

A History of The HoHoKam of Mesa

By Tom Rhodes, February, 1997

INTRODUCTION

Spring training baseball fans often comment on what a well-oiled machine the Ho Ho Kam of Mesa is. We have a viable parking procedure, our ushers know the geography of the stadium and the games usually being on time. The Big Ho is a personable fellow who gives a nice welcoming speech, and the singer of The National Anthem remembers the words and sings on key. If the Cubs win, it's wonderful. But even if they don't, it's another great day at the ball park.

By any measure the Ho Ho Kams are a very successful volunteer organization. Each member knows what job is to be done, when it is to be done and how to do it. None of them expects any form of remuneration. Each member is there from love of the organization, love of Mesa, love of baseball, and love of the Cubs. As this history will tell you, however, what today's visitor sees has not always been the case. Spring training at HoHoKam Park today is the product of experiment, change, trial and error. This is the story of the evolution of the organization from a loosely knit group of visionary young Mesans into today's "well-oiled machine." This is the story of those 35 charter HoHoKams and the hundreds who have worn the red shirt in the nearly 50 years which have ensued.

This is the story of the HoHoKam.

CHAPTER ONE "PREHISTORIC TIMES"

Abner Doubleday is often credited with inventing the game of baseball in Cooperstown, NY in 1839. Doubleday did write an early rule book, but it is more likely that the game merely evolved. Rounders, stickball and cricket are all games from which baseball takes bits and pieces. In 1845, Alexander Cartwright, a New Yorker who loved sport, founded the first club with the expressed purpose of playing baseball. He also wrote a rule book for the game. Other than these dates, no one really knows when or where a ball was hit by a bat for the very first time.

There are, however, dates which can be stated in fact. For example, the National League of major league baseball was organized in 1876. Among the first franchises of the National League was the Chicago White Stockings. In the next few years, this club had several nicknames (including "The Orphans"). The nickname "Cubs" finally landed in 1900, and stuck in 1907. (The team which we

know today as the Chicago White Sox was begun, along with the American League, in 1900).

For years, major league baseball began as soon as the last snow had melted and the mud had dried enough to allow for the ball to roll. For professional and amateur alike, the season started just as soon as it could, but it couldn't start soon enough.

Working off the effects of a long winter of good food, good life and little, if any, exercise took some time. It was not unusual for a good team to be not-so-good until a month or so into the season. After several years of this early-season fumbling and stumbling, an enterprising franchise owner decided that his players would play much better if they had some warm-up time prior to the beginning of the season. If he took his players to a place where the sun shone early in the year, they could work out the kinks of winter and get ready to play ball. This, of course, would give his team an edge in the early part of the season. It didn't take other franchise holders long to see the wisdom in this strategy. Thus spring training was born.

Since most of the franchises in those days were located in the east and midwest, Florida was the nearest warm-weather location. For some time virtually all spring training activities took place in "The Sunshine State." March brought throngs of baseball players and fans. There was plenty of competition for exhibition games, but facilities were primitive and space at a premium.

It wasn't until the 1940's that Horace Stoneham grew tired of the Florida rat race. After looking for a suitable warm weather site, he finally decided on the Phoenix area to train his Giants. For several years Stoneham and the Giants enjoyed the warmth and hospitality of The Valley of The Sun, but with little competition.

Although the Cleveland Indians had established their spring camp at Hi Corbett Field in Tucson, the logistical problems of holding exhibition games between the two teams were great. So the two teams had lots of workouts and lots of inter-squad games and a few games between themselves.

It was clear that more teams were needed to make spring training in Arizona viable. In 1950, several events occurred which would work together to entice more owners to make the westward move.

Stoneham's Giants were in Arizona, but had little competition. The Yankees had plenty of competition in Florida, but owner Del Webb, whose Arizona construction business was booming, wanted them to be where he could see them. The solution was a one year swap. The Giants trained in Florida that year, and the Yankees in Phoenix.

At the same time, Phil Wrigley's Cubs had been training on Catalina Island, California. Being so secluded, the Cubs had absolutely no competition. Because Wrigley wanted his boys to have some game experience prior to Opening Day, he broke camp early and brought the team to Arizona, where they played several games with the Yankees and the Indians, as well as the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League.

The Oaks had trained that spring in Mesa. Their arrival was due to the work of Virgil Crismon (Mayor of Mesa), Bill Asher (a vice president of the Valley National Bank) and Dwight Patterson (a young rancher from Mesa). These three had taken some huge risks with the Oaks and with the Mesa Chamber of Commerce. The season was not as big a success as all had hoped, and the Oaks never returned to Mesa. In addition, the Chamber of Commerce lost money on the Oaks and also lost their interest in spring baseball.

During that spring, Patterson became acquainted with Webb and Wrigley and it didn't take long for a deal to be struck between the Cubs and the Mesa triumverate. Late in 1951, the Cubs announced that they would hold their spring training in 1952 at Rendezvous Park in Mesa, AZ.

Thus the stage is set

CHAPTER TWO

THE RETURN OF THE HO HO KAM

Around the time of the birth of Christ, a tribe of agriculturally based nomads arrived in the Salt River Valley. They are known today as the "HoHoKam," or "those who vanished." Although little is known of these ancient ones, it was these industrious people who dug the rudiments of the irrigation system which makes possible the life we know today in the Valley of the Sun. In the 15th century AD, true to their name, this tribe vanished from the Valley. Where they went (or why) is unknown.

In 1951, in a totally different form, the HoHoKam returned. In May of that year, Dwight Patterson and 34 other public spirited Mesans gathered together and created a special events committee of the Mesa Chamber of Commerce. They called themselves the HoHoKams, and their leader bore the title of "Chief Big Ho."

Although it wasn't specifically stated, the sole purpose for this committee was to attract major league baseball to Mesa, in the spring of the year, to train for the upcoming season. Mesa would provide the venue, and some major league team would provide the talent.* Although the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League was the first team to train in Mesa, it was the Chicago Cubs which put the town on the spring training map.

It was only right and natural that Patterson be elected the first Chief Big Ho. It was he, after all, who convinced P.K. Wrigley to take a chance on tiny Mesa as a spring training site. It was also he who organized the Chamber of Commerce committee into the HoHoKam. Patterson was Chief Big Ho for each of the first 5 years that the HoHo's existed. All told, he has served as Chief Big Ho for a total of 8 years.

That first crop of HoHoKams consisted of bankers, lawyers, journalists, farmers, ranchers, retailers, insurance salesmen and at least one politician. They came from all walks of life to present their professional talents, and, for the most part, they had been members of the Mesa Jaycees. Together they put forth a great deal of sweat for the betterment of the organization and the community.

In the beginning it was as it is today. The HoHoKam, like the industrious souls who came before, do virtually everything necessary to insure the success of their endeavor. In the ancient case, the HoHoKam dug the irrigation ditches that brought the water that insured the success of their crops.

The modern version of the HoHoKam see to it that the cars are parked and that the tickets are sold. They also take the tickets at the gate, and seat the patrons in the proper location. In the early years, they also sold programs and refreshments. Today they still sell the programs, but leave the goodies to professionals.

As already stated, Patterson was the first Chief Big Ho. (A list of all the past Big Ho's can be found at the end of this work.) The other officers of the organization are the Little Ho, the Sachem, the Kam and the Wampum. Among Native American tribes a Sachem is a wise counselor who advises the leadership of the tribe. In the HoHoKam of Mesa, the Sachem is the secretary. The Wampum is the keeper of the treasury. The Kam is the social director.

The first Little Ho was Mesa attorney John Rhodes. Realizing that being a leader of the HoHoKam was going to entail a lot of work, Rhodes ran for and was elected to Congress in November of 1952. He was replaced as Little Ho by Lyle Stevens.

The office of Sachem was occupied from the founding of the organization until 1965, by LeRoy Kellis. For the next 14 years that office was held by Howard Godfrey. Since 1979, the office has been held by a variety of HoHo's, including Guy Wolf, the current Sachem.

The names of the keepers of the Wampum have been lost in the mists of time. For the last several years the Wampum has been Phil Kellis. Phil followed Dale Johnson and Howard Godfrey as minders of the wealth.

During the first several seasons, the HoHo's served an additional function other than the day-to-day sponsorship of the spring training games. They also served as an auxiliary funding source for repairs and expansions to Rendezvous Park, as well as guarantors of a minimum gate for the games.

In the 1952 season, Rendezvous Park held a maximum of 3,000 people. Seating consisted of wooden planked bleachers and folding chairs in the boxes. Clearly the capacity of the stadium had to be expanded. In addition, Mr. Wrigley wanted a dormitory built to house his players. This expansion was accomplished via a joint obligation shouldered by the Cubs, the city and the HoHoKam. According to the Chicago Daily News, the city put up \$30,000.00, Mr. Wrigley put up \$40,000.00, and the HoHoKam found a way to provide \$50,000.00. Because money was tight in Mesa in 1952, the surviving HoHoKams interviewed for this history still marvel at the fact that they were willing to take this risk. Somehow they met their commitment, and the project was completed.

There have been many other expansions and improvements since, each of which has been financed, in whole or in part, by the HoHoKam. Charter member Chris Fluhr and past Big Ho Howard Godfrey tell of one expansion which required each member to sign a personal guarantee of \$3,000.00. Each of these gentlemen was willing to take on the obligation, but neither was willing to tell his wife what he had done!

One of the traditions of the HoHoKam was born in those early years. In 1957, Kam Ray Swift hatched a brilliant idea. The season was over and the long hot summer was upon us. The HoHo's and their wives had had a wonderful spring, but had little reason or opportunity to socialize as a group during the "off season." A weekend series between the Cubs and Giants was coming up, and it seemed logical that the HoHo's visit with their team, to be sure that business was being conducted properly. Thus the first HoHoKam Business Trip was organized. The term "monkey" has never been associated with this now long-standing tradition. This first trip consisted of a long, hot and very fun bus ride to the Bay Area. Subsequent trips to San Francisco used the train and airplanes as conveyances. The organization has also traveled to San Diego and Chicago. But it is always business, business, business! Being a HoHoKam has always been a great honor. It's also always been great fun!

Those early years were ones in which the Cubs players and the HoHo's bonded together and many lasting friendships were formed. Among the older Ho's are memories of meeting the train at the Southern Pacific depot at the beginning of the spring season. There are also stories of car pools to ferry players and Ho's out to The Buckhorn for steak fries.

After the dormitory was completed, life revolved around Rendezvous Park. Spring training for players and members alike was a full time endeavor. Work

occasionally reared its ugly head, but putting on the spring show was the essence of life for the early HoHoKam.

All good things must, it seems, come to an end. The relationship between the Cubs and the HoHo's was friendly and on an even keel until 1965. In that year John Holland, a close associate of P.K. Wrigley, grew dissatisfied with conditions in Mesa. He convinced Mr. Wrigley that the team would be better suited in Southern California. After the 1965 spring training season the Cubs announced that they would move their 1966 camp to Anaheim, California.

There was great sadness in Mesa, particularly among the HoHoKam. For the next 3 springs there was no major league baseball in the spring in Mesa. The HoHoKam did little more than have an occasional meeting or social gathering. The leadership of the organization, starring Chief Big Ho J.W. "Dan" Boone, never gave up hope of finding another franchise to train in Mesa.

*The telling of the story of baseball in Mesa is not the intent of this work. The history of baseball in Mesa is told in Lester "Truck" Dayton's wonderful book Truck's Home Plate, which is published by the author, and available from him at 138 West First Street, # 6, Mesa, AZ 85201.

CHAPTER THREE THE FINLEY YEARS

In 1968, after three seasons with no spring baseball in Mesa, Dwight Patterson and the current Chief Big Ho, J.W. "Dan" Boone, convinced Charles O. Finley, the controversial owner of the Oakland Athletics, to hold spring training in Mesa. Strangely enough, it was several steel pylons in the outfield at Scottsdale Municipal Stadium which make Finley decide on the move. These metal posts held up the storm fencing which constituted the outfield boundaries of the field. "Charley O." felt that these were a hazard to his outfielders, and requested that Scottsdale Parks and Recreation either put in a warning track, or remove the posts. Each request was denied.

For want of a little foresight on the part of Scottsdale officials, the A's announced that their 1969 spring training would take place at Rendezvous Park in Mesa. No sooner had this announcement been made than the Cubs, who were supremely sorry they had left Arizona, decided to return. Scottsdale was vacant, and therefore won this plum. Incidentally, when spring ball began in 1969, the steel pylons and storm fence were gone. They were replaced by a regular outfield fence and a warning track!

For the most part, the A's were a bust in Mesa. It was through no fault of their own. After all, in 1972, 73 and 74, the A's won the World Series. In spite of their success, they were never able to fill either Rendezvous Park or, later, HoHoKam

Park. When asked why this might be, several past Chief Big Ho's have opined that the A's were not a crowd-pleasing team, and had little following with the midwesterners who typically winter in Mesa. Nonetheless, one very important event occurred during the Finley years which lead us to where we are today. The Centennial of Mesa occurred in 1978. In anticipation of this event, several changes took place in our town during 1976. Mayor Wayne Pomeroy, himself a HoHoKam, decided that the town needed a community center. The logical spot for this center was downtown, and the logical part of downtown was Rendezvous Park. The old municipal swimming pool had been condemned, as had the skating rink. Each had been torn down. The site was perfect. The only problem was the baseball stadium.

Fortunately, the city had anticipated the need for a new spring training site. For all its charm and historical significance, Rendezvous Park was woefully inadequate. In 1975, Pomeroy's predecessor, Mayor Eldon Cooley, caused the city to purchase a plot of land north of Brown Road and east of Center Street (across from the municipal cemetery). It was here that the first HoHoKam Park was erected. It was ready for play during the spring of 1977. On a very sad day late in 1976, Rendezvous Park was razed.

As the years went by, it became more and more apparent that the synergy between Mesa and the A's was not working. After the 1978 season, Finley and the HoHoKam agreed to a parting.

Chief Big Ho Bob Peterson, together with the ever-present Dwight Patterson, negotiated a return of the Cubs to Mesa.

"After all the work was done and the papers signed, I turned over the job of Chief Big Ho to Howard Godfrey," remembers Peterson faceously. "In February, when the Cubs arrived in Mesa, they presented a beautiful golf bag to the Chief Ho. I did all the work, and Godfrey got the treasure. I've bearly spoken to the SOB since!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"THE CUBS RETURN"

In his welcoming letter to the membership in February, 1979, Big Ho (the "Chief" had disappeared) Howard Godfrey wrote: 'Well, it is that time of the year again,

but the major difference is we have a ball club with a sound history and a semblance of an organization with which to work. We are making considerable changes in the ball park for the Cub organization and it is going to be lots different."

With this pronouncement, stanza two of the saga of the Cubs in Mesa began. Thanks in no small way to the influence of Bob Kennedy, the new manager of the Cubs, Mr. William Wrigley, the new owner of the club and Big Ho Bob Peterson, the decision was made to move back to the "friendly confines" of Mesa. Kennedy, who had been the manager of the A's just before their stay in our town, had come to love Mesa and the HoHoKam. When he had the chance to prevail on Billy Wrigley, he did so. Bob Peterson and the HoHo's, never truly satisfied with the A's relationship, were only too happy with this decision.

This saga could easily be seen as one of the Cubs and HoHoKam Park. This stadium which had its inaugural season in 1977, was opened for the Athletics. Much like a second wife, the Cubs were never very fond of this edifice. It was, after all, built for that other ball team. At the behest of the Wrigleys (and later the Chicago Tribune), numerous additions, corrections and other alterations to HoHoKam Park were made, but it never quite succeeded in pleasing the Cubs. In the beginning, HoHoKam Park stadium consisted of the block grandstand building and the baseball field. Inside the building were locker rooms for home and visiting teams, a concession stand, rest rooms, a press box and, most important of all, the HoHo (aka "El Perro Rojo") room. In the ensuing 18 years, right and left field bleachers, a picnic pavilion, more rest rooms, vastly improved home team locker facilities, batting cages, practice infield, practice field and enlarged parking areas were added.

In the 1987 remodeling of the Cubs locker room, Big Ho Dale Riggins discovered a floor covering which would allow the ball players to walk around in their cleats without endangering their health or the floor. This rubberized surface was thought to be revolutionary, and Riggins got many accolades for his ingenuity. Now, several years later, he is willing to admit that the inspiration for this floor came from a new horse trailer he had bought. The greats of major league baseball were walking around the locker room on the same substance that Dale's horse rode around on. Thus the mighty don't fall!

Of all the changes which have taken place over the years, perhaps the least expensive and most meaningful was unveiled in 1991. In that year, on the first day of spring training, Big Ho John O'Neill announced that henceforth the name of the facility would be "Dwight W. Patterson Field at HoHoKam Park." A fitting tribute to our great founder.

Along with several other Ex-Big Ho's, Mr. Riggins notes that the HoHoKam have had several negotiations and renegotiations with the Cubs organization over the years. There have been times when we weren't sure whether we much liked the Cubs. There were times when it was obvious that the Cubs didn't care much for us. One thing has been abundantly clear forever: The Cubs didn't like HoHoKam Park worth a farthing.

Ex-Big Ho Fernando Guerrero remembers renegotiation fondly. In 1982, Guerrero and Cubs General Manager Dallas Green sat down in Anthony's Restaurant (on top of the First National Bank Building) and discussed the relationship between the Cubs and the HoHoKam. They decided on the things which needed to be changed, and then shook hands. A deal had been made. Big Ho John O'Neill remembers his renegotiation experience as one in which Cubs ownership attempted to take complete control over spring training. These were tumultuous times during which conflicting signals came from various parts of the Chicago Tribune family. "We'd get one story from Larry Himes (chief of baseball operations), and then another from on high in the Tribune organization." Fun was not allowed. A hand shake deal was certainly not enough.

O'Neill says: "We poured a million and a half into that old stadium, not to mention thousands into community service and what we put into Rendezvous. Nobody made us do these things. We did them on our own. That makes me proud." Thus it was that with the renegotiation among the Cubs, the HoHoKam and the City of Mesa which took place in 1995, the Cubs agreed to stay in Mesa for 20 years in return for a new, state-of-the-art stadium. This set of negotiations were not as contentious as those described by O'Neill. Nor were they as pleasant and simple as those described by Guerrero. According to Ex-Big Ho Dennis Hawker, the HoHo's have given up a fair amount of their autonomy, but relations with the Cubs are better today than they have been in many years.

Current Big Ho Bob Kernagis agrees. He notes that during the most recent Business Trip to Chicago, the HoHoKam were treated with an unprecedented level of respect by the Cubs organization.

On the Saturday after the last game of the 1996 spring training season, the HoHo's held a work day. All of the paraphernalia amassed over 18 years in the old HoHoKam Park was boxed up and stored. Several days later the wrecking crew arrived on the site. Within days the old stadium was but a memory. Not long thereafter, the new stadium began to emerge from the ground. Over the next 10 months, a new and finer HoHoKam Park began to take shape.

On Thursday, February 20, 1997, the new HoHoKam Park, a fabulous 12,600 seat facility with many varied uses, was unveiled to the Cubs and the City. A new era had dawned. Now all that remains to be done is for the Cubs to win the World Series

CONCLUSION DWIGHT AND DON

Throughout the gathering of the information contained in this essay, the story of two men have occurred and reoccurred over and over again. Dwight Patterson is, and always has been, the Chief Big Ho of the HoHoKam. Perhaps this is why the word "Chief" phased itself out over the years with later leaders of our organization. Had it not been for Dwight's drive, vision and leadership, the HoHoKam of Mesa might easily have gone the way of their ancient namesakes. Dwight always has been, as he is today, the inspiration of the HoHo's. As Albert Einstein once noted, genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. In our case, I'm not sure of the percentages. But there can be no question but that to a great degree the perspiration of the HoHoKam was provided by the late Don Fuller.

In the preparation of this work, I've relied to a great extent on the memories of several of our brethren. Chris Fluhr, Howard Godfrey, Bob Peterson, Fernando Guerrero, Sr., Dale Riggins, John O'Neill, Bob Kernagis, Clare Felstead, George Bliss, Lee Roy Kellis, Phil Kellis each have had their input. An afternoon with Dwight helped put the whole thing in perspective. Special mention is due to Lester "Truck" Dayton, who gave me time, pictures, newspaper clippings, anecdotes and, most of all, encouragement. An essay written in 1987, by the late Dick Dozer on the philanthropic activities of the HoHoKam was also very useful. Each of these gentlemen have been of tremendous value to me, and have my undying gratitude.

My biggest regret is that this project didn't get started a year earlier. If it had, I might have had the help and memories of Don Fuller. Don passed away last summer.

I had known Mr. Fuller my whole life. Some of my earliest memories are of shopping with my mother at Fuller's Fine Foods. It's ironic that my need for Don's insight came some 50 years after we met, but less than one year after his death. A former colleague of mine once noted that "first you have all the time in the world, and then you have no time." Sic transit gloria!

Thus it is that this history, and much of the reason for it, are dedicated to Dwight Patterson and Don Fuller. Two remarkable men for whom all HoHoKam, the City of Mesa and nearly 5 decades of baseball fans are grateful.