

Baseball in a Strange Place *

Much time is spent preparing for the annual opening of the Colebrook Historical Society. On one such occasion we were going over a wealth of material dealing with the Sage and Corbin families. One object was labeled a “remembrance book”, which can best be described as the ancestor of the autograph book, and in it a pleasant surprise awaited.

This book belonged to Caroline Whiting, the daughter of one of Colebrook’s prominent families, who attended the Torrington Academy. All of the dates are 1830, 1831 or 1832. Tucked between the pages were three slips of paper that looked very much like money, but are, in fact, reward slips given by a Sunday school teacher to deserving students. It is the design on these documents that are of interest. They are printed in color and have a large central picture flanked by four smaller drawings. One of these shows two girls playing on a swing, while another shows three boys playing what appears to be baseball. The boy in the foreground is in the act of swinging a bat at a ball.

Your first thought is that they are playing baseball, until you realize that the date of these papers seems to predate the game that we have come to believe Abner Doubleday invented. This prompted some research in the old trusty 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, which yielded up the following: “As the origins of baseball are wrapped in obscurity, several possible choices are championed by various ‘experts’. Some believe it evolved from the English game of rounders, several versions of which were played in America during the colonial period. Others say that its resemblance to rounders is merely a coincidence and it had its origins in the United States, probably at Cooperstown, N. Y., in 1839, when it is said, Abner Doubleday [later a general in the U. S. Army] devised a scheme for playing it.”

“About the beginning of the 19th century, a game, generally known as ‘One Old Cat’, became popular with schoolboys in the North Atlantic states. This game was played by three boys, each fielding and batting in turn, a run being scored by the batsman running to a single base and back without being put out. This was accomplished by either being tagged or hit by a thrown ball by the fielder.

Two Old Cat, Three Old Cat and Four Old Cat were modifications of this game, having respectively four, six or eight players. A development of this game bore the name ‘townball’ and the Olympic Town Clubs were first played in the neighborhood of New York, where the Washington Baseball Club was founded in 1843. The first regular code of rules was drawn up in 1845 by the Knickerbocker Baseball Club.”

Returning to the portrayal on our reward slip, it seems that, small as it is, the drawing is quite accurate. Three boys are shown, and this would have been the version used around here, as our one-room schoolhouses never had the makings for two baseball teams. As a matter of fact, the entire town used to be hard pressed to field enough men and boys for a game now and then. We used to refer to the event as the game between the married men and the single men. Just the thought of these games brings back a flood of wonderful memories.

You will be able to see these bits of baseball memorabilia for yourself at the museum rooms, as well as many other interesting items too numerous to mention. The biggest problem of small museums such as Colebrook’s is what to display and how long to display it. We attempt to create new displays every so often to make new acquisitions

available and to cycle our older possessions. In the early years, when we didn't have nearly so many objects, the curators tended to leave things pretty much alone, which ultimately had a negative effect, as the public tended to stay away in large numbers believing (rightfully so) that they had seen everything the first time they visited.

For this reason we now keep reminding our patrons that they should drop in at least once a year to refresh their perception of their cultural heritage; you won't find it boring.