

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The pitcher eyes home plate, looks toward first, and throws the pitch. Strike three! It's another summer baseball game in Kansas. But wait, these players are wearing woolen uniforms, and they're not even using baseball gloves. Is this a throwback to the 1860s? Yes, and it's a wonderful way to celebrate the heritage of baseball. This is today's Kansas Profile.

As we learned last week, Mark Wellbrock is owner of the Jetmore Food Center in Jetmore, Kansas. He is also a part of a remarkable revival of old-time base ball (spelled as two words) in our state. His team is known as the Hodgeman Nine.

A guy Mark knew from Jetmore visited Colorado Springs and happened to see a vintage base ball game. He came back and told the Jetmore folks all about it.

It was a bunch of guys in old-time uniforms playing old-time base ball. So some guys in Jetmore wanted to try it.

"I love baseball and I like history," Mark Wellbrock said. "I had played baseball all the way through college." So, with financial sponsorship from Mark's store (the Jetmore Food Center), a vintage base ball team was put together. Retro uniforms and equipment were gathered and a team was assembled.

Taking its name from the county, the team became known as the Hodgeman Nine. The team now plays up to twenty times per year.

"We play using 1860s rules and equipment," Mark said. "It's kind of like living history or a re-enactment, but no one knows the outcome."

The players wear cool-looking retro uniforms with striped hats. The uniforms look cool, but they are definitely not cool in temperature. In fact, they are actually quite hot, like the woollen uniforms of yesteryear.

The Hodgeman Nine plays games in various locations around the state and beyond. "We get calls from Colorado, Oklahoma, and eastern Kansas," Mark said. Some tourism attractions have had the Hodgeman Nine come in and play to help create a nostalgic environment. "We ask for enough funds to recoup the costs of equipment." Mark said.

"We have players ranging from eighth grade to 58 years old and everything in between, from novice to experienced," Mark said.

This is also a way to bring together people across the region. Besides Jetmore, the team has players from the rural communities of Larned, Spearville, and Hanston, population 268 people. Now, that's rural.

One of the hallmarks of vintage base ball is sportsmanship. "This is not a win-at-all-costs type of sport," Mark said. "We make it a point to follow gentlemanly conduct." It doesn't sound like there was a lot of trash talking going on at the 1860s ball diamonds.

In fact, the Hodgeman Nine uses the old-time language. For example, instead of "Batter up", they might say, "Striker to the Line". "Huzzah" was a term used to cheer a fine play, and a "Muffin" was a player that wasn't all that skilled. The umpire might wear a top hat and tails, but was called a "Blind Tom". Well, some things haven't changed...

Why does Mark Wellbrock do this? “It’s educational, and it’s a way to export knowledge about our county,” Mark said. “Baseball is a huge part of our history. It’s important for our kids to get that experience of teamwork,” Mark said.

After one of Mark’s presentations about the vintage sport, a person told him that it had reinstilled his love of baseball. It influenced another current baseball coach to teach his team the history of the game.

“One of our players had played college ball at the Division One level, at the University of Houston,” Mark said. “He told me that playing with us was the most fun he had ever had on a baseball field.” After a tournament with vintage teams from three other Kansas communities, the Hodgeman Nine are now Kansas Vintage Base Ball champions.

The pitcher eyes home plate and lets the ball fly. This isn’t just another baseball game, it is vintage base ball. We salute Mark Wellbrock, the Hodgeman Nine, and all those involved with vintage base ball for making a difference by capturing and preserving this heritage. Huzzah!

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.