

## Bringing the National Pastime to Texas: The Texas League

by Scott Sosebee

*The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.*

*Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at [sosebeem@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeem@sfasu.edu).*

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(Apr 17 2023)      And more baseball!

Texas is probably known more for football than baseball, but some may be surprised that sixteen Baseball Hall of Fame members are Texas natives, the third most of any state behind Illinois and California. Besides that, of course, the Houston Astros are the defending World Series champions, so baseball is obviously a “big deal” in the Lone Star State.

After the introduction of the game to Texas by occupying Union soldiers during Reconstruction, passion for the new game of baseball swept Texas as “town teams” began play and schools also began to organize teams. What the state lacked in those early years, however, was an organized professional league, but that absence ended with the organization of the Texas League in 1888. The now AA circuit still exists, and under the same name, which makes it one of the oldest in organized baseball.

The Texas League formed in 1888 with clubs in Dallas, Galveston, Houston, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio. Later in that first year, they were joined by the first team from outside the state when New Orleans joined the league. Those first years were difficult, as the teams were plagued by low attendance, too little operating money, and on occasion scandal—usually involving gambling. The Texas League almost folded in 1891, and again in 1893, but by 1903 it found stability and began to become a staple as a “farm league” (although the teams were wholly independent in those early years) for the newly established “Major Leagues,” as the new agreement between the National and the American Leagues came to be called. The Corsicana Oilers club became the most powerful team of those early years, primarily since its oil baron owners paid some of the highest salaries in the nation. The confederation gained greater prominence within the baseball world when it signed an agreement with the Southern Association in 1920 to match the winners of each

circuit in the “Dixie Series” to determine the “baseball champion of the South.” The Dixie Series would continue until 1967.

Minor League Baseball, as those teams outside the “Major Leagues”—the American and National—came to be known, formed with a meeting between a group of team owners at the Leland Hotel in Chicago in 1901. The result was the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, a loose confederation between organized teams outside the “Majors” throughout the nation. The Texas League became a member, and as was the practice teams began to align themselves with the major clubs to provide a “farm team” that would allow young players to hone their skills before going to the “big club.” A new agreement in 1921 allowed Major League teams to own minor league organizations, a move which accelerated the formation of specific classifications, a taxonomy that denoted the skill level of the teams and players and provided a more orderly progression to “The Show,” as the Major Leagues began to be called in the late 1960s. The Texas League evolved to become a double-A level league, which is the penultimate step to the Major Leagues, although many players have gone straight to the Big Leagues from AA ball.

Almost every major city in Texas, as well as those in adjacent states, have at one time fielded a team in the Texas League, including Lufkin in a short stint early in the 20th century. In all, thirty-eight cities in eight states have hosted teams in the Texas League. San Antonio is the only charter city left to have a team, but the League has included teams from as distant as Wichita, Kansas and Jackson, Mississippi, although for the most part the Texas League has consisted of clubs from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. El Paso enjoyed a long-time tenure as a Texas League team—second only to San Antonio in number of years—but the El Paso Diablos folded in 2013, although the Sun City again has a team with the moniker of the Chihuahuas. The Chihuahuas are now a AAA club in the Pacific League. The West Texas city of Midland acquired a Texas League team in 1972 with the Midland Cubs, and they remain a member (Midland Rockhounds, an affiliate of the Oakland Athletics). Currently, there are five Texas teams in the Texas League—The San Antonio Missions, Midland Rockhounds, Corpus Christi Hooks, and Frisco Roughriders, and the newest entry, the Amarillo Sod Poodles (a pox on whoever chose that name!). They are joined by the Arkansas Travelers (North Little Rock), the Northwest Arkansas Naturals (Springdale), Springfield Cardinals (Springfield, MO), and the Tulsa Drillers. The spirit of organized baseball in Texas is thus now in its third century!

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