

## Field of Dreams: Santa Cruz County's Love Affair with Baseball

*By Geoffrey Dunn*

1930 was a big year for professional baseball in Santa Cruz. Trying to spur the local economy in the midst of the Great Depression, Mayor Fred Swanton put together a financial package that placed the Santa Cruz Padres in the California State League. Featuring a host of former professional ball players, including future Hall of Famer Harry Hooper and former New York Yankee star Ping Bodie, the Padres were one of the most formidable teams ever to take the field in Cal League history, and they won the league's mid-season pennant their first year of play.

Managed by San Franciscan Gene Valla, the Padres hosted their games at a stadium near Bay Street, at the corner of Gharkey and Laguna.

"We lived right across the street from the ball park," recalls Angie Giannini, whose family allowed Valla to store the team's uniforms and equipment in their garage. "Big crowds would come to the games every Sunday—more than a thousand people. There really wasn't much else to do here back then."

After the games, the players would mingle with their admiring fans, many of whom would invite them to picnics and dinners. Giannini remembers that she and her young girl friends would wear their Sunday best to the games.

"Oh, we really dressed to kill," she says with a chuckle. "We were in love with all the ball players. They were so handsome in their uniforms."

Apparently more than a little romance mixed in with the national pastime. In a letter written on Palomar Hotel stationery to a local woman named "Helen" in the spring of 1930, an out-of-town ballplayer named "Bill" professed his love while lamenting the tribulations of his profession. (The spelling and punctuation are left intact.)

"Gee, kid, I am home again milking cows as before, it looks as if I better get in some other kind of line other than baseball as I have been a perfect failure... I was suppose to go to Texas and play ball, and just got notice that the league brok up before it got started, it seems as all my luck is bad luck. My only good luck in baseball is when I met you... No kidding, if you can find anything for me to do in dear old Santa Cruz—just let me know and I will be down on the first train. That sounds as I am pretty hard up doesn't it? Well! I tell you, I want to get away from home for awhile and I might be able to get serious... Well, before I sign off I want to give you a hint, 'the next time I am in Santa Cruz and just for one night I hope I will have the pleasure of seeing you alone, and not with a crowd,' I sure wanted to see you alone that evening I was there,... I guess you ask why?, but I cant explain in this letter.

As Ever,

Your Sweet William"

Padre fans were also treated to some decent swings on the playing field. The team's biggest attraction, both literally and figuratively, was Ping Bodie. Born Francisco Stefano Pezzolo in San Francisco's Little Italy, Bodie became the first Italian to play in the Major Leagues when he signed with the Chicago White Sox in 1911. (He had changed his name earlier in his career to hide his ancestry.) Short and stocky, and with a legendary appetite for pasta and red wine, he was one of professional baseball's most colorful characters for more than 20 years and its first great power hitter. He was also a regular character in the fictional sports stories of Ring Lardner, who often poked fun at his girth and eating habits.

By the time he reached Santa Cruz, Bodie was in the twilight of his career and more than a little out of shape, but he still had plenty of punch in his bat. In a game against San Francisco in the Padre's first season here, the "Cow Hollow Kid" hit a home run that, according to local sports scribe C. B. Bradley, was "headed in the vicinity of Neary's Lagoon."

"Bodie is the most popular player who ever climbed into a monkey suit," Bradley added. "He likes to exchange courtesies with the fans and is just the kind of player who can take the razz with a smile... the locals eat the big Pezzolo up."

Santa Cruz County's love affair with baseball began in the late nineteenth century, when teams representing municipalities were springing up across the country. Just about every hole-in-the-wall community had a baseball team, and Santa Cruz County was no exception. Watsonville, Aptos, Soquel, Felton, Ben Lomond, Boulder Creek and Santa Cruz all sported semi-pro squads during this era. According to Leon Rowland's *Annals of Santa Cruz*, a team calling itself the Electrics played at the end of William Ely's trolley line on West Cliff Drive in 1894.

The first Santa Cruz County player to make it to the big leagues was Jim Roxburgh, a native of San Francisco who grew up in Santa Cruz and played on local teams. Roxburgh was a catcher in the 1880s for the Philadelphia and Baltimore teams of the American Association (precursor to the American League) and was a teammate of the young John McGraw, who went on to become the legendary manager of the New York Giants.

By the late 1890s, Santa Cruz had a professional team of its own, the Santa Cruz Beachcombers (later to become the Sand Crabs) of the Pacific States League, the highest level of organized baseball during that era on the West Coast. Like most other American institutions of the time, professional baseball was racially segregated, and the lone African American associated with the Santa Cruz team was mascot Edward Purse.

"Eddie turned out to be a pretty good ball player himself," the late Malio Stagnaro recalled in a 1984 interview. "It broke his heart that he couldn't play for the team."

The Beachcombers, who held their games in a ball park behind the Leibbrandt bath houses in Beach Flats, were led by brothers Ed and Charley Daubenbiss, of the pioneer Soquel family, and Bill "Red Dog" Devereaux of Oakland. Following a Santa Cruz win over San Francisco in which Ed Daubenbiss pitched his team to victory, a local poet found cause to write:

*Who killed the Bushnells?  
We—the Beachcombers,  
Three baggers and homers  
We killed the Bushnells!*

*Who was our hero?  
Why Edward, God bless him,  
Girls, kiss and carress him!  
Ed was our hero!*

Two other players from the Beachcombers, Mike Donlin and Frank Arellanes, found their way to the major leagues. While Donlin saw action in only a handful of games with St. Louis and Cincinnati, Santa Cruz native Arellanes, an infielder-turned-pitcher whose brothers Abe and Tom also played on the Beachcombers, had his contract purchased by the Boston Red Sox in 1908. He soon became one of the American League's first effective relief pitchers, and in 1909 he

led the league in saves and relief victories, and won 17 games overall. In spite of posting excellent statistics in his first three seasons, he was released by Boston in August of 1910 and returned to the Pacific Coast League, where he would pitch for Sacramento, Salt Lake City, Denver and Vernon until his unexpected death in 1918.

In 1909, Arellanes was joined on the Red Sox by another young alumnus of the local sandlots, Harry Bartholomew Hooper. Born near Hollister in 1887, Hooper and his family moved to Capitola in the early 1900s. After receiving an engineering degree from St. Mary's College, Hooper played baseball on weekends for teams in Soquel and Alameda before being called up by the Red Sox.

For the next 17 seasons, Hooper was one of the game's biggest stars, and was regularly among the American League leaders in triples, stolen bases, and assists for outfielders. He was widely respected as the field leader on the Red Sox team that won four pennants and three World Championships during a six-year span, the final one coming in 1918—Boston's last World Series triumph.

Hooper had a special teammate on those championship teams, a flashy left-handed pitcher named George Herman Ruth, later to be known throughout the land simply as "Babe." Ruth was one of the best young pitchers in all of baseball, but Hooper recognized Ruth's potential as a batsmen and convinced Red Sox manager Ed Barrow to turn him into an everyday player. In 1920, Ruth was sold to the Yankees for \$100,000 and went on to become an American icon.

Hooper finished out his career in the 1920s with the Chicago White Sox, whose image had been badly tarnished by the 1919 World Series betting scandal (most recently depicted in John Sayles' film *Eight Men Out*.) White Sox owner Charles Comiskey sought out Hooper because of his sterling reputation, and Hooper responded with a trio of .300 seasons, including an average of .328 in 1924 at the age of 37. By the time he retired in 1925, he held 19 major league records and still holds the all-time American League marks for assists and double plays by a rightfielder.

Following his big league career, Hooper eventually returned to Capitola where he served as the city's postmaster for 25 years and continued to play local baseball well into his forties. In 1971 he was named to Baseball's Hall of Fame, where he joined his old Red Sox teammates Tris Speaker and Duffy Lewis on the walls of Cooperstown—the only Hall of Fame outfield in baseball history. He died in 1974.

If Hooper was the Golden Boy of local baseball, Hal Chase was its perennial Bad Boy. Raised in the Santa Cruz mountains above Soquel, where his father ran a sawmill, Chase played his first organized baseball for the semi-pro Soquel Giants, a rough-and-tumble team composed primarily of young loggers and ranch hands. After a season at the University of Santa Clara, Chase embarked on a professional career that eventually took him to the big show with the New York Yankees in 1905.

Most baseball historians regard "Prince Hal" as the finest fielding first baseman of his era, as well as one of its more prolific hitters. (Babe Ruth named him ahead of Lou Gherig on his all-time team.) But he was also an incorrigible drinker and gambler whose off-the-field antics and suspicious on-the-field miscues eventually got him expelled from the game. It was Chase who served as the liaison between former big league pitcher "Wild" Bill Burns and New York gambler Abe Rothstein, the primary conspirators in the 1919 Black Sox betting scandal.

Knowing no other trade than baseball, the banished Chase took to playing in the "outlaw" leagues of California, Arizona, and Mexico, where he became a hero in the small, working-class towns of the region. A wandering alcoholic, he contracted beriberi and died in Colusa, California, in 1947.

"I'd do anything if I could start all over again," he said on his death bed. "What a change there'd be in the life of Hal Chase."

While Santa Cruz Cruz County had ample representation in professional baseball during the game's so-called Golden Era, its connection to the big show during the years surrounding World War II was relatively slim. Former Santa Cruz High pitcher Bill Clemensen pitched a dozen games for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1939 season, and two more in 1941, but

military service during the war all but ended his professional career. He pitched two innings for the Pirates in 1946 and then said good-bye to the game.

Like Clemensen, many young Santa Cruz men went off to fight in Europe and the Pacific during the war, and when they returned tried to reclaim their lost youths. A number of fine semi-pro teams sprung up locally in this era, the most prominent being the Santa Cruz Seahawks and the Swiss Dairy. The later club featured a number of local Italian players, including Louie Castagnola, Dick Fassio, and Nig Tamagni, as well as brothers Fred and Paul Juhl and Johnny Reis.

The one certified Santa Cruz star during the war era was Joltin' Joe Brovia, better known as the "Davenport Destroyer." The son of Italian immigrant parents who worked at the Lone Star cement plant, Brovia was also a product of Santa Cruz High, where he pitched and played the outfield. When he was only 17, Brovia joined the El Paso club of the Arizona-Texas League.

Although originally signed as a pitcher, the 6-foot, 4-inch Brovia quickly developed a powerful batting stroke and led the league in hitting with a .383 average. After batting .322 the following year in the Western International League, Brovia was brought up to the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League (PCL), managed by Lefty O'Doul.

Many considered the PCL to be the west coast equivalent of the Major Leagues, and the Seals were one of the most respected franchises in PCL history. Dozens of baseball's all-time greats, including the DiMaggio brothers and Tony Lazzeri, had played for the Seals, and in the 1940s, they were a PCL powerhouse. Following solid seasons with the Seals in '41 and '42, Brovia's contract was purchased by the Chicago White Sox, but a draft notice from the U.S. Army put an immediate halt to his professional career.

"I wound up serving in the European theater during the war," Brovia says today in the living room of his westside Santa Cruz home. "I saw plenty of action, and by the time the war was over, I couldn't even hit my house."

Nevertheless, he picked up his career with the Seals from '46 to '48, then was sold to the PCL's Portland Beavers and, later, to the Sacramento Solons.

Although not much defensively, Brovia was one of the most feared hitters in PCL history and was recently named to the all-time PCL team, based on his lifetime PCL batting average of .305 and 194 career homers. His greatest feat, however, came on a foggy night in San Francisco when he blasted a towering home run over the centerfield fence at Seals Stadium. Legend has it that the ball, which carried an estimated 560 feet, hit a drunk on Portrero Street who sold it for a jug of wine. A recent edition of Sports History magazine ranked the blast alongside Mickey Mantle's 1956 homer at Griffith Stadium as one of the longest balls ever hit.

Finally, at the age of 33—after 16 years in professional baseball—Brovia got his chance at the major leagues, when the Cincinnati Reds called him up in the middle of the 1955 season. The Reds' general manager Gabe Paul was looking for a left-handed pinch hitter, and Brovia fit the bill.

Coming into the games cold for only one swing day after day, Brovia never found his rhythm, and his defensive liabilities prevented him from becoming an everyday player. Facing some of the era's great hurlers like Robin Roberts, Warren Spahn, Don Newcome and the young Roger Craig, Brovia collected only a couple of singles in 18 pinch hit appearances and was soon sent back to the PCL. He finished out his career in 1957 with the Oakland Oaks and Hermasillo of the Mexican League.

Had Brovia been playing these days, he might well have been a million dollar designated hitter in the American League.

"I see these guys batting .220 and .230 making millions of dollars," he says shaking his head. "The most I ever made was \$9,000 with the Reds. But, hey, I got no regrets. I'd do it all over again. Baseball was my life."

It would be a full generation before Santa Cruz County had another big league connection. In the early 1970s, Soquel High star Pete Hamm pitched parts of two seasons with the Minnesota Twins, while Watsonville native John Sipin played

out the 1969 campaign with the San Diego Padres before crossing the Pacific and having an extremely successful career in Japanese baseball.

Currently no fewer than a dozen Santa Cruzans are pursuing professional careers in baseball, four of whom—Dann Bilardello, Mark Eichorn, Glenallen Hill, and John Orton—have seen major league action this season.

But the area's love affair with baseball goes much deeper than its connection to the big show. Perhaps as many as 10,000 county residents—men and women, boys and girls—play some form of organized baseball here annually.

"Santa Cruz has always been a great baseball town," says Brovia. "When I grew up here, hell, that's all we could think about: baseball, baseball, baseball. The people here still love it. I still love it. It's a great game."

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## Sources

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