

## Baseball in Mobile

by Joe Cuhaj and  
Tamra Carraway-Hinckle

Reviewed by Emmett Burnett

The Port City's love affair with  
America's Favorite pastime  
is chronicled in this  
lavishly illustrated book.

With well over 200 photographs, stories, facts and recollections, "Baseball in Mobile" takes you out to the ballgame, Mobile-style. The book chronicles the summer game from its introduction here in 1860 to present-day Hank Aaron Stadium.

Co-authors Joe Cuhaj of Daphne and Tamra Carraway-Hinckle of Mobile have blended facts, history and memories in a volume that addresses every aspect of south Alabama baseball, from Hank Aaron to hot dog vendors.

Two factors set this book apart from other sports histories: the photographs, many never seen outside the homes of the families submitting them, and the stories. The authors interviewed athletes and their relatives, friends, co-workers and associates

of local baseball. "We wanted more than a statistics list and museum pictures," Cuhaj says about his work. "Once people found out what we were doing, they were very forthcoming with information."


People such as Mobile's Bolling brothers—Milt, formerly of the Boston Red Sox, and Frank of the Detroit Tigers and Atlanta Braves—not only shared their careers but vast information about the game and Mobile. "The two were very endearing. They donated hours of their personal time to help us," Carraway-Hinckle notes.

Together, the writing duo provides a good balance of baseball facts and local insights. Third time author Cuhaj, a former radio broadcaster and sports announcer, brings a vast knowledge of the game, its people and events to the book. If "Baseball in Mobile" was a broadcasted event, Cuhaj

would do the play-by-play announcing, Carraway-Hinckle the color commentary. "I wrote what it felt like to be at a game," she says. "There is nothing like the magic of a summer evening under the stars at the game—the crack of wood against a ball, the hotdog aroma, friends and family cheering the home team. I wanted to capture that atmosphere."

Mobile's love for the national pastime started around 1860. Thousands of fans would cram into Monroe Park, "the Coney Island of the South," to watch the summer games. The city's first professional team formed in the early 1900s. How could you not love a group of grown men calling themselves the Mobile Oyster Grabbers?

In 1905, the Grabbers lost their grip and the season prematurely closed because baseball fever fell to yellow fever. Returning




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in 1906, the team soon won Mobile its first championship. The city was euphoric. With fresh memories of the Civil War and losses from yellow fever, Mobile needed a reason to celebrate. Wars, disease, the Great Depression and hurricanes would come and go, but baseball was here to stay. "People here have always loved baseball," Cuhaj says. "We had close to 300 people at one of our book signings. Everyone could relate a baseball story. Either they knew someone in the game or reminisced the good old days of Monroe Park and Hartwell Field."

Most of the local boys of summer eventually left baseball, trading league play for families and jobs. Some stayed, some went on to greatness. One was Satchel Paige. "He was one of my favorites in this book," Carraway-Hinckle says about the pitcher on the book cover. Paige grew up in Mobile and worked at Union Station as a porter. Young LeRoy would carry bags, suitcases, or "satchels" for travelers passing through town. Nicknamed "Satchel" by the other porters, Paige's moniker stayed with him. According to the book, he was good-natured, flamboyant and somewhat cocky. When it came to baseball, his skill backed his boasting.

And then there is Henry "Hammerin' Hank" Aaron. Every Mobilian worth his salt knows of the homerun king born and raised in the Port City. Next to the first televised moon landing, Mobilians' most-watched broadcast event was probably on April 8, 1974, the day Aaron broke Babe Ruth's homerun record. The story is retold in the book with facts and figures many of us have forgotten in the 30 years since that Atlanta Braves hit heard around the world.

"Baseball in Mobile" has a compelling photograph of Aaron as a 17-year-old, posing for a picture at the local train station. He is about to board the railcar that takes him to his first baseball training camp. It is a prophetic image of a man about to embark on a train, pro baseball and world fame.

Paige and Aaron achieved glory by leaving Mobile. The authors point out that many baseball legends did just fine here in town. One of the best known was Eddie Stanky.

A former shortstop for the St. Louis Cardinals who married a Mobile woman, Stanky became the University of South Alabama's first baseball coach in 1969. The

college and the coach aged well together. During his 14-year tenure at the school, Stanky sent 43 players to the major leagues. One of Mobile's favorite personalities, the university coach retired in 1983. He remained in Mobile until his death in 1999.

His namesake, Stanky Field, lives on. More than 100 University of South Alabama alumni have signed professional contracts. The university has ranked consistently in the college top 25 national baseball polls.

These are just a few of the more famous people who ran the bases in Mobile's baseball history. The book also has dozens of everyday Mobilians with accounts of their days in the ballpark. Reviewing "Baseball in Mobile" has the same problem as writing it. There are so many people, so much talent and so many stories that, inevitably, something will be left out. As the writers say in the book's acknowledgement, "Any failure to include significant individuals was unintentional."

Upon completing these chapters, the reader appreciates that baseball in this part of the state is what football is everywhere else. Mobile has its share of football fans, but this mid-sized town has produced some of the finest baseball players to run the diamond. Most of them—major and minor leaguers, famous and should have been—are discussed in this work.

"Baseball in Mobile" is a story of how men once played for the love of the game not the love of a paycheck. Some still do, playing in state-of-the-art facilities such as Hank Aaron Stadium. Some once did, performing in places like Monroe Park that now exist only in memories.

This is more than a sports book; it is a story of South Alabama history told through baseball. The eight chapters chronicle local baseball for the athletes and fans who love the game. It is the tale of a game that united people. For a few hours a day, race, politics and religion did not matter. People came together on hot July bleachers. Regardless of who we were, we shared a love for the field of dreams.

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