

# ***BUILDERS’ PARK***



***Home of the  
Newport News  
Baby Dodgers***

***INTRODUCTION:*** For most of the twentieth century, baseball was the national past time. It was played by children on improvised ball fields or in the streets in countless neighborhoods. It was played in a more organized fashion by school, church and other social organizations. It was also played professionally by players ‘on their way up...or down’ the talent ladder in dozens of major league ‘farm’ organizations.

Every American community had one or more facilities dedicated to the sport where spectators could watch, cheer and jeer as their professional local teams won or lost. Residents of the Virginia Peninsula supported such activities at a variety of venues.

One such ramshackle facility was situated in the extreme eastern end of old Warwick County, between Warwick Road, now Warwick Boulevard and the railroad tracks. The main entrance for Builders’ Park was directly across Warwick Road from 73<sup>rd</sup> Street and the apartment building that can be seen in the lower right-hand portion of the following 1946 photo. Old ‘Downtown Newport News’ was about a mile to the right of this location and Hilton Village roughly two miles to the left.

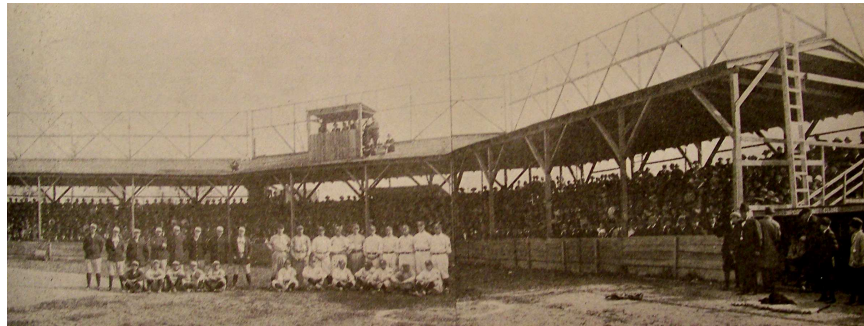


Between 1944 and 1948, it was home to the Newport News Baby Dodgers; a team in the Class B Piedmont League. I lived two blocks away and attended many games, rooting for the team that was also called ‘da Bums’ on occasion; perhaps inspired by their usually woeful record. As I created this reminisce, lots of baseball jargon came to mind. I happily sprinkled some of it throughout the following pages.

*Bill Lee* – August 2012

***A BRIEF HISTORY:*** Organized baseball on the Virginia Peninsula dates back to August 1894, when a Virginia League team called the Staunton Hayseeds became the Newport-News-Hampton team. They next played under the name Hampton in 1896. Based on league records, they did not participate in competition again until 1900-1901, when they were known as the Newport News Shipbuilders.

The Shipbuilders resumed play between 1912 and 1922. In 1916 and 1917, they won the league championship. This vintage photo, taken of the 1916 team, was made at a stadium that once stood on Wickham Avenue in the East End of Newport News.



Between 1922 and 1941, no professional baseball team had its home in Newport News. In 1941, a team called the Newport News Pilots, a Class C farm team for the Philadelphia A's was organized and again participated in Virginia League competition.

It is presumed, but not known if Builders' Park was constructed as a home field for that team. Or, perhaps, the facility was already in place; used by local school teams. No records of its creation, or for that matter of its destruction, could be found. The only photograph of the facility that could be readily found is the one on the previous page.

In 1942 the team was renamed the Newport News Builders. World War II had a significant impact on organized baseball. Perhaps as a direct result, no Newport News home team was fielded in 1943. But on at least two occasions, in 1942 and 1943, exhibition games were played there by teams from the now-defunct Negro League. One of those games started at 8:15 PM; good indication that lights existed at the ball park in the early 1940's.

***BASEBALL IN WORLD WAR II:*** During the war years, over 500 major leaguers and more than 4,000 minor league players enlisted or were drafted. Although President Roosevelt encouraged the commissioner of baseball to keep the sport active for morale purposes, the number of active minor leagues in America dropped from 44 to 12.

The teams that survived were primarily made up of older players that normally would have been unable to compete, plus high school-age boys and young men that were physically disqualified from the military...but not from baseball.

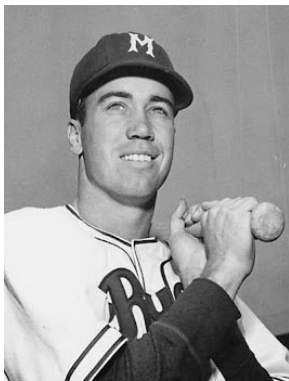
At Newport News, most, if not all of the unpaved parking lot that served Builders Park was converted to open steel plate storage for the shipyard's use. Railroad spur lines were laid down in that area, and remained, abandoned, for several years after the war.

I remember seeing them on my way with chums to participate in the placing pennies on the C&O's main line for fast-moving, approaching passenger trains to flatten. To avoid being seen engaged in that forbidden practice, we used the high wooden fence that surrounded the ball park to hide our activities.

In 1944, the Virginia Peninsula regained a professional baseball team.

***THE BABY DODGERS:*** The Piedmont League had started up in 1920 as a Class C minor league. Between 1931 and 1955, its status was elevated to Class B...still several levels below the major leagues. In 1944, a Brooklyn Dodger farm team was organized in Newport News, which replaced a sixth team that had played in the Piedmont League the year before. The other teams represented the Virginia cities of Lynchburg, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond and Roanoke.

A sometimes less-than-affectionate nickname for the Brooklyn team was 'da Bums'; a tag provided by disgruntled fans when their team was not winning. The emulating appellations 'Baby Dodgers' and 'da Baby Bums' soon found their way into the sports pages of the Daily Press and the Times Herald.



The ages of the 1944 Newport News Dodgers ranged from 16 to 39. Only one name on the team's roster is readily recognizable today. That season, seventeen year-old slugger and future Hall-of-Famer Duke Snyder briefly played for the Brooklyn farm team in Montreal before being transferred to Newport News.

In 1945, he entered military service, but upon his return he made his way to the big leagues, and Dodger immortality. I don't recall ever seeing Snyder play at Builder's Park. But in later years when he became a major league star, local sports writers repeatedly reminded us that he had once been 'one of our own'.

The 1944 Baby Dodgers played 139 games, but only won only 61 and finished sixth that year. They played almost every night, and often in double-headers on the weekends. They traveled in a bus, much like this one, that had the team's name painted on the sides. I remember seeing it parked in that same unpaved lot mentioned above on some summer mornings.



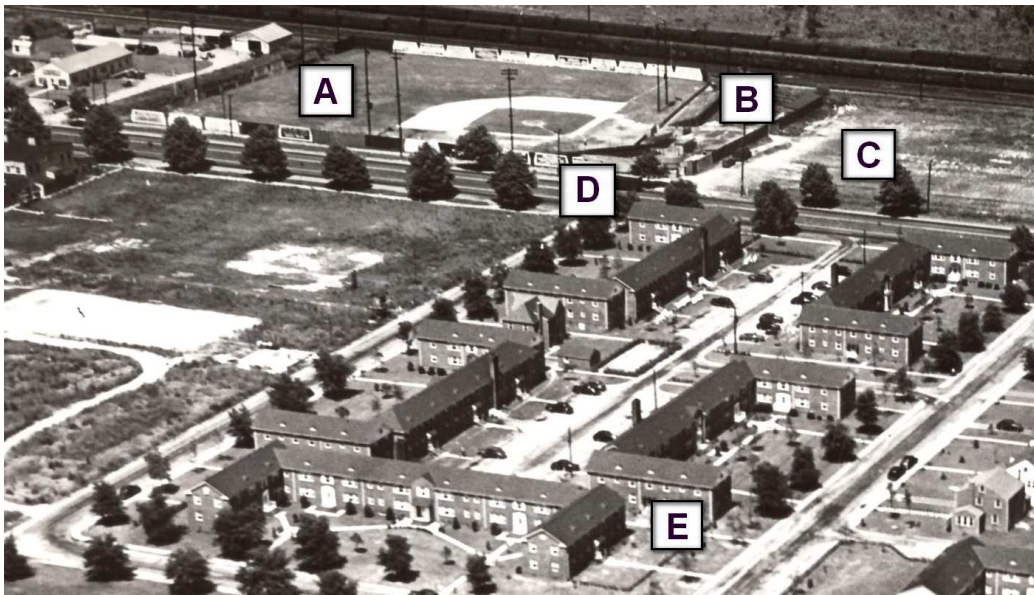
***BUILDERS' PARK MEMORIES:*** I believe I started going to games there in 1946; usually in the company of William H. "Buddy" Hollingsworth, a neighbor who worked 'days' at the now long-defunct *Times Herald* and whose son was an infant; far too young to go to any games.



We lived within walking distance of the ball park and the glow of the lights and the noises of the crowd were...to a ten year-old boy...intoxicating. And, I guess to Buddy too. Of course, that was before TV and air conditioning did in most minor leagues.

The following photograph is a slightly expanded copy of the one on this reminisces' cover page. The several letters superimposed in blue indicate the following features:

- A:** The playing field at Builders' Park
- B:** First base bleachers to the left of this letter indicator, and operational support facilities and I think some rest rooms and concession stands.
- C:** Parking lot and steel storage yard for NNS during World War II.
- D:** Grand stand with team offices, clubhouse and locker rooms located beneath.
- E:** Marks the Huntington Courts' apartment building where we lived. Buddy lived in the one immediately to the left of the letter-indicator.



We always gravitated to the bleacher section along the first base line. We sat on rough wooden benches with no protection from foul balls or the weather. That was Buddy's choice, perhaps because bleacher seats cost less than the ones in the grandstand. He also preferred double-headers, no doubt again for the pricing advantage they presented. When, in recent years I have infrequently attended a baseball game, I have found myself drawn to that area of any baseball stadium.

The visiting team's dugout was along the first base line, directly in front of our preferred seating. Their relief pitchers warmed up in the outfield foul ball area. There was no bull pen, per se. This arrangement was mirrored along the third base line for the home team.

I recall that the bleachers were only a few rows high. The grandstand had more rows of seats, protected by an overhanging roof and a sloping wire screen between the spectators and the playing field. The park's lighting and sound system were barely adequate. The outfield fences were covered with advertisements for local businesses inside the park. Additional ads were painted on the outside of the fencing that faced Warwick Road.

Vendors roamed the stands. I indulged in bottled soda pop, plus peanuts, popcorn and crackerjacks; probably in multiples. You could take the empty bottles back to one of the concession stands for a refund. Which everyone did, except for an occasional errant bottle that found its way onto the playing field when a call went against the home team.

There were also cheaply printed programs for sale that had team photos, ads and blank score cards if you wanted to keep score. I think they cost a dime. Each program included an insert with the teams' line-ups for that particular game and a 'lucky number' that was called out for some prize or other during the seventh inning stretch.



As partly visible in this photo of me at age 10 on the left, my usual attire at games consisted of high top black sneakers, dungarees, white socks, plain white T-shirt, and...yes ma!...clean underwear. Plus, invariably, a dark blue cap with a white 'N'; much like the cap shown in the photo to the right of a Newport News Dodger player of that era. Lots of people wore similar caps to the games, but never backwards...except for the teams' catchers. Unthinkable in 1946!

I believe the A&N store on Washington Avenue sold those caps. Back then, baseball caps came in sizes. Alas, when I outgrew mine I discarded it.



Foul balls those that went over the fence on the 3<sup>rd</sup> base side occasionally hit a passing car. Those that hit the grand stand screen rolled down to the delight of the crowd who always followed a ball's return to the playing field a chorus of WHOOO-O-O-O-OOPS!

I don't recall the locations or condition of the rest rooms. Perhaps that's best, given the conditions of such 'conveniences' in those days! Ticket prices totally escape me, now. But I suspect, since adult movie prices at the time were less than fifty cents (and popcorn was ten cents a box) that the ball park's prices were competitive. The press box and the stadium announcer's vista were atop the grandstand. I can only guesstimate, but believe that the ball park's capacity could not have been much more than two thousand.

***THE SUCCESSFUL '46 SEASON:*** For the Baby Dodgers, 1946 was a banner year. They had a winning regular season (76-64), finishing third in the regular season standings. But in the playoffs, they took the top prize. It also was the year when four players I so fondly remember seeing play at Builders' Park first took the field.

One player became a major league star, captured many awards and holds, even today, many big league records. But improbably, to date, he has not been elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. Another played very briefly in the majors, then became a movie and television star, and a household name. The remaining two later became fixtures in the Newport News community, once their playing days were over. All four of them had their baseball careers interrupted by military service before playing for the Newport News Baby Dodgers.

***GIL HODGES:*** Gilbert Ray Hodges served in the Marine Corps in World War II and received the bronze star for his accomplishments in the Pacific. He was 22 years old when he joined the Newport News team in 1946. Playing as the team's principal catcher, he participated in 129 games that year.

He jumped from that Class 'B' team directly to majors in 1947 and enjoyed a long and productive career with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Long after he left town, I avidly followed his career, including his play in Los Angeles after the Dodgers broke many a heart in Brooklyn by moving to the West Coast. He was, after all, another 'one of ours'...



I don't recall if the following story is a recently resurrected memory of mine or just an urban legend that reporters picked up on and repeated that I later read about. Memories are like that, you know. Anyway...at one game in Newport News, one of the fingers on his throwing hand was split open by a foul tip. He just stuck it in the dirt to stop the bleeding and finished the inning without any medical attention.

***CHUCK CONNORS:*** Kevin Joseph "Chuck" Connors was far better known for his starring role in *The Rifleman* on TV than as an athlete. But in 1946, following a stint in the army, at age 25 he played first base for the Baby Dodgers in 119 games and led the league in home run production that year. Born in Brooklyn, he played only one game for his hometown Dodgers in 1949. He then played with a few other big league teams before going into acting. He was a multi-talented athlete, and even played briefly in the NBA.

He was tall...6-foot, five inches...and was better than average when it came to batting, running the bases or fielding. Few errant throws from his teammates ever got past his lanky physique, and he could 'dig one out of the dirt' with the best of them. Part of his attraction, at least to me was that he also was somewhat of a clown. He often baited umpires, to the delight of the partisan crowd. On more than one occasion, he made his manager unhappy by going too far and getting tossed out of a game.

He was a southpaw, like me. I begged my parents to buy me a first baseman's glove just like the one he used. They did, probably for my birthday or Christmas. I think that glove came from Montgomery Wards. I do remember being disappointed that there wasn't a Chuck Connors model available. That glove, too, is long gone...



In this partial team photo I found posted on the Internet, taken in Newport News in 1946, he is in the front row, far right.

**SODDY GROAT:** Clarence M. “Soddy” Groat was Canadian and a full-blooded Indian. Older than most, he was 30 when he played about two-thirds of the 1946 season in Newport News. He also played the entire baseball season there in 1947 and 1948.

Soddy participated in several different team sports before World War II. During the war, he served in the infantry in Europe, receiving the Purple Heart, and the Bronze Star and the Silver Stars. In early 1946 he played briefly for Brooklyn's Montreal farm team before being transferred to the Newport News team. In the 1946 season, he roomed with Gil Hodges, and later named his son, Gil David Groat, after his friend.

He played center field and often ranged far to his left or right, covering ground more quickly than anyone thought humanly possible to snag fly balls and even line drives. His trademark was making risky ‘basket catches’ waist high, which the fans loved. No so much, his manager. Soddy's height was listed as five foot, eight inches, but in the dimly lighted far recesses of center field, he seemed shorter; perhaps due to his stocky build.

**WAYNE JOHNSON:** Robert Wayne Johnson, a South Carolina native and World War II veteran, was 26 years old when he first pitched for the da Bums. In 1946 he compiled a 16-7 pitching record, and was the ace of all Baby Dodger hurlers that year. He was touted as being instrumental in the capture of that year's league pennant. He pitched again for the Newport News team in 1948, but his performance was hampered by injury.

Johnson later pitched for a couple other teams in the Piedmont League and also in the Textile League in South Carolina. Bone chips in his throwing arm resulted in the need for an operation that prevented him from ever reaching the big leagues.

For some period of time, perhaps in 1948, Wayne Johnson roomed in a private residence that was adjacent to a playground where my friends and I often played a completely unorganized game of baseball. On one or two occasions, he wandered onto our improvised diamond and gently pitched to a bunch of delighted kids.



## ***THE PENINSULA WAR MEMORIAL STADIUM:***

In early 1947, the Brooklyn Dodgers organization announced that their Piedmont League franchise would be moved elsewhere, unless a better facility could be provided. Leading citizens in Newport News and Hampton quickly organized the Peninsula Athletic Corporation.

In an amazingly short period of time, they raised over \$200,000 and found a site in Hampton on Pembroke Avenue for a larger and more modern baseball park to keep professional sports on the Peninsula. When they learned that cash and a priority were required in order to purchase \$21,000 worth of structural steel, they turned to Homer L. Ferguson, then Chairman of the Board at NNS for help. Characteristically, he had the shipyard order the steel and declared it to be the Company's contribution to the stadium building effort. Other local firms also supplied materials and labor, gratis.

But bad weather prevented the new facility from being completed in time for the start of the 1948 baseball season. Da Bums were forced to games on the road for two months. The first game played in War Memorial Stadium took place on Sunday afternoon, June 6, 1948. The Newport News team's opponent was their arch rivals, the Norfolk Tars; a New York Yankee farm team. The Newport News Baby Dodgers won that game, to the delight of an overflow crowd of 4,500 fans.

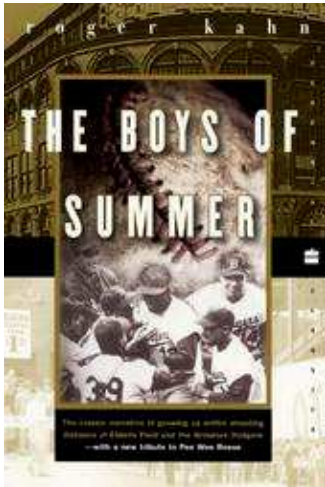
For some reason, perhaps because the facility was still incomplete and the parking lot not paved; the facility wasn't dedicated until the following Wednesday night. A smaller crowd witnessed Homer L. Ferguson throw out the first pitch. But the real treat that evening was a pitchers' duel...between Wayne Johnson and a then-obscure twenty one year-old Norfolk Tars pitcher named Edward Ford.

Later and better known as "Whitey" Ford, he went on to star for the New York Yankees and became a Hall of Famer. The Newport News team won that game as well, 3-2 in the tenth inning. Both Johnson and Ford were relieved during the course of that extra-innings' contest, so neither was officially credited with a win or tagged with a loss.

I don't think that Buddy Hollingsworth and I attended either of those games. We did go to a few other games at the new stadium the first season it was in use. But it just wasn't the same. Buddy had a LaSalle sedan that had seen better days, and it was always a question if we'd get to a game or not...or back home afterwards. Eventually, we stopped going to games altogether when Buddy and his family moved to Buckroe Beach.



***THE BOYS OF SUMMER:*** The Baby Dodgers franchise last played in 1955. The next year the Piedmont League folded. But the Brooklyn Dodgers won the World Series in 1955 for the first time, overcoming the New York's Bronx Bombers. It was their only series win in Brooklyn before the team moved to the West Coast. During that seven-game World Series, Duke Snyder hit three home runs and Gil Hodges one.



Their accomplishments, failures and private lives, and those of their teammates was later heralded in a book about that ultra-successful season. Entitled *The Boys of Summer*, many consider it to be the best book ever written about baseball.

By 1955 I was a shipyard apprentice, working and learning on the waterfront, and yearning to be selected 'to go to the drawing room'. The games were all played in the day time that year; five of the seven on weekdays. Concealed radios in waterfront shops and shipboard offices were tuned in. The latest developments were passed rapidly by word-of-mouth. It was easy to gage Brooklyn's success by the number of low-volume cheers or moans from shipbuilders fond of da bums.

***EPILOGUE:*** Duke Snyder, depicted on the right, played a cameo role in Chuck Connors' TV show a few years before he retired from baseball. He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1980 and passed away just last year at age 85.

Chuck Connors appeared in numerous TV show and motion pictures over a span of forty years. Because he was from Brooklyn, he was happier than many of that city's native sons when the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles, where he resided until 1999. Always a heavy smoker, he died of lung cancer at age 78 that year.



Gil Hodges played a number of years for the Dodgers at Brooklyn and Los Angeles, and later for big league teams. In 1969 he coached and led the New York Mets to a World Series title in what is considered one of the biggest upsets in baseball of all time. Two days shy of his 48<sup>th</sup> birthday he collapsed and died of a heart attack on a golf course.

Soddy Groat married a Virginia Peninsula girl in 1947. Following his baseball career, he took up residency in Newport News in 1951. He owned a restaurant until 1970. Afterwards he became active in many Peninsula organizations; including coaching and leading the Peninsula Catholic high school baseball team to a state championship in 1976. Soddy Groat passed away at age 82 and is interred in Peninsula Memorial Park.

In 1949, Wayne Johnson also married a girl he met in Newport News while playing professional baseball. After his career ended, they lived in Newport News and raised a family. He worked in the shipyard for an unknown number of years. In 1977, he and “Whitey” Ford were reunited at a ball game at War Memorial Stadium. Wayne Johnson passed away in 2001. He was 81.

Peninsula War Memorial Stadium still stands and is in active use at age sixty-six. Renovated several times since 1948, it has been the host to nine different major league affiliated teams. Currently it is the home of the Peninsula Pilots, a minor league team. The facility is also where the Apprentice School’s baseball team plays its home games.

My best baseball buddy...Buddy Hollingsworth...continued to work for the *Daily Press* organization until 1970. He passed away unexpectedly during baseball season that year. As I recall, he was less than 60 years old. I have since lost all touch with his family.

As for the demise of Builders’ Park, little is known. The facility was listed in city directories for Newport News for the years 1946 and 1947 as “Community Recreational Center”. Its address was listed as 7300 Warwick Road, but no ownership or other useful information is provided in those books. There are no similar entries in the 1948 or later editions of the directories, leading one to assume that it was abandoned and/or demolished in the late 1940’s, and the land subsequently put up for sale.

Commercial buildings have taken the ball park’s place, including a car dealership on the northwest corner of Warwick Boulevard and 73<sup>rd</sup> Street. Today that facility, depicted on the right, is a third-rate used car lot.



No one there, when asked, knew anything at all about Builders’ Park or the Baby Dodgers.

Last year I visited the old Builders’ Park site, looking for some signs of where I once spent so many happy hours. There was nothing to see. The only remotely relevant thing I found was the railroad tracks that once supported high speed passenger trains on their dashes to and from the waterside terminal at the end of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street.

I didn’t have any pennies in my pocket, but that didn’t matter. The steam locomotives that once roared by, spewing plumes of black smoke and shaking the ball park no longer exist either...

What I did find recently, in the process of rekindling my memories and augmenting them with information and illustrations gleaned from Internet was the following photograph. It is, without a doubt, a photo of the 1946 Newport News Baby Dodgers team.



In the second row, third from the left and standing taller than the rest is Chuck Connors. On the far right of that row is, I believe, Soddy Groat. In the front row, second from the right is Gil Hodges. Neither the clarity of the photo...or my memory allows for a positive identification of any of the others.

But that's more than enough for me. I don't think any one ever said that nostalgia had to be perfect.