



Austin Pioneer baseman stretches for a throw during a practice game. *Courtesy Ed Knebel Collection, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library. PICA 06088.*

"When Every Town Big Enough to Have a Bank Also Had a Professional Baseball Team": The Game Returns to Austin After World War II

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ONE OF THE BEST ECONOMIC DECISIONS WE'VE MADE," MAYOR BRUCE Todd commented in March of 1995 after the Austin City Council unanimously voted to fund the construction of a baseball stadium. Such an investment would guarantee the AAA Phoenix Firebirds' relocation to Austin. Citizens and civic groups vehemently opposed the plan. The following October, after public outcry forced a referendum, 49,111 Austinites cast ballots against a ten-million-dollar bond needed to build a twenty-two million-dollar ball park; only 18,019 supported the bond. Firebirds owner Martin Stone refused to relocate to Central Texas without such a facility and Austin remained the largest city in the U.S. without a professional baseball franchise.²

In contrast to the difficulties of reestablishing minor league baseball in the Texas capital in 1995, Mayor Tom Miller and his council found a more supportive environment for the national pastime during the post-war years of baseball's second "Golden Age." In 1947 Miller united a group of Austin civic, business, and political leaders in order to secure a minor league franchise in the Class B Big State League. Their combined support not only made it possible for the new owner Edmund P. Knebel

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¹ Furman Bisher quoted in Neill J. Sullivan, *The Minors: The Struggles and the Triumph of Baseball's Poor Relation From 1876 To Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 167. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Southwestern Social Science Convention in New Orleans in March of 1997.

² Debbie Hiott, "City OKs \$10 Million in Funds Toward New Baseball Stadium," *Austin American Statesman*, Mar. 31, 1995, p. 11A (quotation); Nina Reyes and Jeff South, "Voters Explain Stadium Decision: 13 Precincts in East and Southeast Austin Supported bonds to Build Ballpark," *ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1995, p. 17A; Diana Dworin, "Investor Seeks Stadium for Double-A Ball: Williamson Voters Might Be Asked To Pay for a Stadium After Defeat of Austin Plan," *ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1995, p. 1A.

to build a ball park on an unimproved tract of city property and to organize a team in less than three months, it kept professional baseball in Austin for twenty years. Such support was not rare in postwar America. Similar promotional activities took place throughout the United States during the late 1940s and the 1950s. As the nation prospered, the disposable income and free time of many Americans increased, resulting in the booming growth of the entertainment business. As a part of that leisure-time industry and because it was recognized as the National Pastime in a period of overt patriotism, professional baseball in general and the minors in particular experienced unprecedented popularity. In small towns and cities across the country, civic-minded individuals and organizations, in an attempt to attract or keep a professional franchise, connected baseball with what they felt was good about their communities and their nation. These endeavors to tout baseball were part of a concerted effort to promote local prosperity. Ironically, that same prosperity eventually caused minor league attendance to dwindle and clubs to fold or relocate. Austin's story is representative of those cities' experience.³

Initially, professional baseball in Austin benefited from the shifting circumstances of the country following World War II. Pent-up demand for consumer goods, conversion to peace-time production, and government favoritism towards business encouraged the vast economic expansion of the postwar era. Prosperity increased the profits of business owners and the wages of workers, whose ranks now swelled from the glut of returning war veterans. Greater disposable income, war-time savings, and an increased number of consumers created a prodigious demand for leisure-time activities. The returning soldiers not only provided many of the patrons of this new Golden Age for the entertainment industry, they also supplied a wealth of the talent. Dance halls, movie theaters, amusement centers, and professional baseball all experienced tremendous increases in business.⁴

The minor leagues in particular witnessed an astounding splurge of new teams and leagues. Mostly confined to the urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest before the war, the owners increasingly ventured into new markets. Lured by newly emerging cities in the West and Southwest, established teams relocated, prosperous leagues expanded, and new associations organized, even bringing small towns "not big enough to support minor league baseball . . . into the fold." The number of these professional associations grew from twelve in 1945 to an all-

³ James Gilbert, *Another Chance: Postwar American, 1945-1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 243-255.

time high of fifty-nine in 1949. The Texas capital would be one of the many cities to benefit from that enlargement.⁵

This minor league expansion significantly affected Texas, which had a tradition of community support for baseball; a tradition that included over one hundred cities that had hosted professional franchises since John McCloskey organized the Texas League in 1888. But in 1945 there were no professional teams or leagues operating in Texas because of World War II. In 1946 many circuits across the United States resumed play, including the Texas League, the East Texas League, and the West Texas-New Mexico League. The fan turnout at some of the East Texas League parks was truly amazing. With a population of only 17,000, Greenville drew 160,000 fans, nearly ten times its number of residents, and Texarkana's total attendance of 130,000 was more than double its 55,000 citizens. Such success promoted the growth of new circuits. In 1947 the organization of the Arizona-Texas and the Longhorn Leagues and the split of the East Texas League into the Lone Star and the Big State Leagues brought the number of circuits operating in Texas to six.⁶

The capital for this postwar expansion of minor league baseball in the Lone Star State came from oil. Spindletop and other oil fields in East Texas spurred Texas business growth before and during the 1930s when petroleum began to fuel the nation, integrating the state's economy with the nation's economy. That relationship reached maturity during the industrial growth of World War II. The jump in oil prices at the outbreak of World War II made rich men of many East Texas investors even before the postwar prosperity brought new industry to the sunbelt states.⁷

After the defeat of the Axis Powers, several of these East Texas wildcaters invested in professional baseball. Howard Green, Big State League president in the early 1950s, claimed that the league was "financed largely by the 'black gold' of East Texas." The most flamboyant of these oil tycoons was Richard W. "Dick" Burnett, a "strong man, a violent man . . . [with] a strong love of the game." Although he ultimately failed in his highest baseball ambition—bringing major league baseball to Texas—his influence on baseball in Texas was significant. With the war

⁵ Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 255.

⁶ Sullivan, *The Minors: The Struggles and the Triumphs of Baseball's Poor Relation from 1876 to the Present*, 165; Bill O'Neal, *The Texas League, 1888-1987: A Century of Baseball* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1987), 4; Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 216, 224-229; "Big State, New B League, Opens in Texas April 15," *Sporting News*, Apr. 16, 1947, p. 47; Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 224-229.

⁷ William C. Hardt, *A Shared Past: Texas and the United States Since Reconstruction* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1991), 1; Dallas Morning News, 1990-1991 *Texas Almanac* (Dallas: Dallas Morning News, 1991), 551.

over and money flowing from his oil fields, he bought the Texarkana Bears, then of the East Texas League and later a charter member of the Big State League. But his baseball goals far exceeded Class B and he had more than adequate assets to aid his quest for a team in a higher classification. Using his newly acquired wealth, he paid \$500,000 for the entire Dallas Baseball Club, Incorporated. He stayed involved in the Big State League until his death in 1955 by using the Class B league's franchises (Gainesville, Longview, and Galveston) as farm clubs for his Class AA Dallas team. Other successful East Texas oil men who owned Big State League franchises included Claude Lee, successor to the Dallas Rebel owner at Texarkana, and J. C. Stroud, owner of the Port Arthur team. The Wichita Falls Spudders, a team that went through a succession of owners, was often backed by oil money. Petroleum revenues also provided a base for economic expansion in Texas, thereby directly and indirectly contributing to the success of many businesses in the state and to the increased disposable income of the working class.⁸

Economic prosperity attracted people to Texas. The population of Texas, 4,663,000 in 1930, climbed to 6,415,000 by 1940; despite a reduction in the rate of growth during the war the population continued to increase, hitting 7,711,000 by 1950. The Lone Star State's capital city attracted many of those who migrated to sunbelt urban areas after World War II, enough in fact to place Austin among the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the southwestern United States. From 1930 to 1940 the population of Austin grew from 53,120 to 87,930. But by the end of the war five years later, it was still well under 100,000. Postwar prosperity caused that number to leap to 132,456 by 1950. Austin's stature as "one of the fastest growing cities in the Southwest" would prove vital in bringing a Big State League franchise to Central Texas.⁹

The population and economic growth in Austin, unlike that in much of Texas, especially East Texas, was not the result of oil but "money and power that came from the federal government." Franklin D. Roosevelt's

⁸ "BSL Gets Golden Start," in *Big State League/Gulf Coast League 1952: History, Records, Pictures*, ed. Roy Edwards (Ft. Worth: Babcock Co., 1952), 9 (1st quotation); Tex Maule, "Burnett Couldn't Play Baseball, So He Bought Team," *Dallas Morning News*, June 2, 1955, p. 21 (2nd quotation); Harry Hunt III, *Texas Rich: The Hunt Dynasty from the Early Oil Days through the Silver Crash* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), 137; Gilbert, *Another Chance*, 26; Louis Graves, "Burnett Planning Purchase of Other Minor Loop Clubs," *Sporting News*, Apr. 21, 1948, p. 18; George White, "Oilman Burnett, New Dallas Owner, Expects Club Some Day to Be in Majors," *Sporting News*, Apr. 21, 1948, p. 18; "Texarkana Owner Puts Franchise Up For Sale," *Austin American*, Dec. 30, 1952, p. 15; "J. C. Stroud Sells Sea Hawk Club," *Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 11, 1955, p. 22; Harold V. Ratliff, "BSL Called One of the Richest Baseball Circuits," Gainesville (Tex.) *Daily Register*, Jan. 29, 1952, p. 4.

⁹ John Edward Weems, *Austin: 1839-1989* (Austin: Austin American Statesman, 1989), 39 (quotation); United States Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970. Part 1* (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1975), 35; John L. Andriot (ed.), *Population Abstract of the United States* (McLean, Va.: Andriot Associates, 1983), 774.

New Deal programs provided money for building dams on the Colorado River, for erecting Bergstrom Air Force Base southeast of the city, and for constructing a magnesium plant that later became Balcones Research Center. According to Anthony M. Orum, "From 1933 through 1949, Austin mayor Tom Miller, Lyndon Johnson, a few bankers, and the federal government shaped the growth of Austin." The 290-pound Miller, Austin's answer to Chicago's Richard Daley or Tammany Hall's Boss Tweed, forged a cooperative, if not always congenial, working relationship with the local business community, a relationship he referred to as a "splendid spirit of cooperation . . . between the City Commission and the Chamber of Commerce." The enthusiastic promotion of post-war growth by Mayor Miller and the Chamber of Commerce culminated in the creation of a ten-year development program in 1946 which included the Interregional Highway (Interstate 35) and the Longhorn Crossing Dam (which created Town Lake).¹⁰

Not part of that formal plan but very much a part of Miller's vision was a professional baseball team. The local political boss thought that "a good baseball team makes a better city." Local civic, business, and political leaders believed that professional baseball would "enhance the city's image, promote commerce, and encourage local development"—an idea common among municipal leaders across the forty-eight states. Miller and local business leaders once again consolidated resources—this time in an effort to return professional ball to Austin after an absence of twenty-one years.¹¹

The first baseball franchise in Austin had been a charter member of the Texas League, but, after a poor won-lost record in 1914, the team moved to Shreveport. In 1915 an Austin club competed in the Middle Texas League but played poorly and lasted only one year. A Texas Association franchise founded in 1923 lasted longer, but its demise in 1926 left Austin without professional baseball until 1947.¹²

During those interim years, Austin baseball fans were not limited to amateur or even semi-pro teams like Ed Knebel's Seven-Up squads; they could and did watch the excellent University of Texas Longhorns, who under the guidance of legendary coach William "Uncle Billy" Disch had won the Southwest Conference (SWC) title every year but one (Baylor,

¹⁰ Quotes from Anthony M. Orum, *Power, Money, and the People: The Making of Modern Austin* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987), xi (1st quotation), 72 (third quotation), 131 (2nd quotation); David C. Humphrey, *Austin: An Illustrated History* (Northridge, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1985), 206.

¹¹ Mark Batterson, "Mayor Endorses Pioneer Project," *Austin American*, July 5, 1955, p. 21.

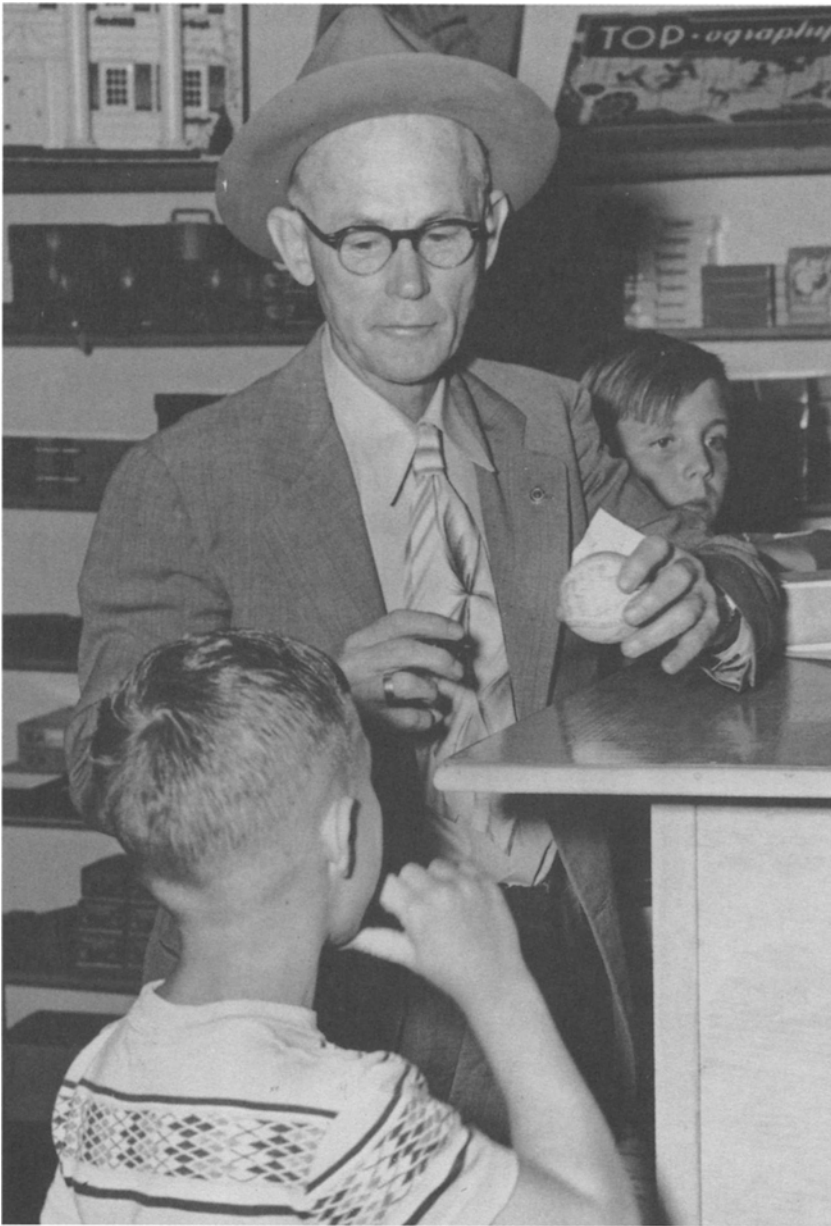
¹² "Disch Field Started on the Road to Reality over a Cup of Coffee," *Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 19, 1955, p. 56; Bill O'Neal, *The Texas League, 1888-1987: A Century of Baseball* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1987), 211.

1923) since 1915. In 1928, after the opening of a new Clark Field (older Texas alumni usually remember this park for the limestone hill, nicknamed "Billy Goat Hill," that ran the length of the outfield fence) local fans received a special treat—an exhibition game between Texas and the already legendary New York Yankees, featuring Lou Gehrig and "Babe" Ruth. The New Yorkers won that game 12 to 8 and returned the next year to defeat the Texas nine 8 to 6 before an estimated crowd of sixty-five hundred. Such appearances were rare during the Great Depression, but local rooters still witnessed some of the best college baseball in the state. The local university won fourteen SWC titles in those twenty years without a local pro team. Disch added nine more to his total and then relinquished control of the team to a former UT player and the man who replaced "Shoeless" Joe Jackson in the Chicago White Sox outfield, Bibb Falk who led the Longhorns to five more championships before 1947. Although Longhorn supporters saw excellent players like Ernie Koy, C. C. "Tex" Hughson, and Bobbie Layne perform for these pennant winners, college schedules in the mid-century were very brief, usually less than twenty-five games, hardly enough to satisfy the average fan.¹³

Not surprisingly then, there were several individual attempts before 1947 to bring professional ball back to Austin. In 1940, Edmund Knebel began negotiations for the purchase of Galveston's Texas League entry. Knebel, considered "one of the city's greatest sports boosters," had rejected a professional offer from the Detroit Tigers after his collegiate career at Blinn College in 1916 and remained in Central Texas, where he built a successful business bottling Seven-Up and Nu-Grape. The normally frugal businessman was quite a baseball fanatic, spending thousands of dollars sponsoring local semi-pro baseball teams. His hope to relocate the Galveston franchise in Austin was an apparent attempt to bring a higher level of competition to Austin. Before he closed the deal, however, the United States entered World War II. The suspension of the Texas League season in 1942 terminated his plans. In 1941, Knebel's future partners in bringing professional baseball to Central Texas, the Austin Junior Chamber of Commerce, began formulating plans for a stadium in hopes that the Texas League's Beaumont franchise might be available. World War II also ended that effort.¹⁴

¹³ Falk guided the University of Texas to its first two national championships in 1949 and 1950. He coached the Longhorns to a total of twenty-one SWC championships. Neil Farmer, *Southwest Conference Baseball's Greatest Hits* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1996), 95-100, 252-253, 325-327, 313-315, 334.

¹⁴ Damond Benningfield, "Ed Knebel: Austin's Mr. Baseball," *Austin*, vol. 27, no. 12 (Dec., 1985), 87, 88; Wilbur Evans, "Sports Center Could Be Home for Lot of Austin Activities," *ibid.*, Jan. 4, 1947, p. 7 (quotation); George White, "The Sports Broadcast," *Dallas Morning News*, Jan. 16, 1947, p. 5.



Austin Pioneer owner Edmund P. Knebel signs an autograph for a young baseball fan. *Courtesy Ed Knebel Collection, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library. PICB 04438.*

The booming postwar economy rekindled interest in minor league baseball, especially in East Texas. The Class C East Texas League resumed operation the first year following the war “and all clubs enjoyed a banner season . . . when fans flocked to the ball park to spend money

saved during World War II." The phenomenal success at the turnstiles led cities in Central and West Texas to express interest in joining the league. Knebel, probably harboring hopes of either joining an upgraded East Texas League or of finding interest in the formation of a new league, attended an organizational meeting in Longview in early January of 1947. Due to the number of cities represented at the meeting, league president J. Walter Morris proposed the creation of a new Class C circuit. But Knebel, accompanied by Jaycee representative Roy Martins, rejected Morris's plan claiming that "the baseball fans of Austin would demand at least a Class B brand of ball." Once again stymied in his attempt to bring a suitable level of baseball to Central Texas, Knebel returned to Austin.¹⁵

Representatives from five other cities were more persistent. They founded a new league and, while still recruiting additional cities, applied for Class B status. National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues' president George Trautman denied their request, citing the league's failure to obtain the necessary two hundred and fifty thousand combined attendance. Austin with its population of over one hundred thousand became essential to the aspirations of the founding members of the new league, underscoring the value of the recent population boom in securing a franchise for the Central Texas city. In late January, league delegates, including newly chosen president J. Walter Morris, met with Mayor Miller and his council, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Henry Ramsey, outgoing Jaycee president, reported, "Austin only needs to furnish the ball park to assure itself a representation in the newly formed Class B league that includes such cities as Waco, Wichita Falls, Paris, Texarkana, Sherman and Greenville."¹⁶

Fortunately, the location for a ball park had been decided upon in 1941, when the Jaycees tried to raise money to bring the Beaumont team to Austin. Referred to as the Butler tract, it was "just off Barton Springs Road and east of the railroad." Because that tract was city-owned and required the city council's endorsement to be used for a private enterprise, the Jaycees made no move to acquire the property at that time.¹⁷

The creation of the new league proved catalytic. On January 27, 1947, the city council in special session approved the use of the Butler tract as

¹⁵ "Knebel Forceful in Forming Loop After Longview Confab," *Austin American*, Apr. 16, 1953, p. 4B (quotations); Sullivan, *The Minors*, 165; David Pietruza, *Minor Miracles: The Legend and Lure of Minor League Baseball* (South Bend, Ind.: Diamond Communications, 1995), 67.

¹⁶ Wilbur Evans, "Loop Head Comes Monday for Meet," *Austin American*, Jan. 24, 1947, 24 (quotation); "Knebel Forceful," 4B; Sullivan, *The Minors*, 165; Pietruza, *Minor Miracles*, 67.

¹⁷ Evans, "Loop Head Comes Monday for Meet," 24.

the site of a ball park. During the same meeting, Mayor Miller, city manager Guiton Morgan, Jaycees John Terrell, Neville Johnson, Dupree Johnson, and Ramsey met with Morris, Texarkana team owner Dick Burnett, Paris team owner John Bunes, Waco team owner C. C. Maxey, and Sherman team owner Arthur Willingham to finalize the awarding of the franchise to Austin. Also present was Jake Atz Jr. of the Evangeline League, who wanted ownership of the capital city team. Miller and Morris both commended the Jaycees for their work, which included \$17,000 raised to construct a ball park in 1941. The yet-to-be-announced franchise owner was to supply the balance of the money needed to build a proposed \$55,000 stadium.¹⁸

Morris planned to announce the name of the new owner the following Saturday at a meeting to be held in the Jefferson Hotel in Dallas. Although the *Austin American* reported without explanation that "prospective owners of the franchise asked that their identity be withheld," the *Dallas Morning News* listed the prospective owners as Ed Knebel, Jake Atz Jr., Fred Marberry, "and one or two others." That Jake Atz Jr. was the son of the late Texas League manager of twenty-two years, John Jacob "Jake" Atz, explained his attendance at the meeting in Austin. It also cleared up any speculation concerning his abrupt resignation as general manager of the Natchez Giants of the Evangeline League. Although at the time of his resignation he had claimed that "he was withdrawing from the game entirely," his family background and personal involvement in organized baseball and Ed Knebel's amateur career and financial patronage of semi-pro baseball in Austin made them the most likely subjects of Morris's earlier comments concerning the prospective owners. Morris, after announcing the prospective owners' wish for anonymity, assured the reporters that the "two were rich in baseball experience." This certainly described both Atz and Knebel.¹⁹

Knebel's baseball background and previous associations with city leaders (he had even been urged to run for the city council during the war) made him the local choice. However, the soft drink mogul, despite his comments in Longview, apparently still preferred a Class AA Texas League franchise and was reluctant to accept ownership. Mayor Miller, a master in the art of persuasion, successfully appealed to Knebel's civic pride and love of baseball. League officials, who preferred Atz because

¹⁸ J. Walter Morris was also president of the Evangeline League in 1946; Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 222; Wilbur Evans, "City Council Okehs [sic] Butler Tract for Park," *Austin American*, Jan. 28, 1947, p. 11.

¹⁹ Evans, "City Council Okehs [sic]," 11 (1st and 4th quotations); "Austin, Gainesville in Big State Loop," *Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 3, 1947, p. 9 (2nd quotation); "Caught On the Fly," *Sporting News*, Jan. 29, 1947, p. 23 (3rd quotation); "Etex Loop Heads Meet Here Sunday," *Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 1, 1947, p. 5; William B. Ruggles, *The History of the Texas League* (Dallas: The Texas Baseball League, 1951), 263, 267.

of his strong professional contacts, were probably more difficult to convince. But Miller and local officials were adamant and after a week of speculation by sportswriters, the league organizers officially awarded Ed Knebel the Austin franchise.²⁰

City leaders and local citizens immediately speculated on the bright future for baseball in Austin. Class B was to be only the beginning. Knebel quickly announced his desire for the team's eventual acceptance into the Class AA Texas League. In fact, he planned to pattern the operation of his Austin club after that of a Texas League entry—Texarkana. Local baseball legends, William J. "Uncle Billy" Disch and Bibb Falk also alluded to the highly respected Class AA circuit, with Disch expressing a wish that the "Texas league may again become an all Texas affair."²¹

But first the franchise had to prepare for the inaugural season of the Big State League. That would be quite a challenge, since Knebel faced a number of problems: no park, no manager, no players, and no time to waste before the season opened on April 15. Money, however, did not seem to be a major concern since Austin's increasing population and support from the city and the Jaycees gave Knebel hope for a huge following and future profits. And, until those predicted crowds began generating working capital, Knebel had his successful Seven-Up Bottling Company to provide the bulk of the team's financial backing. On April 11, Knebel borrowed \$25,000 from his soft drink company to incorporate the Austin Baseball Club, of which he was the principal stockholder with 248 of the 250 shares. Although that initial loan was paid back on October 14, 1947, it initiated a trend that would be followed throughout the life of the ballclub. Whenever baseball revenues were low, the baseball owner turned to the soft drink mogul for cash.²²

While finances did not loom as a major problem in the late winter of 1947, the lack of a ball field did. Although actual work on the playing surface started only in January of 1947, planning for a professional baseball park began before World War II. In 1940, the Austin *Tribune* reported that Mayor Miller backed the building of a \$30,000 park. One year later Knebel and Dupree Johnson also determined that Austin needed a new park. Knebel's complaint that his semi-pro teams had lost too many

²⁰ Taylor Glass, Interview by Joe O'Neal, May 23, 1974, transcript, Taylor Glass Collection (Austin History Center, Austin, Tex.); "Knebel Forceful," p. 4B.

²¹ Wilbur Evans, "Austin's Top Baseball Men Happy To See Sport Return," Austin *American*, Jan. 29, 1947, p. 11 (quotation); "Knebel to Announce Plans For Austin Ball Club Soon," *ibid.*, Feb. 4, 1947, p. 9.

²² During the same meeting that league officials awarded the franchise to Knebel they officially adopted the name Big State League. "Big State, New B League," 47; John Edward Weems, *Austin: 1839-1989* (Austin: Austin American-Statesman, 1989), 39; One share of stock cost \$100; Seven-Up employees Henry Kuempel and William H. Elliot owned one share each; Texas Secretary of State, *Corporate Records*, Computer Reel Ext.: 000520, pp. 1018-1058.

balls at House Field initiated a discussion that ended with a fund raiser. Using local public school students, the Jaycees collected approximately \$16,000 by selling lapel pins for fifty cents apiece. Mayor Miller then convinced the city council to pledge to match what the Jaycees raised. But before construction could begin and before the city doubled the total, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The Jaycees turned the money over to the city which invested it in war bonds.²³

Although the city never matched the Jaycees' contribution, by 1947 the money had earned nearly \$1,000 in interest. With the full amount still earmarked for the construction of a park, the City of Austin deposited the \$17,000 in an escrow account. At the regular meeting of the city council on January 23, 1947, Dr. E. H. Givens, identified as a member of the Negro Chamber of Commerce, presented the Council with a number of requests, the fifth of which was a request "to build a baseball park." Although this request was only for a recreational baseball field in the black section of then-segregated Austin, it apparently initiated discussion of ball fields in general, a discussion that led the council to authorize the city manager and recreation director to "see what can be done about laying out the baseball field on the Butler tract." This move did not directly affect the Jaycees' escrow account, but it did allow the preliminary work on the playing surface at the future site of Disch Field to begin. Yet, only after the awarding of the Big State franchise to Knebel and completion of the fences and grandstand did the Jaycees allow the city to give the money to Knebel. While this was often the way in which old acquaintances conducted business in small cities after World War II, it is also indicative of Knebel's ample financial resources and his confidence in a vocal commitment from local leaders.²⁴

Once the franchise was officially Knebel's, the pace of construction quickened. With less than three months before the season opened on April 15, Knebel still needed to secure a lease, get the approval of various government agencies to construct the stands, and, of course, actually have that entire structure built. In a fashion typical of postwar politics in Austin and across the country, Knebel and city officials joined forces. Speculating that Knebel would spend about \$125,000 to prepare the franchise for opening day, the mayor convinced the city council to offer Knebel a longer lease. He also reminded them that Knebel's construction

²³ "If Baseball Park Will Pay for Itself—," *Austin Daily Tribune*, Apr. 22, 1940, Baseball File (Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin; cited hereafter as CAH); "Disch Field Started on the Road to Reality over a Cup of Coffee," *Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 19, 1955, 56.

²⁴ Austin, Tx., *Minutes*, 910, 911 (1st quotation), 919 (2nd quotation), 1231. The city also prohibited the sale of alcohol, a huge source of revenue at many baseball stadiums, at Disch Field. Knebel, a teetotaler, never publicly objected.

of a ball park had relieved the city of that obligation. Interestingly, no mention of an earlier council's pledge to provide matching funds for construction was made.²⁵

This was even more curious considering how favorable the lease was to the city. Knebel's contract ran for five years with an option for an additional five years. The annual rent was \$1,000 and Knebel paid for the construction of fences, stands, playing field and other improvements. He also paid the utility bills. And, although he could not charge for parking, the lease required him to supply parking attendants. Besides admissions, his income depended upon the sale of advertising and concessions. Once the contract expired, "title to said improvements . . . [became] property of the City of Austin." The city's only responsibility was for streets and parking lots. Still, the council withheld approval until April 24, after the season started and the temporary construction was complete.²⁶

In effect, Knebel built a stadium on city property without a written lease and with his own money. The city did not release the Jaycees' \$17,000 until after the Jaycees' March meeting when the organization authorized President John Terrell to write a letter to the city council advising the councilmen to relinquish control of the money. Council approval followed on May 1, at which time the members demanded that the facility built on the Butler tract be named Disch Field, in honor of William J. Disch.²⁷

Such a strong request coupled with an unexplained delay in relinquishing the funds could be inferred as evidence of friction between Knebel and the city's civic leaders, a conclusion not supported by a broader view of their relationship. Knebel's connection with Central Texas amateur and semi-pro baseball programs had brought him into contact with many Austin municipal officials during the previous two decades without any reports of major disagreements. In fact, his initiative and dedication to local projects boosted his stature, although it probably caused a bit of jealousy also. As Howard Green recalled, in some cities "a spot on the team's board of directors was more prestigious than a place on the city council." Still, it appears that Knebel and city leaders had developed a type of mutual respect as well as a mutual trust. Thus, proceeding without an official permit was not deemed risky; indeed, to have done otherwise would only have delayed completion of Disch Field.²⁸

²⁵ Orum, *Power, Money, and the People*, 131; Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 197–203; Austin, Tx., *Minutes*, 1045.

²⁶ Austin, Tx., *Minutes*, 1212–1213.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1046, 1230; Mr. Disch had been aware of this since 1941; Evans, "Top Baseball Men," 11.

²⁸ David Pietrusza, *Minor Miracles: The Legend and Lure of Minor League Baseball* (South Bend, Ind.: Diamond Communications, Inc., 1995), 57.

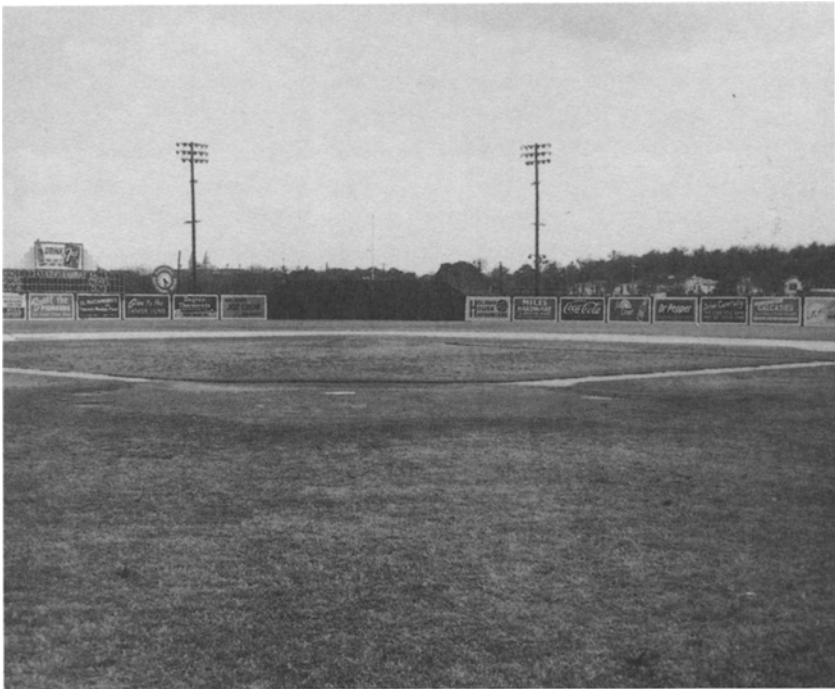
Federal officials and red tape were another matter. Since the Civilian Production Administration (CPA) wanted nothing, neither the loss of manhours nor materials, to interfere with postwar housing construction, the federal agency temporarily rejected Knebel's application for a construction permit. Then, in an extreme example of post-World War II government/business cooperation, Mayor Miller, city manager Morgan, and architect Charles Page Jr. helped Knebel revise his application. Miller even indicated that the city might officially join Knebel in the next application if this revision met with disapproval. Uncertainty over the status of the park led to speculation on alternatives. Austin *American-Statesman* sports editor Wilbur Evans proposed House Park or Clark Field as substitutes until Disch was completed. He also listed their limitations. House Park could not handle large crowds and would not be available until public schools adjourned in June. The University of Texas's Clark Field was without lights and would not be available until May 15, after the Longhorns' season was finished. Knebel apparently considered neither of these options. During the last week in February, he asked the Big State League's schedule-maker William B. Ruggles to assign Austin only road games during the first two weeks of the season.²⁹

Knebel's optimism proved to be well founded. Whether due to the change in phraseology or possibly Miller's political influence, on March 15, the regional office of the CPA in San Antonio issued Knebel a building permit. At that time, Knebel assured the public that the present work on the park would be completed April 25. He also announced that a concrete-and-steel grandstand was to be built after completion of the regular season in September. The CPA permit included provisions for those plans. Apparently, other city officials needed only the CPA's acceptance of the park proposal. Construction approval from the city building inspector came only days after the CPA announcement.³⁰

The municipal permit came less than six weeks before the already delayed home opener. League statistician Ruggles scheduled opening night in Austin for April 26, the day after the target completion date of the temporary stands. Despite the tight schedule and the postwar scarcity of steel (contractors used drill-stem pipe and oil casings from Texas oil fields), Knebel persevered. At the regular meeting of the city council on April 24, Miller read a letter from Knebel inviting the city manager

²⁹ Wilbur Evans, "Knebel's Problems Would Have Put Abner Doubleday to Shame," *Austin American-Statesman*, Feb. 16, 1947, p. 16; "Knebel Gets Aid In Park Permit," *Austin American*, Feb. 27, 1947, p. 16.

³⁰ "Knebel Given Okeh for Park," *Austin American*, Mar. 15, 1947, p. 9; "Knebel Gets Local Permit for Ball Park," *ibid.*, Mar. 19, 1947, p. 13; "Knebel Gets Aid in Park Permit," *ibid.*, Feb. 27, 1947, p. 16; Evans, "Knebel's Problems," 16; "Knebel Awarded Austin Post," 7; "Knebel Gets Aid," 12.



Looking southwest from the Disch Field grandstand. Note the Seven-Up sign above the left field scoreboard. *Courtesy PARD, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library. PICA 06063.*

and the city council to be his guests at the first game played in Disch Field. The council responded by officially congratulating "Knebel on his successful efforts in financing and taking over the Club." Knebel had during "nine hectic weeks in 1947 spent \$200,000 of his own money to build Disch Field . . . a park with 3,500 grandstand seats and 2,000 bleacher seats." Fans in the grandstand faced the southeast and gazed at a field that measured 340 feet down both foul lines and 400 feet to centerfield. Above the scoreboard behind the left-center-field fence was a sign urging the team's rooters to drink Seven-Up.³¹

While Knebel concentrated on pushing construction of the temporary Disch Field to completion, his manager R. C. "Beau" Bell hunted for players. The selection of players did not begin until March 2, when Knebel named Bell, a former major league player for the St. Louis Browns, Detroit Tigers, and Cleveland Indians, as his player-manager. On March 24, Bell opened a baseball camp at Landa Park in New Braunfels, Texas, where in earlier years the Toledo Mudhens, Minnea-

³¹ Austin, Tx., *Minutes*, 1197 (1st quotation); Benningfield, "Mr. Baseball," 87 (2nd quotation); "Knebel Forceful," 4B; Austin, Tx., *Minutes*, 1197; Wilbur Evans, "Slugging Ability Should Add To Pioneers' Appeal at Home," *Austin American*, Apr. 25, 1947, p. 17; Disch Field Photographs, Emund P. Knebel Collection (Austin History Center, Austin, Texas).

polis Millers, and Tulsa Oilers had trained. To help attract prospects, Knebel placed an advertisement in the *Sporting News*. Such ads were not uncommon and this one did produce at least one player for Austin, catcher Carlton Nebel, who along with others at the camp represented a variety of baseball experience: minor league, college, semi-pro, amateur, even major league. Besides Bell, there was one other former major leaguer, catcher Sam Harshany, of the St. Louis Browns.³²

Eventually Bell, Harshany, and Nebel joined a collection of lesser-talented baseball players to form the inaugural Austin Pioneers, a team that proved better at drawing fans than winning games. Teams in the four most western cities of the Big State League (Austin, Waco, Gainesville, and Wichita Falls) all started the season at a disadvantage since they had to field entirely new teams, while the eastern half of the league (Sherman-Denison, Greenville, Paris, and Texarkana) had competed in the East Texas League the year before. Sportswriters in Waco, Gainesville, and Austin emphasized this handicap and the final standings attest to their insight. Waco, Austin, and Gainesville placed eighth, seventh, and sixth, respectively, while the Spudders of Wichita Falls managed a third-place finish.³³

Unlike the other new clubs, the Pioneers were also unsuccessful in signing star players. Recent collections of the records of players with long and/or successful minor league careers reveal the caliber of the 1947 Pioneers. Those books contain the records of seven men who played for the '47 Wichita Falls team, seven who played for the '47 Texarkana team, six players from the '47 Sherman-Denison squad, five members of the '47 Greenville entry, four who played for Gainesville in '47, three played for the '47 Paris team, and three players were from the '47 Waco team. Apparently no members of the 1947 Austin Baseball Club ever played long enough or produced well enough to be included. Consequently, going into its initial season fielding a ragtag lineup and playing in a makeshift stadium, the Austin club had little chance of being competitive. Like recent major league expansion franchises, the Pioneers depended on the newness of professional baseball to the area and special promotions to attract fans.³⁴

³² Morris Williams, "Knebel Names Beau Bell Austin Baseball Manager," *Austin American Statesman*, Mar. 2, 1947, pp. 17-18; "Bell to Conduct Baseball School," *Austin American*, Mar. 15, 1947, p. 9; Advertisements, *Sporting News*, Jan. 29, 1947, p. 22; Advertisements, *ibid.*, Mar. 12, 1947, p. 26; Advertisements, *ibid.*, Feb. 26, 1947, p. 26; Gilbert, *Another Chance*, 26; Jack Gallagher, "Porky Can Squeal From Any Position," *Austin American*, Aug. 14, 1947, p. 13.

³³ "Uncle Ezra's Sports Sizzles," *Gainesville Daily Register*, Mar. 18, 1947, p. 4; "Uncle Ezra's Sports Sizzles," *ibid.*, Apr. 11, 1947, p. 5; Jack Gallagher, "Pioneers Are Like Weather—Everybody Criticizes Them," *Austin American*, July 15, 1947, p. 11; Wilbur Evans, "Big State League Power Vested in East at Start," *ibid.*, Apr. 9, 1947, p. 14.

³⁴ "Big State League," *Sporting News*, Apr. 30, 1947, p. 33; "Final Big State Averages," *Austin*

At that they would prove highly successful, drawing the league's fourth-best attendance in 1947 (106,099) and eventually becoming the perennial league leader in attendance. Promotions and community involvement were the keys. Almost immediately upon receiving the franchise, Knebel announced plans for a name-the-team contest. To ensure only acceptable names (the Austin *American-Statesman* reported Knebel's distaste for "Senators" or "Rangers" and the University of Texas laid claim to "Longhorns" and "Steers"), Knebel appointed a panel of judges to select five nominees. The announced panel consisted of Austin's most prominent citizens: Mayor Miller; Fred Nagle, Chamber of Commerce president; Bibb Falk, University of Texas baseball coach; Toney Burger, Austin High School coach; J. E. McClain, state director of American Legion Baseball; Wray Weddell, from KTBC radio; Jake Pickle, from KVET radio; Conrad Vernon, from KNOW radio; Wilbur Evans, and Knebel. Knebel also announced that representatives from the Jaycees, the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Club, the Optimists, the Lions Club, the South Austin Civic Club, the North Austin Civic Club, and the Exchange Club would be on the panel. He sent invitations to all of the area's political, business, and civic leaders, further cementing the bond between the Austin Baseball Club and the community. Members of the panel who attended the meeting in the Crystal Ballroom of the Driskill Hotel chose "Pioneers," "Colonels," "Texans," "Aces," and "Jaycees" from the nearly five hundred names that local fans suggested. Then the fans voted. After an extended election period, business manager Bill Elliot proclaimed fifteen-year-old Murray Forsvell, the first to offer Pioneers as a name, the contest winner and awarded him a season pass. The Austin Pioneers thus joined the other Big State League teams with mascots—the Gainesville Owls, Greenville Majors, Paris Red Peppers, Sherman-Denison Twins, Texarkana Bears, Waco Dons, and Wichita Falls Spudders.³⁵

With its newly acquired moniker, the Austin Pioneers concentrated on advertising the home opener scheduled for Saturday, April 26. Once again, Knebel teamed with local business owners and politicians to promote the team. Tickets went on sale at a number of locations around

American, Sept. 30, 1947, p. 13; Lloyd Johnson (ed.), *The Minor League Register*, (5th ed.; Durham, N.C.: Baseball America, 1994); Society for American Baseball Research, Minor League Committee, *Minor League Baseball Stars* (3 vols.; Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1978–1992).

³⁵ Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 224–282; Morris Williams, "Knebel Names Beau Bell Austin Baseball Manager," Austin *American-Statesman*, Mar. 2, 1947, p. 18; Morris Williams, "Centex Fans Asked to Name Austin Club," *ibid.*, Feb. 25, 1947, p. 16; "Fans To Tag Austin Nine From Five Suggestions," Austin *American*, Mar. 4, 1947, p. 12; "Fans Choose 'Pioneers' As Baseball Team Name," *ibid.*, Mar. 15, 1947, p. 17; Peter Filichia, *Professional Baseball Franchises: From Abbeville Athletics to the Zanesville Indians* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1993), 81, 90, 174, 218, 232, 243, 251.



Aerial photograph of Disch Field. *Courtesy Ed Knebel Collection, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library. PICA 06061.*

town: sporting goods stores, hotels, drug stores, and, of course, the Seven-Up Bottling Company. The promoters' expectations were high. They urged fans to purchase tickets, which went on sale April 21, "early in order to relieve the congestion at Disch Field on opening day." The *Austin American* carried a list of opening-day activities in its April 24 issue. Set to precede the game against the Wichita Falls Spudders, those festivities called for "Governor Beauford Jester to toss the first ball to Mayor Tom Miller." Other notable Austin citizens including Sheriff Rip Collins, Police Chief R. D. Thorpe, and the field's namesake Billy Disch also had participatory roles in the opening ceremonies.³⁶

The weather was not as amiable as these leading citizens. Rain caused the postponement of the game until Sunday, April 27, but not Saturday's parade. The wet weather continued into the next day but the *Pioneers* and *Spudders* managed to play the first game of a scheduled doubleheader. Although the crowd was a disappointing 2,260, pregame ceremonies took place as planned. Honored guest "Uncle Billy" Disch

³⁶ "Pioneer Tickets on Sale," *Austin American-Statesman*, Apr. 20, 1947, p. 15 (1st quotation); Wilbur Evans, "Former Greats on Card For Disch Field Opener," *Austin American*, Apr. 24, 1947, p. 11 (2nd quotation).

watched as "Mayor Tom Miller introduced Austin baseball greats of yesteryear and Governor Beauford Jester threw out the first ball." Sports reporter Evans called Jester's toss a strike. The Austin nine were also successful, ending the Spudders eight-game winning streak with a twelve to six home-team victory. Inclement weather denied the Pioneers a chance to inflict further damage on the Spudders' record.³⁷

Despite the delays, professional baseball, as it did in numerous other towns and cities, returned to the Texas capital after World War II. The rain-marred opener marked the beginning of Austin's nine-year stay in the Big State League. That first year's seventh-place finish was indicative of the future talent. During the team's nine-year existence, Austin baseball fans saw only two future major leaguers, George Estock and John Andre, perform for the local nine. Although the Pioneers never won a Big State League pennant, they often led the league in attendance, attracting a record 188,193 fans in 1949. As the major leagues expanded into the West and Southwest in the late 1950s and early 1960s, successful "draws" like Austin moved to higher classifications. After the 1955 season, Knebel and the Big State League sold the Central Texas territorial rights to the Class AA Texas League and Allen Russell, owner of the Beaumont Exporters. Russell renamed his franchise the Austin Senators (later the Braves), and operated from the Texas capital through 1966.³⁸

Even after relinquishing territorial rights to the Austin Senators' owner Allen Russell, Knebel was more than an average fan for he still owned the ball park, which he leased to Russell, and his Seven-Up Bottling Company still sponsored almost twenty amateur teams. Because of Knebel's past and continued involvement in the sport and his contributions to the betterment of life in Austin, he was "Austinite of the Year" in 1959 and entered the Austin Baseball Hall of Fame in 1965, shortly before his death at the age of seventy-two.³⁹

Before he died, Knebel watched the Austin Senators win a championship in 1959, which they later matched in 1966. The former owner

³⁷ Wilbur Evans, "Pioneers Dedicate Disch Field with 12-6 Victory," *Austin American*, Apr. 28, 1947, p. 3 (quotation); "Wet Grounds Delay Pioneers' Debut," *Austin American-Statesman*, Apr. 27, 1947, p. 15.

³⁸ Sullivan, *The Minors*, 69-70, 241-245; Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 24, 224-282; Joseph L. Reicher, *The Baseball Encyclopedia: The Complete and Official Record of Major League Baseball* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1988), 1643, 1792. The team name changed from Senators to Braves in 1965 the year before the Milwaukee Braves moved to Atlanta. Robert Bryce, "Disch Days of Old," *Austin American-Statesman*, Dec. 23, 1994, Baseball File (CAH); Donald Dewey and Nicholas Acocella, *Encyclopedia of Major League Baseball Teams* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 308.

³⁹ Frank Denton, "Austin Thanks Mr. Baseball," *Austin American*, Knebel Collection; Benningfield, "Ed Knebel: Austin's Mr. Baseball," 87-88; "Baseball in Austin," *Austin American-Statesman*, Sept. 25, 1994, Baseball File (CAH).

also saw some outstanding talent perform for the Senators, a farm club of the National League's Milwaukee Braves. Denny Lemaster (ninety wins in eleven years for the Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves, Houston Astros and Montreal Expos including seventeen wins in 1964), Phil Niekro (318 wins for Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves, New York Yankees, Cleveland Indians, and Toronto Blue Jays), Rico Carty (204 home runs and a .299 career average for the Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves, Texas Rangers, Chicago Cubs, Oakland A's, Cleveland Indians, and Toronto Blue Jays), Ralph Garr (.306 average in thirteen years with Atlanta Braves, Chicago White Sox, and California Angels), and Dusty Baker (242 home runs in a nineteen-year career with the Atlanta Braves, Los Angeles Dodgers, San Francisco Giants, and Oakland A's) were a few of the future major leaguers who spent part of their minor league apprenticeship in the Capital City.⁴⁰

Visiting Texas League teams also brought some outstanding players to Austin to compete against the Senators, including future Hall-of-Famers Brooks Robinson (San Antonio Missions—1956 and 1957), Gaylord Perry (Corpus Christi Giants—1959, Rio Grande Valley Giants—1960), and Joe Morgan (San Antonio Bullets—1964). In fact, a bevy of future major league stars, regulars, and utility players spent enough time in the Texas League between 1956 and 1967 to have made a trip to Austin. A lesser-talented player with a Hall-of-Famer's last name also went through Austin, even played for the Senators, on his way to the majors during the waning years of Knebel's life, Hank Aaron's younger brother Tommie.⁴¹

Although better players were coming to Disch Field, bigger crowds were not. The club was experiencing financial difficulties as early as 1961 when Russell wrote to Knebel pleading for his rent to be lowered to "\$2,500 payable April 25th each year in lieu of the present \$5,000." The franchise managed to stay fiscally solvent for a little over six years before a rapidly disintegrating stadium and crowds of under four hundred forced an ultimatum. Only one year after Austin won an abbreviated Texas League playoff against the Albuquerque Dukes one game to

⁴⁰ The team name changed from Senators to Braves in 1965 the year before the Milwaukee Braves moved to Atlanta. Robert Bryce, "Disch Days of Old," *Austin American-Statesman*, Dec. 23, 1994, Baseball File (CAH); Donald Dewey and Nicholas Acocella, *Encyclopedia of Major League Baseball Teams* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 308; Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 297, 319; Bill O'Neal, *The Texas League, 1888-1987: A Century of Baseball*, (Austin: Eakin Press, 1987), 213; Joseph L. Reichler (ed.), *The Baseball Encyclopedia: The Complete and Official Record of Major League Baseball* (7th ed.; New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1988), 1954; Damond Benningfield, "Remembering Austin Baseball," *Daily Texan*, Nov. 29, 1979, Baseball File (CAH); Reichler, *Baseball Encyclopedia*, 821, 2040; Bryce, "Disch Days of Old"; Reichler, *The Baseball Encyclopedia*, 723, 983.

⁴¹ O'Neal, *Texas League*, 126, 130, 134; Benningfield, "Remembering Austin Baseball"; Tommie Aaron played seven years in the National League for the Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves hitting thirteen home runs and batting .229 in 437 games. Reichler, *Baseball Encyclopedia*, 695.

none, the Senators' parent club, the Atlanta Braves, demanded that the city improve the poorly maintained park. When the city refused, the Braves migrated to Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1967. In 1969, more evidence of professional baseball's past in Austin disappeared when the city demolished Disch Field, which many had once considered the finest Class B facility in the minors.⁴²

Wrecking balls demolished a number of old minor league stadiums during the 1960s, many of which had been built by the Works Progress Administration before World War II or, like Disch Field, by a combination of private and public funds after the war. An earlier sign of the demise of the minors was dwindling fan support. Attendance for all of minor league baseball, which had plummeted in the 1950s, bottomed at about ten million and then stabilized at eleven million in the 1960s, approximately a quarter of the 1940s' figure. The professional game in Austin actually had shown a certain amount of resiliency compared to the established teams and leagues across the nation that folded throughout the fifties and early sixties. The most notable example of the collapse was the folding of the sixty-one-year-old American Association which ended operation in 1963. Austin's old association, the Big State League, did not come close to lasting that long, finishing its eleventh and last season in 1957 with only four teams—Victoria, Corpus Christi, Beaumont, and Abilene.⁴³

The reasons for the decline of the minors are numerous and most of them surely played a role in the demise of the professional game in Austin. Television, expansion of the American and National Leagues, and air-conditioning, all of which made major league games more accessible and more comfortable to view, combined with other factors—radio, Little League Baseball, the relocation of major league franchises to top minor league cities, the Korean and Vietnam Wars—almost destroyed the minor league system nationwide. Not all of these affected baseball in Austin to the same degree.⁴⁴

Some had a minimal effect. The Korean War caused only a slight shortage of manpower and for a limited time. The relocation of major league teams in the 1950s (the Boston Braves to Milwaukee in 1953; the St. Louis Browns to Baltimore in 1954 to become the Orioles; the

⁴² Allen H. Russell to E. P. Knebel, Feb. 6, 1961 (quotation), Knebel Collection; Reichler, *Baseball Encyclopedia*, 695; Bryce, "Disch Days of Old"; Rain limited the 1966 Texas League play-offs to one game. Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 319; "Baseball in Austin," Baseball File (CAH); R. U. Steinberg, "A Short History of Professional Baseball in Austin," *Austin Chronicle*, Apr. 22, 1988.

⁴³ Sullivan, *The Minors*, 256; Johnson and Wolff, *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 291, 309.

⁴⁴ A lengthier discussion of these and other causes attributed to the decline of minor league baseball can be found in Sullivan, *The Minors*, 235–255, and Pietrusza, *Minor Miracle*, 11–13.

Philadelphia Athletics to Kansas City in 1955; the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles in 1958; and the New York Giants to San Francisco in 1958) did not bring the highest level of the game substantially closer to Texas. And Texas League baseball was already faltering in Austin before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964 gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the power to escalate the war in Vietnam and robbed the nation of thousands of young men.⁴⁵

Other factors destructive to the minors had a tremendous effect on the game in Austin. Little League Baseball came to Austin in 1950 and was a huge success. Thousands of parents, relatives, and friends came to watch the boys play each day, including an estimated three thousand people on opening day in May of 1950. The average crowd at each of the four parks that summer was five hundred. At that time the minor league Pioneers were ecstatic if they averaged selling two thousand tickets a game. On Thanksgiving Day two years later, KTBC-TV made the first televised broadcast from Austin, featuring the annual gridiron battle between the University of Texas and Texas A&M. The following year, local baseball fans learned that a "game-of-the-week" television deal would soon bring them a major league contest every Saturday afternoon. In 1962, the National League expanded, adding franchises in New York and Houston. Now Austinites needed only to drive a little more than 150 miles to watch the major league teams in action, a relative hop, skip, and jump in a state as expansive as Texas. By 1965, fans willing to make that three-hour drive, watched the Houston Astros compete against the stars of the National League in the air-conditioned comfort of the Astrodome.⁴⁶

Austin fans were able to enjoy professional exhibitions of the National Pastime locally for twenty years in large part due to the consensus of the postwar era, a time in U.S. history when middle America considered growth progressive and dissent unpatriotic. Municipal leaders across the nation worked to bring new businesses to their cities in order to increase jobs, expand recreational opportunities, and upgrade their citizens' living standards. The cooperative effort among civic groups like the Junior Chamber of Commerce, private businessmen like Edmund Knebel, and political bosses like Tom Miller was typical of the times. The unprecedented economic expansion of the West and Southwest and the resulting migration during the late 1940s and 1950s testify to the success of

⁴⁵ Dewey and Acocella, *Encyclopedia of Major League Baseball Teams*, 43-44, 99, 357, 442-443, 517; Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 467.

⁴⁶ Quote from "KTBC-TV Opens Turkey Day with A&M-Texas Tilt!," *Austin American*, Nov. 22, 1953, 1B; Carl Lundquist, "'Game of Week' TV Deal Seen for Baseball," *ibid.*, Dec. 1, 1953, p. 23; Dewey and Acocella, *Encyclopedia of Major League Baseball Teams*, 254-257; Al Williams, "City Recreation Department Sees Record Participation," *Austin American-Statesman*, July 9, 1950, p. 19; "10,000 May see Little Leaguers," *Austin American*, July 7, 1950, p. 27.

these methods as does the creation of the Austin Pioneers. That nationwide prosperity, which initially served as a boon to the game at all levels, ultimately altered America's leisure-time activities. Although it threatened only the upper ranks of organized baseball, that lifestyle change destroyed the lower minor leagues and sent Austin's professionals to Louisiana.