

FIRST ANNUAL  
SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION  
BASEBALL CONFERENCE



OCTOBER 8-9 • 2004

Saturday, September 4, 2004

Birmingham Post-Herald

BEN  
COOK

Ben on  
baseball



## Rickwood to host Southern Association Conference

Between the years of 1885 and 1961, some of the best minor league baseball in the nation was played in the Southern Association.

In Birmingham, Rickwood Field was the home of Southern Association baseball from 1901 to 1961, when the league closed its doors. In its prime, the Southern Association was a crown jewel of minor league baseball. It was Double-A baseball, but it played stronger. It played at Triple-A level and sometimes even at major league levels.

In the early years, players went from the Southern Association to the major leagues and found it a step down in competition.

But the Southern Association, like all minor leagues, ran into declining interest in the 1950s and '60s as people found it much easier to sit at home and watch television in air-conditioned comfort than to go to the ballpark on a steamy, humid summer night.

In the 1950s, the Southern Association was a stronghold in the south with teams in Birmingham, Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga, Mobile, New Orleans and Little Rock.

Since the league closed down in 1961, Atlanta has become a major league city while Nashville, Memphis, New Orleans have moved into Triple-A leagues. The rest joined other Double-A leagues, such as the current Southern League which was formed in the 1960s from the remnants of the Southern Association and the Class-A South Atlantic League.

But the memories of the Southern Association and the baseball that was played there are still strong. And to that end, the first annual Southern Association Baseball Conference will be held Oct. 8-9 at Rickwood Field.

The conference will feature historians, writers and fans that grew up on the Southern Association or have become fascinated by its colorful history.

The conference is sponsored by the Friends of Rickwood and is open to anybody who is interested in reliving the glory days of the league. I'll give you details on attending the event at the end of this column.

In 1901, the Southern Association was one of the seven founding members of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, the organization that still governs minor league baseball.

Between 1920 and 1958, the Southern Association and the Texas League staged the Dixie Series at the end of each season. The Barons won the Dixie Series five times in seven tries as a member of the Southern Association.

Once the Southern Association folded, the 1967 Barons won another Dixie Series as the Southern League and Texas League tried to revive the traditional season-ending championship series.

The Southern Association Baseball Conference will relive memories of the great players who came through the league, such as Shoeless Joe Jackson, Harmon Killebrew, Walt Dropo and Luis Aparicio.

It will also pay homage to some of the colorful characters who became legends throughout the Southern Association, such as George "Shotgun" Shuba; Jimmy Piersall; Robert Lennon, who once blasted 64 home runs in the 1954 season for the Nashville Vols; Stan "The Monster" Palys, who terrorized pitchers for three seasons while playing for Nashville and Birmingham; and the Chattanooga Lookout outfielder named Jim Lemon, who hit four home runs in the 1955 All-Star Game at Rickwood Field.

A reception and dinner on Friday night, Oct. 8, at the Oxmoor Road Holiday Inn and a Saturday gathering at Rickwood Field from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., which includes a lunch served at the ballpark.

The price for the entire event is \$65, or \$40 for the conference only. For more information, call David Brewer, executive director of the Friends of Rickwood, at 458-8161 or e-mail him at [d.brewer@rickwood.com](mailto:d.brewer@rickwood.com).

*Ben Cook's column on Major League baseball appears each Saturday in the Birmingham Post-Herald.*

# First Annual Southern Association Baseball Conference

Rickwood Field Birmingham, Alabama

Saturday, October 9, 2004

9:00 A.M.	Morning coffee and donuts
9:30 A.M.	Welcome and introductory remarks
9:45 A.M.	Derby Gisclair “The New Orleans Pelicans: The Heart of the Southern Association”
10:15 A.M.	Mark Stang “Baseball’s Barnum of the Bushes: The Life and Times of Joe Engel”
10:45 A.M.	Morning break
11:00 A.M.	Skip Nipper “The Story of Nashville’s Sulphur Dell”
11:30 A.M.	Rickwood video
11:45 A.M.	Park tour and exhibits
12:30 P.M.	Lunch
1:00 P.M.	Gary Higginbotham “Sixty Years of the Mobile Bears”
1:30 P.M.	Tim Darnell “The Atlanta Crackers: The Southern Association’s Best Team?”
2:00 P.M.	Clarence Watkins “Remembering the 1960 Fire at Memphis’ Russwood Park”
2:30 P.M.	Afternoon break
2:45 P.M.	Bill Plott “The 1887 Memphis – Mobile Series: Another Candidate for the All-time Worst Team?”
3:15 P.M.	Ben Cook “A Tribute to America’s Oldest Baseball Park: Rickwood Field”
3:45 P.M.	Closing remarks
4:00 P.M.	Book signings & exhibits



# SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF BASE BALL CLUBS

This is to Certify that the Birmingham Base Ball Association  
of Birmingham, Ala. is a member of the

## Southern Association of Base Ball Clubs

and is hereby granted the exclusive right and privilege to play base ball in the city of Birmingham

State of Alabama as a member of and under the protection of the SOUTHERN

ASSOCIATION OF BASE BALL CLUBS and under the protection of the National Association of Professional Base Ball Clubs of which the SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF BASE BALL CLUBS is a member until December 15, 1920, in accordance with the constitution of the SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF BASE BALL CLUBS and amendments thereto in force ~~December 15, 1913~~ June 10, 1918.

The signers of this certificate hereby jointly and severally covenant and agree with the holder hereof and with each other that they will protect the holder of this certificate or its assigns in the full enjoyment of the rights and privileges herein conferred during the life of this franchise provided that the holder shall in all respects comply with the constitution and by-laws of the SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF BASE BALL CLUBS.

Done in accordance with a resolution unanimously adopted at the regular annual meeting of the SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF BASE BALL CLUBS held in the city of Atlanta, Ga., December 15, 1913; ~~20, 1920~~; affirming resolution adopted

at the special meeting in  
Birmingham, Ala., June 10, 1918.

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June 10, 1918 Southern Association of Base Ball Clubs league document, containing signatures of the presidents of the eight member teams. Ironically, due to the United States' participation in World War I, the league would suspend play approximately two weeks after the signing of this document. New Orleans won the abbreviated season with a 49-21 record, 7.5 games ahead of Little Rock. Courtesy of the Birmingham Barons.



# First Annual Southern Association Baseball Conference | PRESENTERS:

**Derby Gisclair** A lifelong resident of New Orleans, S. Derby Gisclair is a member of SABR and its Oral History Committee. He is a Sustaining Member of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, and has written several articles on baseball. He is currently working on a history of the New Orleans Pelicans and is the author of the recently published Baseball in New Orleans.

**Mark Stang** A resident of Tampa, Mark Stang is the author of five books on Major League baseball, including Baseball By The Numbers, a guide to Major League player uniform numbers. A SABR member since 1990, he is also a two-time recipient of the annual SABR Baseball Research award.

**Skip Nipper** A graduate of Memphis State University, Skip Nipper is a member of the Sporting Goods Agents Association, the National Sporting Goods Association, and SABR. His commitment to collecting and preserving memories of Nashville's SulphurDell Park resulted in the creation of his website, [sulphurdell.com](http://sulphurdell.com).

**Gary Higginbotham** Native to Galveston and a graduate of Southern Mississippi University, Gary Higginbotham has conducted historical research on the Mobile Bears, the Southern Association, the Cotton States Leagues, and college football.

**Tim Darnell** A lifelong resident of Atlanta, Tim Darnell is a seasoned newspaper and magazine journalist, having served in the capacity of both reporter and editor. He has contributed to The New Georgia Encyclopedia, and is the author of The Georgia Tech Trivia Book. He is also the author of the recently published The Crackers: Early Days of Atlanta Baseball.

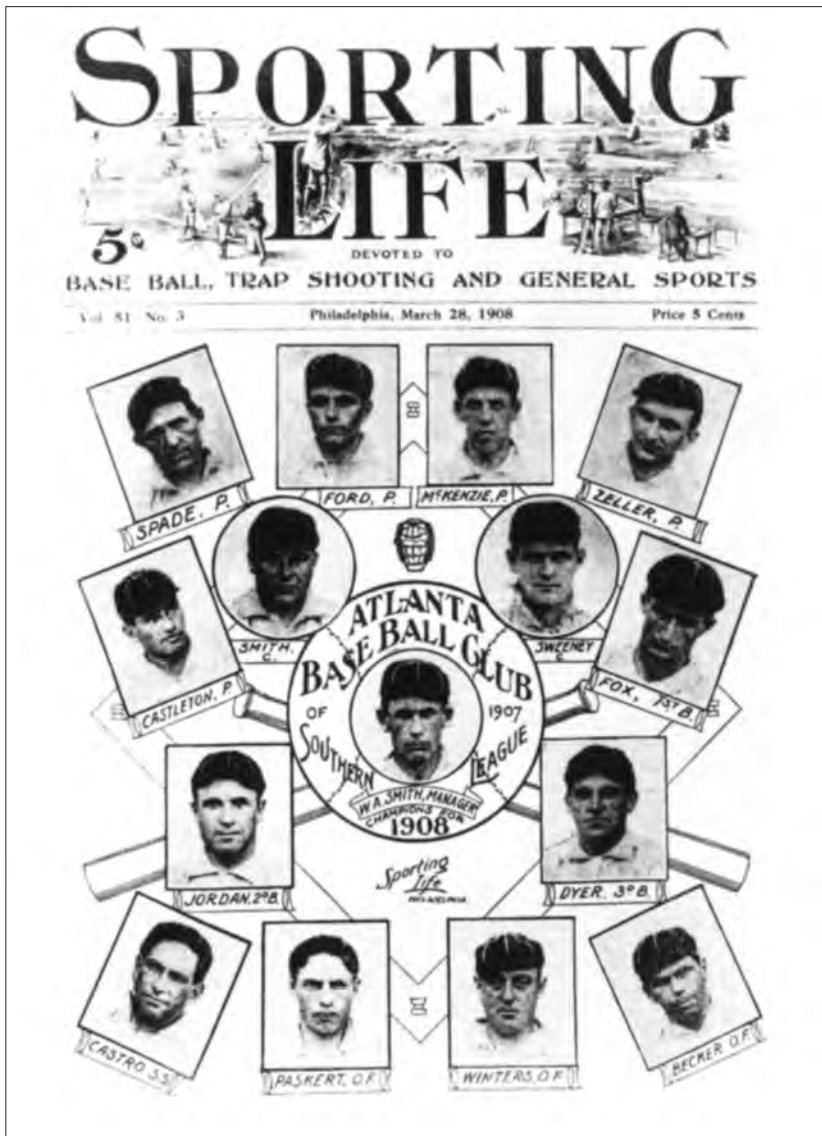
**Clarence Watkins** Memphis native Clarence Watkins is a graduate of Memphis State University and lifelong baseball fan. His work related travels across the Southeast have allowed him to pursue his interest in the history of the Southern Association, including collecting and gathering information on all of the league teams and ball parks.

**Bill Plott** A reporter for The Birmingham News and a sports historian, Bill Plott has written several books on high school sports. He is a member of the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame Old-Timers Selection Committee.

**Ben Cook** Sports columnist for The Birmingham Post-Herald, Ben Cook has covered sports in the Southeast for over three decades. During his journalism career, he has also written for The Birmingham News, the Sporting News, and Sports Illustrated among others. The author of three books on college football, he is currently researching and writing his fourth book, a history of Rickwood Field.



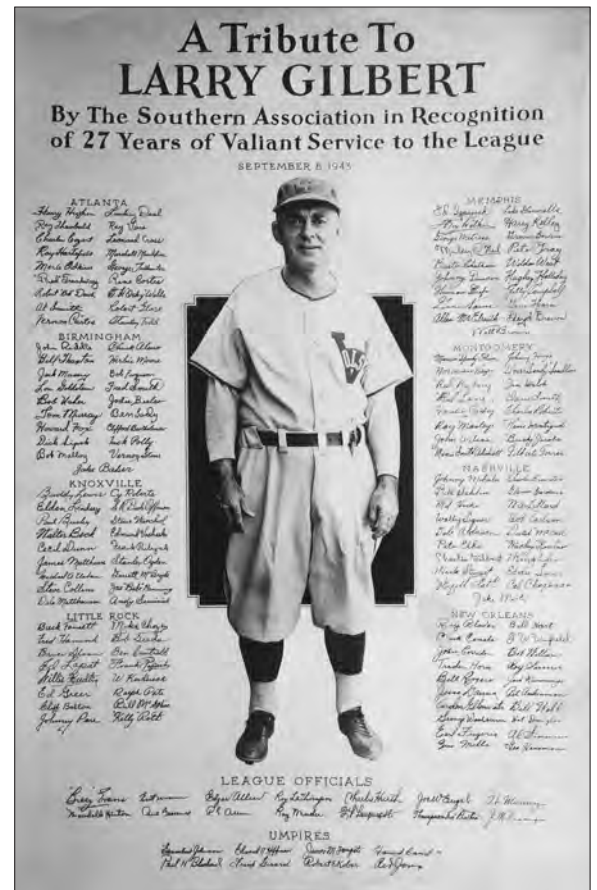
Capacity crowd at Chattanooga's Engel Stadium for the September 25, 1932 Dixie Series game between the Lookouts and the Beaumont (Texas) Explorers, pennant winners of the Texas League. The Lookouts defeated the Explorers 4 games to 1 to clinch the Dixie Series title. Courtesy of Josh Leventhal and Take Me Out to the Ballpark.



March 28, 1908 cover of Sporting Life Magazine, featuring the Atlanta Base Ball Club, who outpaced Memphis by 3.5 games to claim the 1907 league pennant. George Paskert, Atlanta outfielder, earned the season homerun crown with 6. Courtesy of Clarence Watkins.



In August 28, 1912 game action, Mobile Gulls' catcher Joe Dunn singles in shortstop Dee Walsh. Despite this rally, Birmingham held on to defeat Mobile, 5-3. The Barons also held on to clinch the league pennant, 6.5 games ahead of the Sea Gulls. Courtesy of Carlton Molesworth, III.



1943 tribute to longtime Southern Association player and manager Larry Gilbert. A former member of the 1914 Boston "Miracle Braves," he was sold to New Orleans in 1917, beginning a Southern Association career that spanned more than three decades. Courtesy of the Birmingham Barons.



Wire service image of Memphis' Russwood Park following the April 17, 1960 fire that destroyed the grandstand. Courtesy of Clarence Watkins.





Ernie Harwell called games for the Atlanta Crackers from 1943 – 1948, at which time he was “traded” to the Brooklyn Dodgers in exchange for catcher Cliff Dappert, of their minor league Montreal franchise. This is the only example in baseball history in which a player was traded for an announcer. *Courtesy of Clarence Watkins.*



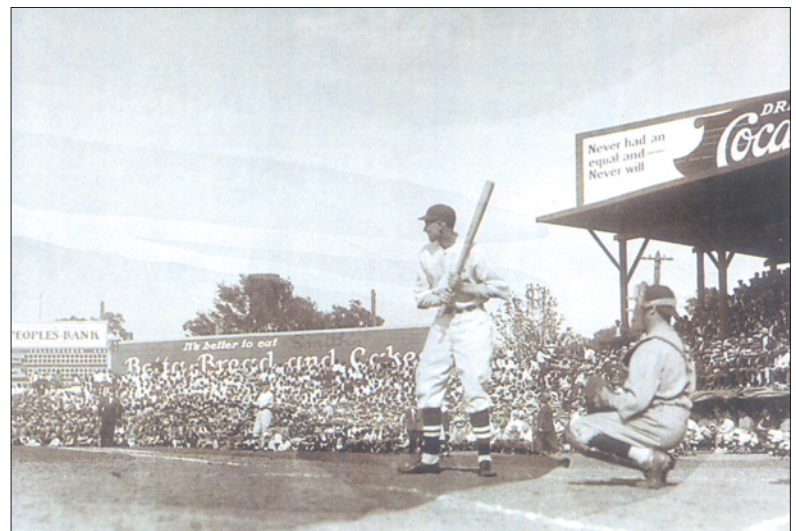
On the Cover: Baron power hitter Walt Dropo's famous 1948 blast over Rickwood's mammoth scoreboard. The 1948 Barons drew 445,926 fans to set the all-time in-the-seats Southern Association attendance record. *Courtesy of Birmingham News and Steve Ross.*



1954 capacity crowd at Birmingham's Rickwood Field anticipates the tag at third on a Nashville base runner, with the home plate umpire covering the call. The shoulder patch worn that year by Baron ball players commemorated the 50th anniversary of Birmingham's iconic Vulcan statue, originally cast for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. *Courtesy of Birmingham News.*



Cover of the 1905 Reach's Official American League Guide, featuring the 1904 Southern Association Champion Memphis Egyptians. *Courtesy of Clarence Watkins.*



Capacity crowd at Mobile's Monroe Park. Built in 1893, Monroe Park sat off of Mobile's South Washington Avenue, part of what is today the Alabama State Docks. *Courtesy of the Eric Overby Collection, University of South Alabama.*



Atlanta base runner slides into third before a full house at Rickwood Field, while Baron infielder prepares to throw to first. Courtesy of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce.

Special thanks to:

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