

*The following is transcribed from Jim Benishek's written recollections about the Baseball Program at Branch and the development of the Branch Recreational Park Complex In Branch, Wisconsin.*

The Branch Recreational Association.

At the start of 2003's youth tournament at the Branch Park, president Dale Lindner ask me (Jim Benishek) if I could offer some reflections on the early years of the program. At a time in our history when people are complaining about cutbacks in programs in funding, it seems like a good idea to me.

This program started in early 1972 when I met a friend and neighbor, Ben Steuer, at the then post office at Brunner's in Branch. We were soon joined by Al Kleman. I suggested we go have a couple of beers as I had an idea I would like to promote to them. I suggested we start a community center and sports complex rather than having people like Carl Laviolette, Berlin Bolle, and Jack Herrmann trying to build ball diamonds for the kids on their own property. I felt it should be a community rather than an individual project to raise funds. I suggested we take over the Branch Fire Department picnic date as they were going to drop it because of getting more tax support.

So we held a meeting at the fire station. I was elected president, the position I believe I held for five years. And Al Kleman was elected Secretary, a position I believe he held for nine years. We wanted to incorporate the organization, but couldn't afford a lawyer, so Al wrote of the articles of Incorporation and sent them to Madison and they were accepted. Al passed away about a year ago (2002), but I often said I could be president of anything if I had a Secretary like Al Kleman.

We were one of the first organizations to go to a three day picnic back then. I hired full size bands like Elroy Berkholz, Don Schleis, Bob Kuether, Romy Gosz, and others.

The first years we held our picnic behind Brunners at Branch and went into radio broadcasts starting the second year with Romy Gosz on the bandstand. Tom Flattery of WCUB was a radio engineer-announcer and he put so many mikes on the band stand that I think Romy was almost afraid to get up there. You could tell the weather was changing and about 4 o'clock a severe thunderstorm hit. It blew down one tent, the roof off the lunch stand and the only way the big tent stayed up was some good souls standing out in the storm hanging on to the ropes. We had put the band in that beer tent and we got a lot of music out of Romy. He got so nervous, he didn't put the trumpet down. Those first years I wrote and sold the ads, not hard to do when you have sponsors like Louis "Pat" Brunner who said "Jim, you sell what you can and give me the rest of the bill." I never had to charge him any extra. We had three or four broadcasts over WOMT-WCUB-WAUN and the cooperation we received from this area and much of the county was truly outstanding. We were looking for a building site when Lorenz Raeder contacted me and asked if we were interested in 25 acres he had purchased west of Branch. He then owned the Branch Cheese Co. and found he couldn't use the land for what he had intended and

would sell it to us for \$1000 less than he paid if we were going to use it for a park-recreation center. It seemed a little bigger than we needed, but we are glad we have it now. Don Risch's dad, Paul, gave us a loan from his fire insurance Co. so now all we had to do was get started, easier said than done. We built a 50' by 120' building on the property under the guidance of member Bob Kutil, mostly with membership efforts in the evenings. But we were plagued with bad weather, especially the first year at the new park. Our picnic got washed out 3 times and finally got a day in on Labor Day and we got some badly needed money to pay the interest on our loan. The standing joke at that time was if you need rain, just have Branch schedule a picnic! The ground was soft and freshly seeded and we didn't have the roads in that we have now. I remember one evening, Andy Anderson of WOMT with mike in hand and Bob Konkol and the 7 Sharps on the band stand ready to play when the storm hit. Even with the bays closed, the rain was flying 10-15 feet into the building. I said, "Andy we have to cancel if we go on the air, people will try to come and even if we get them in we don't know if we can get them out." Maybe a less determined group would have looked for a buyer and walked away, but the old saying is you can't tell how much fight is in a dog by its size. Or maybe we believed in the sign somebody put up which said "The Branch motto, the Difficult we do right away, the impossible takes a little longer."

Over the years, I've made some radio friendships I still cherish, like Andy Anderson and Don Seehafer from WOMT and Bill Walters and Lee Davis from WCUB. The cooperation we received from the radio stations and orchestras those early years was outstanding. I had the easy job, but the orchestras I had to cancel, I always hired back at the first opportunity. The beer and the refreshment stand wasn't too bad, but the lunch stand headed by Jim Stradel Sr., many of those early years, had the difficult task of selling the meat and bakery.

About that time we decided to lite the east ball field, so we bought used lite poles from the City of Manitowoc and a set of lites from a supplier who ended up with 2 sets and was very happy to sell us one. Roy Hoffman and a small crew installed them. Roy was active in our organization in many ways and he went on to lead many organizations in their fish boils. As usual we were short of money so we went to members and friends for loans and they responded. After building a second ball field (Bolle diamond) we decided to go into ball tournaments including mixed couples. At the start of one mixed couples tourney, the weatherman again visited. I and Ray Madsen arrived at the park to find Ed Grenier trying to shovel water off the ball field. It looked more like a fish pond and all three of us felt it was unplayable. Gene and Betsy Reindl drove in. We explained the situation to Gene and Betsy and Gene in his usual? Talkative way said simply "Play Ball." So I went home to cancel the first round of games till the morning and order a load of somewhat drier from Jim Sauer and with a dozen or so of members with rakes and shovels we were in a couple of hours, indeed "Playing Ball." We did not have a telephone at the park in the early years, so it resulted in a lot of chasing.

Why did we do it? I suppose there are many reasons. I started as a 14 year old farm boy playing for Branch in the Manitowoc County Fast Pitch league, one of 5 clubs I played

for. But back in the 1930-40's some of us including locally, played on a level area of what was really cow pastures and the old saying "look out, that's not second base," was once in awhile all too true. We have improved that situation a lot, and in the early 1960 as a member of the Manitowoc County traffic Dept. we started the County Traffic Baseball program. That continued until the Sheriff and Traffic depts were merged and the program was dropped. Then I and fellow Branch members Ray Madsen and Rick Aukamp met to reorganize the program. We added girls softball to the program and I guess I came up with the name of Manitowoc County Youth Sports. Rick and his wife, Sue, are to be complemented, Rick for all his work and Sue for all the typing. And at that time they were city residents. We made some changes in the structure of the program and includes all interested rural areas of the county along with some fringe areas and is one of, if not, the biggest rural programs in the state. (Now close to 140 teams) In a recent talk with Dennis Gutman from St. Naz., who is doing a great job as President of the County Youth Sports, he informed me that the profits from this year's pizza drive will return over \$48,000 to the league and teams.

We have been blessed with the assistance of many members and friends down the years, many doing deeds at their own expense. Russ Johnson, a neighbor and member who owned Color Craft and now lives in Arizona, saw to the planting of most of the shade trees at the Park. Ben and Grace Shimon, also members, Ben planting all the evergreens around the park and ball fields. Ben is a story in itself, he is around 80yrs old and umpires by himself at the park for Branch's Men's slow pitch rural traveling league. He and Dale Bolle only quit playing on the team a few years back, a team managed by Jack Kotche, another very active fellow.

Branch this year sponsored 13 youth teams plus a ladies and men's team. Some years back we also sponsored the Branch Blaze hardball team in the Northeast Wis. Shoreland League. Our team was made up of mostly boys from the county youth sports program, plus a few others. In Branch, if you put ball gloves on the Bolle boys and fill in the blank spots you had a team. Bill and Gary were also right handed pitchers and Paul when he was on was a nifty left hander. There were two Maribel boys, Kevin Konkol and Kelly Holb who were regulars on the team and two school teachers, first Terry Wittman, teaching in Manitowoc who could play almost any position on the field and then Brian Cashore, teaching at Mishicot, who was an All-American at Oakbrook II. It was a pleasure to watch him play. This Team was started by Marv Braun at Whitelaw, fell into Bob Bolle's hands and then taken over by Branch. I was not surprised when this year I saw, on TV, Terry Wittman, teaching and coaching a girls high school team from I believe Appleton in the state basketball tourney. The Branch Blaze were managed by Ken Bauman, Ray Madsen and then by Paul Varney as a player-manager. We were the smallest community in the league playing against teams like Kewaunee, Algoma, Howards Grove, Lux-Casco, a team or 2 from the Fox Valley and Green Bay areas, but were always competitive and one year won the league championship. I was happy to do the P.A. work for the games. For the Blaze games we operated the lunch-refreshment stand out of the west end of the building. The call was "Ray Madisen's frying Johnsville Brats."

Some of the umpires who have worked games at the park are Ray Berres, Chuck Delsman, Bernie Coogle, Dave Korte, Gary Reinke, and all 6' 5" of Mike Check who still gets down to umpire pee-wee games, etc.

The Branch Area has a long history of sports people going back to the early 1900's when my dad Jim "Pomp" Benishek, Ally Wetenkamp, Guy Drews, Ervin "Shorty" 6' 5" Lakatos, Adolph Jana the Shimeks and Carbons and coached by blacksmith Joe Carbon had one of the better basketball teams in this area of the state. They once played (in Feb of 1912) a barnstorming pro team who had an open date, who I believe, later became the New York Knicks. They wanted the entire gate, won the game, but stated it was one of the better games they had in Wis.

We had a lot of notable baseball people in the area like my neighbor, Gene Mand, and Lee Wetenkamp. Gene recently retired from coaching at Lincoln High and Lee, a product of County Sports program and Lincoln High, and now coaching at Branch, both retired after playing many years in the Sheboygan A's program. Another neighbor, Pat McGlin, who tried the climb in pro-ball and took my position as president of Manitowoc County Youth Sports when I stepped out, along with sidekick Loyal Kattreh, coached in the Branch youth program for many years. Gene Reindl, Ned Brazzle, and Jim Woespe are examples of others. Jim stating that it should be a teaching-learning experience. It is also interesting to note that both of the managers, Kenvin Stangel of the Manitowoc Legion team and Chris Schwarz of the Manitowoc Bandits, played some or all of their youth baseball at Branch. Branch has always had a strong program in the County Youth program. School Hill has come on real strong. In my opinion, the girls leagues are producing great teams and players. In the early days of the county program girls had to play hardball and some competed very well with the boys. Debbie Reindl could play infield and even pitch with the best of them and Rachel Green had a throwing arm many boys envied. The Delsman and Herrmann girls were always foremost along with the Reindl girls on the Branch team along with Amanda Dworak who is going on to make her name in tennis. And let's not forget the Havolovitz children, Tim and his sister Heide, and their day Ken, "Huby" who along with Doris were so active at Branch.

In the boys program many of the same names come forth along with the Madsen and Check boys and many more. Gene Reindl and Pat McGlin were both long time coaches in the Branch Program. Pat established a record that will be hard to beat, 114 wins, 9 losses.

With many organizations canceling their picnics because of the cost of music and the drinking laws, it becomes more important to support the park with a good sports program. The days of stocking our big cooler with around 200 halves of beer and sometimes having to restock on Sunday are apparently gone and we should be looking for some sporting event or meal (maybe another Hoffman fish boil if they're not being overdone) because it's becoming important to raise funds.

If I can inject a little humor in this it could be about the fellow who one picnic year asked if we could look for his false teeth in the parking lot. We found them, not in the parking lot, but in a toilet that wasn't flushing properly.

Another thing, Branch has been active in its support of Manitowoc County All Sports Program. There are a couple people who I believe should be nominated and are more deserving than me and a lot of others already in the program. Dave Stangel had been one of the counties top fastball pitchers for many-many years, until recently a sports shop operator, a teacher of the art of pitching and helping many individuals and organizations in their sports needs. When I have ask him about this, his mistaken reply has been, "Wait until I do something." Keith Bonde, All Sports President, and I believe he has done enough. Another is Marv Braun from the 7 Lakes Golf complex, who has done so much for the sports field during his lifetime.

I would like to thank those who helped me and all the people working in the Branch Program and hope you will continue your support of officers and members. I think we have shown what a small community with effort and determination can achieve. Let's continue to be "Branch Proud"

Jim Benishek