The Farmers' Game: Baseball in Rural America

Benjamin G. Rader
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

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Reviewer Victoria Smith is associate professor of history and ethnic studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. She is the author of *Captive Arizona: Indian Captives and Captive Indians in Territorial Arizona, 1850–1912* (2009).

At the academic level, this book engages several lines of inquiry. It explores the life of Mary Alicia Owen, a Vassar-educated folklorist, and her sisters Ella, a geologist, and Juliette, an artist and ornithologist. All three unmarried academic females called St. Joseph, Missouri, home their entire lives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The author, Greg Olson, examines the published folklore and fiction of Mary Owen and places her in the context of the academic struggle between folklore as anthropology and folklore as literature. He also connects the upper-class Owen family to the history of St. Joseph and explores the society that fashioned their lives.

Iowans, especially those interested in river towns born as ports of departure for an expanding American West, will find in Owen’s life and work archetypes for their own historical pioneers: a wealthy, educated, and influential unmarried woman suspended between her privileged upbringing and an insatiable curiosity about the characters that peopled her world; the displaced natives, bereft of homelands, never quite sure if the land they lived on was really theirs; African American elders in their shantytowns, caught between the antebellum slavery of their youth and the marginal freedom of emancipation; and tales of encounters with Romani gypsies who wandered the frontier river towns of the American West. Owen interacted with them all, yet carefully maintained the class and racial boundaries that separated her from her subjects. Despite determination and an inquisitive mind, Owen could never quite surmount the social perceptions that bound her.


The history of baseball in America has been told almost exclusively as a city and as a professional game. David Vaught seeks to rectify this lacunae by offering a history of rural baseball—the game played by farmers and the residents of small towns. The supremacy of the city game’s history arose in part, Vaught contends, from the effort of base-
ball scholars to demolish the myth of the game’s origins in the country-
side, in the tiny, bucolic town of Cooperstown, New York. In doing
so they neglected to examine the widespread playing of baseball-like
games in the Cooperstown area during the antebellum era. Once they
demonstrated the error of the Cooperstown legend, they proceeded
to tell the remainder of baseball’s history as if rural baseball hardly
existed. No one can deny that the main historical focus has been urban
and professional baseball, yet Vaught argues that rural imagery none-
theless occupies a huge place in our memory of the game. Simply wit-
ness the continuing popularity of the movie Field of Dreams (1989) or,
for that matter, the epic poem “Casey at the Bat” (1888).

In seeking to redress the balance, Vaught offers a set of discrete
essays that examine the game in specific places and at specific times.
Much of The Farmers’ Game concerns the sport’s economic, social,
and cultural context. Hence, the reader finds that baseball in early
nineteenth-century Cooperstown intertwined with conflicts arising
over the area’s increased democratization; that the transition in the
late nineteenth century from wheat to fruit farming touched off a
“baseball epidemic” in the Putah Creek neighborhood of California;
that the popularity of baseball in late nineteenth-century rural Texas
can be attributed to the arrival of European immigrants and to the pro-
duction of cotton; that the surfacing of superstar Bob Feller in Iowa in
the 1930s is comprehensible in the context of the rise of the “modern
American farmer”; that the decline in the popularity of baseball in
southwestern Minnesota corresponded to the decay of its small towns
after World War II; and that Gaylord Perry’s rise to stardom in the
1960s and 1970s can be understood as a “case study of a quintessen-
tially southern, authentically rural icon of popular culture” (125).

Vaught’s chapter “The Making of Bob Feller and the Modern
American Farmer” is of special interest to Iowans. Unlike previous
accounts of Feller, Vaught carefully reexamines the “farm-boy-makes-
good” narrative, one promoted by William Feller (Bob’s father) and by
Bob himself. According to this myth, the Fellers were traditional rural
folk whose loyalty to agrarian ideals propelled Bob into baseball star-
dom. Instead, based on research in local land and court records and
newspaper reports, Vaught finds that William Feller was an excep-
tionally shrewd and successful “modern” farmer. He made smart
business decisions—such as when and how much to invest in land
and equipment and when to plant wheat rather than corn. William
likewise went about systematically preparing his son for a career in
professional baseball. Indeed, William even built Bob his own baseball
field, the equivalent of the “Field of Dreams,” and Bob himself was
almost as good at baseball entrepreneurship as he was at throwing the “heater.”

For those interested in baseball’s place in local history, whether in rural or regional terms, this is an extraordinarily good book. Vaught’s narrative rests on an enormous amount of research in primary sources, including records found in county courthouses and stories in small-town newspapers, as well as on published secondary accounts. Well written and researched, it offers a convincing set of stories about the role of baseball in the history of the American countryside.


Histories of the arms race during the Cold War typically focus on the technological, scientific, or military aspects of atomic weapons. In The Missile Next Door, historian Gretchen Heefner offers an intriguing new take on how ordinary citizens in the Midwest interacted with missile installations on their farms and ranches. Based largely on oral histories with South Dakota ranchers and activists, a lively and engaging narrative provides an intensely human account of daily life alongside weapons of mass destruction. As policymakers designed ever more destructive weapons, those who housed the missiles on their land did not necessarily protest the rationality of the arms race, but they did express deep concerns about their rights and freedoms, the environment, and the viability of the agricultural economy.

During the late 1950s, the Eisenhower administration adopted the concept of “mutually assured destruction,” or the deterrence of war through a buildup of atomic weapons. When intercontinental ballistic missiles became the weapon of choice, policymakers came to believe that the Soviets would be deterred from attacking the United States by distributing thousands of missile installations staggered throughout the American countryside rather than concentrating missiles in one vulnerable area. Senators and state boosters vied for these installations in their home states in order to reap the economic benefits, leading the air force to favor prevailing political winds over geography when selecting missile sites.

Residents of small towns and even larger urban centers welcomed military spending as a much-needed boost to the local economy. In