

An excerpt from "Goodbye, Baseball"

by Kevin Myrick

A gang of boys waited outside the ticket office at Riverside Park as Dwayne Mitchell took a final stroll to the main entrance. Dwayne walked slowly inspected the concession stands underneath the grandstand. He expected as the most senior ticket agent in the park for everything to be shipshape in his ballpark, even if this was to be the last game in the place. The thought saddened him as he bent over to pick up a dirty napkin missed by the cleaning staff earlier. He dropped it into the closest trash can as the gang of boys watched him through the iron bars of the park's front gate. He straightened his tie and continued his stroll to the ticket office.

"Say mister, you ain't gotta go lookin' all purty for us, we just want in," one of the shaggy haired taller boys behind the gate said. It sent the whole group laughing, to Dwayne's red faced embarrassment.

He huffed and took one last look around to see if there was anything else out of place before he unlocked the door to the ticket office and went through the motions of preparing for the fans to come pouring in and dirtying up his stadium. The boys were his biggest nuisance. The unwashed guttersnipes poured into the park early, all shoeless and half shirtless. He only imagined how thick the fleas must be in their thick tangle of hair, of which only two didn't have covered with a cap with an embroidered red "A" sewn onto the front above the brim. They paced like lions in a zoo behind bars waiting to be let loose inside inside the park. Dwayne took his time counting and re-counting every greenback and coin in the cash drawer, then took even more time unrolling a spool of paper tickets to hand through the small opening in the window.

The more impatient of the boys started dancing from foot to foot as if they were natives trying to will the gods to make Dwayne speed up his routine and let them inside. The crack of the bats echoed through the empty corridor under the grandstand and out the front gate, prompting a wild rumble from the group.

“Come on mister, we're missin' battin' practice,” one of the younger kids whined. He didn't wear a hat and pressed his face between the bars until it could go no further and his cheeks pushed inward toward his nose and mouth.

Dwayne ignored the boys and checked his watch to see if it was time to open the main gate and let fans into the park. He thought about doing this with a bit of ceremony, letting the heavy iron gate built 40 years before at the Allendale Ironworks open slowly as he deliberately stepped and pushed it gently. He didn't think the boys deserved it; they were always too eager to get inside and run crazy through his clean park. The dirty rabble driving him mad as they chased fly balls arcing into the grandstands and outfielders and dropped their trash wherever they stood at the moment before taking off at each crack of the bat. It was bad enough the regular fans let their peanut shells and paper hot dog wrappers fall on the ground underneath their seats, dirtying up what is otherwise a beautiful house of worship to baseball along the Nuwyeh River.

Now even this temple to the game would close down. He finished placing the ticket spool in the spinning rack and around a wheel to where he could easily pull and tear them away and hand them to customers he thought about how much he'd miss this place. He even admitted to himself with a smirk growing across his lips that he'd miss the dirty gang of boys running through the park like wild animals.

Since his parents brought him to Allendale as a young boy, he watched with amazement the men in uniforms hitting, running and

fielding the ball around the park as if they were playing a pickup game in a dirt lot. For 30 years he watched baseball at Riverside Park, and until a few years ago he only dreamed of working for the team. When the newspaper advertised an opening for a ticket seller, he jumped at the chance and worked his way up to his senior post. The position did not come with a raise in his pay but it afforded him the opportunity to watch the games for free once the other ticket sellers clocked in and took their stations.

The owners of the Allendale Generals - Horace T. Camden and James Wilkes - could no longer afford to keep up the salaries of the ticket sellers and the extra pay that came to the players on the teams. The owners couldn't even afford to keep the lights on at night, so all home games this year were scheduled in the afternoon so they'd wrap up before the sun set behind Vickers Mountain. Dwayne thought the 1932 season wasn't the same without the post game July 4th fireworks or the annual Ironworks company picnic organized by the wives of the employees at the end of the season.

No more Ironworks meant no more company picnics, or baseball in Allendale. James Wilkes was left without any other choice than bankruptcy when the shock on Wall Street in '29 eventually found its way to his business. There were no more buyers for the steel made in the red brick building on the North Shore of the Nuwyeh. He tried to hold on as long as he could with loans from Allendale Savings and Trust, but a few months before the house of cards tumbled down on his head. The Ironworks closed its doors at the end of June.

Without anyone to buy the iron ore being dug out from under Walnut Ridge, the mine went under too. Followed not too far behind by the bank which couldn't handle so many of its customers losing their only means of employment and the employers all at the same time. Allendale was barely holding on in September 1932 when Camden and Wilkes announced that the Generals would not be coming out to play again in the spring of 1933 or anymore after.

Even baseball was going bust in Allendale. If Dwayne could rub a magic lamp and a genie pop out granting him only one wish, it would be to have baseball be played here at Riverside Park for the rest of eternity. Too bad there were no genies to be found in these parts.

The boys brought him back out of his thoughts with jeers as the bell tower atop Oak Hill struck two o'clock.

“Come on mister, open up! Open up!” they chanted together as they dragged sticks across the iron bars. Dwayne walked out of the office and almost ran around to the entrance as he watched the hands on his watch turn to one past the hour, making him late to open on the final day of baseball in this fine town. That itself was a cardinal sin.

The boys ran past him as he pulled open the gate and each dropped a quarter onto the window sill of the ticket office before disappearing into the ballpark. Dwayne decided that he might not miss the gang of dirty boys so much after all.

