RECREATION
SPRINGDALE'S FIELD OF DREAMS

Submitted by Martha Zwettler Martin

He grew up a farm boy in Springdale Township. Later, Don Henderson went on to play in the farm leagues of two major league baseball teams.

For Henderson, 74, baseball was a family affair. His father, Forest, started tossing around the ball with Don and his older brother, Norman, at an early age.

"I played so long, I don't even remember when I started," Don says, shaking his head.

Forest, known to many baseball fans as "Pops," managed several successful ball teams from the small town of Riley, located just a few miles from the Henderson farm. "Pops" not only included his sons on the roster, but his nephews and brother, as well.

Baseball coursed through the Henderson blood so strongly, in fact, that the ball clan even had their own baseball diamond in a farm field not far from the house.

"We'd always have a mitt and a ball. We'd practice for an hour every day, even if hay was down. We always took an hour at noon," Don says.

The Sugar River Valley Baseball League, formed by Don's father, used that diamond for league games for two or three years, he says. The games drew a crowd, and "the old neighbor advertised 'ice-cold' pop that was as warm as could be," he chuckles.

With a strong dedication and desire for the game inspired by his father, and holes in the old house sliding from fast-pitched balls to prove it, Don went into high school with something to share.

He attended Mt. Horeb High School from 1937-1941, and was successful with any ball that he touched, except football. His father never let him play that game.

"He wouldn't even let me play football in high school because I had a baseball future," he says.

The lanky Henderson helped the basketball team make it to the State Tournament. And in 1939, the Mt. Horeb Cardinals Baseball Team won the State Tournament held in Platteville.

"My brother pitched against Prairie du Chien. I pitched against Fennimore. We won both games," Don boasts.

Walter Roeck coached Don during his first two years of high school. Roeck, now 85, says, "He was one of the top cogs in the wheel. He was one of the best boys we had."

Throughout his high school pitching career, Henderson never pitched a losing game. His powerful arm swept the competition away again in 1940, when he pitched a perfect game in league play against Verona. He set a new Sugar River Valley League record on June 8, 1941, for the most strike-outs in a nine-inning game. He threw 22.

His strong arm didn't go unnoticed. When Henderson was 16, he attended a baseball school in Madison conducted by Red Smith, manager of the Green Bay Blue Jays.

"I was only 16 years old and I pitched in there for him. He told me, 'You've got a tremendous baseball career ahead of you, but you're too young. We'll see you in a bit.'"

Smith held true to his word and recruited Henderson after his high school graduation. Before his first season, he worked at Ray-O-Vac Battery Corp. for a while, then quit to get ready for baseball.

"I had to get myself in shape. I had a contract," he says.
He would be playing for a Class B team in Green Bay, part of the Northern League. That contract was worth $75 a month.

“You laugh, hell, I made money on that!” he snaps as his face, leathery like an old ball mitt and tanned from hours on the field (baseball and farm), reveals his pride.

He played for the Green Bay Blue Jays, a farm team for the Chicago Cubs, for a month. He moved on to the Oshkosh Giants, part of the New York Giants team. Things were going pretty well, until World War II caused teams in the Southern League to fold. The higher ranked players traveled up north, and eventually Henderson was forced out.

Undaunted, he came back and played ball in Sauk City. And this was where he met Gertie, his bride of 54 years. She lived near the ball park and worked in a soda shop downtown. She walked to work about the same time he left practice.

“She always made it a point to be right there when I went home,” he says.

Henderson practiced hard every night. “I pitched and ran around the diamond 30, 40, 50 times before I went home for supper.”

His hard work allowed him to play with and against some big-name players. He played with Butch Perkins on the Sauk team. The coach drove down to Dodgeville to pick Perkins up on Sundays, so he could play first base. Perkins went on to play football for the Chicago Bears.

Henderson moved on to play ball in the Madison Industrial League for a team called “Huegel, Hyland-Riley.” Here he went up against some of baseball’s greatest players like Bobby Feller, Mickey Cochrane, Ted Fritsch, Jug Gerard and Elroy (Crazylegs) Hirsch.

But in 1942, arthritis set in. “That’s when things started to go to hell,” Henderson admits. Even with the pain, he kept on pitching. His courage and stubbornness let him play what is probably the most memorable game of his career.

It was July 25, 1946, and the Kansas City Monarchs played against the Industrial All-Star team. The Monarchs brought along one of the best — Satchel Paige. When asked which team won, Henderson proclaims, matter-of-fact, “Ol’ Satchel was pitching. I don’t think we won.”

When Henderson played in Madison, he was no longer earning a living off of baseball. He had a wife and family to support. He took over the family farm, and during the baseball season, would go straight from one field to another, oftentimes not even stopping for a bite to eat.

“We’d be threshing and had to milk and didn’t have time to eat before the games at 7:00. The fans brought hamburgers into the stands for us,” he says. He adds that the Riley team always drew the biggest crowds because they liked the hard-working farm boys that made up the roster.

For Henderson, playing ball in front of those fans fulfilled some of the dreams he had as a farm boy. But he can't help but speculate on how far he could have gone if arthritis hadn't gotten in the way.

“I think I would have made it, except arthritis set in. I’m pretty sure I’d have made it,” he says, giving a wink.

RILEY’S SQUAD, 1943

The lead-off man, husky Ray plays at third, at second is Jay. The first sacker, Odegard, was badly injured. He led the hitters, so I’ve heard. Lumbering Gust is held in high esteem; He’s the key to a successful team. To the service must go the shortstop Bill, To fill his place comes lanky Phil. Smied and Dan and Norm catch flies; A miss is a tragedy, also a surprise. Paulson and Stuessy and also Steve Come in to play when others must leave. Burgenski, occasionally on the mound Recently to a lifemate got himself bound. Don Henderson, too found his way to the altar, And proceeded to put on the matrimonial halter. At managing his players, Forest has made a success, And he still can play, we must confess. The man behind the plate is the best of all At snapping the ball, Fassbender beats ‘em all.

— by a Riley Fan
Riley’s Victory was truly great.
To Kennedy’s Nine, ‘twas a sorrowful fate.
Interest was keen as Gust reached the mound,
Faced six batters, but none made the round.
Lautenbach allowed three to reach base,
Two of them scored, to set the pace.
Yearning for revenge, the opponent team
Retaliated with ease, it surely did seem.
Scores were tied in this our third inning,
Two Strike Outs! Oh! The fun’s beginning.
Through error and hit two men reached base
But fate did not change our interesting race.
Two attempts were made by Kennedy’s Nine,
Six “fans” for Gust! Isn’t that fine?
Another scoreless inning for Riley, too.
One struck out, of infield flies there were two.
Everyone’s admiring the farmer boys.
The fans are thrilled and making plenty noise.
The top of the order again, swing the bat.
Only three face the pitcher — that’s that.
Identical treatment to Riley is shown,
Only one connects and is easily outthrown.
(Time out)
Lautenbach leaves for the Navy on the morrow
Bringing to his teammates a deep, sincere sorrow.
Losing a pitcher on whom hopes held high,
Burdens our soul with a heavy sigh.
(Sixth Inning)
Two men are now put in scoring spots,
As Riley made two errors (not to be forgot).
Ideas for victory are very, very remote.
Extra innings would have been the spectator’s vote.
(7th Inning)
Kennedy’s Nine again face Gust.
Down One, Two, Three without any fuss.
With Norm on base, the end came at last,
With Gust’s terrific, victory blast

— by a Riley Fan


BASEBALL BENEFIT PROGRAM
Sponsored by the Riley Baseball Team
RILEY HALL — RILEY, WIS.
Thursday, April 28th, 1938
TICKETS—10¢; 3 for 25¢
This ticket entitles holder to one chance on valuable prizes to be given away to holder of lucky number, but is not good for admission to program.
ADMISSION TO PROGRAM—25¢

On October 29, 1886, the passenger train left Mt. Horeb going east at 11:55 a.m. It collided with a wild engine in the deep cut between Riley and Pine Bluff Stations and one man was killed and several were injured. The engine was going to Pine Bluff to help a freight going east and ran by Riley, contrary to orders.
MILITARY RIDGE TRAIL

In September, 1982, the Dane County Park Commission approved a state plan to purchase 16 miles of railroad right-of-way between Mt. Horeb and Highway PD (McKee Road) in Fitchburg for an outdoor recreation trail.

The Department of Natural Resources' plan was to extend the 23.5-mile Military Ridge Trail. In 1981, the DNR had bought the Chicago and Northwestern right-of-way between Dodgeville and Mt. Horeb and was developing it into a trail for bicycling and other outdoor activities. The Mt. Horeb-to-Fitchburg track was abandoned by the railroad in 1982, allowing the link.

The route between Mt. Horeb and Verona has a good, scenic quality, especially where it gets away from the highway, with geological points of interest in a driftless, unglaciated area west of Verona. It was anticipated that the trail will be used for bicycling, snowmobiling, hiking and bird watching.

The 39.6-mile Military Ridge State Trail was dedicated in June of 1990, with a ceremony held at 11:30 a.m. at Barneveld Memorial Park. The trail allows bicyclists to pedal uninterrupted from Verona to Dodgeville, through the Springdale villages of Riley and Klevenville. Where once people and families rode together by train, they now bicycle, snowmobile, hike and watch birds together.

SPRINGDALE SNIPPETS

The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad established a station in Riley in 1882.