

A Field of Dreams in . . . Alpine?

by Scott Sosebee

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(Apr 10, 2023) Another in a baseball series

In the 1989 film “Field of Dreams,” an Iowa farmer hears a voice that tells him “If you build it he will come,” so he constructs a baseball field from his corn field and one night finds the ghost of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, his late father’s favorite player, on the diamond. What follows is a drama that depicts the often tenuous and difficult relationship between fathers and sons, and how, perhaps, baseball can be a conduit through which the often-contentious bond between the two can be breached. It is a nice Hollywood tale, and one that received its share of accolades upon its release, but there is a story of a real life “field of dreams” in Texas, one that does not have ghosts or melodramatic relations, but it does have a dream of one man and his love of baseball.

Alpine is in the trans-Pecos region of Texas, a land of big sky and wide-open spaces. It is also ranching country, and where Herbert Kokernot, Jr. in the 1940s owned the vast Kokernot 06 Ranch, a continuously operated brand since 1837. David L. Kokernot served as a scout for Sam Houston’s army at San Jacinto, and he also helped to organize the Texas Navy. His service provided a land grant, and he began to run cattle and other stock in Gonzales County in 1837. His sons, Lee and John, moved the operation to the Davis Mountains in 1883, and Lee’s son Herbert took over the operation in 1897. His son, Herbert, Jr., became a partner and general operator of the spread in the late 1930s.

Herbert Kokernot, Jr. surely loved ranching, but he also loved baseball. He had played on an Alpine “town team” when he was younger and continued to follow the game. He became the owner of a new Alpine semi-pro team, the Cats, in 1946. The Cats, like most town teams, had disbanded during World War II, so Kokernot was determined to bring them back to life. It would be a difficult task; many players who would normally play were still in the armed services, so the Cats were not very good. To make matters worse, the

small stadium in Alpine that the team played in was built more than twenty years previous and was in horrible shape. Still, Kokernot pressed on to make his team the class of the region. He renamed the team the Cowboys in the spirit of a “new beginning,” and made his ranch the chief sponsor of the team.

Kokernot had the advantage of wealth, and that became apparent when he began to reconstruct the rickety stadium the team called home. He would spend over one million dollars—1940s dollars—on his masterpiece, which would become Kokernot Field. It would include a wonderful brick façade, a smaller version of the same type of stands that “big league” parks placed in their stadiums, and a field that was the envy of every team that walked onto the diamond. He decided to bow to the new fad and equip his new stadium with light standards in the 1950s, but not just any lights; he wanted the most bulbs in the state. So, he took a train tour of the state and counted the bulbs in each stadium he saw. He discovered that the Houston Buffaloes Park in the east end of Houston had the most lights, so even though Buff Stadium held three times the number of fans than his stadium did, Kokernot Field had more light bulbs.

He also spared no expense in recruiting and paying players, and the Cowboys became the premier team in the Southwest Semi-pro League. But that was still not enough for Herbert Kokernot, Jr. What was the use of having a wonderful field if the best players in the world never walked on its turf? So, he began to pay to fly in major league teams for exhibitions in his magnificent stadium. The games usually came at the end of spring training for the major league clubs. The Dodgers were always a popular draw, as were the St. Louis Cardinals. Even the mighty New York Yankees of the 1950s, and their stars Joe DiMaggio and Yogi Berra played a game at Kokernot Field. Alpine became a Mecca for baseball, and its baseball park a shrine to be seen.

The glory days of Kokernot Field ended when Herbert Kokernot felt the pressure to make his semi-pro team a fully professional minor league franchise. He reluctantly signed an agreement with the Boston Red Sox to be their “D” league affiliate in the Longhorn League. But professional baseball just didn’t sit well with the old rancher, and when the agreement ended in 1961, Kokernot disbanded his team, and his wonderful stadium began to host only the Sul Ross State University Lobos squad. But even that only lasted until 1968 when Sul Ross ended their baseball program. Kokernot gifted the stadium to Alpine High School, and he became almost a recluse at his ranch. He died in 1987, and his wonderful park had fallen into great disrepair. Professional baseball revived briefly with the Big Bend Cowboys of the independent Continental League in 2009, but the league folded in 2010. Still, Kokernot Field remains, the testament to a man who built a real life “field of dreams.”

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