

“The Day the Indians Played Ball in Kent” From *Rooted in Kent* by Roger J. Di Paolo

It was a baseball game to remember, a contest with “a finish the like of which is seldom seen,” the Kent Courier reported. Several hundred spectators enjoyed “a frenzy of excitement” on that summer afternoon in July—the day the Indians played in Kent.

Yes, the Indians. No, not *those* Indians.

The baseball team that brought thrills to local sports fans didn’t hail from Cleveland, but from Indian reservations throughout the country.

And, if contemporary sports accounts are to be believed, the Nebraska Indians put on quite a spectacle when they played the Kent Islanders on July 2 and 3, 1900.

The Nebraska Indians were a team “gathered up from all over the United States wherever there are Indian reservations,” the Courier reported, with players from the Seminole, Shawnee, Chippewa, Sioux, Oneida and Winnebago nations.

“They are not only interesting because they represent a race which is dying out, but play an astonishingly good game of ball,” the Courier reported, noting that the hard-hitting team “usually won seven out of eight games.”

The Kent Islanders were a popular attraction on the community baseball circuit, drawing crowds to Island Park, their home field, located in what is now Fred Fuller Park.

The Islanders, also known as the Kents, were managed by Kent businessman Elmer France, who joined the team as a player in 1878 at the age of 15 and remained involved with it for 20 years. The Kents maintained a busy schedule, playing five games in the eight-day stretch that included the dual meet with the Indians.

Admission to the Kents-Indians game was 25 cents, with grandstand seating 5 cents for “gents” and free for ladies. The admission fee apparently was a bit high for the times because the Courier reported that Manager France wanted baseball fans to know that the Indians would not agree to play for a lesser admission since they would receive a percentage of each ticket.

Game 1 was played on July 2, 1900. The Kents got off to a bad start, with three errors and a single, as the Indians drove home two runs. Five innings “full of fast, clean, close and exciting playing” followed, with the bases loaded by the Indians in the sixth inning. “If someone had been thoughtful enough to drop a pin, its fall would have been heard clear over the river,” the Courier reported in its play-by-play account.

The Kents managed a come-from-behind win in the ninth inning, edging the Indians 4-3. “Hats, scorecards and other objects filled the air” as the home crowd celebrated, the newspaper reported. It was only the second game the Indians had lost in Ohio in the past month.

The Courier account singled out Kent player Joe Denning for sensational fielding, noting that his two running catches in the fifth inning “set the crowd wild with enthusiasm.”

The rematch on the following day was an entirely different story.

The Indians and the Kents were tied by the fifth inning when a heavy rain began to fall. The game continued, but the visitors proved too much for the home team: the final score was Indians 11, Kents 6. Of the Indians’ 11 runs, three each were credited to pitcher Albert Ninahan, an Oneida, and short stop Spotted Crow, a Pine Ridge Sioux. Both had homered in the first game too.

Curiously-or perhaps not-the Courier’s play-by-play account of Game 2 is lacking in detail. “There was some good play and some bad, but all in all it was a contest well worth seeing,” the report concluded.

The Kent Islanders are long gone, but their playing field remains. “The Island” at Fred Fuller Park is better known as Kramer Field and, 100 years later, baseball is still drawing crowds there every summer. The modest bridge that provides access from Stow Street was rebuilt several years ago, but it, too, boasts a bit of history. It’s a successor to a span once known as “the cow bridge,” which was built in the late 19th Century to allow a Kent resident to pasture his cow on “the island.”

And the Indians? You’ll have to travel a bit farther than Kent to see them play.