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Pioneer Night Baseball In Des Moines

The *Des Moines Register* of April 28, 1945, contained an obituary which tugged at the heartstrings of more than one Iowa baseball fan:

"The ghosts of Western league baseball in Des Moines better have a last fling—and soon," it read.

"The 'old home place,' a tottering steel and wood grandstand at Sixth and Holcomb avenues, went under the auctioneer's hammer Thursday. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, just the kind for an opening day game.

"But there wasn't an umpire there to call 'play ball.' Instead it was George L. Garton (an old fan himself), secretary of the school board, who was officiating."

The "old home place" thus sold was the grandstand of the Western league ball park and it brought \$2,200; the purchaser was W. F. Kucharo, president of the Kucharo Construction Co. Where it stood, North high school students now have an athletic field; with its razing, Des Moines lost a dilapidated landmark, the site of the first adequately lighted night baseball game in the country.

The ball park was built in 1912 at a cost of between \$10,000 and \$12,000 by Tom Fairweather, former mayor, and Frank Isbell, former Chicago White Sox star, when they took over the Western league franchise in Des Moines. They sold the park and stand to the Des Moines school board in 1920 for about \$8,000 plus some other real estate owned by the board, but were also given the right to continue using it as a ball park for ten years. It was later used as an athletic field for North high school and for softball and twilight league ball.

The story of night baseball, and also of other well-lighted night athletic contests, is in reality the story of E. Lee Keyser of Des Moines, owner of the baseball club at that time. The story of the first night game, May 2, 1930, was best told after Keyser's death in a column by Sec Taylor in the *Des Moines Register* of April 27, 1950:

"I expressed this belief while he was living and I write it again now that Lee Keyser is dead — his name should be inscribed in the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N. Y.

"For he saved minor league baseball during the depression years in the early '30s and he saved both minor and major league baseball during the war years of the early '40s.

"Without night ball not even the triple-A leagues could have continued during either of those trying periods, nor could big league cities like St. Louis, Cincinnati and perhaps several others have survived while the war was being fought at home and abroad.

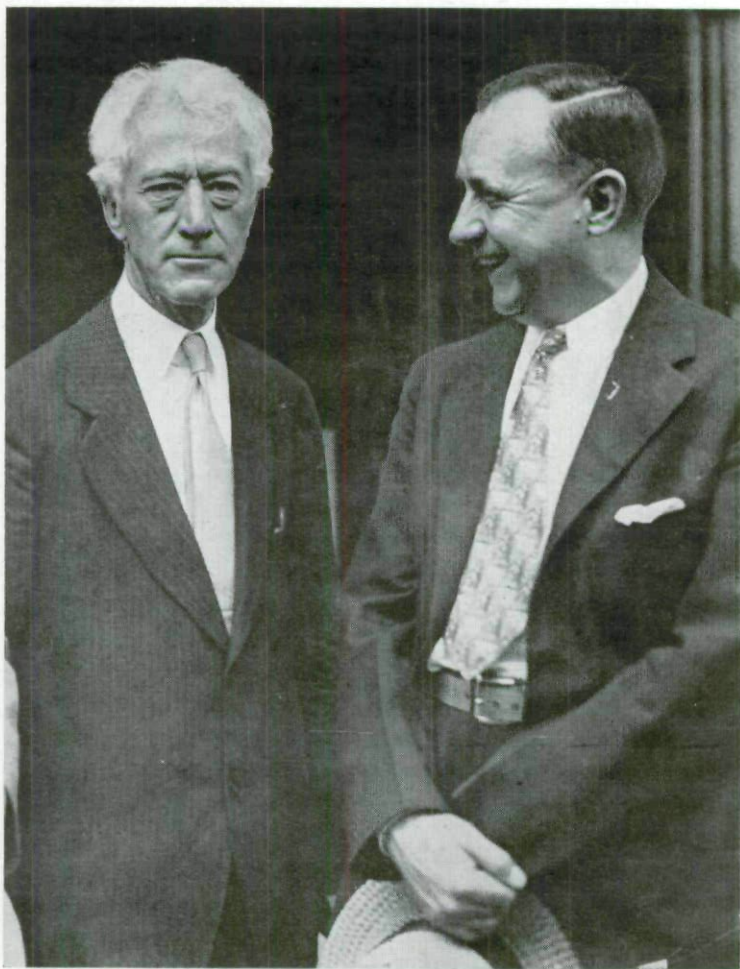
"It was Keyser, if you have forgotten, as so many seem to have done, who started modern after-dark baseball competition.

"That was back in 1930. But for several years prior to that he had toyed with the idea of illuminating the old park on Holcomb Avenue in Des Moines and experimenting with after-dark baseball.

"Perhaps some will argue that night ball would have come along anyway without Keyser.

"But the fact remains that it was he who had the foresight and the courage to make the venture and that he did it just at a time when minor league baseball needed the increased attendance night games provided to survive the depression.

"It was from the convention of the minor leagues in late November or early December in 1929 that press association wires carried the startling news that the Des Moines Western league club would play its home games under the lights during the coming season.



K. M. LANDIS, LEFT; E. L. KEYSER, RIGHT

Kenesaw Mountain Landis was commissioner of baseball (often called czar of baseball) when he visited Des Moines in June, 1932 to raise the 1931 Western League pennant won by Des Moines. This picture was probably taken at that time though it is undated. He was also in Des Moines in May, 1927 to raise the pennants won in 1925 and 1926.

"Immediately baseball men everywhere ridiculed the idea. They said it was impossible. Others declared that even if it were possible, it was impractical—that baseball was and always would be a day sport.

"But while the skeptics sat back with knowing smiles—some even laughed — Keyser went ahead with his preparations.

"The Demons, as they were then called, trained at Harlingen, Tex., that spring. Keyser had negotiated guarantees for his club in that city, for Denver at San Benita, for Wichita at McAllen and for Omaha at Mission, all in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

"Joe Christy of Des Moines represented Keyser during the construction of the steel tower and the installation of the lighting units while the club owner had to be with his team.

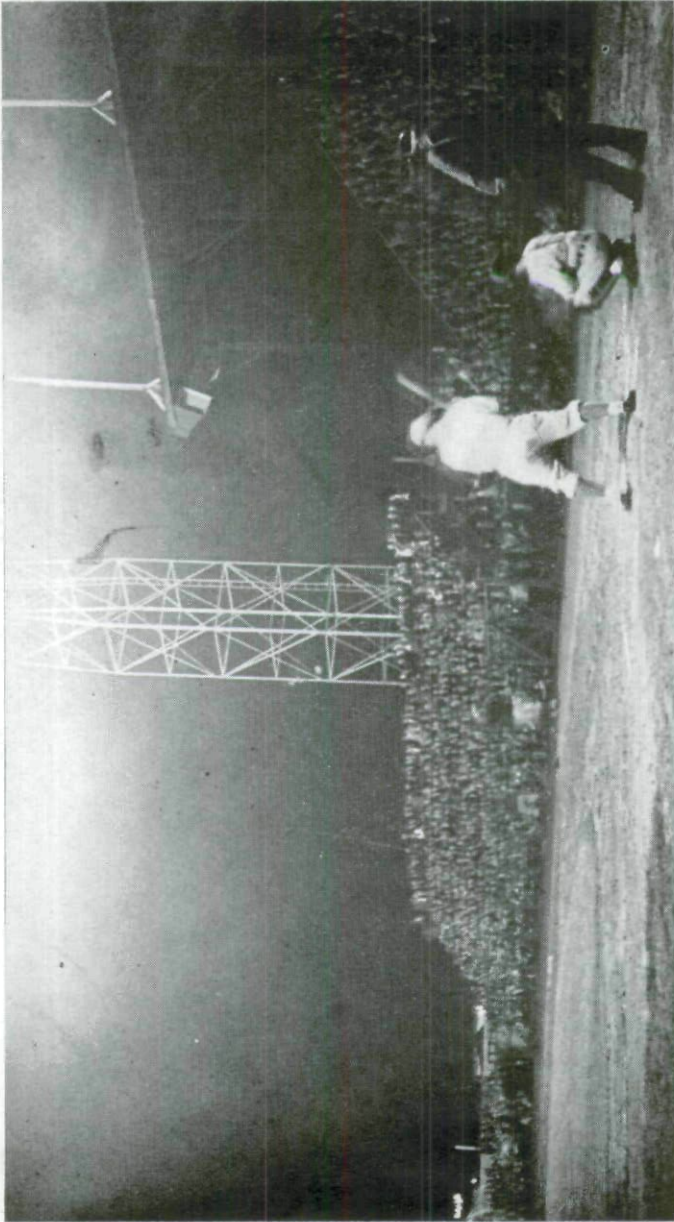
"To their credit and to the credit of General Electric and to the Des Moines Power and Light Co. officials, the installation, although the first one with adequate illumination for baseball, remained one of the best in the minor leagues until it was dismantled early in the [Second World] war.

"The Demons opened the season in the southern half of the league in mid-April, returning here on the afternoon of May 1, which was an open date.

"They went to the park that night for their first batting practice under the lights.

"When the hitters drove balls over the fences and to all parts of the field, when the infielders and outfielders caught grounders and flies with the same celerity and certainty they had in the daytime, and when the spectators who had been invited to witness the experiment could follow the ball, it was apparent that baseball could be played at night, and expertly, too.

"The next night when Des Moines opened its home season against Wichita with a burst of base hits that sprayed all over the park, Judge K. M. Landis, the baseball commissioner; club owners and scouts, who were Keyser's guests, or at least some of them, were convinced.



FIRST NIGHT BASEBALL GAME MAY 2, 1930 IN THE OLD DES MOINES
WESTERN LEAGUE BALL PARK

"For within two months many other minor league parks were illuminated.

"But there were still some skeptics. Even *The Sporting News*, the well known baseball magazine published in St. Louis, printed an editorial which said that although night baseball apparently was possible, that it might be all right in the small minor leagues, but it would never do for the larger minor or the big leagues.

"Five years later Cincinnati was playing some games under lights and now [1950] every major league club with the exception of the Chicago Cubs schedules night games on its home grounds.

"No claim has ever been made that the first night baseball game was played in the Des Moines park. Games, such as they were, were played after dark before the turn of the century.

"After Keyser's announcement late in 1929 that he would install lights a few clubs beat him to it. A contest was played at Independence, Kan., a night or so before the opening game here in 1930. Lincoln, Neb., dedicated its lights the night before.

"But the claim is made, and can not be refuted successfully, that the first game under adequate illumination was played here.

"Furthermore, no one can dispute the fact that Keyser is responsible for modern night baseball.

"I could go on and on recounting other fine things this generous, sincere, fun-loving impulsive friend did for baseball, for the people in it, for Des Moines, and for persons he scarcely knew.

"But that is not necessary. His time and his money, when he had it, were everybody's. All who came in contact with him know that.

"Night baseball is his monument."

E. Lee Keyser, the Des Moines man who masterminded this first adequately lighted night baseball game, died on April 26, 1950; at that time he was employed by the St. Louis Browns as secretary of minor league operations.

He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and once sold popcorn and peanuts in the St. Louis ball park.

In 1914, when the Federal league was formed, Keyser was given the job as secretary of the St. Louis Federal league club. When this league folded, he became a salesman. In World War I, he was business manager of the Camp Dodge newspaper, coming to Des Moines in 1917. When the 88th division went overseas, Tom Fairweather, then mayor of Des Moines and owner of the baseball club there, hired Keyser as business manager of that team.

In 1921 Keyser purchased a half interest in the club and in 1934 became sole owner, selling the Kansas City American association baseball team which he owned and ran. In addition to night baseball, one of his innovations was the "Knothole club," composed of children who were admitted free to league games. He also served several terms as Des Moines Parks commissioner during the 1930's and ran for sheriff in 1942.

The lights installed for the original night game in 1930 were removed in 1941 for use in construction of the Des Moines ordinance plant, but were later replaced. The ball park grandstand, however, fell into disrepair. Des Moines ceased to have a Western league team after the 1937 season. In April, 1939, fire destroyed a 60-foot section of the grandstand on the third base side, and in 1945, in spite of some objections on the part of sports fans who said the action would deprive Des Moines of seating facilities at the city's one adequate baseball diamond, the grandstand was sold at auction in April, 1945.

On the following page is the box score of the first night baseball game in Des Moines. It is taken from the *Des Moines Register* as were the pictures of Mr. Landis, Keyser, and the game.

The box score for the historic game of May 2, 1930:

WICHITA	ab	h	o	a	e
Jensen, cf	4	0	4	0	0
Swansboro, 1b	5	2	8	0	0
Johnson, lf	5	1	1	0	0
Dugas, rf	4	1	2	0	0
Vigare, 3b	5	1	2	0	0
Sankey, ss	4	1	2	3	0
Lindimore, 2b	3	1	1	4	0
Harris, c	4	1	3	0	0
Meadows, p	0	0	0	0	0
Cano, p	0	0	0	0	0
Newbill, p	3	1	1	1	0
*Berka	1	0	0	0	0
Yocke, p	1	0	0	1	0
<hr/>					
Totals	39	9	24	9	0
DES MOINES	ab	h	o	a	e
Nielsen, ss	3	0	2	1	1
Norris, 2b	5	3	0	6	1
Oglesby, 1b	5	2	12	1	0
Keyes, rf	5	4	4	0	0
Hughes, cf	4	2	2	0	0
Berger, lf	5	3	1	0	0
Windham, 3b	4	1	1	1	1
Lingle, c	4	0	4	0	0
Tinning, p	3	0	1	4	1
<hr/>					
Totals	38	15	27	13	4

*Batted for Newbill in seventh.

Wichita	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	0	0	—	6
Des Moines	11	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	x	—	13

Two-base hits—Newbill, Dugas, Berger 2. Stolen base—Swansboro. Struck out—By Tinning 4, by Newbill 1, by Yocke 2. Bases on balls—Off Tinning 3, off Meadows 2, off Cano 2, off Newbill 1. Hits—Off Meadows 6 in 0 innings, off Cano 2 in 0 innings, off Newbill 5 in 6 innings. Losing pitcher—Meadows. Umpires—Swacina and Hopper.

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