The Yarmouth Townies: History and Economics of Yarmouth Baseball After World War II

by Henry Shub

Town and Country Kitchen on Route One in Yarmouth was open for business, and the smell of fresh fruit pies filled the restaurant. The front door blew open and in walked Ted Williams, Red Sox superstar and future Hall of Famer. People tried not to stare, "but something about him was larger than life." JoAnne Barker grew up in Yarmouth, and her grandmother owned the Town and Country. JoAnne waitressed there as a teenager in the 1960s, and the bustling restaurant was always filled with guests, but no one as exciting as this baseball icon and real-life hero.

The Town and Country had earned a reputation for homestyle cooking, a large glass case with freshly baked pies, an excellent gift shop, and a long counter where locals and tourists would stop in for a cup of coffee. JoAnne recalls Williams would often visit Maine for fishing trips or to work on advertising campaigns for a local baking company. She remembers no one bothered him for his autograph that day because they knew her grandmother would not have approved of people making any sort of scene with a customer (J. Barker).

Life in Yarmouth, and across the country, was changing during this period. World War II had ended, and veterans were returning home, and they started moving out to the suburbs to start their families. Roads were improving, young couples could now afford their own car, and construction began on a paved Route One. Yarmouth neighborhoods like Rand Road and Newell Road started coming alive in the 1950s and 60s (R. Barker). A new bridge connected the mainland to Cousins Island, crews finished building the power plant, and residents could now live on the island all year long. The power plant created more jobs and many workers settled in Yarmouth (Worthing). Main Street was like out of an old movie: churches, schools, Dairy Joy ice cream shop, train station, movie theater, and Vaughn's Pharmacy was in the brick building on the corner of Portland Street. Students attended North Yarmouth Academy until Yarmouth High School opened its doors in September 1961 (J. Barker and Worthing).

Yarmouth was growing, and it didn't slow down when the interstate came through town. It was controversial at the time, as the state built the highway across the Yarmouth harbor and its

fishing villages, isolating the waterfront from the main area of town (Worthing). While some locals were frustrated, it did lead to some excitement for local kids. A big ice storm hit during construction of Interstate 295, and children grabbed their skates, and hit the road. They skated along the highway before it opened to traffic to pass time during one frigid Maine winter (J. Barker). Skating was popular behind the Main Street bank when it was cold, and baseball was popular everywhere in the summertime. Children during this era loved to play baseball in their neighborhoods, and for a long time, they could only listen to the Red Sox on the radio but in the 1950s and 60s that was changing. Many homes were getting televisions, and Maine television station WCSH started broadcasting Red Sox games over the airwaves (Baumer 32). Mainers could now watch the Red Sox on tv.

Following the war, new attendance records were being set at national ballparks, but the sport also had a major following here at home. Veterans had returned home, there was hope and optimism following the war, and on a practical basis new technology like washing machines freed up time around the house for hobbies and pastimes – none more popular than America's Pastime (Baumer 7). Town teams were born, and they attracted high-quality talent. Kennebunkport's team was run by George Herbert Walker, the namesake (and father and grandfather) of two United States presidents. He filled his team with college players from the Ivy League. The City of Auburn team recruited major league players to participate and paid them because most professional ballplayers made very little money at the time (Baumer 15). In Yarmouth, baseball was a bit more simple to start. No big recruits or high-priced players. It was a growing community with significant town pride and townspeople were looking for fun and entertainment (Worthing). The local papers reported on the Yarmouth Townies competing in the Casco Bay League as early as the 1940s, but things really took off once Yarmouth had a new home field: Bennett Memorial Field.

Rowe School opened in the downtown village in the 1950s. It was behind Merrill Memorial Library, and the property was perfect for a hometown baseball field. The Press Herald reports teams often played on an old field on Elm Street before the town dedicated Bennett Memorial Field in September 1956. 1,000 people attended the dedication ceremony, as the field was named for Elden H. (Baldy) Bennett. Bennett played on casual town teams through the 1930s, and he also served as a coach and umpire before his death in 1953. Businesses sponsored

the dedication game, and the community was able to raise money to improve the field and purchase a plaque to mark the name ("Dedicate Bennett Field and "Bennett Field Dedication"). Interest in town baseball was growing, and the Yarmouth Townies became proud members of the Portland Twilight League.

The level of play was outstanding, equivalent to lower-level minor league baseball. Teams were filled with excellent college players home for the summer, plus young locals in their 20s and 30s who had settled down near their hometowns. It was a large time commitment for players and coaches, often playing up to six days per week. Successful teams often had a central, colorful figure leading the way. For Yarmouth, it was Manager Charlie Turner (Baumer, interview).

Turner was a legend with a big personality. He was born in 1903 and was an excellent youth baseball player. He became well-known for his popular egg business, where he would sell eggs door-to-door around town. He would also sell vegetables and household items from his pickup truck and was a true entrepreneur at the time. Turner also became a familiar face thanks to his time working at the local train station. Outside these jobs, he worked very hard at coaching baseball. Turner coached the Townies in the 1940s and 50s but mostly relied on homegrown talent back then. The Townies were good during that period, but the Townies were exceptional once the 1960s hit (Baumer interview and "Charles F. Turner").

Turner started advertising for players in local newspapers and was able to attract players from all over the state. An ad appeared in the Press Herald in May 1961 looking for players to fill out his roster, and his strategy worked, because the Townies became a dominant force in Maine baseball. Turner and the Townies won the Portland Twilight League six seasons in a row, from 1961-1966. They were invincible, and the community loved them. The nightly newspaper, The Evening Express, published an article in August 1962 inviting the town to a big Friday night dance at the Masonic Hall. Turner was selling tickets, and all proceeds would benefit The Townies so they could purchase team jackets. The event was a hit.

Playing baseball was not very lucrative for the Townies. If players were from out of town, locals might offer them a place to stay for free at homes near the field. The best players received $5 per game, earning up to $40 per week (Baumer 20 and 90). The town may have seen a small economic boost from the team. Players and fans might spend some extra money at local venues

after the games (Baumer, interview). There was a popular pool hall on Main Street for a time, but it did not serve alcohol or much food. If folks wanted a meal or a drink after a game, they might drive north on Route One to the Sea Cove. Located where the old Muddy Rudder restaurant is now, Sea Cove was a popular spot back in the day (R. Barker and J. Barker).

The Townies did not use a business sponsor for their name, but Turner likely sold advertisements that hung on the outfield fence (Baumer, interview). One set of uniforms included the name Yarmouth Hardware Company on the jersey (Worthing). The Townies also received financial support from town government. Town Manager, Dick Blanchard, was reported to have thrown out the first pitch on some opening days (Baumer, 218). Newspaper articles show Turner would invite town selectmen to dinners with the team to celebrate championships, and for several years, a portion of the municipal budget would be dedicated to the Townies ("Yarmouth"). The town provided $500 in 1966, but in August of that year, Turner went back to the town selectmen to ask for $150 extra to fund additional tournament costs (Peterson, 11). Other newspaper clippings about the budget showed Yarmouth gave the Townies $900 in 1967 (Peterson, 12). By 1975, the Press Herald reports Yarmouth was dedicating up to $1000 to the team every year. It was a sense of town pride, and most locals were happy to support them financially. Pat Feury and Bob Clarke, who both played for the Townies, recall players would take off their hats about halfway through the games and go walking through the crowd. Fans would toss money in the hats to support the costs of running the team. Clarke recalls big crowds, especially for playoffs games, and he still remembers the day he hit a homerun at Bennett Field in the 1970s – 50 years ago and these memories are still an important part of his life (Feury and Clarke).

The Townies had success in the 1970s but times were changing. Turner was getting older and started receiving coaching help from player-captain Pat Feury. Feury had joined the Townies back in 1963 and played for them for 15 years. Alan Livingston took over as player-coach by the mid 1970s and Feury continued to assist. Turner stepped back from day-to-day coaching but continued to be involved in his general manager role. The team won the Twilight League once again in 1975. The Townies were a Maine baseball dynasty in the 60s and 70s. Feury, Livingston, and 30 other players for the Townies are all members of the Maine Baseball Hall of Fame (Maine Baseball Hall of Fame and Worthing). A remarkable run. In 1976, the team held an alumni game

to honor Turner, and it was a hugely successful event ("Old-Timers Due"). Turner was getting older, and it was important to his players and the community to honor him with a special day.

Charlie Turner lived in Yarmouth until his death in April 1977. He still has grandchildren living in the area, although they were young when he died, and do not have vivid memories of his time coaching. Family proudly shared that Turner was inducted into the Maine Baseball Hall of Fame in 1996 (Matthew Turner).

Turner died just as the 1977 season was getting underway, and shortly after, you can see the first glimpse of economic troubles for the team. A Press Herald article from February 1978 talks about a dance and raffle fundraiser. The fundraiser happened in October 1977, and four months later, the raffle winner was expressing frustration for not receiving her prize, a gift card to a local supermarket ("Winner Wants Prize"). As municipal budgets continued to increase, Yarmouth decided to stop funding the team after Turner died. A Press Herald article noted "The Town of Yarmouth didn't come up with the needed funding this year, so a new sponsor was needed" so many players retired or started playing for the Maine Merchants, located out of town. The well-liked manager, Livingston, soon ended up taking over as the varsity coach at South Portland High School ("South Portland"). 1978 marked the end of an era for Yarmouth Baseball. Yarmouth was not alone as other town teams came to an end as well. Families became busier, computer and internet technology changed how people communicate, crowds were smaller, and it was hard to recruit new talent.

Traditional town teams may be gone but strong baseball in Yarmouth remains. Yarmouth Little League, for example, is thriving and went through a recent period of unprecedented growth. It had record participation in recent years with as many as 200 baseball players participating in a single season. Little League also brings big crowds of spectators down to the North Road fields (A. Shub).

Yarmouth High School Baseball continues to thrive as well. The high school opened its doors in 1961, but the Clippers played their home games down the road on Bennett Field for nearly 40 years. The program was led by successful coaches such as Ron Barker and Steve Merrill during that time. The 1990s brought three state championships: 1991, 1994, 1995.

Construction began on a new field at the high school in the mid-1990s and the Clippers started playing games there by the turn of the century. Bennett Field is still home to Yarmouth's middle school teams. John Gleason, former Townie and Maine Baseball Hall of Famer, even came back to Yarmouth to coach middle school baseball in recent years.

The new high school field ushered in a new era of baseball. Yarmouth moved up to the larger Class B division, and it soon welcomed a new coach as well. Coach Marc Halsted has now led the Yarmouth High School Baseball program for 20 years. Yarmouth won the Class B State Championship in 2017 and 2024. Several notable players have come up through Halsted's program ("Yarmouth Clipper Baseball"). None more notable than Gibson Harnett.

Harnett was a 2017 graduate of Yarmouth High School. He pitched 20 scoreless innings in the 2017 playoffs to lead the Clippers to the state title that year. Harnett was a standout athlete and remembered as a fantastic teammate, friend, and competitor. Harnett died from a soft-tissue sarcoma cancer in 2024. It is extremely important to the entire Yarmouth baseball community that every youth baseball player in town today knows about the life and legacy of Gibson. Little League invites the Harnett Family back for Opening Day, and the new "17 House" (Gibson's uniform number and the year he graduated) now stands tall behind home plate at the high school. Gibson's presence is still very much felt at the high school baseball field. He died in January 2024, and five months later, Coach Halsted and the Clippers brought home a state championship in his memory.

The Townies may be gone, but Yarmouth Baseball is still going strong. Watching baseball games at North Road, Bennett Field, or at the high school still brings people together today. During good times and hard times, baseball is there. The Townies built a solid baseball foundation, and the organization was a grand slam within the community, but the Townies biggest win of all was the strong baseball legacy it left behind on the baseball diamonds of Yarmouth.

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