

VISALIA

GOSHEN & GIDDINGS

65 YEARS OF VISALIA PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL

*Donny Baarns*

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# Irish Eyes, Orphans, and Pirates

## Visalia's Deep Baseball Roots

Long before professional baseball became a fixture in Visalia, the sport was introduced and nurtured into a Tulare County tradition. How did it happen, and what were those early days like?

It might be a stretch to say that baseball in Visalia has its roots in Northern Ireland. But not much.

When Thomas Fowler was born on March 17, 1829 just outside Belfast, Ireland, his parents couldn't have known that their son would eventually become the patron saint of baseball in a small California rancher town over 5,000 miles away. In fact, they would not have had the slightest idea of what "baseball" was. But Thomas was destined to be first a traveler, then a wanderer, and then a restlessly enthusiastic picture of American frontier success.

The first sign that young Thomas was not going to be an ordinary man was when he left Ireland at age 18. Nobody knows why. Maybe he didn't either. But he arrived in New York in 1847, and found work as an apprentice at a machine shop, breathing poisonous iron dust all day long.

As a young immigrant with a dangerous, exhausting, low-paying job, Fowler could have become one of the faceless thousands of Irish who were swallowed alive by the 19th Century New York slums. In fairness, his family was very wealthy, and he may have come to the country with more resources than the average immigrant. But that, in itself, was part of what made Fowler so fascinating: he was the family's only son, and stood to inherit a fortune from his parents if he had just stayed in Ireland. But he chose to risk it all to come to America, where, in the days before wireless money transfers and interconnected world banking systems, his family's wealth was largely useless.

When he was tired of the machine shop job, he didn't sail back to Irish safety, either. Instead, he wandered down through the American South to New Orleans, then migrated through the plains to Texas, and then

found his way from Texas to California, where, in the early 1850s, he settled in the newly incorporated region of Tulare County.

Fowler was originally drawn to California by the Gold Rush, which had begun a few years earlier. California was rumored to be a land where precious ore was everywhere and quick riches were easily found. In reality, gold was very difficult and arduous to mine, and required a large amount of luck to find. Fowler quickly realized that the people who were getting rich weren't the miners themselves; they were the merchants who sold goods to the miners. Fowler deftly adjusted his plans, and instead of spending his money on mining equipment, he started buying, breeding, and slaughtering beef cattle to supply food to the mining communities.

Over the following years, his business boomed and expanded, until he dominated the meat markets in Central California and silver-rich Nevada. He acquired a 40,000 acre ranch, and his cattle, with their distinctive "76" brand, were said to be in the "tens of thousands."

Fowler became one of California's wealthiest and well-liked citizens, and he used that popularity to win election to the State Senate in 1869. He would be re-elected multiple times. "Honest Tom" had reached the pinnacle of his influence and success. He married, had five children, and seemed to be set for life.

But he was still the same restless man who had left a fortune in Ireland and wandered

across North America, and he needed a new challenge. He had always dreamed of being a successful miner; it was, after all, what had driven him to the state in the first place. Pragmatism had made him a cattle rancher, but prospecting was what he really wanted to do. So when the opportunity presented itself, he purchased the rights to the Empire Mine in Mineral King, raised millions of dollars in investment, and went to work on his new venture.

As a side project, he also founded a general store in Visalia and named it after his mine. The Empire Store was born, and became a major sponsorship force in the area.

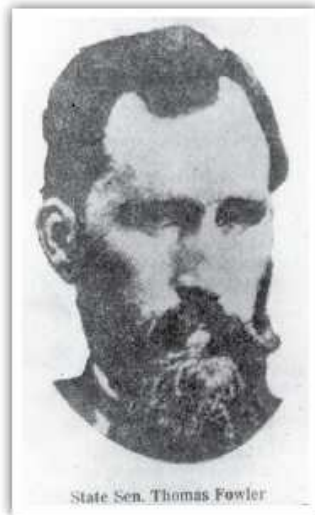
With his considerable money and clout, Fowler could fund any cause or venture he liked. One of those causes, it turned out, was baseball. It's not exactly known how Fowler became a fan of the new craze that was sweeping the country. Some speculate that he picked it up while making frequent visits to San Francisco and Sacramento.

Regardless of where he found the sport, Fowler seemed to enjoy any kind of competitive action. He was known for his boisterous, stereotypical Scotch-Irish temperament; the

California Senate Guide of 1878 described him as "a fearless man, a little apt to get excited." The guide warned that "It is dangerous to tread on Senator Fowler's toes, for he is as quick to resent as to forgive an injury...He is a hard man to fight against, for the reason that he has acres, cattle...and a pluck that will surmount any difficulty."

It isn't surprising that Fowler had this kind of personality; it took tremendous forcefulness to establish oneself as a giant in the tough mid-19th Century California landscape. Laws were not always evenly enforced, bandits and robbers were still rampant, and justice was something that individuals often took into their own hands.

Once, according to popular legend, Fowler and another Irish immigrant got into a heated argument by the shores of what is now Bravo Lake in Woodlake, California. They supposedly squared off and boxed for the rest of the day, attracting a crowd of native Yokut tribesmen who yelled "Bravo!" every time either of them landed a punch, thus giving the lake its name. Whether the story was true or not, Fowler's combative nature made him an ideal patron for sports.





Two unidentified members of the Empire Baseball Club of Visalia pose for an 1879 photograph.

And so, in April of 1879, a new baseball team was formed. They were known as the Empire Club of Visalia (officially sponsored by Fowler's Empire Store), and they were the first organized team in Visalia. Fifty years after Thomas had been born across the Atlantic Ocean, he and his self-financed club were about to make history. But it wouldn't be pretty.

Their first opponent was the Two Orphans club of Bakersfield. Bakersfield had a head start on Visalia in population and baseball, and already boasted a few established teams.

The *Weekly Visalia Delta* described the Two Orphans as "an old club," and relatively speaking, it probably was.

Two Orphans had agreed to come to Visalia via train to play against the Empires, who had not even held a formal practice since being founded less than a week earlier. The game was played on a Sunday in front of "a large number of people," who saw the experienced Two Orphans take advantage of the green Empires in a 31-6 pasting. But the event was still a rousing success, as the crowd was enthused about the new sport. Bakersfield players "expressed themselves as well satisfied with the reception they received in Visalia" and agreed to host a return contest.

Later that summer, Visalia prepared to head to Bakersfield for the rematch.

"They will also take with them their guns and glass ball traps, and have a pigeon and glass ball shooting match," reported the *Weekly Delta*. "The Bakersfield boys may win the base-ball match, but they will find it difficult to beat our boys at shooting."

The Empires traveled to Bakersfield on July 13th, 1879. The Visalia team, along with "60 of Visalia's encouraging and enterprising citizens together with a number of ladies and the Visalia Silver Cornet Band" left at 1 AM on Sunday. They arrived in Bakersfield at 5 AM and were "met by a delegation from the Two Orphans and the Bakersfield band in a most cordial manner." After resting briefly at the Arlington House and French Hotel, they were greeted by the locals. "The citizens, many of them old Visalians, called during the morning and spoke their welcome,"

reported the *Delta*. After listening to several "soul-stirring airs" from both the Visalia and Bakersfield bands, the crowd moved to the sporting grounds for the shooting contest and ballgame.

As it turned out, the *Weekly Delta* was half-correct in their prediction: Bakersfield won the baseball game *and* the shooting contest. This time, the Empires managed to score 21 runs, more than tripling their output from three months prior. Unfortunately, Bakersfield scored 44.

The final inning-by-inning line score, reprinted in the *Delta*, was not aesthetically pleasing:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	R
EMPIRE (VISALIA)	0	0	0	0	4	2	6	5	4	21
TWO ORPHANS (BAKERSFIELD)	4	3	3	5	6	9	5	5	4	44

*Obviously, the now-familiar rule of skipping the bottom of the ninth inning when the home team had already won was not in place yet.*

After the games, the Visalians were escorted back to their hotel, where "a sumptuous supper was given by the Two Orphans." The Visalia delegation used the *Weekly Delta* to convey their gratitude to the citizens of Bakersfield for their hospitality, and wrote that they hoped "to be able at no very distant day to return the compliment."

Within the next few years, multiple teams had been sponsored and founded in Visalia, and they were regularly competing with and beating Bakersfield teams. By 1887, Visalia had a seven-team city league. By the 1890s, a San Joaquin League was in place. Baseball was firmly entrenched in Tulare County, and was there to stay.

*Joe Charboneau was first to meet Gil Ramirez after his momentum-shifting grand slam (Visalia Times-Delta)*



Ramirez was just 21 years old, and was in his second season of pro ball. The light-hitting backup catcher had appeared in only 45 games during the regular season and had batted just .218. But with the bases loaded in the bottom of the 4th inning, Ramirez stepped up and lined the first pitch he saw over the left field fence for a grand slam.

The Oaks never looked back, as they raced to an 11-3 blowout win to even the series at 2-2. Then, they turned right around and played a decisive Game 5. It was Bob Vaselec's turn to pick up the hero baton, and he would seize it with both hands.

Vaselec, who pitched briefly in the Major Leagues with the Twins a couple years later, took the ball in the nightcap and never gave it up, throwing a complete game. The Oaks took a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the 2nd when Tack Wilson's clutch 2-out single brought home Gary Bozick. Lodi tied it in the top of the 3rd, but Visalia went back ahead in the bottom of the same inning on an unearned run. John Daynor led off with a single, went to second on a ball in the dirt and then to third on the same play when Lodi's catcher threw the ball into center field. He then scored on an error by the Dodgers' shortstop. And after a season of crushing home runs and overpowering offense, that gift run turned out to be Visalia's last, and most important, of the season.

Vaselec did the rest, making the slender 2-1 advantage stand up. He pitched out of jams in the 5th and



*Gil Ramirez gets off the Visalia bus during a 1978 road trip. (Jim Rumelhart)*



*The Visalia Times-Delta captured the championship moment perfectly.*

7th innings and threw a perfect 8th. Then, in the top of the 9th, with Rec Park rocking, he retired the first two Lodi batters, but walked future Major Leaguer Mark Bradley to put the tying run on base.

That brought up George Kaage, who had hit over .300 that season. But he would never have the chance to steal the title.

Bradley tried to swipe second, and Steve Herz, who was behind the plate for the Oaks in this final game, threw a laser to the second base bag. Gary Bozick, the shortstop, caught the throw and tagged the sliding Bradley out. And Visalia had done it.

For Veselic, it was his 2nd league championship in 3 seasons; he had also won it with the Reno Silver Sox (yes, Reno used to be in the California League) in '76. After his brief stay in the Majors in the early '80s, he bounced around in the minors and independent leagues until 1990. He died at only 40 years old of cancer in 1995.

Joe Charboneau, as mentioned by Weiss and Marshall, became an overnight sensation in the Majors a couple years later, and then fell from that pedestal almost as quickly. Scott Ullger is still the Minnesota Twins' third base coach today. Tack Wilson made it to the big leagues in 1983 and again in '87.

And what of grand slam hero Gil Ramirez? He never played pro ball again. But he went out on top, just like the rest of the team. It's a feat that Visalia clubs have yet to duplicate. It's what makes the 1978 Visalia Oaks' magical season an unforgettable one in franchise and city history.

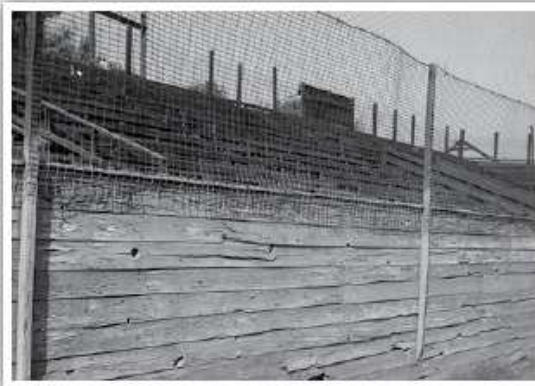


We come now to a batch of pictures that were taken after the 1962 season. Visalia had churned through affiliation agreements with the Cubs, Reds, Athletics, and even the Pacific Coast League's Hollywood Stars. In '62, they had been a Chicago White Sox farm team and were known as the Visalia White Sox, as evidenced by the sign above the ballpark's main entrance off of Giddings Street.

What makes these pictures especially poignant is the fact that the wood was all about to be torn down. The White Sox left town after '62, and Visalia would have to wait until 1968 for professional baseball to return. In the meantime, the rotting, creaking lumber was ripped out and junked, and the now-familiar concrete berm was constructed.



A view of the ramp leading up to the far section of the wooden grandstand down the left field line.



Sixteen years after the wooden stands had been last repaired, the planks that lined the first base side of the bleachers were showing their age.



A beautiful profile shot of the grandstand, taken from the Box Seat section of the first base line. Aluminum fold-down chairs populated this area during games.



A close-up view of the wooden benches, which were splintering and cracking from a decade and a half of sitting in the Central Valley sun. We've spoken with older fans who remember seat-cushion vendors making a healthy profit during each game. You needed one if you were going to survive.



# Programs Here!

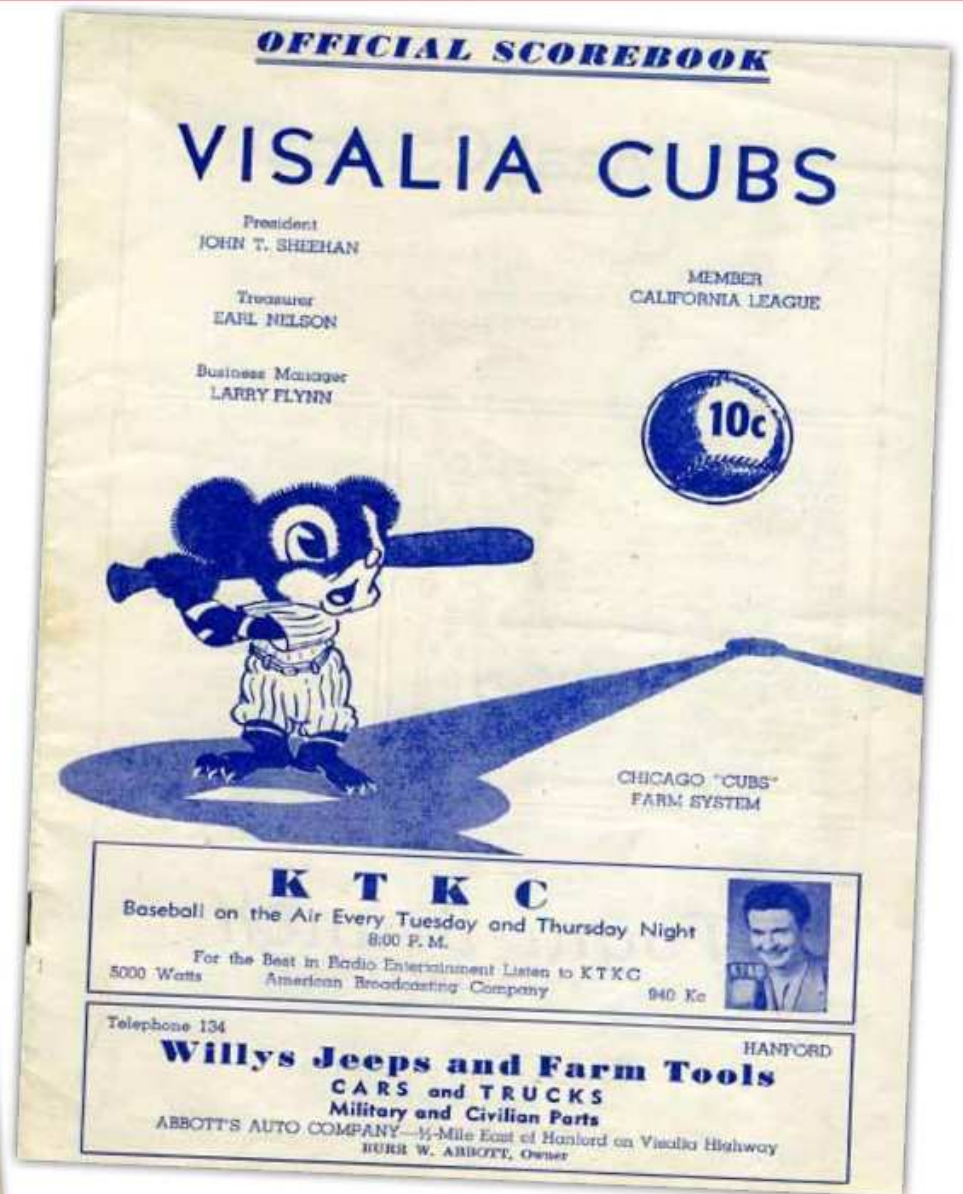
## Visalia Game Day Publications Through the Years

Visalia Professional Baseball Club has put out a program or scorebook in nearly every season of its existence. We have collected copies of many of these annual publications, and the diversity of their designs, colors, and concepts is fascinating.

As with every other aspect of this project, our thanks go out to the many fans and collectors who have graciously donated or lent us their old programs. If you have something from a year not listed here, please let us know!



1947

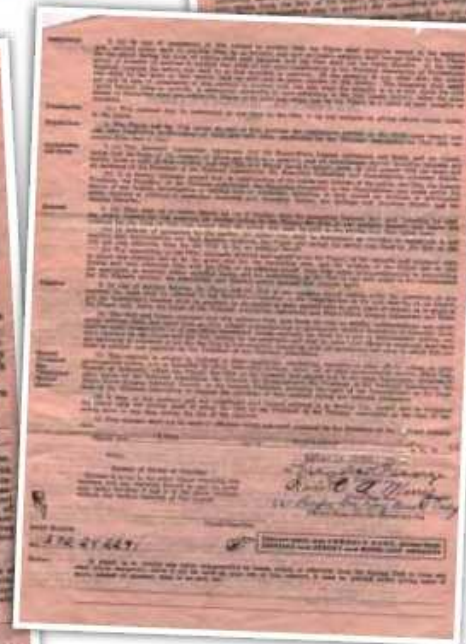
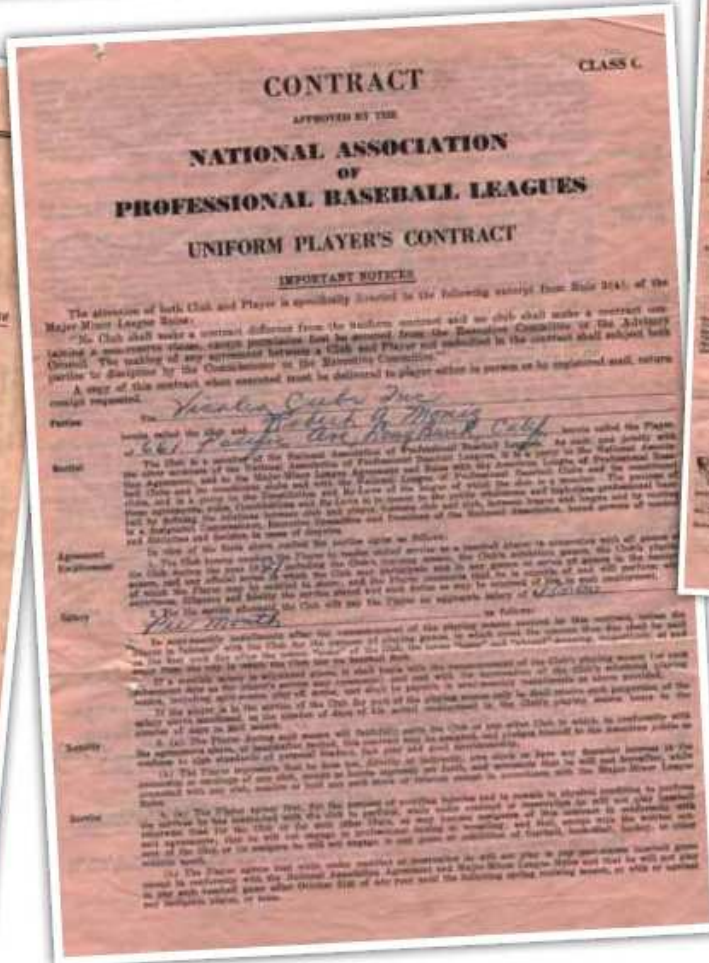
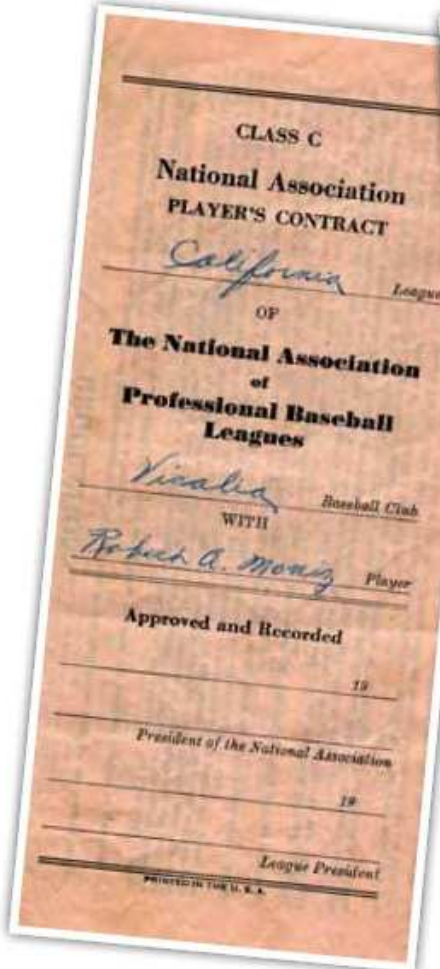


1948



Visalia adopted this "Jumping Cub" logo in the late '40s and used it for a few years. Their Christmas cards to season ticket holders utilized the figure, who is endearing despite doing so many fundamental things incorrectly during his swing. His feet are off the ground, he's not watching the ball, he's swinging too hard, he's not rotating the hips... and yet, he's apparently managed to hit a line drive. Not bad for a young four-legged mammal.

Incidentally, the '49 version of the Cubs had gone just 42-98; perhaps they were taking lessons from their mascot.



Bob Moniz played for Visalia in parts of six seasons. He showed us the contract he signed in 1947; as you can see, the pay was meager, even by mid-20th Century standards.

Don Alfano, who was a standout Cub in 1946 and '47, told us he received an extra \$50 a month in his second season with the team...for driving the team bus on road trips.

There's a degree of irony in this picture, but it takes a little research to uncover it. We'll get to that in due time. Meanwhile, do you notice anything strange in the photo?

If you said "safety pins," you win. The Visalia Cubs' jerseys were hand-me-downs from the Major League club, and they often were not in the best shape after being worn at Wrigley Field the previous year and then shipped cross-country.

This shot was taken on Opening Day of the 1947 season. John Intlekofer, the Visalia manager, is on the left, and big Jack Bryson, with his uniform held together by a couple makeshift devices, is the man on the right.

Bryson, like many players in that era, had his early career interrupted by World War II. He had been signed by the Washington Senators in 1941, and had begun his professional days in Orlando, Florida, at the tender age of 18. But he was drafted the next year, and found himself occupied with more important things until after the war.

The '47 season was his first in the Cubs organization, and his first full season back in pro ball. He was now 24 years old, and the years he'd lost had prohibited him from developing the raw talent that the Senators had seen in him six years earlier.

Bryson had a statistically solid season, as he went 16-13 in 1947, with a 3.94 ERA. His control, however, haunted him, as he walked 131 batters. He returned to Visalia in '48, and while the walks



remained a constant feature of his game, his ability to pitch around them did not. He slumped to a 3-15 record with an ERA of over 6, and the Cubs released him. He remained in the area, playing for nearby Porterville in the Sunset League, but didn't have much luck there either, and retired from baseball after 1949. We haven't been able to determine what happened to him after his playing days.

John Intlekofer, meanwhile, helped lead the team to a dramatic turnaround from their inaugural season, when they won only 39 games. Intlekofer's club went 79-61, a full 40 games better than in '46, and they finished in second place. Only Stockton, who ripped off a mind-blowing 26 consecutive victories at one point, compiled a better record than the Cubs.

Unfortunately, the California League didn't have playoffs in those early years; the team with the best regular-season record was simply declared the league champion. The Cubs, no doubt, would have welcomed the chance to play Stockton in a short series, but that opportunity did not exist yet.

Intlekofer didn't just manage from the bench; he was a pitcher-manager, although he threw only 56 innings in what would be his last playing season. He was 35 years old that year, and he'd been playing professionally since he was 19. His minor league career had taken him through Portland, Macon, Waterloo, Omaha, Little Rock, Cedar Rapids, Decatur, and two stops in the glamorous Pacific Coast League with the Los Angeles Angels and the Hollywood Stars.



*John Intlekofer poses with Elvis on the set of Love Me Tender.*

Already well past the point of Major League potential, he was transitioning into a managerial role, and his first go-around was a highly successful one.

After the 1947 season, though, Intlekofer managed for only one more year before leaving the game. It seems logical that he had made contacts within the movie industry during his playing days in Hollywood, because in his post-baseball days, he became a successful wardrobe and costumer for 20th Century Fox. He worked on films such as *Planet of the Apes* and *M.A.S.H.*, and also outfitted Elvis Presley in several of his movies. Intlekofer passed away in 1999 in Woodland Hills, California at the age of 88.

A picture of John and Elvis, personalized with a thank-you note from The King himself, recently sold for over \$4,500 on auction, along with a brown cowboy hat that Intlekofer picked out for Presley for his first film *Love Me Tender*.

All of that was still ahead of Intlekofer when he stood next to Jack Bryson in April of 1947. The irony, of course, was that a man who went on to become a wardrobe to the stars was managing a team that couldn't even afford buttons for their ragged hand-me-down jerseys.

# Pauline “Ma” Taylor

A huge baseball fan and a shrewd businesswoman, Pauline Taylor knew a fortunate convergence when she saw one. Baseball players loved her Taylor’s Hot Dogs stand because it was the most affordable food in town, and she loved them like a mother in return. She regularly invited players to her family’s house for free meals, especially those who were the poorest and furthest from home.

One of Taylor’s first regular baseball customers was Vada Pinson, who ate at the hot dog stand almost daily in 1957. The Taylor family remained close friends with Vada throughout the rest of his life; he often drove back to Visalia to visit them.

When the team folded after the 1962 season, Taylor headed a committee that sought to bring baseball back to town. They eventually succeeded, convincing the Mets to become an affiliate. Then, when the Mets left after 1975, Taylor helped spearhead support for the City of Visalia’s ownership of the franchise. She was a tireless advocate of baseball and invested countless hours making sure that it had a future in the city.

“One thing’s for sure,” Taylor told *Sports Illustrated* in 1978, “never again will the Majors pack up and go home, leaving us without a franchise. It’s ours now—here to stay as long as we want it.”

Although the city would sell the franchise to private bidders five years later, Taylor’s words have held true; Minor League Baseball has not left Visalia since.

# Dick Anthony

Dick Anthony was such a fan of Visalia baseball that he lived at the ballpark for 13 years.

As Director of Parks and Recreation for the city, Anthony lived with his wife and family in a 2-story house next to the clubhouse down the left field line of Recreation Park until the facility was remodeled in 1968.

Anthony always supported the ballclub, but his finest hour was in 1976, when he pushed through the city’s initiative to purchase a team from the California League and run it themselves. In fact, the responsibility for overseeing the team fell to Anthony himself, which he assumed with great energy for the next several years until health problems forced him to retire. But he had already done his part to make baseball a permanent fixture in Visalia.



# Harry "Bud" Heslet

## 1956 Visalia Cubs

Since its inception in 1941, the California League has been known as the most hitter-friendly league in the Minors. It has seen over 2,000 alumni graduate to the Major Leagues, including future MVPs, Rookies of the Year, batting champions, world champions, and Hall of Famers. And yet, not one of them has hit more homers or driven in more runs in a California League season than Bud Heslet.

Harry "Bud" Heslet was a 36-year-old veteran journeyman when he landed on the Visalia Cubs' roster in 1956. It was his 14th season as a professional, all of them spent in the Minor Leagues. He had begun his career in 1940, missed three seasons to World War II, and then resumed his trade in Norfolk, Joplin, Twin Falls, Binghamton, Newark, Toronto, San Antonio, Shreveport, and Sacramento.

As a grizzled veteran, Heslet proceeded to demolish the California League in record fashion. He clubbed a jaw-dropping 51 home runs and drove in a gargantuan total of 172. His .334 batting average wasn't bad either.

"I don't know how to explain it," Heslet told Minor League Baseball's official web site nearly 50 years later. "I was hitting a home run every three games...I really enjoyed that year, and I was real popular in Visalia. I was a happy camper, and I could stick out my chest about it."

What made Heslet's season even more memorable was the fact that it was his last. He hung up his spikes after '56, and stayed in town to work for the Visalia Fire Department for the next 19 years. "I never regretted it," he said. "I had a boy who was two and a half years old, and I wanted to get him settled...I thought it was time I did something else and pay attention to my family."

While he never played under the bright lights of the Major Leagues, Heslet will always be a hero in Visalia, both for his exploits on the field in 1956 and his later, and much longer, heroism off of it. He was able to do what very few professional athletes achieve: he left on top.

"It's better to quit while you're ahead," he stated. "I had a great year, and I probably wouldn't have had a year like that again."

Six decades and thousands of players later, nobody else in the California League has either.

