

1-1-2003

American Indian Baseball

Mark G. Thiel

Marquette University, mark.thiel@marquette.edu

AMERICAN INDIAN BASEBALL

Photographs courtesy Marquette University Libraries

From time to time I have watched American Indian teams play baseball and they do so as enthusiastically as all other American teams.

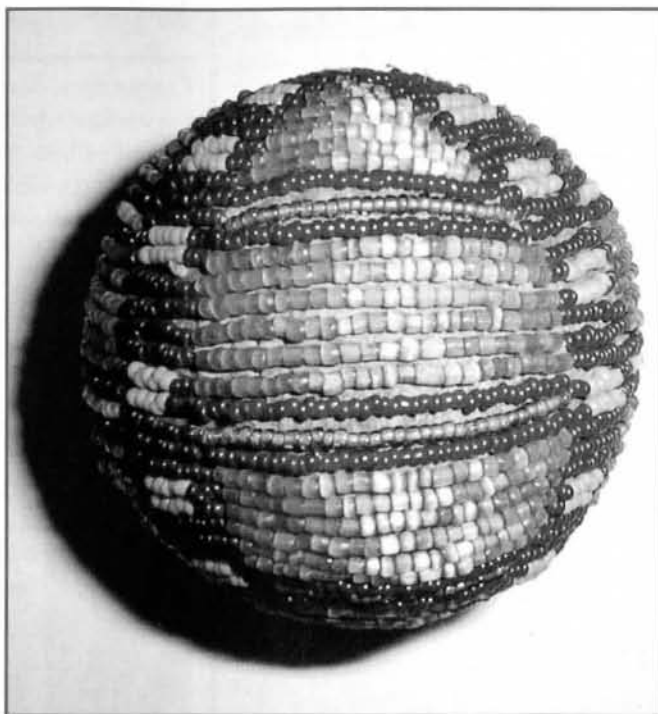
But baseball's impact on American Indian life (and vice versa) is not something that I have given much thought too until early 2002 when I received a query from New York City's American Folk Life Museum. Since then, I've conducted background research on one of at least a couple of related American Indian art objects, slated for display in the museum's forthcoming exhibition, "A Perfect Game: Folk Artists Look at Baseball," May 1 through October 31, 2003.

From my institution, Marquette University in Milwaukee, the museum will borrow a Lakota beaded baseball from the St. Francis Mission School, Rosebud Reservation, St. Francis, South Dakota. Except for a small damaged spot, the ball is fully beaded in size 11 beads using lane stitch and commercial thread. Although this ball's traditional designs and colors of dark green, dark navy blue, "greasy" yellow, and white resemble those used on balls for girls' puberty ceremonies, it has been said that a baseball wouldn't have been used to create a ball for these ceremonies. Rather, it was suggested that this might have been an early-day trophy for a school baseball tournament as beadwork was used for such purposes.

Since ancient times, American Indians made a variety of balls from buckskin and animal hair for ceremonies, team sports, and children's play. Some were decorated by embroidery first with porcupine quills and later with glass trade beads, such as the Crow Indian beaded baby's ball, ca. 1885, shown in *Circles of the World*, pp. 66 and 140.

During the early 20th century, the federal Indian Office used baseball, band concerts, and other athletic events to "Americanize" Indian youth and attempt to reduce the popularity of Indian dancing and rodeos at reservation fairs. Indians enthusiastically adopted the game and in so doing, incorporated aggressive ball hitting and catching skills taken from traditional games like lacrosse and stickball.

With baseball came opportunities to transform non-Indian goods for Indian purposes. The Sauke-Suiattle of the Tulalip



3-inch diameter beaded baseball, by unknown Lakota artist, ca. 1920s-1930s. This ball may have served as a trophy for a tournament. In 1977, Marquette University Libraries acquired it from the St. Francis Mission School, Rosebud Reservation, St. Francis, South Dakota. Following the May-October 2003 exhibition, this baseball will be transferred to the Buechel Lakota Museum, St. Francis, South Dakota.

Reservation in Washington have carved the ends of bats into salmon clubs and with elastic bandage wrappings, men's dancers today widely use the ends of bats as storage sticks for roach headdresses. Bat handles are carved too and have been made into prized horse riding quirts by Lakotas of the Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota. In the late 20th century, beaded baseballs as art have been reported among the Assiniboine and Lakota of the Ft. Peck Reservation, Montana, and the Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota.



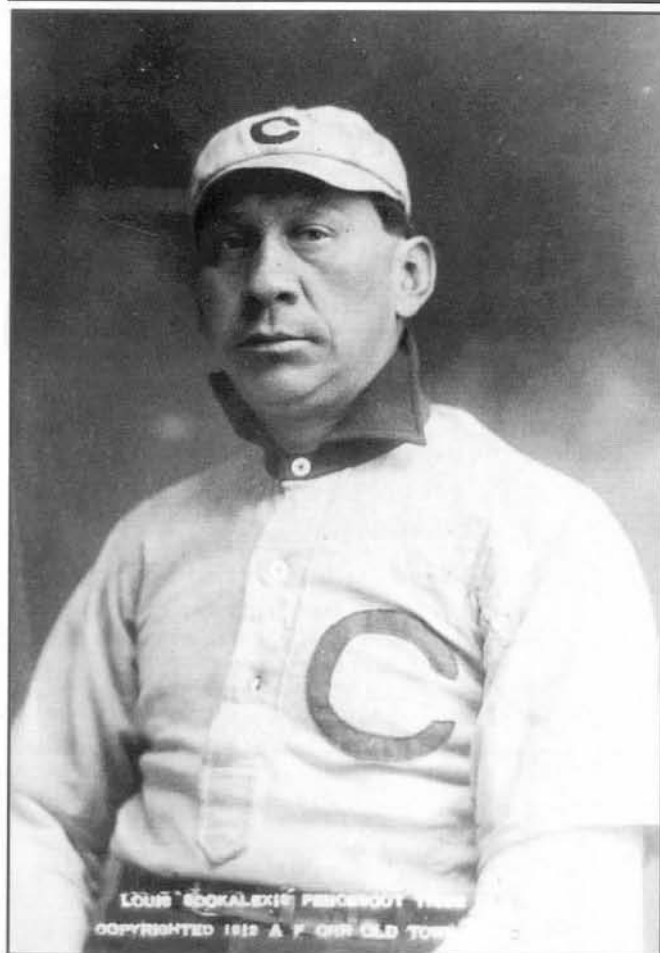
St. Francis Mission School (Lakota Sioux, St. Francis Mission, Rosebud Reservation, St. Francis, South Dakota, n.d., ca. 1917.

Photographer unknown. BCIM 9-1, 52-02, #10840



Ojibwa Indian Team at Immaculate Conception Mission, Rev. Florian Locnikar, O.S.B., Manager, Red Lake Reservation, Red Lake, Minnesota, ca. 1916-1917. Rev. Simon Lampe, O.S.B., photographer. Related illustration in *The Indian Sentinel*, 1:4(April 1917): 33. Rev. Locnikar came to Red Lake in 1916.

BCIM 9-1, 25-11, #10789



Louis F. Sockalexis (1871-1913, Penobscot), Old Town, Maine, played for the Cleveland "Spiders," which reportedly was posthumously renamed the "Indians," in his honor. Later the press promoted the now controversial caricature, "Chief Wahoo."
Photograph by A.F. Orr, Old Town, Maine, 1912.

BCIM 09-1 23-19, #07600

Sources

- Andrews, Frank. Telephone interview, Albuquerque, New Mexico, March, 2002
- Archambault, Dr. Joalyn. E-mail correspondence, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., March, 2002
- Chronister, Allen. E-mail correspondence, March, 2002
- Conn, Richard, ed. *Circles of the World, Traditional Art of the Plains Indians*, Denver Art Museum, 1982, 66, 140
- Culin, Stewart. *Games of the North American Indians*, University of Nebraska Press, 1992 reprint
- Gill, Joseph, S.J. Telephone interview, Rosebud Reservation, St. Francis, South Dakota, March, 2002
- Gill, Steve. E-mail correspondence, March, 2002
- Haukaas, Tom. E-mail correspondence, March, 2002
- Marshall, Mike. Telephone interview, Buechel Lakota Museum, Rosebud Reservation, St. Francis, South Dakota, March, 2002
- Oxendine, Joseph B. *American Indian Sports Heritage*, Human Kinetics Books, Champaign, Illinois, 1988
- Penzkover, Ann Marie. Conversation, Lac Courte Oreille Ojibwa College, Reserve, Wisconsin, November, 2002
- Sells, Cato. *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, Washington DC, 1914, 26
- Whiting, Joe. Telephone interview, Pine Ridge Reservation, Kyle, South Dakota, March, 2002