

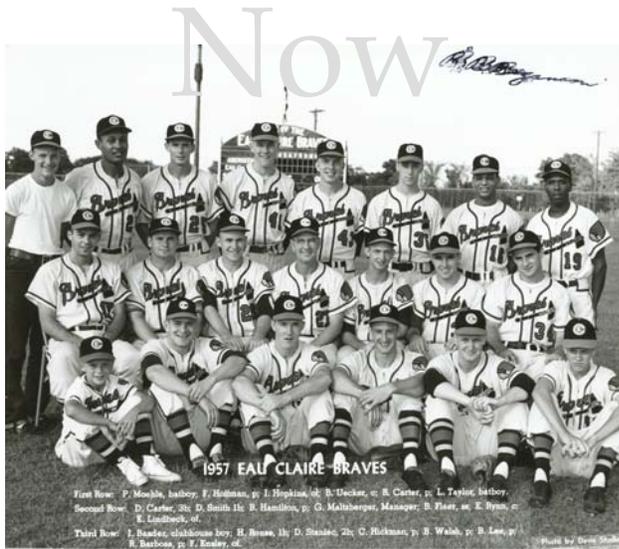
Eau
Claire's
Field
of
Dreams

Field of Dreams

IN EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN

THE HISTORIC CARSON PARK BASEBALL STADIUM

...Then and Then...



Bob Uecker with the 1957 Eau Claire Braves

career included an 18-year stint as a player in the Major Leagues, as well as many years since managing four major league teams.

... And Now

In 1971, the Eau Claire Cavaliers brought amateur baseball back to Carson Park. The Cavaliers featured a mix of Chippewa Valley area players and college ball players. In addition, Carson Park Stadium continues to see regular baseball action from a number of other amateur and school related teams in the region. As many as 200 games a year are played in the stadium.

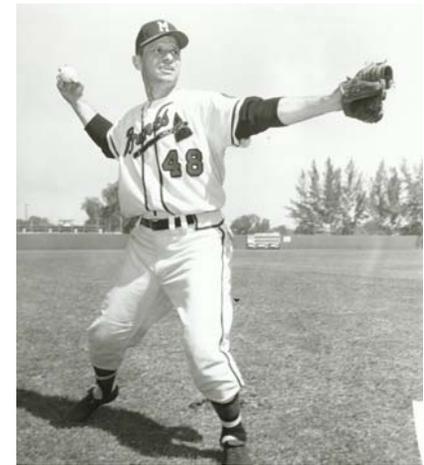
In addition, the stadium plays host to many other community events. Such events include circus shows, community festivals, high school graduations, and a number of local benefit events. Annual attendance at all of these events often tops 75,000 people. People have many fond memories of the stadium and events held there over the years.

Then...

Hank Aaron wasn't the only notable major league player to have played in Carson Park. Through the 1940s and 1950s some of the best young ballplayers from throughout the United States played for the Bears and Braves in Eau Claire.

In 1940, Andy Pafko, who grew up in Boyceville, had his baseball dreams come true in Eau Claire. Andy had a seventeen-year major league career that included a year with the World Champion Milwaukee Braves in 1957.

In 1950, Billy Bruton became the first black player to play for the Bears. Wes Covington, a 1952 teammate of Hank Aaron, went on to a 10-year career with the Milwaukee Braves. In 1956-57, "Mr. Baseball," Bob Uecker, played in Eau Claire and had a brief major league career. Bob made his name as a baseball comedian and an announcer for the Milwaukee Braves. In 1960, Joe Torre led the Northern League in hitting. His



Andy Pafko



Glory Days

Henry Aaron, 1952



Henry Aaron as a Milwaukee Brave



Henry Aaron at statue dedication, 1994

In mid-June 1952, Henry Aaron arrived in Eau Claire from Mobile, Alabama, to join the Eau Claire Class C minor league team. Early in the season he had played for a Negro League team from Indianapolis, when he accepted a \$350 per month contract from the Boston Braves and was assigned to Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Until his first game in Carson Park he had never stepped into the batter's box to face a white pitcher. He hit two run-scoring singles in his first two at-bats and his professional career was underway. Local baseball fans soon were talking about the shy young player from Alabama with the powerful lightening-fast wrists. In the 1952 season with the Bears he made the All-Star team by July, finished with the third best batting average in the league and was named "Rookie of the Year." People who saw Aaron predicted great things for him.

By the next season, he had moved up to a Class A minor league team in Milwaukee and in 1954, he joined the Milwaukee Braves. "Hammerin' Hank" replaced Babe Ruth as baseball's all-time home run king with his 715th home run on April 8, 1974 with the Atlanta Braves. He finished his 22-year major league career as a Milwaukee Brewer and is the all-time leader in home runs with a total of 755. In 1982, he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.



Henry Aaron as a Milwaukee Brave

Glory Days



Eau Claire Bears, 1937.
First team to play in Carson Park.

The “Glory Days” of Eau Claire Baseball, 1933-1962

During the Depression years of the 1930s, baseball became the “national pastime” as Americans tried to forget the hardships in their lives. In 1933, the Northern League was reorganized and the Eau Claire Bears became part of it. From 1933 to 1937 the Eau Claire Bears, (affiliated with the Chicago Cubs) played at Chappel Field on Eau Claire’s north side near the VFW on Starr Avenue.

The need for a new stadium in the early 1930s resulted in the City submitting a proposal to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for funds to build a stadium in Carson Park. The project received funding of \$60,000 and by June of 1937 the Carson Park Stadium was hosting its first game.



Carson Park, c. 1940.



Ariel view of stadium – c. 1960.

The 1930s began a 25-year “love affair” with baseball in Eau Claire. The Eau Claire team had one of the best records in the Northern League with five league titles and 16 winning seasons. Sixteen local “baseball heroes” advanced to the major leagues, more than any other team in the Northern League. Beginning in 1950, the Eau Claire Bears (now affiliated with the Boston Braves) had three consecutive “Rookie of the Year” players, including Henry “Hank” Aaron in 1952. The team changed their name from the Bears to the Braves in 1954 after their parent club, the Boston Braves, moved to Milwaukee in 1953. By 1962, the popularity of local baseball started to fade and the Eau Claire Braves’ season was cancelled.

Early Days



Local players, c. 1920.

The Early Years of Baseball in Eau Claire

The first game of baseball was played in 1839 as an adaptation of the English game of Cricket. Abner Doubleday is credited with inventing the game. It was first played on the East Coast but spread westward after the Civil War in the 1860s. The first Eau Claire baseball team was called the “Clearwater Boys” and they reportedly played their first game in September 1867. Soon thereafter, several other local teams were organized. By 1885, there was a ball field in what is now Owen Park; some games drew as many as 2000 spectators!

By the early 1900s, Eau Claire played in the Wisconsin State League and by 1910 had a team in the new Northern League. These games were played in what was called the “Driving Park” located east of State Street in the Third Ward, but residential

development in the area soon relocated the baseball games to where the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire now stands. In 1922 the Northern League disbanded, but semi-professional baseball was not dead in Eau Claire.



Aerial view of Stadium – 1951.

A Renewed Interest...

In the early 1990s, a renewed interest in the city's baseball heritage centered on the recognition of Henry Aaron's connection to Eau Claire. Jerry Poling, a columnist for the *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, wrote a series of articles reminding folks that Hank Aaron, a living legend, played his first season as a professional in Eau Claire at Carson Park. These articles sparked local interest and an area sculptor was commissioned to create a statue of Aaron as he appeared in 1952. On August 17, 1994, several thousand people came to Carson Park to welcome back one of their favorite sons at the dedication ceremony for the statue.

Building on this awareness, the City of Eau Claire proposed a \$560,000 stadium revitalization project in

1995. Community organizations and hundreds of individuals contributed nearly \$200,000 to assist in the funding. The renovation project was completed in 1998 and included improved seating in the grandstand, a completely remodeled area under the grandstand, and improved handicapped accessibility. The sensitive design for the renovations enabled the historic and architectural character of the stadium to be preserved, while making the experience for fans more comfortable. Today the tradition of Eau Claire baseball is alive and well in Carson Park. The stadium provides a community link to the past and preserves a "field of dreams" for current and future players and fans.

The Carson Park Baseball Stadium is important to the recreational and cultural history of Eau Claire and is one of the last surviving examples of a WPA-era baseball stadium.

Because of this, the stadium is eligible for both the State and National Registers of Historic Places. The State and National Registers are the official lists of architecturally and historically significant properties for the State of Wisconsin and the United States.

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Carson Park Today



Sandstone Stadium...



Stadium under construction – 1936.

The Grand Old Stadium

Carson Park was first developed in 1915, from land donated to the City by an heir of William Carson, a wealthy lumberman from the 1880s. Once the site of a lumber camp and sawmill, the park is surrounded by Half Moon Lake, an oxbow lake of the Chippewa River. Back in the lumbering days, Half Moon Lake served as a holding pond for the sawn logs awaiting the trip downriver.

During the Depression Years of the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt developed the Work's Progress Administration (WPA) as a tool to create jobs. Seeing the benefits of this program, the city of Eau Claire submitted a proposal to the WPA to build a stadium in

Carson Park that would seat over 1500 fans. The simple, but elegantly designed stadium was constructed of sandstone quarried from a site near Downsville, Wisconsin, about 30 miles west of Eau Claire. By June 1937, the stadium was ready to host its first game.

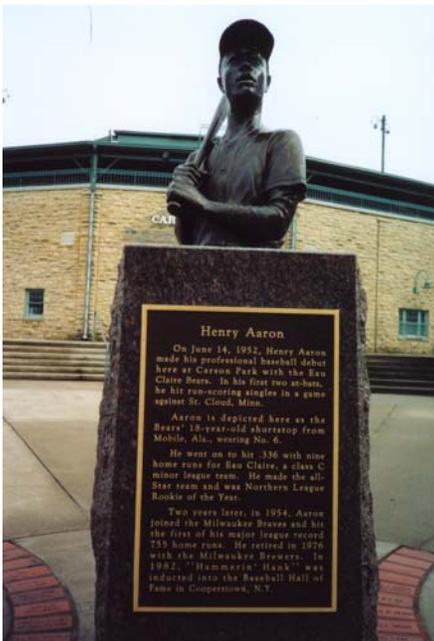
The first season of baseball at Carson Park was a resounding success. The players liked the southwest-northeast orientation that shaded them from the late afternoon sun. In addition, fans and players alike enjoyed the wooded, park-like surroundings of Half Moon Lake. For 65 years the traditions of Eau Claire baseball have included the massive stone stadium in Carson Park.

special thanks

Acknowledgments

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