

The Baseball Whisperer: A Small-Town Coach Who Shaped Big League Dreams

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understanding water's importance in the lives of my family and neighbors and learning to conserve it" (138–39).

Apps is known for his many works on Wisconsin history and culture, but his stories have relevance beyond the places he so artfully describes. Each chapter is a quick, stand-alone story that will stir kindred memories of water use in readers' minds. With prose appealing to local historians and weekend warriors alike, *Never Curse the Rain* will resonate with any rural Iowan who ever fished from a truss bridge, camped on a sand bar, floated a river, or took their family to the lake.

The Baseball Whisperer: A Small-Town Coach Who Shaped Big League Dreams, by Michael Tackett. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016. xvi, 255 pp. Illustrations, index. \$26.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Corey Seeman is the director of Kresge Library Services at the Ross School of Business of the University of Michigan. He previously was the director of technical services of the National Baseball Library of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown and has focused his sports research on minor league baseball.

When you tune into a Cardinals or Cubs game over the summer, you see the best baseball has to offer. Yet the participants in those games represent only a tiny percentage of those who pick up a bat, ball, and glove over the summer. So many players dream of being a Royal or Yankee as they toil in the minor leagues, independent leagues, semipro baseball, collegiate summer leagues, and youth summer traveling teams year in and year out. The dreams of playing in the Major Leagues has led many players to Clarinda, a city of just over 5,000 in southwestern Iowa. You didn't go to Clarinda just to play baseball. You went to change your life, though not all of the players knew that at the time.

In 1969 Merl Eberly, a 35-year-old former minor league ballplayer, took over the Clarinda A's as field manager. Under his guidance, the community team became a collegiate league team. Collegiate leagues enable athletes with college eligibility left to continue playing over the summer and enhance their skills to get a better shot at the minor leagues. Eberly could not have known how successful his endeavor would be. He rallied the Clarinda community to support this summer league baseball team that won a championship and produced scores of Major League baseball players in what might be the least likely of stops. Clarinda alumni who made it to the Major Leagues include Bud Black, José Álvarez, Von Hayes, Scott Brosius, and many others. Clarinda had one special alumna in Ozzie Smith, the great shortstop from the San Diego Padres and Saint Louis Cardinals who was inducted into the National

Baseball Hall of Fame in 2002. During the 1981 season, when Major League baseball endured its first major strike, the Clarinda A's won the championship of the National Baseball Congress, a major tournament of amateur and semiprofessional teams held each year in Wichita.

The unlikely path to the Major Leagues that many ballplayers have taken through Clarinda is the subject of *New York Times* Washington Bureau editor Michael Tackett in his first book. Tackett, whose son Lee played for one season in Clarinda, takes us on a tremendous journey to see the special aspects of summer baseball in that city. Although Lee never played Major League baseball, the lessons he learned from his season with the Clarinda team inspired Michael Tackett to tell a different story of baseball. Students and fans of the game are regularly presented with new works on the greats of the game. Tackett gives us a story we have not heard before, and that is what makes it fascinating.

Through this beautiful, well-written book, we see the three passions in Merl Eberly's life: his community, his family, and his game. Eberly, along with his wife, Pat, who played a prominent role with the team, share the story with community members who saw the A's as an important element in the city's cultural life. Readers are transported to Clarinda and can visualize the community and the changes that took place over the 50-plus years that Merl was connected with the A's. Tackett introduces readers to the people who invested their time and energy to make this baseball team a source of civic pride.

A minor quibble: there may be too much emphasis on the Major League ball players who came through Clarinda. That may give the story broader appeal, but perhaps at the cost of squeezing out some of the stories from the ballplayers who became better people in their stop along the way to adulthood but not to the Major Leagues.

The title implies that Eberly had some mystical skill that allowed him to communicate with those others cannot connect with. His "whisperer" skills seem to be more straightforward, however. He instilled in his players, family, and community a work ethic that comes through clearly. Through these stories, we understand that his work ethic not only connected these players to the Major Leagues but also showed how anyone may grow and prosper in their chosen profession or avocation. That might be the finest aspect of this work. Tackett weaves a story that addresses the changes in middle America in the second half of the twentieth century. It should be on the bookshelf of anyone who is passionate about Iowa history, even if baseball is not a topic of interest.