leagues, the East Texas League flourished in the midst of the region's spectacular oil boom. Like most minor leagues, the East Texas League suspended operations for the duration of World War II, then enjoyed renewed popularity in the postwar baseball boom. But a combination of conditions in the 1950s staggered the minor leagues, and the East Texas League was one of many junior circuits which died in that troubled baseball era. During the league's existence, East Texas baseball fans saw some of the great career minor leaguers, several former major leaguers, and numerous young athletes on their way to the major leagues. For decades the East Texas League provided a valid and interesting version of the National Pastime, and was an important source of recreation and entertainment for East Texans.

Baseball was America's first team sport, and by the early decades of the twentieth century the American public was captivated by the game. There were town teams in every rural community, semi-pro clubs abounded, almost every small city boasted a team in one of scores of minor leagues, and the sporting public avidly followed the exploits of major leaguers. The first professional league in the Lone Star State was the Texas League, which began play in 1888. Numerous East Texas communities fielded teams in the Texas League, including Paris, Texarkana, Beaumont, Galveston, Houston, Greenville, Corsicana, Longview, and Tyler. Most of these cities joined numerous other East Texas communities in lesser minor leagues; 101 Texas communities have placed teams in professional baseball, more than any other state.

The East Texas League was founded in 1916, during baseball's dead-ball era. It was a time of Ty Cobb, base stealing, and bunting and playing for one run, and baseball fans in Crockett, Lufkin, Nacogdoches, Palestine, and Rusk witnessed this style of play for part of the 1916 season. All minor league teams then were independently owned, often by local stock companies composed of baseball enthusiasts who never expected a return on their modest investments. In 1916 rosters and salaries in the low minors were limited, but weak attendance in small communities would quickly deplete club coffers. A five-team league did not offer sufficient variety of competition to maintain fan interest over an entire season, and on any given afternoon one East Texas League team was idle. Like many other fledgling minor leagues, the East Texas League ended play on July 19, well before the end of the regular schedule. Each team had played only about two dozen games. Palestine, led by player-manager Pete Hughes, an ex-Texas Leaguer, won eleven of its last fifteen games to take the championship.¹

The distraction of World War I disastrously curtailed minor league attendance. Twenty minor leagues operated in 1917; just nine began in 1918, and only one completed the season. The East Texas League was dormant for

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seven years after its inaugural season. The decade of the 1920s historically has been termed the Golden Age of Sports. Babe Ruth led baseball into an exciting era of home-run hitting and high-scoring games, and the sport reached new heights of popularity. In 1923 six East Texas cities formed a new East Texas League, although none of the previous communities provided a team. Greenville, Longview, Marshall, Mount Pleasant, Paris, and Sulphur Springs formed the league's nucleus for the next three years. Ike Hockwald, a prominent businessman and resourceful baseball enthusiast in Marshall, was appointed league president, and William B. Ruggles, *Dallas Morning News* reporter and statistician-historian of the Texas League for decades, agreed to provide official statistics for the East Texas League. The National Association, parent organization of the minor leagues, designated the East Texas League a Class D circuit based on the population of its small cities.²

A 129-game schedule was arranged, although each team lost about ten games to rainouts, and the season was divided into two halves so two winners could engage in a post-season playoff. But Paris, which had won the championships of the now-disbanded Texas-Oklahoma League in 1921 and 1922, made it three pennants in a row by winning both halves of the season in 1923. The 1923 Paris club was led by manager-first baseman Paul Trammell, who hit .323. Paris posted the best team batting average in the league, was second in fielding, and had two excellent righthanded pitchers named Anderson (19-9) and Osborne (17-7, including 23 compete games in 24 appearances). Homer Peel, a twenty-year-old outfielder-infielder, began a long and notable career as a rookie for Marshall, batting .322; in 1946, after playing for the New York Giants and St. Louis Cardinals, and having established the highest lifetime batting average in Texas League history, the forty-three-year-old Peel finished his playing days by hitting .322 for Paris of the East Texas League. Another important East Texas Leaguer who made his first appearance in the circuit in 1923 was infielder Wally Dashiell from Jacksonville, who played in Marshall and hit .293. Such budding stars were paraded through East Texas main streets prior to a game; minor league parks usually had no clubhouses – certainly not for visiting teams – and players dressed at their hotels, were conspicuously driven through town before each game, then returned to the hotel for post-game showers. Transportation to away games was usually in automobiles, although old school busses sometimes were purchased by the clubs.³

The six clubs from 1923 were joined by Tyler and Texarkana for 1924, and play was scheduled from April 22 through August 24. Newcomer Tyler took both halves of the schedule, winning the pennant and the team batting title. Texarkana bought Homer Peel for 1924; he played three positions and hit .368. Smead Jolley, a magnificent minor-league hitter who accumulated a .366 lifetime average, batted .370 for Texarkana. But the batting champ was Mount Pleasant infielder-outfielder Tom Osborne, who had been a football player at SMU. Osborne, who did not play baseball in college, turned to minor league baseball and “had a cup of coffee” with Houston in the Texas League in 1922. He was not a good infielder and was tried at several position, but he was too potent a hitter to keep out of the lineup. In 1923 Osborne hit .287 for Mount

Pleasant, where he operated a business and made his home. Over the next year Osborne ripped East Texas League pitching unmercifully, posting an astounding .432 mark. Beaumont of the Texas League purchased his contract; Mount Pleasant protested the transaction, but Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis ruled against the East Texas League club, and Osborne finished the year at Beaumont. The star of Marshall's Orphans – soon renamed Comets – was an infielder-outfielder named Daniels who hit .358 and blasted a league-leading thirty-five home runs.⁴

The eight clubs from 1924 began the 1925 season, but by June Mount Pleasant and Sulphur Springs had folded. The six surviving clubs reorganized the schedule and carried on. Paris and Texarkana posted identical records in the first half of the season, but Paris won the second half. A post-season playoff series was arranged, and Paris swept three games from Texarkana to claim another pennant. Greenville right infielder Tom Pyle, a native of Alto who had batted .440 in forty-three games in 1924, hit .388 to win the batting crown in 1925. The home run champ was Tyler first baseman-outfielder T.J. Hollway, who hit .353 with forty-three homers in just 116 games.⁵

The same six teams comprised the East Texas League in 1926. Longview won the pennant because of two Texas League veterans, outfielder Lee King (.372 with twenty-one homers and a league-leading fifty stolen bases) and pitcher Alvah Bowman (20-4). But the outstanding performance of the year came from Tyler outfielder John William "Moose" Clabaugh, a legendary minor leaguer who compiled a .339 lifetime average during a sixteen-year career. He played seventy-six games for Paris in 1925 after spending the early months of the season in two other leagues and hit .385. For Tyler's Trojans in 1926 he played 121 games and led the East Texas League in batting average (.376) and runs scored (106) – and blasted a record sixty-two home runs, the seventh highest total ever in minor league baseball.⁶

Club owners met in Tyler late in January 1927 and organized a new eight-team league. The Lone Star League was composed of Longview, Marshall, Paris, Texarkana, and Tyler of the East Texas League, and Corsicana, Mexia, and Palestine of the Texas Association. T. H. Fisher of Paris, president of the East Texas League, was elected president of the Lone Star League. Fisher faced serious problems; last-place Longview had to disband after a month of play, and the league voted to drop next-to-last Marshall to keep the schedule balanced. Tyler won the first half of the season, while Mexia prevailed in the second half, but the Tyler Trojans triumphed in the playoff, four games to two, to claim the pennant. The league's best player was Carl Reynolds, an East Texan from LaRue, who was the hitting titlist (.376) and stolen-base champ (32) while playing for Palestine. Reynolds finished the season with the Chicago White Sox and accumulated a .302 lifetime average with five major league clubs during a thirteen-year career. Tyler pitcher Willie Underhill (13-6) finished the year with the Cleveland Indians, but he did not remain in the major leagues.⁷

The six teams that finished the season in 1927 carried on in 1928. First-half winner Palestine defeated Texarkana, victor in the second half, to claim

the pennant. Tyler outfielder Charlie Dorman enjoyed the outstanding performance of the season, hitting .408 with thirty-nine homers and thirty-nine doubles to lead the league in each category. His contract was sold after 114 games to Cleveland, where he hit .364 in twenty-five games, then, curiously, never reappeared in the major leagues.⁸

Only Palestine, Sherman, Texarkana, and Tyler joined the Lone Star League in 1929. But a four-team league did not interest fans, and play lasted only a few weeks. On May 16 the circuit disbanded, with Tyler and Palestine leading the standings. When clubs folded, the players went on the market. The sale of the contracts of promising players to teams in higher classifications was a primary source of income for independent minor-league owners.⁹

The Great Depression staggered minor-league baseball, but the East Texas oil boom produced operating capital from newly-wealthy baseball enthusiasts. In 1931 Henderson, Kilgore, and Longview – from the heart of the oil patch – and Tyler – which was becoming a headquarters for East Texas oil men – organized a revived East Texas League. But the lack of competitive variety inherent in four-team leagues doomed the circuit, and the East Texas League disbanded long before the scheduled end of play. The circuit did not operate in 1932, although Tyler and Longview spent most of the summer in the Texas League. In 1933, Longview, Tyler, and Henderson helped found the Dixie League, an eight-team, Class C circuit which included Waco and clubs from Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi.¹⁰

The next season East Texas cities organized the Class C West Dixie League, composed of Henderson, Jacksonville, Longview, Palestine, Paris, and Tyler. Although under a different name, the East Texas league was back in operation. J. Alvin Gardner, president of the Texas League, provided expertise as president of the West Dixie League and the East Dixie League. During the season the Paris club disbanded and the franchise was shifted to Lufkin for the second half of the season. Jacksonville, the eventual pennant winner, built a new ball park near the present Lon Morris College gymnasium, with a covered grandstand. The opener for the Jacksonville Jax was celebrated by the high school band, and every home game was announced by a huge banner suspended over a downtown street proclaiming “BASEBALL TODAY.” A lady whose house was just west of the ball park had flower pots in her yard and on the porch. The Jax had to pay for every flower pot broken by a foul ball, and club president Red Anderson later complained that flower pot purchases were among his highest expenditures.¹¹

Wally Dashiell, player-manager at Jacksonville, led the Jax to the 1934 pennant by winning both halves of the season. The Jax featured a splendid pitching staff: Jackie Reid (12-2 with a league-leading 1.98 ERA); Linville Watkins (19-9, the highest victory total of the year); Walter Becker (18-4); and Rufus Meadows (11-5). Lou Frierson of the Paris-Lufkin franchise hit forty homers, while Tyler's Fern Bell won the batting title with a .373 average and was sold to a higher classification after playing 108 games. Following the playoffs the Jax traveled by train to Mexico City to play the Mexican League

champs in a best-of-nine series. Playing every other day to large crowds, the East Texas leaguers won the necessary five games.¹²

In 1935 Lufkin's Foresters dropped out of the league, but the six-team lineup was sustained when Shreveport fielded a team. The Louisiana club folded early in June, and the circuit again became an all-East Texas aggregation when the franchise was moved to Gladewater. Gladewater's flamboyant and free-spending club owner, Dick Burnett, who had made a fortune in the East Texas Oil Field, purchased the Dallas Texas League franchise as the capstone of his minor league network. Later, when Gladewater entered a crucial East Texas League series, Burnett sent one or another of his Dallas pitchers to the Bears for the five-day "tryout" period permitted by minor league statutes. Wally Dashiell, who had moved to Tyler, led the Trojans to the best season record through the heroics of batting champ Tom Pyle (.376) and hurler Grady Bassett (23-8), league leader in almost every pitching category. Pyle, a career minor leaguer, hit .354 lifetime and spent seven seasons in the East Texas League – indeed, many of the circuit's best players continued to turn up in East Texas cities and became familiar performers to the fans.¹³

During the second half of 1935, club owners decided to adopt the Shaughnessy Playoff Plan, which was gaining popularity in the minors. Frank Shaughnessy, a longtime International League official, devised the post-season playoff scheme to sustain fan interest during a runaway pennant "race." The team finishing first would play the fourth-place team in a best-of-seven, semi-finals match. The winners played a best-of-seven championship series. As many as twenty-one playoff games might be staged, and winning teams might play fourteen extra games, half at home, since the East Texas League alternated sites for each post-season contest. The additional income frequently proved to be the difference in a team making or losing money for the season, and during the latter stages of a season fans would continue to follow a lower-ranking club battling for fourth place and a playoff berth. When a first-place team lost in the playoffs, customarily there was a double designation for the club that finished first and the playoff winner. The International League instituted the Shaughnessy Playoffs in 1933, and that season the Texas League also tried the system. East Texas League officials decided at mid-season in 1935 to stage the successful new system. The East Texas circuit's first Shaughnessy playoff saw Tyler defeat fourth-place Longview in the opening round, four games to one, while second-place Palestine fell to Jacksonville in six games. In the finals the defending champion Jax won another title with a four-game sweep over the Trojans.¹⁴

Another device utilized by minor league clubs to offset Depression woes was night baseball. Although slipping away from work to view an afternoon game imparts a delicious sense of "hooky," more fans can attend night games; when minor leagues began to playing under lights in 1930 there was an appreciable jump in attendance. Night games also brought welcome relief from East Texas heat, and even though some cities – Jacksonville, Palestine, and Henderson, for example – did not at first install lights, night baseball soon dominated the East Texas League. Weekend games usually were played in the

afternoon, but doubleheaders often started in the afternoon, followed by the nightcap under the lights.

In a meeting held at Shreveport on October 26-27, 1935, the East Dixie League assumed the name of the old Cotton States League, with which the member clubs historically had been associated, while the West Dixie League changed to its proper label, East Texas League. The circuit increased its player limit from fourteen to fifteen and expanded to eight teams. The league president was J. Walter Morris, an experienced and capable baseball man who had played for the University of Texas and several Texas League teams, and who also had served Texas League clubs as a player-manager, business manager, owner, and for five years, league president. In 1936 and 1937 he was concurrently president of the East Texas, Cotton States, and Evangeline leagues. The Class C East Texas League was composed of the Gladewater Bears, Henderson Oilers, Jacksonville Jax, Kilgore Drillers, Longview Cannibals, Marshall Tigers, Palestine Pals, and Tyler Trojans. East Texas League ball parks during the 1930s and 1940s were spacious, which produced high batting averages and pitchers' ERAs but few home runs. Despite a 154-game schedule, Longview's third baseman, Merv Connors, and Gladewater's center fielder, Clary Hack tied for the home-run title with just twenty-four each – and only one other batter managed more than twenty home runs. Longview player-manager Ernest "Tex" Jeanes won the batting crown with a .362 average, and a total of twenty-seven regulars hit over .300 in 1936. Similar statistical patterns prevailed through the remaining years of the East Texas League. Marshall's Tom Jordan won the home-run title in 1940 with just nineteen and in eight of the league's remaining ten seasons, no team hit as many as 100 home runs. Eddie Hock, a twenty-three-year career minor leaguer, played for Gladewater in 1936 and for Texarkana in 1937; Hock set the all-time record for singles in a career by a minor league player. In the playoffs in 1936 Gladewater and Tyler emerged from the opening round with triumphs over Longview and Jacksonville. Although Tyler's Trojans boasted the best season record in the league, Gladewater won the finals in six games.¹⁵

Dick Burnett decided to move his championship team from Gladewater to Texarkana, a much larger city and a good baseball town. Burnett, beginning to display the promotional gifts that brought more than 53,000 fans to the Cotton Bowl for a Texas League game in 1950, uniformed his Texarkana Liners in red, white, and blue flannels with blue pinstripes, with a blue stripe down the leg; white caps with red bills; and white stockings with red-and-blue rings. Texarkana and the seven holdover clubs that began the season in 1937 made up the East Texas League for four unusually stable seasons. A community-wide ticket drive gave Marshall the opening day Attendance Cup. The College of Marshall band played the National Anthem as a league record 2,039 fans crowded into Matthewson Park near the college.¹⁶

In May Marshall's Tigers were involved in the East Texas League's most spectacular brawl during a game in Tyler. When Trojan first baseman Charley Baron slid into third base flashing his spikes, Marshall third baseman Gene Ater began swinging. The two managers, Wally Dashiell of Tyler and Mar-

shall's J.P. "Alabama" Jones, flailed away until separated. Spectators leaped out of the stands, and Marshall pitcher Tex Nugent took out a fan and Trojan infielder Rudy Laskowski. Marshall won the game, 6-5, Ater went to the hospital with a broken jaw, and afterwards Dashiell scuffled with a Marshall player in a Tyler cafe. Baron, genuinely sorry for breaking Ater's jaw, visited the convalescing player daily.¹⁷

There were several remarkable pitching performances during 1937. Tyler southpaw Rufus Meadows led the league in winning percentage (.806) with a gaudy 25-6 record, including six shutouts. Henderson fireballer Walter Schafer went 23-14 and set an all-time league record with 274 strikeouts, while Marshall's Tex Nugent was 21-11. Red Lynn, who pitched doubleheaders, hurled fifty-six games and an all-time record 340 innings in a 140-game season. His won-lost mark was 32-13, and he became the only thirty-game-winner in the history of the East Texas League.¹⁸

Power for the Jacksonville lineup was supplied by slugging second baseman Tommy Robello, who led the league with thirty-three homers and 130 RBIs. Although Tyler edged out the Jax for first place, Marshall defeated the Trojans in the playoffs while Jacksonville squeaked past Henderson. Jacksonville beat Marshall, four games to two, for another title.¹⁹

The batting crown was won in 1938 by outfielder Gordon Houston of Texarkana, who hit .384 and was promoted to the Texas League. On February 10, 1942, Lieutenant Houston of the Army Air Force was killed during a training flight near Tacoma, Washington – the first professional baseball player to die in World War II. Another Texarkana player, center fielder Gabby Lusk, hit .334 and scored a league-leading 152 runs in just 136 games, while Henderson's Guy Cartwright hit .351 and scored 143 runs in 112 games. Wallie Eaves, a Texarkana fastballer, went 15-4 and struck out 209 batters in only 174 innings before being called up to the Texas League and, eventually, the major leagues. Another future big league pitcher was Ed Lopat, who spent 1938 with Kilgore, 1939 with Longview, 1940 with Marshall, then became a New York Yankee after the war. Marshall finished first but lost the opening round of playoffs to fourth-place Tyler. Texarkana and Henderson battled for seven games before the Oilers finally won. The finals also went the full seven games. Tyler's Big Bill Lanning pitched in three of the last four games to lead the Trojans to the pennant. Tyler, which clicked off a record-setting 155 double plays during the season, had finished with the best overall record the previous three years, but only now enjoyed a playoff title.²⁰

For the 1939 season the legendary Jake Atz was hired to manage the Henderson Oilers. During a long managerial career he led Fort Worth to six consecutive Texas League championships, and in 1939 the sixty-year-old Atz skippered Henderson to first place in the East Texas League. Atz had the league's leading base stealer (60), second baseman Tommy Tatum, and an excellent pitching staff: Steve Rachunok (22-6); Ed Weiland (18-9); and Gene Hinrichs (15-8). Good pitching performances were turned in by Kilgore's Frank Perko (20-4), and Longview's Eddie Lopat (16-9, with a league-leading 2.11 ERA). In

the opening round of playoffs Henderson defeated Marshall, while Kilgore downed Palestine. Kilgore's hitting attack was sparked by center fielder Eddie Knoblauch (.335 with a league-leading 125 runs scored), who had an illustrious minor-league career, by first baseman Ray Sanders (.333) and Steve Perko, who hit well enough (.272) to be placed in right field when not on the mound. Kilgore swept Henderson in four straight games to win the playoff title.²¹

World War II sharply curtailed the minor leagues. Wartime travel restrictions and the enlistment of millions of young men reduced the minors to just ten leagues by 1944, but the East Texas League was one of the first of the lower classification circuits to experience the distractions caused by the war. In June 1940, last-place Jacksonville and Palestine, which had climbed to third place, disbanded because of poor attendance. The league set up a six-team schedule, and Jake Atz led the Henderson Oilers to first place during the final months of the season. Marshall was managed by shortstop Salty Parker, who led the league in hitting (.349) and the Tigers to a playoff victory over Henderson. At the same time Tyler defeated Longview in the playoff opener. The finals went the full seven games, with the Trojans winning the seventh and decisive contest, but later Tyler was disqualified and the pennant awarded to Marshall. During the season Marshall outfielder Dave Philley hit just .264, but he showed promise to move up to Shreveport in the Texas League, and later the Paris native enjoyed a long major-league career.²²

In 1941 only Longview, Marshall, Sherman, Texarkana, and Tyler were willing to place teams in the East Texas League. At a meeting held in Longview on Sunday, March 9, 1941, the East Texas League voted to disband "temporarily," but five years passed before the circuit resumed play. The minor leagues prospered immediately in the postwar years. The East Texas League was one of forty-two junior circuits which operated in 1946, and by 1949 there were fifty-nine minor leagues. East Texans, like other Americans, were war-weary and ready for recreation. In 1946 the East Texas League provided baseball fans with an astounding and courageous performance, while eight East Texas cities competed in a 140-game schedule: Greenville, Henderson, Jacksonville, Lufkin, Paris, Sherman, Texarkana, Tyler. Monty Stratton, a budding Chicago White Sox pitching star before the war, had shot himself with a pistol while hunting on his mother's farm near Greenville following the season in 1938. His right leg was amputated above the knee, but he resumed his pitching career in an exhibition game in Houston in 1942. Sherman signed the thirty-four-year-old amputee in 1946 and Stratton responded magnificently. He still possessed a major league curve, and a gentleman's agreement prevailed not to bunt on him. Stratton completed twenty of twenty-seven starts and posted a sparkling 18-8 record. Only two pitchers in the league won more games, and standing-room only crowds turned out to see him pitch. He played in 1947 for Waco, pitched a few exhibitions in succeeding seasons, and worked with James Stewart on the popular film, "The Stratton Story," in 1949.²³

East Texas League fans welcomed back a few pre-war players, such as sluggers Buck Frierson and Merv Connors. Homer Peel was president of the Paris club, and the forty-three-year-old hitting star played first base and outfield

and hit .322. Peel's friend and former teammate in Shreveport, Vernon "George" Washington, played right field for Texarkana and displayed his still-awesome batting talents. Washington, who learned to play on a rough diamond on the family farm near Linden, was an indifferent fielder but a ferocious line-drive hitter. He was a left-handed batter with small hands and a powerful swing; when he missed a pitch his bat often would sail out of his hands into the first-base dugout or grandstand, so some ballparks were rigged with a screen to raise when Washington batted. Washington hit .344 for Texarkana in 1946, then won three straight batting titles. Texarkana was in the Class B, Big State League from 1947 through 1953, and for two years player-manager Washington showed his charges how to annihilate opposition pitching. In 1947 he collected 222 hits in 141 games, walloped thirty-seven homers and 143 RBIs, and hit .404. The next season he led the Big State League with a .384 average. In 1949 he became player-manager at Gladewater and, although now forty-one years old, he hit .387 to pace the East Texas League and struck out just six times in 512 times at bat. Washington played part of 1950 with Dick Burnett's Dallas Eagles of the Texas League, then finished the year – and his career – with Gladewater, ripping East Texas League pitching at a .352 clip in sixty-four games. He retired to his Linden farm with a .347 lifetime average as a minor leaguer.²⁴

Pinky Griffin, second baseman for the Paris Red Peppers in 1946, was married in his uniform at home plate before a standing-room-only crowd. The fans took up a collection and presented \$300 to the newlyweds – Griffin made just \$100 per month as a Red Pepper. Home-plate weddings were not infrequent around the East Texas league, and the couple usually passed under a line of bats held by the groom's teammates.²⁵

One of the most outstanding pitching performance in East Texas League history was turned in by Henderson southpaw Elton Davis, who led the league in 1946 in every important category except strikeouts. Incredibly, he completed all thirty-one of his starts, added fourteen relief appearances, batted .283, and posted a 26-6 record. Paced by Davis, the Oilers finished first, then sailed through the Shaughnessy Playoffs to win an outright championship.²⁶

During this period of East Texas professional baseball, most clubs featured daily play-by-play broadcasts of their games. The only exceptions were those cities which had daylight radio stations that could carry only weekend games, which were played in the afternoons. Like the more talented and fortunate players, the best broadcasters moved up. Bill Merrill, for example, called Marshall Browns' games as a young college student, later broadcast Texas League games, then made the big leagues as play-by-play man for the Texas Rangers. Broadcasts had been common since the 1930s, but another form of baseball communication was a Western Union play-by-play wire service: in Marshall during the playoffs in 1937, "a detailed play-by-play account will be given fans over a loud speaker system hook-up on the west side of the courthouse lawn..."²⁷

In 1947 Greenville, Paris, Texarkana, and Sherman as the Sherman-Denison Twins, helped form the new Big State League, forcing the East Texas League to reorganize. For 1947 and 1948 the reorganized Class C circuit called

itself the Lone Star League, before returning to its historic name. Henderson, Jacksonville, Lufkin, and Tyler added three familiar cities – Kilgore, Longview, and Marshall – along with Bryan, and league membership remained stable through the remainder of the decade. A prewar star, Merv Connors, who had led the league in home runs in 1935 and 1936, hit .318 with twenty-six home runs and 106 RBIs for Longview. Connors, who brandished a big black bat, hit .301 for Kilgore in 1949 and 1950 and was the last East Texas League home run champion with twenty-six in 1950. One of five twenty-game winners, Paul Kardow of Marshall, was an imposing six-foot-seven-inch 240-pounder. Another Marshall righthander moved over to Henderson in 1947. Travis Reeves, who pitched at Carthage High School, was 7-6 when he slipped on wet grass and suffered an injury that ended his minor-league career. He entered radio work in Henderson and eventually became a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame as Gentleman Jim Reeves. Henderson center fielder John Stone won a rare Triple Crown in 1947: he hit .396 with thirty-two homers and an all-time league record 185 RBIs. But Henderson finished seventh in the standings. Kilgore wound up in first place by half a game, then beat Tyler and Marshall in the playoffs to win an outright pennant.²⁸

Kilgore repeated its first-place finish and playoff victory in 1948. Catcher-manager Joe Kracher established an all-time league record with a .433 batting average, including 104 RBIs in 113 games; Jesse Landrum, who played second base and right field for Bryan, hit .411; and Henderson manager-first baseman Melvin Hicks hit .405 in fifty-two games. Henderson's John Stone hit .323, and for the second year in a row led the league in home runs (23) and RBIs (146). Longview righthander Ralph Pate was 23-3, and hit .284.²⁹

The same eight teams played in 1949, but the Lone Star League label was dropped in favor of the more familiar East Texas League. Although Gladewater's George Washington was the batting champ (.387), John Stone of Henderson hit .371 with 115 RBIs and a league-leading forty-four stolen bases. Joe Kracher was still Kilgore's catcher-manager, but his incredible average dropped to .329. Southpaw Otho Nitcholas, a pitching star for Tyler in 1948 (18-7, 1.98 ERA), was 11-1 for Gladewater. Gladewater and Longview dominated regular season play, but in the playoffs first-place Longview was defeated in seven games by Kilgore, while Gladewater had to go to the seventh game to defeat Paris. Fourth-place Kilgore apparently was exhausted by the playoff opener, falling in the finals to George Washington's Gladewater club in four straight games. Playoff attendance totaled 43,328, an average of nearly 2,300 per game.³⁰

League attendance after the war soared annually past 400,000 paid admissions per season, a crowd of 4,268 witnessed the All-Star Game in 1948, and the playoff attendance in 1947 was a circuit record. But in 1950 attendance patterns changed ominously in the East Texas League and in all other minor circuits. The phenomenal impact of television devastated minor league baseball. Another factor in Southern states was the increasingly availability of air conditioning—instead of cooling off at a ball park, East Texans turned on the window unit and plopped down in front of a TV set. Yet another aspect in the decline of the minors was the explosion of youth baseball; parents who spent

several nights per week at little league games and practices were not inclined to turn out for minor league baseball. As attendance declined minor league clubs and entire leagues disappeared: from a high attendance of nearly 42,000,000 in 1949, patronage declined to 9,963,174 in 1963; in 1949 there were fifty-nine minor leagues, but by 1963 there were only eighteen junior circuits still in business.³¹

In 1950 East Texas League attendance declined by nearly one-third from the previous season to 288,243, while playoff attendance dipped by more than half to 20,914. Although eight teams began the season in 1948, 1949, and 1950, Paris and Bryan, seventh and eighth in the standings, disbanded on July 19, 1950. The league limped on with six teams, and defending titlist Gladewater finished first. Fourth-place Longview, twenty-three and one-half games off the pace in the standings, defeated Gladewater in a seven-game playoff opener. The second-place Marshall Browns beat Longview's Texans, four games to one. Then the Browns, termed the "Whiz Kids" because the team averaged just twenty years of age, defeated Longview in the finals, also in five games. Marshall had finished first in 1938 and had been awarded a playoff title in 1940 by default, but had never won an East Texas League crown.³²

Shortly after the season ended, sports observers recognized that a "revamping" of professional baseball in Texas was inevitable: "There were too many leagues and too many clubs last year. Teams were falling out during the season, financial drives had to be put on to keep others in and... you could count on your fingers the clubs that broke even..."³³ The Korean War added another negative force to minor league baseball. Another mass callup of able-bodied young men was feared, and that travel restrictions again would prevail, along with disinterest on the part of fans distracted by war. On Sunday, January 28, 1951, East Texas League directors met at the Hotel Longview. President Jimmy Dalrymple, a former ETL pitcher and manager, was told that Tyler and Henderson were ready to play ball. Marshall sent word that the defending champs would field a team if the league operated, but no club representative was present. Gladewater's representative left before the decisive vote was taken, announcing that Gladewater would "await developments." Letters had been sent out to numerous cities inviting backers to place a club in the East Texas League. Only Corsicana responded, but its Chamber of Commerce president admitted that no adequate ball park was available. East Texas League owners discussed operating a four-team circuit, but wisely decided to play with no fewer than six clubs. After four hours, Dalrymple reluctantly announced the decision not to operate the East Texas League in 1951.³⁴

There was hope that the circuit would be revived, but conditions for minor leagues steadily worsened and the East Texas League was just one of dozens of junior circuits that passed out of existence in the 1950s. Yellowing newspaper accounts of long ago games still exist, and numerous former players, fans, and club officials can impart their recollections of one of East Texas' most important recreational institutions. But the most tangible reminders of the East Texas League are old ball parks, scattered here and there across the region. Historians are well aware of the seductive charm of structures from bygone eras. Just as old homes, school buildings, churches,

and commercial structures can evoke the ghosts of decades past, old baseball parks suggest diamond heroes in baggy flannel uniforms and grandstands crowded with East Texans from another era.

In Jacksonville and Corsicana there are vacant lots where the Jax and the Oilers once played. In Greenville only the gateway and sidewalks remain to indicate Majors Field. In Paris the concrete reserved-seat section is all that remains of the grandstand, but the playing field has been maintained, and on a drizzly spring afternoon in 1986 the author watched two area high school teams play a district game on the old diamond. In Henderson youth baseball is played at Oiler Field, where the entire concrete grandstand – built as a bowl on a natural hillside – remains, although the roof has been removed. In Marshall the ball park, built in 1946 to house the Browns, long hosted Maverick high school baseball, but today only the concrete grandstand foundation remains. In Tyler Mike Carter Field, built by the WPA in 1938, was the home of the Trojans until 1955; handsomely refurbished in the early 1990s, it now hosts the Tyler Junior College Apaches and Tyler's professional team in the Texas-Louisiana League. Kilgore's Driller Field, with an outfield fence built of oil field boiler plate, still is the home of KHS Bulldog baseball, and has been splendidly maintained.

If a traveler stops to visit any one of these old ball parks, it is not difficult to remember little boys marching through the grandstand hawking hot dogs and ice buckets full of bottled Cokes, of Moose Clabaugh slamming home runs, of Henry "Sugar" Kane running down fly balls for the Marshall Browns, of a bat flying out of the hands of George Washington, of Red Lynn hurling both ends of a doubleheader for the Jax, of one-legged Monty Stratton breaking his curve ball past the bat of a Class C hitter. Lamar Ford, who grew up in Marshall idolizing the Browns, doubtless spoke for generations of East Texas boys when he reflected on the baseball of his youth: "The attention and friendship given to us by those professional athletes certainly had a bearing on our lives and attitudes during that time and for the rest of our lives. They gave us something to occupy our time, probably keeping us out of a lot of trouble. They also gave us something to look forward to, not only day-to-day, but season-to-season. The games themselves did not stand out – an out was an out, a home run was a home run. Being there was what was important, win or lose. The few of the Browns I was able to keep up with advanced no further than Class AA baseball, but in all our eyes, they were Major Leaguers!"³⁵

NOTES

¹*The Reach Official Base Ball Guide* (Philadelphia, 1916), p. 250.

²*The Reach Official American League Guide* (1923), p. 471.

³*The Reach Official American League Guide* (1923), pp. 471-476.

⁴*The Reach Official American League Guide* (1924), pp. 373-380; William B. Ruggles, *Roster of the Texas League, 1888-1952* (Dallas, 1952), p. 83.

⁵*The Reach Official American League Guide* (1925), pp. 427-435.

⁶*The Reach Official American League Base Ball Guide* (1926), pp. 283-287; *Minor League Baseball Stars, I* (Manhattan, Kansas, 1978), pp. 11-12, 35-36; Moose Clabaugh played eleven games for the Brooklyn Dodgers late in 1926, but he hit just .071 and spent the rest of his career in the minors.

⁷*Spalding's Official Base Ball Guide* (Chicago, 1927), pp. 315-320; Hy Turkin and S.C. Thompson, *The Official Encyclopedia of Baseball* (New York, 1956), pp. 289 and 340.

⁸*Spalding's Official Baseball Guide* (1928), pp. 299-304; Turkin and Thompson, *The Official Encyclopedia of Baseball*, p. 131.

⁹*Spalding Official Base Ball Guide* (1929), pp. 340-342.

¹⁰Robert Obojski, *Bush League: A History of Minor League Baseball* (New York, 1975), pp. 341, 344-345.

¹¹Obojski, *Bush League*, p. 394; and interview with Beverly C. Brown, Carthage, Texas (January 29, 1987).

¹²*Spalding Official Base Ball Guide* (1934), pp. 219-223.

¹³*Spalding Official Base Ball Guide* (1935), pp. 246-252.

¹⁴*Spalding Official Base Ball Guide* (1935), p. 248; Obojski, *Bush League*, pp. 46-48.

¹⁵*Reach Official American League Base Ball Guide* (1936), p. 246.

¹⁶*Marshall News-Messenger* (undated issues provided by Mike Hammonds).

¹⁷*Marshall News-Messenger* (undated issues provided by Mike Hammonds).

¹⁸*Spalding Official Base Ball Guide* (1937), pp. 239-245.

¹⁹*Spalding Official Base Ball Guide* (1937), pp. 239-240.

²⁰*Reach Official American Base Ball Guide* (1938), pp. 303-309.

²¹*Spalding-Reach Official Base Ball Guide* (1939), pp. 286-292.

²²*Spalding-Reach Official Base Ball Guide* (1940), pp. 289-294; Turkin and Thompson, *The Official Encyclopedia of Baseball*, p. 278.

²³*Longview Daily News* (March 10, 1941); *Marshall News-Messenger* (undated issues provided by Mike Hammonds); *Baseball Guide and Record Book* (1946), p. 383; Obojski, *Bush League*, p. 24.

²⁴*Minor League Baseball Stars*, Vol. I, p. 93; *Minor League Baseball Stars*, Vol. II, p. 110.

²⁵Bob St. John, "Baseball Idol Brings Back Bygone Times," *Dallas Morning News*, (January 12, 1986).

²⁶*Baseball Guide and Record Book* (1946), pp. 377-382.

²⁷Interview with Bill Merrill, Carthage, Texas (May 24, 1986); *Marshall News-Messenger* (September 9, 1937).

²⁸*Baseball Guide and Record Book* (1947), pp. 396-402.

²⁹*Baseball Guide and Record Book* (1948), pp. 320-326.

³⁰*Baseball Guide and Record Book* (1949), pp. 306-312.

³¹Obojski, *Bush League*, p. 27.

³²*Baseball Guide and Record Book* (1950), pp. 328-333.

³³*Longview Daily News* (October 3, 1950, and January 29, 1951).

³⁴*Longview Daily News* (January 29, 1951).

³⁵Interview with Lamar Ford by Malisa K. Ford, Marshall Texas (November 12, 1986).

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