"I Think It Is Pretty Ritzy, Myself"

Kansas Minor League Teams and Night Baseball

by Larry G. Bowman

The advent of night baseball in the minor leagues in 1930 was an innovation that had far-reaching implications for all of baseball, both professional and amateur, and Kansas teams were in the forefront of that remarkable revolution. Kansas had a long tradition of minor league baseball prior to 1950; two of Kansas' sturdier minor league franchises, the Independence Producers of the Class C Western Association and the Wichita Aviators of the Class A Western League, further enhanced their reputation when they played prominent roles in the introduction of night baseball. The Aviators were caught up in the innovation in an accidental way. They were scheduled to oppose the Des Moines Demons at the Demons' home opener in Iowa. The Demons' owner, E. Lee Keyser, recently had installed lights in Keyser Park, and as the vagaries of the Western League's schedule would have it, the Aviators were destined to participate in a historic event. The Independence Producers, on

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The first official night baseball game in the minor league was played in Independence, Kansas, on April 17, 1930.

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the other hand, took a more direct hand in the move toward night baseball in the spring of 1930. The city of Independence installed a lighting system at the Producers’ ballpark and enjoyed the distinction of being the site of the first regular-season, professional game to be played under artificial lighting.

The years following the Great War were prosperous ones for organized baseball. Major league baseball headlined Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and a host of great players. It was one of baseball’s golden eras that featured new stadiums, large crowds, and considerable profits for the owners and operators of major league franchises. Minor league teams also enjoyed a period of expansion and modest prosperity during this era spanning 1918 through 1928. At the end of the war in 1918, the number of minor league teams had dwindled from a pre-war high of fifty-one in 1912 to only ten. The war, of course, had greatly hampered the minor league franchises in signing players to their rosters, and the number of minor leagues temporarily declined as many of the leagues suspended play until the war ended. Then, once the nation returned to “normalcy,” as Warren G. Harding declared it ought, minor league baseball enjoyed a renaissance. By 1923 thirty-one minor leagues were in operation across the United States. Throughout the 1920s the number of minor leagues in operation never were fewer than twenty-four, and while the levels of prosperity of the leagues and the teams within each often varied dramatically, professional baseball clearly flourished immediately after the Great War. After about a decade of prosperity, however, minor league baseball’s fortunes rather inexplicably began to wane.

Late in the 1920s professional baseball obviously lost some of its appeal to the American public. Major league teams continued to enjoy a relatively stable stream of paying customers at their games, but minor league teams witnessed declining attendance and decreasing gate receipts. In view of the nation’s nearly frenetic prosperity, such a worrisome development prompted a debate among baseball’s pundits as to why fewer fans attended games. James M. Gould, a sportswriter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, wrote a column in December 1929 in which he expressed a sentiment that seemed common among baseball’s authorities when he declared: “The baseball boom has collapsed. Golf, motor cars, the desire of the people to play themselves rather than watch grown men play for them—all these are given for the reasons for the decline in the popularity of the game.” Other writers speculated that the American boy was losing his interest in baseball as he turned to sports such as basketball, track, golf, tennis, and other activities that competed with baseball. Whatever the cause, it was painfully apparent to minor league owners that they could not continue business as usual and hope to reverse the downward spiral of attendance.

4. In 1927, 9,992,668 people attended major league games, and by 1929 attendance totalled 9,689,183—a net loss of 303,485. A decline of a little more than 2 percent in major league attendance was not catastroph-ic, but many baseball writers were convinced that it was the harbinger of leaner times yet to come. For attendance figures at major league games, see Hy Turkin and S.C. Thompson, eds., The Official Encyclopedia of Baseball (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1975), 69; Neil J. Sullivan, The Minors (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 137–42.

3. Ibid.
The Independence Producers, as did nearly every other minor league franchise in the United States, faced dwindling attendance and sought new means to attract patrons. Baseball and civic leaders in Independence decided to act in accordance with the belief that night baseball might be minor league baseball's salvation and opted to erect lights (apparent in this photograph) in their stadium.

Des Moines Demons' owner E. Lee Keyser was one of those concerned baseball executives. He had begun his career as a boy in St. Louis selling scorecards at Sportsmans Park, and when the ill-fated Federal League placed a franchise in St. Louis, he was granted the concession for scorecards for the St. Louis team. After the collapse of the Federal League, Keyser moved to Des Moines where in 1920 he bought half ownership in the Des Moines Demons and began his career as a minor league executive. By the late 1920s, his Western League Des Moines Demons had begun to experience decreasing attendance, and Keyser was convinced that the minor leagues needed to adopt new marketing strategies to offset the financial plight they faced. Night baseball, he reasoned, was potentially an important means to attack the problem of dwindling gate receipts. Keyser had witnessed some of the universities in the Midwest and at least one Iowa high school turn to playing well-attended football games under the floodlights in 1928 and 1929, and he never doubted that baseball could imitate their successes.8

Before the appearance of night football games, some colleges and universities had used electrical lighting to hold evening practices to avoid the late summer heat and to accommodate the athletes' class schedules; and the idea of games under lights evolved from the discovery that football at night was not an unnecessarily complicated possibility. As the pioneering colleges enjoyed handsome attendance at their evening contests, a forward-looking man such as Keyser could not but speculate on how night baseball would fare with the fans.

Minor league baseball historically faced two difficult problems. Attendance at weekday games always was sparse because small-town America was at work, and secondly, as summer progressed afternoon baseball was a warm, sometimes excessively warm, experience. Most minor league ballparks were not as well designed to shield their patrons from the sun as were major league parks, and in the low minors most parks offered no protection from the relentless sun. When a few colleges resorted to night football so fans could enjoy a game in the cool of a late summer evening,

8. Drake and the University of Detroit were particularly successful in adapting to night play. Sporting News (St. Louis), February 13, 1930; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 13, 17, 1929; Washington Post, September 28, 1929; "Football At Night With Plenty of Light," American City 41 (September 1929): 157. Burlington High School in Burlington, Iowa, probably was the first high school in the nation to install lights for football.

Keyser was intrigued by their daring and success. Night baseball, Keyser reasoned, would directly attack the problems of poor weekday attendance and afternoon heat.

Keyser's notion of night baseball was not as eccentric as some in 1930 undoubtedly thought it to be. Several night baseball games had been played before curious onlookers well before Keyser began popularizing the idea. In all the incidents of night games prior to 1930, the events were designed more to demonstrate the uses of artificial lighting than to promote night baseball. The earliest of these games under artificial light took place in Hull, Massachusetts, in 1880. Others experimented with night play in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on September 2, 1883; in Cincinnati, Ohio, on June 19, 1909; and in Chicago, Illinois, on August 28, 1910. All of these games were played by amateur teams that used lighting hastily erected for the contest and then dismantled. Perhaps the most curious example of night baseball occurred in Concordia, Kansas, on July 24, 1905, when the local town team played the visiting Haskell Indians from Lawrence, Kansas, under gas lights. Only the infield was illuminated by the gas lights (one being in the center of the field), and all the players took up positions in the lighted area. Concordia won the contest by a score of seven to four. The score seems to indicate that special rules may have declared that any ball hit beyond the lighted area to be either foul or an out; had players been allowed to "hit away" and drive the ball into the unlighted outfield, likely the score would have been outrageously high. All of these contests simply were commercial promotions or curiosity events and nothing more.

Perhaps the most important experiment with baseball lights, as far as Keyser and his contemporaries were concerned, was one that took place in West Lynn, Massachusetts, on June 24, 1927. Two teams out of the New England League, Lynn and Salem, played each other in an exhibition game sponsored by the General Electric Employees' Athletic Association. A group of engineers from General Electric Company constructed an experimental set of lights on the General Electric Field in West Lynn and invited the two minor league teams to play a seven-inning exhibition contest. The engineers hoped to demonstrate that night play was possible, and by doing so, interest major league teams in installing General Electric's lighting system. The technical aspects of the game were successfully handled, and Lynn won by a score of seven to two before an esti-
mated crowd of five thousand. Once the game was played the lights were dismantled and the experiment was not repeated. Organized baseball remained aloof to the notion of night baseball, but the efforts of the engineers caught the attention of many baseball executives, Keyser among them.\textsuperscript{14}

By 1930 the technology for effective lighting was substantially improved over what it had been in 1927, there was a pressing need for night baseball to be adopted in the minor leagues, and a few adventurous leaders in sports, notably those in college football, had demonstrated the practicality of night sporting events.\textsuperscript{15} Men such as Keyser needed little additional stimulus to usher in the revolution that occurred in the spring of 1930.

Keyser actually began formulating his plan to illuminate his park in Des Moines to offer the Demons’ fans night baseball late in 1929. In December at the annual meeting of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Keyser made his first nationally noticed public announcement of his intention to play night baseball.\textsuperscript{16} The National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues was the agency founded by the minor leagues in the early 1900s to govern their affairs, and it was the appropriate forum for Keyser publicly to inform his colleagues of his intention of experimenting with night baseball. Although his statement was greeted with amused chuckles from many of the assembled baseball men attending the conference, Keyser was undeterred. The following February, at the annual meeting of the Western League held in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, he reiterated his plan for commencing night baseball in Des Moines in the upcoming season and declared he would have his park ready for the Demons’ home opener on May 2, 1930.\textsuperscript{17}

As a result, the die was cast for the Wichita Aviators to be involved in a precedent-setting event.

Keyser probably was not surprised when another team entered into the drama unfolding in 1930. Dale Gear, president of both the Western League and the Western Association, also was a tireless promoter of night baseball. Gear, who maintained the offices of his dual presidency in Topeka, Kansas, was concerned with falling attendance at minor league games, and in the spring of 1930 he declared: “I don’t believe there is any question that night baseball is the exact solution to attendance problems in the minors. There is a period from 8 o’clock until 10 at night that the average man has nothing to do, and I believe that the baseball park will be the place to find him this summer.”\textsuperscript{18} Gear’s viewpoints on night baseball were taken to heart in Independence, Kansas, which was one of the stalwarts of the Western Association. The Independence Producers, as did nearly every other minor league franchise in the United States, faced dwindling attendance and sought new means to attract patrons to the ballpark. Baseball and civic leaders in Independence decided to act in accordance with Gear’s obvious belief that night baseball might well prove to be the salvation of the minor leagues. What began as a survival strategy in minor league towns inadvertently developed into a low-key race to determine whether Des Moines, Iowa, or Independence, Kansas, was to be the birthplace of a new era in professional baseball.

Keyser’s counterparts in the movement for lighting the ballpark in Independence were Marvin L. Truby, the business manager of the Producers, and Mayor Charles H. Kerr. Truby, a longtime friend and admirer of Gear and a millionaire oilman who once had been Gear’s baseball teammate, advanced the

\textsuperscript{15} Some baseball owners were aware of a popular game that had emerged in California. It was called night ball, and it began in Corona, California, when a group of local businessmen set up some lights and began to play a version of baseball on a field about half the size of a regular diamond. By 1929 the Southern California Night Baseball Association had been formed. It was composed of three leagues of eight teams each. While the leagues did not play what strictly could be called baseball, substantial crowds turned out in the evenings to watch the games. See “Night Baseball on the Pacific Coast,” Playground 33 (April 1929): 34; "More Light on Night Baseball," Literary Digest 106 (September 1930): 36.
\textsuperscript{16} New York Times, December 5, 1929; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 6, 1929; Sporting News, December 12, 1929.
\textsuperscript{17} New York Times, February 6, 1930.
\textsuperscript{18} Sporting News, March 20, 1930.
money to fund the lighting system for the Producers.\textsuperscript{19} Keyser, on the one hand, and Kerr and Truby, on the other, had their own visions on how the lights ought to be installed. Keyser opted for a more expensive and time-consuming approach to constructing towers for his ballpark.\textsuperscript{20} The galvanized iron towers Keyser decided to construct were ten feet square at the base and were anchored in approximately ten feet of concrete. Each tower rose ninety feet above the diamond, and when all six were completed, they supported 146 lights that were designed by General Electric Company to generate fifty million candlepower.\textsuperscript{21} Each evening large numbers of curious onlookers drove to the vicinity of the ballpark to view the day’s progress as the skeleton-like towers rose above the horizon; and once the lights were installed and the engineers illuminated them, the crowd became something of a problem for the ongoing work. Newspapers throughout the Midwest carried Associated Press reports of the progress in preparing the Demons’ park for night baseball. Interest in Wichita, Kansas, concerning the construction of the Demons’ lighting system was understandably keen. The Wichita Eagle regularly carried the Associated Press’ reports on the events in Des Moines. One report in the Wichita paper informed its readers that the workers had been handicapped by thousands of birds that had been attracted to the lights apparently fooled into thinking it was daytime, and that housewives whose homes were in the vicinity of the ballpark had reported a surge in egg production in their henhouses. The chickens, the newspaper reported, had been kept awake for longer days now that the floodlights were turned on each evening as the engineers tested and focused the lighting system.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Meanwhile in Independence, Kansas, city officials and the management of the Producers pursued an alternative approach to the task of installing floodlights at Riverside Park. Even though local fans’ interest in the alterations under way at the ballpark was somewhat overshadowed by their concern over the recent failure of Independence’s Commercial National Bank, many of Independence’s residents followed the ongoing work with considerable interest. On March 13, 1930, the Independence Daily Reporter informed its readers that Mayor Kerr and Truby had obtained the pipe necessary to construct six poles that were to stand sixty feet tall and support the floodlights.\textsuperscript{23} A few days later the paper reported that the projectors, which had been purchased from the Giant Manufacturing

\textsuperscript{19} Justin Anderson, “Independence Magnate Credited as the Father of Night Ball,” ibid., July 3, 1930.
\textsuperscript{20} New York Times, May 3, 1930; Des Moines Register, April 29, 1930.
\textsuperscript{21} Des Moines Register, April 26, 1930.
\textsuperscript{22} Wichita Eagle, May 1, 1930.
\textsuperscript{23} Independence Daily Reporter, March 13, 1930.
Company in Council Bluffs, Iowa, had arrived in Independence. The Daily Reporter invited local citizens to visit the city's warehouse and inspect the floodlights before they were put into place on the six welded poles. By April 5 two of the light standards were assembled, and Mayor Kerr correctly predicted the floodlights would be ready for an exhibition game between the Producers and the House of David team that was scheduled for April 17, 1930.24

Des Moines and Independence each approached the task of installing lights in completely different fashions. Keyser opted to build the type of towers for the floodlights that were commonly used to support high voltage transmission lines. As a result, he spent approximately twenty-two thousand dollars on the system he installed.25 Kerr and Truby simply turned to the use of local resources and expertise. Considering that Independence was located in an oil and gas producing area, they had no difficulty in securing steel pipe to serve as supports for the lights, and competent welders were plentiful. Once the pipe had been converted into six poles and put into place, the six sets of floodlights were hoisted into position, secured, and focused, and the system was ready for use. The lights erected in Independence were cheaper to install, about eight thousand dollars, and the time consumed in doing so was far less than that needed to erect the Des Moines system.26 Keyser's more elaborate approach to installing lights was perhaps more aesthetic to the eye than was the system in Independence, but each served its purpose well enough.

Kerr and Truby busied themselves with preparations of the lighting system for the ballpark and did not engage in extensive advanced publicity for their efforts to bring night baseball to the Western Association. Keyser, on the other hand, capitalized on his experiments. His announcement in Chattanooga the previous December had generated more than just local interest in his efforts; and as time for the inaugural game in Des Moines approached, Keyser labored diligently to bring national attention to the game itself by turning it into a carefully orchestrated event. He invited Commissioner of Baseball Kenesaw Mountain Landis and a host of baseball dignitaries to attend the Demons’ opening night, and he arranged to have a radio broadcast of the game over a national network. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) agreed to transmit the game, but because of previous programming commitments it could not start the broadcast until 10:30 P.M. eastern time, which meant that NBC carried only the game’s last five innings.27

Keyser’s tireless promotion of night baseball explains why the pioneering efforts in Independence went relatively unnoticed outside the midwestern section of the United States. Nevertheless, on the evening of April 17, 1930, the Independence Producers defeated the House of David, a renowned semiprofessional organization, by the score of nine to one before seventeen hundred spectators.28 The devoted fans of the Producers enjoyed the evening, the novelty of night baseball, and the spectacle of the unique House of David players in their flowing beards and long hair. Those who attended the game were pleased, and their comments were enthusiastic. Mrs. Julius Frolich, a local resident who identified herself as an avid Producers fan, commented on the game saying: “I think it is pretty Ritzky, myself. It’s a clever idea and I hope it’s a success as it undoubtedly will. It’s keeping in progress with the city and is something different.”29 Other comments carried in the Independence newspaper were equally enthusiastic. But the history-making event was the game scheduled the following week with Muskogee, Oklahoma. Muskogee was one of the Producers’ arch rivals in the Western Association, and local fans eagerly anticipated the season-opening series.

24. Ibid., March 10, 17, April 5, 1930.
28. Independence Daily Reporter, April 18, 1930; Wichita Eagle, April 29, 1930; Sean Kaney from Chicago handled the microphone duties for the broadcast.
The last week of April was one of heavy rains and fierce storms across the Middle West, and the Producers and the Muskogee Indians had to contend with wet grounds. Even so, on April 28, 1930, the two met in the first night game in professional baseball, which Muskogee won thirteen to nine. A crowd of fifteen hundred (two hundred fewer than had attended the House of David exhibition game) witnessed the beginning of a new era in minor league baseball. Even though the unsettled weather probably retarded attendance, the evening was a success. Surprisingly the Independence Daily Reporter did not gloss over the fact that Independence had bested Des Moines in the quest to play the first night game; Des Moines was not mentioned in any of the reports of the Muskogee game. The low-key reaction probably was in part owing to the fact that the folks in Independence knew the schedule had favored them. Des Moines had opened the season on the road and had no chance to play the first night game before early May. Whatever the reason for the sedate reaction to being the first minor league city to play night ball, Independence obviously had earned an important place in the history of baseball.

On May 2, 1930, four days after the Independence-Muskogee game, the Demons played the Aviators under the lights in Des Moines. Keyser had prepared well for the game. Even though commissioner Landis did not attend, a collection of baseball notables including E. S. Barnard, president of the American League; Branch Rickey of the St. Louis Cardinals; J. Alvin Gardiner, president of the Texas League; Thomas J. Hickey, president of the American Association; Dale Gear; and a number of major league and minor league scouts and executives, and slightly more than twelve thousand spectators watched the Demons defeat the Aviators by a score of thirteen to six. While the game was not an artistic success, no one blamed the score on the lights. Baseball executives such as Bill Friel from the St. Louis Browns and J. Alvin Gardiner expressed the belief that the lighting was good, and that the football-like score resulted from the fact that the players simply did not have one of their better games. Because the game started at 8:30 P.M., to permit NBC to broadcast the last part of the contest, it lasted until 1:00 A.M. Even so, the fans remained enthusiastic through the ninth inning, and a portion of the overflow crowd contentedly sat on the.

30. Independence Daily Reporter, April 29, 1930. Not far away, in Enid, Oklahoma, on the same night, the Kansas City Monarchs also played a night game against the Phillips University team. The Monarchs of the Negro National League had purchased a portable lighting system mounted in trucks that they used to play night games on the road. See Call (Kansas City, Mo.), May 2, 1930.

the grass along each of the foul lines. When NBC began its live coverage of the game at the end of the fourth inning, the game was temporarily halted, and Keyser addressed the radio audience. In a jubilant frame of mind, he remarked: “My reaction to night baseball is glorious and wonderful. The players are happy, the crowd is perfectly satisfied, and it means that baseball in the minor leagues will now live.”

Keyser was so elated with the results of the evening that he immediately rescheduled the next day’s game with Wichita as a night contest. The game the next night drew twelve hundred spectators. While this was far fewer than the opener, Keyser was pleased because the average attendance for a Saturday afternoon game the previous season had been only six hundred fans.

By the time Keyser had gotten night baseball under way in Des Moines, the Independence Producers already had played two night games in their newly lighted park, but national attention largely remained focused on Des Moines. Baseball purists, of course, soon began debating whether baseball under the lights really was baseball; but whether they endorsed or condemned night baseball, all seemed to understand that a major and irrevocable shift in sports entertainment had been introduced. Few argued that it was a fad that would soon disappear.

Night baseball in the minor leagues did not fade away. Once the Producers and the Demons proved to all that baseball under the floodlights was practical and that fans would turn out in encouraging numbers to see the games under novel circumstances, many minor league team owners embraced the concept. By mid-summer in 1930, minor league baseball reached into nearly every section of the country. The high minors as well as the low minors quickly turned to using floodlights. From Los Angeles in the Class AAA Pacific Coast League to Keokuk in the Class D Mississippi Valley League, night baseball became relatively commonplace in 1930. At least thirty-eight teams in fourteen minor leagues adopted night baseball that summer.

Major league baseball, of course, did not immediately employ night baseball. Major league owners have never been renowned for forward-thinking innovations, and they characteristically resisted the trend. John Heydler, president of the National League, made a remark in 1930 that seemed typical of the pomposity and conservatism of the major league ownership when he declared, “I find there is no demand in the major leagues to get away from baseball and all that it means as a great sport through tradition and development and get into show business which, after all, is all that night baseball is or can be.”

Finally, however, on May 24, 1935, the major leagues, which now faced Depression-induced financial straits, began a gradual capitulation when the Cincinnati Reds hosted the Philadelphia Phillies in the first major league night game. By the time the United States entered the Second World War, eleven of the sixteen major league teams had installed lights and featured limited numbers of night contests. Immediately after the war, the remaining major league teams accepted night baseball, save the Chicago Cubs who did not install lights until 1988. Economic pressures and the lure of television revenues finally forced the major leagues to enter the new era pioneered by the minor leagues. What does remain undeniable, however, is that the impetus to night baseball was begun by a series of events that involved two Kansas minor league teams.

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32. New York Times, May 3, 1930. In addition to the national broadcast, the game was carried on shortwave stations WZXX, WZAX, and WZXAF to Australia, the Far East, South America, and Africa. See Des Moines Register, April 29, 1930.

33. Des Moines Register, May 6, 1930; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 6, 1930.


35. Dallas Morning News, August 7, 1930.

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