

Baseball at Bancroft Memorial Park

BANCROFT, Iowa (AP) – For as long as anyone can remember, baseball and Bancroft have gone hand in glove.

Fathers played the game, their sons took it up as soon as they could hold a bat and their sons' sons did the same. On and on it went, one generation following another, through times of depression and bounty, through years of war and years of peace.

"We were bred into baseball," said Dave Schiltz, who played on state championship teams at Bancroft St. John High School in the 1950s.

So strong was that breeding that the community of 1,000 that sprouts from the rich farmland of northern Iowa produced two players good enough to reach the major leagues: pitcher Joe Hatten and infielder Denis Menke.

And over on the east side, where Joe Hatten Boulevard crosses Ramsey, stands Bancroft Memorial Park, 50 years old this summer, an enduring symbol of the game for which the town is known.

Walk into the ballpark and you almost expect to see ghost players from "Field of Dreams" shagging flyballs and taking batting practice.

The horseshoe-shaped wooden grandstand is roofed and has a small pressbox on top. The park sports a fresh coat of green paint, part of a recent \$40,000 refurbishment. A board fence surrounds the park and light towers stand like sentinels on the plain. The infield and outfield grass is neatly cut, the infield dirt is raked just so.

It's no Coors Field, but Bancroft Memorial Park has provided a big-time atmosphere for thousands of small-town players.

"I remember when I was a little kid, that's what you dreamed about _ playing for the Johnnies on that field," said Tom Elsbecker, a former St. John star. "You'd see the older kids playing and those were the kind of guys you idolized.

"When you practiced, you'd imagine you were them," he said. "That's what growing up in Bancroft was all about."

Memorial Park, named in honor of those killed in the two world wars, opened on June 1, 1948. Since then, it has been home to 15 state championship teams, including eight high school titles by St. John, four by the town's American Legion team and one by its semipro team.

St. John closed in 1989, but Bancroft youngsters still play winning baseball at the park. Many went to Swea City North Kossuth, which plays its home games at Memorial Park. Elsbecker is the coach there and guided North Kossuth to the last two Class 1A state championships.

"It always seemed like when you played in that park, you felt you were going to win," Elsbecker said. "You always talk about the gods of baseball, we always felt that if we hung around, we had a chance to win the game."

Many feel it's because of the ballpark that baseball kept going in Bancroft after the high school closed. If Bancroft had an ordinary field, North Kossuth might have played somewhere else, Schiltz said.

"Without our park, baseball here wouldn't be what it is today," said Schiltz, who was a high school teammate of Menke's and is now an insurance agent in town. "If they played over at Swea City, they'd still be good, but this makes it our ballpark."

The park was built after local businessman Joe Welp made a promise to some Bancroft players who were with the semipro team in Albert Lea, Minn. Among those players was Walt Menke, Denis' father, and Walt's brother, Johnny.

"We were sitting around drinking and he said, 'If you come down and play in Bancroft, we'll build a ballpark,'" said Johnny Menke, who lives just beyond the park's leftfield fence. "That's how it got started – over a few drinks."

So the park was built, at a cost of \$20,000 raised locally and with the help of hundreds of hours of volunteer work. The weekly Bancroft Register traced the progress at every step and urged its readers to get involved.

"If you have a spare day, or more or less, to spend time at the ballpark, there will be a job there for you," the paper said in its April 8, 1948 edition.

When the 10 85-foot light poles were installed, the Register called them the "finest set of flood lights in the state of Iowa."

Some 1,500 fans jammed the park for the first game, a 7-4 Albert Lea victory over a Bancroft team that featured the former Albert Lea players.

Denis Menke was 9 years old that day, just a youngster with big dreams. Eight years later, while playing for St. John, he became one of the nation's hottest young prospects – maybe the hottest. So many scouts descended on the Menke farm north of town that Walt assigned them times to visit. While one was in the house, the others waited in the barnyard.

"The ones who were waiting would come up to the house if the fellow inside stayed too long and yell, 'Hey, his time's up,'" said Mary Menke, Denis' mother. "It was quite a scene."

Thirty-three scouts attended Menke's final high school game, a 6-2 victory over Mason City for the 1958 spring state championship. Two days after he graduated, Menke signed with the Milwaukee Braves for \$125,000 and spent 13 years in the majors with the Braves, Astros and Reds.

"The big thing was, we had a chance to play in basically a pretty nice ballpark in high school and Legion ball," said Menke, now the Reds' bench coach. "I remember being a bat boy when my dad was playing in the Iowa State League. I was 10 years old then and I had kind of grown up with that ballpark.

"I also remember working on the field when I was in high school," he said. "That was part of the job if you were going to play there."

Still is.

Elsbecker has his players assemble at Memorial Park at 2:45 p.m. for a 6 p.m. game. Before they pick up a ball or a bat, they rake and water the infield and pitcher's mound.

"Their dedication from that point of view is amazing," he said. "When the kids work on the field, it helps them take part ownership of our park. They want to protect it and play as well as they can."

While the park has stood as a monument to the town's tradition, so did one of its main occupants: V.J. "Vince" Meyer. Except for a stint in the Army during World War II, Meyer coached baseball at St. John from 1935 through 1981, winning 1,105 games and six state championships.

He was St. John baseball.

"No matter what you talk about in baseball history and St. John and Bancroft, a lot that goes back to him and what he did," said Gene Meister, who played on a state championship team at St. John in 1964 and coached the Johnnies to state titles in 1985 and 1986.

"With him, it was a lot more than baseball," said Meister, now the coach at Algona Garrigan. "There were a lot of lessons that as you get older, you start to absorb a lot more. And then to play in a park like that with all the history and all the feeling, it was worth a run or two every night."

The park isn't used nearly as much as in the past. Once there was high school baseball in

the spring, American Legion and town team ball in the summer and then high school ball again in the fall. Now there's only North Kossuth in the summer, plus some district tournament games.

Yet when a campaign was launched to fix up the park, hundreds of current and former residents donated money and time. An overflow crowd packed the park on Memorial Day for a 50th anniversary celebration organized by Bill Dudding. Gov. Terry Branstad was among those who spoke.

"Baseball is almost a religion to the people in Bancroft," Dudding said. "Just about everybody in town, if they haven't played, they had a brother or dad who played or they helped build the ballpark or helped maintain the ballpark.

"And there are people who never played, never had anyone in their family who played, yet they come to the ballgames," he said. "They just enjoy being at the park."