

Chapter 15

The Jamboree

Holyoke has a lively history.

The mountains around it and the valley that became Holyoke, itself, were formed during the Mesozoic Era, the Age of Dinosaurs. That time lasted about 167 million years. I wasn't around back then.

I wasn't around in the 1600s either, when the Dutch and the English came to the area. The Dutch set up trading posts along the Connecticut River and tried to keep it a secret from the English, but it's pretty hard to hide a 410 – mile long river.

Back then a few thousand Indians such as the Agawams and Nipmucks lived in Massachusetts, a name that translated to as "at the place of the big mountains". Obviously, the Agawams and the Nipmucks never saw the Rockies.

In 1783 Titus Morgan and his son Erastus built a sawmill on the Connecticut River. It was the first use of waterpower there and it wouldn't be the last. For the next 170 years, shops, mills and factories especially paper mills, borrowed the power of the river, and waves of immigrants from Europe came to work in those mills. Holyoke was called "The Paper City".

In 1870 Holyoke had 10,733 people and half of the town's population was Irish. There were 89 liquor shops in town. By 1913 the Paper City had exploded to almost 62,000, many of French descent. Immigrants also came from Germany and Poland.

The section of Holyoke near the Connecticut River was called Springdale. Springdale Park was where the Holyoke Youth Baseball League's "jamboree" was held. The jamboree kicked off the start of each baseball season for 600 baseball players, 600 boys. There was only one girl involved in the jamboree and she was the baton twirler, Cindy Boulware. One year Cindy Boulware threw her baton high into the air and it clobbered the coach of the Donut Hole.

"But I don't want to go to the jamboree, Grandpa," I said that Saturday morning in early May.

"Kiddo, I understand why you don't want to have anything to do with the jamboree. I really do, but I need your help serving hot dogs today." After a short parade of the forty baseball teams from three different divisions, each team would play a two – inning ballgame on one of Springdale Park's many diamonds. After each game finished, the players and coaches would walk over to the Springdale Turn Hall, Grandpa's "club", for a soda and a hot dog. Grandpa called it "the day of 1000 drinks and dogs".

After the visit from Coach Mitchell, I vowed never to watch even one inning of Gas baseball yet here I was sitting in the grandstands during their two – inning opener. Afterwards I would race to the Turn Hall to help Grandpa serve hot dogs. The Gas played its abbreviated game against Nouveau Monde Bakery, the Bread Men, the last place team from the year before. It was no contest.

Joey Mitchell struck out the side in the first inning. None of the three hitters from Nouveau Monde even fouled off a single pitch. In the last half of the first, The Gas ignited. Ray Flanagan crouched into his "clamshell" stance and drew a walk. Speed Miller stroked a single to right, and Tank Arbuster was hit by a pitch, the ball thumping harmlessly off one of his massive arms. Joey Mitchell launched the next pitch, rocketing it out to left field way up and over the 15 foot dike that protected the Springdale neighborhoods from any flooding from the Connecticut River. Joey's ball splashed into the water for a grand slam homerun.

"Way to go, Joey!" Paula O'Connor shouted. Paula's girls giggled and congratulated Paula like she had just hit that shot.

"Your boyfriend isn't just cute, Paula," one of Paula's girls said. "He hits touchdowns, too!"

She really couldn't be that stupid, I thought.

"Aren't you going to correct her, Eileen?" Paula said. "I mean, you are like Little Miss Baseball."

I had no clue that Joey was her "boyfriend". The day before Joey and I talked about Bob Gibson's fastball and Sandy Koufax's curve, and Paula O'Connor's name didn't come up even once, but it made sense. Whatever Paula wanted, Paula got.

"I heard that Coach Mitchell gave you your very own Gas hat," she continued. "Does he want you to be the team's bat girl?" A chorus of giggles

from the girls punctuated the remark. Normally, I was good at returning fire in those types of situations, but I said nothing. The word "boyfriend" stuck in a place part way between my head and my heart. It felt like a good time to go and help Grandpa steam a thousand hot dogs. "Where are you going, Eileen?" Paula called to me. "Don't you want to get Joey's bat and bring it back to the bench for him?"

It wasn't any better at the Turn Hall after the first set of games. The Gas won their game, 9 – 0, and Speed Miller was first in line for a hot dog.

"Hey, I wonder if those buns are from the Nouveau Monde bakery?" Speed said. "First we eat up their team on the field and then we eat up their rolls. So, Eileen, did you see me steal second and third base?" Speed asked.

"I can't believe Coach Mitchell would give you the steal sign with a big lead in a game that doesn't even count," I said.

"Speed went on his own," Tank Arbuster answered. "And Coach wasn't too happy about it. He called Speed a "hot dog"."

"I'd rather be a hot dog," Speed said, "than be stuck serving them. Oh, I almost forgot your tip, Eileen. Remember to throw underhand when you play softball with the girls."

I'm not sure if Joey Mitchell laughed along with the rest of his team, but he sure wasn't laughing when I threw a hot dog slathered in mustard at him, overhand.