

In the spring of 1946, baseball was born again. World War II was finally over. The boys were finally back. Man after man, boy after boy, each of them was back to play on the field again. It was as though life could begin for the very first time, as though the war could be placed in the past. And while everyday supplies were short, memories were long, and each of them knew there was something magical in the antics of the game that could bring them back to themselves.

So many men sought the field that there was, in fact, a deluge of players. Some were destined for stardom. Others played more on prayer. Some who were ready for the Big Leagues were relegated instead to the minors, bumped by their youth as older prospects back from the war were re-signed. During the war, while the major leagues had continued play, most minor leagues had shut down. Suddenly they were back up and running, with a plethora of players to run with. And for all the players – or almost all – this is what they lived for, had waited for. This was a part of their destiny. To live in a country that went to war. To love those they loved. And to play ball.

Communities in 1946 loved minor league ball. It was before the proliferation of television, so that major leaguers had not yet stolen that kind of daily loyalty that belongs to the home team. And in the still-somewhat-wild West, where the major leagues had not yet migrated, the local minor league teams did well. For even though there were teams that played like the Big Leagues – like the Oakland “Oaks” and the Seattle Rainiers – they weren’t absorbed into the major leagues yet, and they still were hundreds of miles away from many communities. So small towns loved minor league ball, and loved their local players like they would love a hero coming to save the day. Newspapers made sure of it, as they wrote the stories that put townsfolk on the edge of a spring full of hope.

Spokane, Washington, was such a town, and The Spokesman-Review was such a paper. On the opposite side of the state from Seattle, Spokane was a small town’s small town – the hub of its locale, a river running through it, mountains in the distance, with the wilderness of Canada just to its north. It was a town that was truly at the center of its own universe, dedicated to its way of life, and anxious to see baseball begin.

The town was particularly eager to come back to its modern Ferris Field – nearly a decade old in actual years, but only scarcely used for four years before baseball ended and war began. Baseball just had a way of feeling bigger out at Ferris Field, is what the townsfolk said amongst themselves. At least that’s what I heard them say.



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Everyone agreed that the still-fresh field was an improvement over Old Nat Park, which had gone into disarray, as baseball gradually left there in the years before Ferris Field arrived. Baseball was so long gone at Nat Park that firemen burned down the grandstand there as a field exercise on December 15th that past winter, just 10 days before Christmas and 22 days before January 6th – the Day of Epiphanies – when all that must be revealed can be revealed in a to-the-surface sort of way. And after they demolished the grandstand, they cooked marshmallows over the embering coals. It was quite a sight to see.

I did hear some say that they still missed that old baseball field, which sat in an amusement park on the edge of the river, miles downstream from the center of town and from its waterfall where tribes gathered after the harvest. Old Nat Park may have had its bumps and scars, but it carried with it a legacy of birth, since Spokane had become Spokane just about the time that baseball had arrived and had found its way to the edge of town and to the river rushing beneath it.

It seemed to me that some felt it was abandonment to leave the park behind like they had done when Ferris Field was built. But then I heard others point to modernity, a move away from the years when Old Nat Park had been a place for those who played the game as pros. And then, as consolation, they would, here and there, nod their heads knowingly and remind the nostalgics of Nat Park's *other* legacy. *That* was a legacy to leave behind, they would say, to comfort their comrades who held to old ways.

And it was true, that it would be best to escape that other legacy. For the fire station exercise wasn't the first time those stands had burned. Two Fourths of July – one right before the century mark, one right after it – had also resulted in immolated stands. The second time, in 1906, the fire happened so fast that they say the players barely escaped, were saved only because one of the managers had chased his way back under the stands to the dressing rooms, searing his hands along the way, just to warn them they had to get out. With or without clothes on: get out now. Hard to forget *that* legacy.

I heard a few people, usually the nostalgics, say that the fires at Old Nat Park had just been baseball's way of sympathizing with Spokane's own penchant for burning down, which it had done back in 1889, when its name had been Spokane Falls, and in the summer, when baseball players play. And now that Spokane and baseball were both here to stay, well – it wouldn't, couldn't happen again. But then others said that fire was the park's curse, not worth the risk such fires likely cause. Still others just rolled their eyes



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and patiently explained how fires just happened to be the natural fate for wooden stands, how summer just happened to be the time that fires occurred, and how the Fourth of July just happened to be the summer holiday that brings together that always potentially dangerous combination of careless young boys and firecrackers.

Whichever way, we all knew that the firefighters' exercise at Old Nat Park – in December, not July – had burned that grandstand down for the last time. And what was left, miles away, and not near the river at all, was the town's beautiful, smooth, modern Ferris Field. It was on that field that we impatiently waited for the season to begin. And so it was that, by March of 1946, a month before the season's opening night, nearly every morning's sports section carried some sort of update on the home team – the Spokane Indians. The Tribe. The Spokane Nine.

For that is what the newspaper called them. The Spokane Nine. There was nothing special in the name. They called a Tacoma basketball team the "Tacoma Five," a Hawaii football team the "Hawaiian Eleven." It didn't matter that the nine, or five, or eleven was technically an incorrect number, given how substitute players raised any team's number higher than the minimum needed for the sport in question. It was just the way they wrote headlines then.

And calling this team "The Tribe" made sense. Just like the Cleveland Indians, only with a serious "S" on their chests, to represent "Spokane," a real Indian tribe located in and around the same-named city. Not starkly in the middle of their chests, like Superman, but off to the side (humbly, perhaps) – though most of us could have sworn that the players *were* Supermen, regardless of where the "S" was sewn on the shirt.

And sometimes the paper called them the "Spokanes," after the tribe itself. This made "The Spokane Nine" a little more special than other numbered names, since Spokane was the city but also the tribe, and if you called them the Spokane Nine you were, in a way, calling them the Indians.

And sometimes they called them "nine boys" too – an affectionate, almost possessive term, even if the word "possess" is too optimistic. Really, can one ever possess nine boys? Isn't it just a lot more likely that any group of boys that grows to nine or more is out of the reach of any kind of centralized control?

Spokane called them the boys. Just that – the boys. We did love them so.



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