

Baseball Back in Time at Genesee Country Museum

By Tim Wiles

Calling all Cranks! The national game of base ball — 1865 style — is played almost every summer weekend at the Genesee Country Village & Museum in Mumfords, twenty miles outside of Rochester. “Cranks,” another name for fans, is just one of the words visitors will learn that is specific to 19th century base ball (notice the two-word spelling) when they visit the Museum for a “match” between two of the four teams, dedicated to recreating a version of the game adopted by the National Association of Base-Ball Players in New York City on December 14, 1864.

Four men’s teams meet on a rotating Saturday and Sunday schedule throughout the summer: the Knickerbockers, Flower City, the Rochesters, and the Live Oaks. Fans can watch the familiar game of base ball, and note the differences between that era and the game we know and love today.



Eckford vs Mutual trophy ball – This ball was given as the trophy for a game between two baseball clubs in 1863.

The pitcher, also known as a “bowler,” “hurler,” “thrower,” or “feeder,” delivers the ball under-

hand — and his intent is to deliver a hittable ball — so that action can ensue when the ball is in play. The batter is known as the “striker.” His job is to get on base, circle around and score an “ace,” or a “tally,” now known as a “run.” Fly balls can be caught for an out, even if they have already bounced once, though it is considered more manly to catch them before they hit the ground. There is only one umpire, and his decisions are absolutely final — though he may take a few moments to deliberate — and might even ask



Painting of imprisoned Union soldiers playing ball in Salisbury, N.C. in 1862 during the Civil War.

the spectators what they saw before making a ruling. No one wears a glove or any other protective gear.

The history is not just between the foul lines. Period costumes are encouraged and the etiquette of the day is observed by all. The hawkers serve food that would have been available nearly a century and a half ago — peanuts, birch beer, and other appropriate victuals. Unattended young ladies are asked to sit in a special seating section, so as to avoid the scandal which can result in improper mixing of the sexes. The ladies do get into the act on their own, as teams of the fairer sex meet on selected weekends throughout the summer.

The ballpark is a marvel, with period advertising on the outfield fence, a tower for the tallykeeper and announcer, and a special tent for refreshments. Boys scamper atop the hand-operated scoreboard marking the tallies, and fans sit on historically accurate bleachers, or stand to observe the competition.

Each year the museum hosts the annual National Silver Ball Tournament, hosting as many as a dozen teams of like-minded history buffs in a championship tournament.

Watching vintage base ball at Genesee Country Village & Museum is the closest you can get to traveling back in base ball time. The 4.5-acre field is located adjacent to the historic village, art gallery, and shops of Genesee Country Village and as such, the ball game can be just part of a thrilling stroll into the past. Play ball!



Tim Wiles is the director of research for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Images provided by the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library. For more information about the Genesee Country Village & Museum visit them online at www.gcv.org. This is one of a series written for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2011.