

# Preface

*It's hard not to be romantic about baseball.*

*Billy Beane, Moneyball*

No sport connects us more to our youth than baseball. As adults we can recall with certainty the name of the big leaguer whose signature was etched across our first baseball glove, a prized possession that sometimes found its way underneath our pillow at bedtime. We remember fondly opening a pack of Topps trading cards, chomping on a brittle piece of bubble gum while praying that this would be the pack that contained our favorite baseball hero.

Perhaps the most vivid of all childhood baseball memories is that first trip to a ballpark inhabited by professional players. Remembering the hurried walk through a grandstand portal and catching an initial glimpse of a well-manicured infield transports us to a simpler and more romantic time in our lives . . . a time when we lived and loved baseball.

For those who didn't live near a major league city, that initial trip was likely to a minor-league park. These smaller ballparks dot the landscape of America in towns like Toledo, Salisbury, Chattanooga, Sioux City and Greenville. The stories of the players and the games played in these parks are a part of the local folklore.

From 1938 to 1972, professional baseball was played in Greenville, South Carolina, in Meadowbrook Park. By today's standards, it wasn't much of a structure - a horseshoe-shaped wooden grandstand, a cinder block outfield wall, cramped locker rooms with showers that rarely worked, a rooftop press box and a single concession stand. It was located in what grew to be a seedy area of town, with a prison and a junkyard as its closest neighbors. Meadowbrook was susceptible to frequent flooding from the nearby Reedy River, and it generally stayed in a worn-out state of repair. It was damaged by two fires, the last one leading to its merciful end. But the grass was green, the hotdogs were tasty, and the baseball was storied.

Despite its inadequacies, Meadowbrook Park has a very proud history. In

addition to being the home field for over three decades of minor-league baseball, it also was the site of high school, college, American Legion and Negro league games. It became a multi-purpose venue hosting a traveling circus, stock car racing, professional boxing and wrestling, religious events, and annual dog and horse shows.

Greenville's textile baseball leagues had their own set of ballparks, but occasionally Meadowbrook hosted a textile league event. Also, several of Greenville's textile stars played on one of Greenville's professional teams over the course of the park's history. Although his playing days had ended by the time Meadowbrook was built, Greenville's most famous baseball player, Shoeless Joe Jackson, was given a lifetime complimentary pass to all of Meadowbrook's games. He and his wife Kate were frequent patrons.

Many of the minor leaguers who played in Greenville attained success in the big leagues, none more notable than Nolan Ryan. The Hall of Fame pitcher has referred to his 1966 season with the Greenville Mets as "one of my most pleasant and successful seasons in baseball."

Meadowbrook was also a popular stop over for major league teams barnstorming their way north at the end of spring training. Preseason exhibition games featured baseball immortals such as Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle and Ted Williams. More than forty future Hall of Famers walked across the grass at the historic Greenville ballpark. This is why when old-timers speak of Meadowbrook, a hint of reverence can be detected in their voices.

Meadowbrook was in the heart of one of Greenville's most densely populated Black communities, but Blacks were not openly welcomed in the park. For most of Meadowbrook's existence, *Jim Crow* ruled the day, forcing Black spectators to sit in a segregated bleacher section near the outfield. Neighborhood kids stood on a small hill beyond the left field wall straining to get a glimpse of the action. Negro League teams were allowed to play at Meadowbrook only on certain odd days and times.

Currently, the City of Greenville has plans to build a 40-acre \$60 million park on land that includes the site of the former Meadowbrook Park. It will be called *Unity Park* and has been acknowledged as an attempt to right some of the past wrongs

that occurred in this section of town.

Meadowbrook has its own story of diversity to tell. Wrapped up in the pages of this book you will read about how the park was built by a first generation Sicilian immigrant; how a Cuban immigrant on the 1939 Greenville Spinners became a local fan favorite, how the Negro League's most famous pitcher, Satchel Paige, hurled three scoreless innings at Meadowbrook in 1962, how the first black man to manage a team to a World Series Championship played for the 1964 Greenville Braves, and how a star player for the 1967 Greenville Red Sox began his life in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. You will read how students from Sterling High School, Greenville's oldest black high school, remember Meadowbrook as their "home field," and how one of their star players ended up with a role in Universal Pictures 1976 sports/comedy *Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings*.

In the pages that follow, you will walk through the history of Meadowbrook Park, from its initial funding and construction all the way to the charred remains of its final professional season in 1972. To help tell the story, you will hear the voices of many who played, worked or simply watched baseball at Meadowbrook. As thousands of visitors will begin to enjoy the many activities of the new *Unity Park*, all lovers of the game of baseball can only hope that the *Voices From Meadowbrook Park* will not grow faint.