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The story of fast pitch softball leagues among Mexican American communities in the Midwestern United States goes back at least 70 years. This exhibition features the teams that developed in these communities on both sides of the Kansas and Missouri state lines. It chronicles the development of the game from its pre-Columbian past to the United States, following the mass migration of Mexicans during the Mexican Revolution. The exhibition provides historical context on the baseball leagues and fast pitch softball leagues established by the Mexican American workers and families who settled in the Midwest.

The exhibition also features the premier of Mexican American Fast Pitch Softball Leagues: Connecting Communities Across the Midwest, a documentary film tracing the development of the Mexican American fast pitch softball leagues of the Midwest, and featuring oral histories by former players, photographs, and other human interest accounts. The film tells the story of how the game brought Mexican American communities together across state lines.

Pre-Columbian Ballgame in Mesoamerica

Ballgames throughout history have been a ceremonial event which tied different communities together. Long before Europeans arrived on the shores of what were to become North, Central, and South America, indigenous people were engaging in communal ballgames. Historical records from Mesoamerica indicate that ballgames were generally the culmination of a period of feasting, trading, and social activities. Some feel that the ballgames were a way of integrating the various interdependent villages with tournaments between teams from different villages. The tradition of community involvement in ballgames is still strong today.

“The Mesoamerican Ballgame
is the oldest known sport in the Americas. It originated in southern Mexico approximately 3,700 years ago. For many pre-Columbian cultures, such as the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec, it was a ritual, political, and social activity that involved the whole population.”
Following President James Polk’s war on Mexico, which was concluded with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, and later, the Gadsden Purchase in 1853, approximately 300,000 Mexican nationals found themselves living within the United States. Throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century, Mexican migration to the United States was unrestricted. From 1910 to 1930, more than one million Mexicans migrated to the United States. Later in the 20th century, immigration law, such as the Emergency Quota Act, were passed. Mexicans were exempt from many of these immigration restrictions due to the labor shortage caused by WWI. Railway, agricultural, mining, and other industries hired and transported many Mexicans, mainly men, to the United States to work for them. The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) also fueled the northward migration of families seeking refuge from the war.

“Mexican immigrants obtained work in the slaughterhouses and meat packing plants of Wilson and Company, Swift and Company, Cudahy, and the Omaha Company in Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas and Iowa. They established settlements near the packing plants in Omaha, Kansas City, Sioux City and Sioux Falls. Many meat packers and their families became permanent residents of the Great Plains.”

Bringing Their Love of the Game with Them

The Liga Mexicana de Béisbol (LMB), one of three Triple-A minor leagues in organized baseball, was formed on February 24, 1924 with six teams. Led by sports chronicler Alejandro Aguilar Reyes, known as "Nano Fay," and former baseball player and journalist Ernesto Carmona, both men, with their extensive knowledge of baseball, established the statutes and regulations of the LMB. Nano Fay was the first LMB President (1925–1926), followed by Carmona, who held the position on and off from 1927 to 1940. Nano Fay also created the Mexican Baseball Hall of Fame.

The first championship game was held on June 28, 1925 with the six teams competing. Today there are sixteen teams in the LMB, divided equally into a north and a south zone, the champions of which meet to contest a best-of-seven game playoff series. The season begins in mid-March with the playoffs running through mid-August. As the league celebrates its 90th year in 2015, Mexican Americans also celebrate 70 years of playing fast pitch softball across the United States.
The Kansas City area has long been home to a vibrant and growing Latino community. The earliest settlers of Hispanic origin came to the area via the Santa Fe Trail. Because of the WWII labor shortage in the United States, Mexican workers were transported by the Santa Fe Railroad from El Paso, Texas, to jobs throughout the Midwest. Strong settlements sprouted in Topeka and Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri.

The land surrounding the rail yards in the Argentine district of Kansas City, KS soon became a major settlement for Mexican immigrants. Workers and their families were housed in shacks or boxcars provided by the Santa Fe Railroad. By 1927, 91% of all track laborers in the Kansas City area were Mexican.

The first migrants provided a dedicated manual workforce for the railroads, and many manufacturing and processing enterprises, including meat packing, steel, and agricultural. By the end of WWII, many migrants were promoted to management-level jobs, and their families were fully established in areas beyond Argentine, such as Armourdale in Kansas City, KS and the Westside of Kansas City, MO.

For early immigrants, life in the metro area was often difficult and fraught with segregation and discrimination in many public accommodations. Segregated schools and churches were the norm. Immigrant communities were forced to form alternative mutual protective organizations, like the Union Cultural Mexicana (UCM), in order to provide credit unions, burial insurance policies, recreational organizations, and social/cultural expressions. The UCM eventually became involved in the local political process. Other organizations including Catholic schools, civic organizations, and Protestant missions provided support to immigrant families in the form of education for their children, English language classes, manual arts programs, and recreational activities.

As the Mexican population grew, so did projects to help “Americanize” their communities. Ball parks were built for children to learn and play American baseball. These parks soon became popular community gathering spots, where neighborhoods came together to support their favorite teams, and celebrate their unique culture.
Ballgames have a long and rich history of bringing communities together. Despite usually labor-intensive jobs, Mexican Americans still found time to come together and experience the pleasures of ballgames with family and community. As early as 1919, Mexican immigrants formed baseball teams and leagues throughout the Midwest.

With the absence of male workers who were away fighting in WWI, many Mexican American women entered the workforce. While there seemed to be little time, some women found time and joined softball leagues. The first official women’s softball team in the United States was organized in 1895. Back in the early days of women’s softball, a slow pitch was encouraged because it was believed that a fast pitch might break a woman’s bone.

After the war, a little slower game, close in style to baseball, began gaining popularity among Mexican American girls: fast pitch softball. In a fast-pitch softball game, the ball is still thrown underhand as in softball, but the speed of the ball is greatly accelerated. Men’s teams formed around this new sport. Regional tournaments sprang up in small towns and large cities hosting what was affectionately called the “Brown Circuit.” These tournaments lasted for nearly 50 years.

The few remaining Mexican American fast pitch softball teams today survive because of strong family and community support of the players. Some of these teams have third generation players on their rosters.
In a forthcoming book on Mexican American fast pitch softball, University of Kansas professor Dr. Ben Chappell states, “...thus, while documenting a cultural practice that is held dear to thousands of people, but as yet not archived in any unified way, my book will advance understanding of the resourceful ways that Mexican Americans have confronted the challenges of maintaining a distinct identity in an unequal society...”

What the photos, artifacts, and documentary film in this exhibition demonstrate is that Mexican Americans have made their mark on one of America’s favorite sports: fast pitch softball. The future of Mexican American participation in fast pitch softball is yet to be seen; but, one thing is certain: “the love of the game” continues in the hearts and minds of those who played the game or supported their hometown teams.

Today, many of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of early Mexican immigrants play on little league, high school, and college fast pitch softball teams across the United States. Some play to compete, and others just for “the love of the game.”

Mexican American fast pitch softball leagues have declined over the last two decades. We must continue to tell our stories of the “glory days” of the game. Doing so may inspire our young people to play and experience the pride, fun, and togetherness that the game provides to the community. The joy of hitting the ball as far as you can is a thrill that our young people should not miss.
History of Softball

Softball is said to have started when Harvard and Yale alumni walked at Chicago’s Faragut Boat Club for the score on Thanksgiving Day, 1887. When a Yale supporter heard his alma mater had won, he teasingly threw a ball-up boxing glove at a friend from Harvard. The Harvard fan used a broom stick to hit the glove back at his tormentor. Someone yelled, “ballgame” and the first softball game started.

The game quickly leaked to outsiders in Chicago and, eventually, throughout the Midwest. As the history of softball shaped over the next decade, the game went under the guise of “indoor baseball,” “kitten baseball,” “diamond ball,” “mush ball,” and “pumpkin ball.” In 1925, Walter Hakanan coined the term “softball” while representing the YMCA at a National Recreation Congress meeting, and by 1930, the term stuck as the sport’s official name.

In 1934, the Joint Rules Committee on Softball collaborated to create a set of standardized rules. Up until this point, the game was being played with varied rules, player positions, and ball sizes.

The original softball used by the Faragut Boat Club was 16 inches in circumference. However, Lewis Robe, Sr., the man responsible for organizing softball games for firemen in Minneapolis, used a 12-inch ball. Robe’s ball won out as preferred softball size. Today official softball sizes range from 10 to 12 inches.

By the 1940s, fast pitch began to dominate the game. Commercial semi-pro fast pitch softball leagues sprang up all over the country in large cities and small towns alike. These were men’s and women’s leagues, and it was not unusual for both to be playing on the same night in a “doubleheader.” The speed of these games was very popular with spectators. The women’s games were popular and fun to watch, but the real draws were the men’s games. Pitchers could hurl the ball in excess of 85 mph at a batter 46 feet away, and strike out 15 to 20 batters a game. To make the game even more exciting, a talented pitcher could make the ball perform some baffling aerobatics on its journey to the batter’s box.

The Amateur Softball Association was formed in 1934, and it held a national tournament each year to determine the best softball team in the nation. Soon these state and regional tournaments all over the country selecting teams to vie for the coveted National Championship. Competition was fierce with teams competing not only on the field but also in recruiting the best “fireball” hurler. It was not unusual for a talented pitcher to be recruited by the winning team after his team was eliminated from a tournament. It was rumored that some of these “amateur” were making a fair living playing softball.

Fast pitch softball started to lose popularity in the mid-50s for a variety of reasons. Most families had televisions in their homes and games drew smaller crowds. Although men’s fast pitch softball is still played today, it is now mostly played by girls.

Softball has undergone many modifications since its creation in 1887. 113 countries have joined the International Softball Federation since the organization’s formation in 1952, and softball has developed a following in countries throughout the world, especially in Australia, China, and Japan. Loved by amateurs and professionals of all ages, the world can only anticipate what is in store for the future of America’s other favorite pastime.
Mexican Americans Overcome Discrimination

As early as 1919, Mexican American teams have been playing organized baseball in the Midwest. In the early 1920s, the Guanateciv and Moline Estrellas teams were playing in Illinois. In Kansas and Missouri, teams like the Azteca and Guadalupe Centes teams were playing starting in the 1930s.

When Mexican American Glis returned from World War II, they encountered prejudice and discrimination despite their service to the nation. Segregated restaurants, movie theaters, and sports teams greeted their return home.

Edwin D. Shutt II in his article “Centennial History of Argentine, Kansas City, Kansas, 1880-1980,” wrote: “Argentina, unfortunately, was a mere microcosm of America during the 1920-1950s. Consequently, Mexican Americans suffered covert and more open discrimination in the community.”

The following personal story by Apolonio “Loney” Sauceda (left), a charter member of Argentine Eagles American Legion Post 213, recounts the experience of a local group of Glis who wanted to join a veterans club:

“World War II was over. The men were coming home to a new life. Many had never been anywhere, until Uncle Sam called.

Back in Argentina, the guys became very active in the community, especially in sports; many were members of the Railways Joe Company baseball team, Santa Fe Midnight softball team, and Argentine Eagles basketball team.

In 1947, we wanted to join a club for veterans. Someone mentioned joining the American Legion Post 111. So myself along with John Joe Salazar, Lupe DeLeon, Joe Jaime, Chuck Jaime, Vince Sauceda, Moses Pavas, Fred Sauceda, and a few others, attended one of their meetings. John Joe spoke for the group, and requested to join the post. The Post 111 Commander replied, “We don’t accept Mexicans in our post.” We immediately stood up and walked out.

We decided to form our own official post. John Joe Salazar knew some members of Rosedale Post 346 who could help us organize and get our charter.

In August 1948, Ezra Campbell, Chuck Bowman, and other officers of Post 346 installed John Joe Salazar as our first Argentine Eagles American Legion Post 213 Commander. The Argentine-Mexican Methodist Mission on 26th Street became our post home.”

The formation of the American Legion Post 213, known as the “Eagles Nest,” became the catalyst for many activities in the Mexican American community of Argentine. What at first seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle of discrimination became a challenge and a great success for a new generation of Mexican Americans.

The Argentine Vets Club soon had their own fast pitch softball team, the Argentine Eagles. A field was created at Post 213, and games and tournaments were held with most of the Mexican American community of Argentine in attendance. Many of the Argentine Eagles fast pitch softball players also played on the local basketball team, the Golden Knights.

Joe Madrigal, a former Argentine Eagles and Golden Knights team member, related the dual role of players in a personal interview:”

“Damn, we played baseball and fast pitch softball in the spring and summer, and basketball in the winter...and we were good at both, we won a hell of a lot of tournaments in both sports.”

Most recently, the American Legion Post 213 received a grant to renovate their ball field in the Argentine district. Once complete, post members plan to reengage young ball players and the community through the game of fast pitch softball.
During the heyday (1950s-1980s) of the “Brown Leagues,” many teams took to the road and participated in tournament play across the Midwest region. The teams would practice and work at least two and sometimes three times a week. When the weekend came, they were ready to either host or travel to play in tournaments.

Tournament play started early in the 20th century. The following account is from the Jaso family, who migrated to Newton, Kansas from Mexico in 1916:

“While in El Paso, Texas, Cunto’s sons, Magdalen and Raymundo, played baseball. In 1919, they formed teams among their friends in Newton and played against each other. Around 1927, they picked a team made up of the better players, and competed against Wichita teams. In the early 1930s, the older players turned over the reins to the younger players. Raymundo remained with the team, now calling themselves the “Guadalupanos.” They were champions of their league in 1932. In 1940, Raymundo was the coach of a softball team called the “Mexican Catholics.” Lidio and Nicholas played on this team. The baseball tradition continues as Nicholas’ sons Steven, Manuel, and George, and many of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, play on teams today.”

Large groups of family and friends followed their hometown teams to the tournaments. Motel rooms filled up, and restaurants were busy with tournament attendees. Mexican American host organizations provided delicious Mexican food to the fans as a way to raise funds for their teams. The tournaments took on a “fiesta” atmosphere—host groups would sometimes present a tournament dance complete with live music, food, and drink.

Most of the tournaments were played by the rules of the American Softball Association. Tournaments were played in double elimination brackets; once a team lost twice, they were out of tournament play. Those who ascended to the final bracket often had to endure playing in the grueling summer heat in multiple games. One historic Kansas City, Kansas tournament at Shawnee Park, lasted 20 innings with Newton winning over the KC Aztecas 1-0. It was in these tournament games that outstanding players became local legends.
Mexican American teams take great pride in the athletic accomplishments of the players who made the baseball and fast pitch softball games fun, exciting, and memorable. Organizations sponsoring Mexican American baseball and fast pitch softball have maintained halls of fame to honor players over the years. The Newton, Kansas Mexican American Athletic Club has one of the oldest halls of fame in the Midwest. Many more halls of fame exist across the Midwest region within Mexican American communities.