

THE HEARTLAND OF BASEBALL

BY JOHN BALDRIDGE

BASEBALL IN PEORIA, ILLINOIS HASN'T JUST BEEN A SUMMER RITUAL OR A DAY IN THE SUN ON A WARM AFTERNOON, IT HAS BEEN THE HEARTBEAT OF PEORIANS. WITH THE CITY SITTING RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LINE OF DEMARCATION FOR CARDINALS AND CUBS FANS, THE ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN AFFILIATED WITH BOTH TEAMS OVER THE YEARS AND HAS SEEN SOME GREAT PLAYERS WEAR A CHIEFS JERSEY. BUT BASEBALL IN PEORIA DOESN'T JUST BEGIN WITH THE CHIEFS.

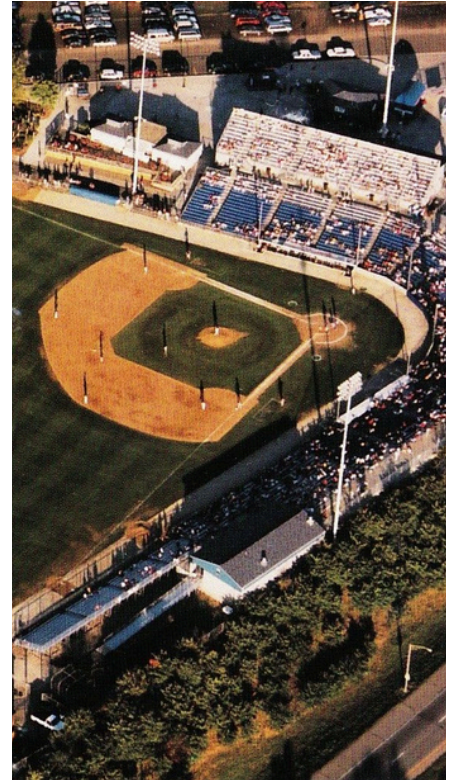
THE ROOTS OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL IN PEORIA DATE BACK TO THE 1800S, WHEN EARLY TEAMS LIKE THE PEORIA REDS, CANARIES, AND BLACKBIRDS PLAYED IN SEVERAL BALLPARKS AROUND TOWN. BY 1895, THE PEORIA DISTILLERS EMERGED, NAMED AFTER THE HIRAM WALKER PLANT. AS THE CITY EVOLVED, SO DID ITS BASEBALL IDENTITY, WITH NAMES LIKE THE PEORIA HOOSIERS AND LATER THE PEORIA TRACTORS, INSPIRED BY THE GROWTH OF NEARBY CATERPILLAR INC.

IN 1923, THE TEAM OPENED A NEW BALLPARK CALLED WOODRUFF FIELD IN HONOR OF A LONG-TIME MAYOR OF PEORIA. THE TRACTORS PLAYED THERE UNTIL 1937, WHEN THE TEAM FOLDED. PEORIA WAS THEN WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL FOR THE NEXT 15 YEARS. THE GAME RETURNED IN 1953 WITH THE ORIGINAL PEORIA CHIEFS, BUT THAT FRANCHISE LASTED ONLY UNTIL 1957.

BASEBALL DIDN'T RETURN AGAIN UNTIL 25 YEARS LATER THIS TIME FOR GOOD WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE PEORIA SUNS IN 1983. A YEAR LATER, THE TEAM BECAME THE PEORIA CHIEFS, PLAYING THEIR GAMES AT MEINEN FIELD NEAR BRADLEY UNIVERSITY UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF JOE MADDON, WHO WOULD LATER MANAGE IN THE BIG LEAGUES AND FAMOUSLY LEAD THE CHICAGO CUBS TO THEIR 2016 WORLD SERIES TITLE, ENDING A 108-YEAR DROUGHT. THE CHIEFS MOVED INTO THEIR CURRENT HOME, DOZER PARK IN DOWNTOWN PEORIA, IN 2002, BEGINNING A NEW ERA OF BASEBALL IN THE CITY.

OVER THE YEARS, PEORIANS HAVE BEEN TREATED TO SOME BIG-NAME PLAYERS WHO WORE A CHIEFS JERSEY. WITH AFFILIATIONS TO THE CUBS (1985-1994, 2005-2012) AND THE CARDINALS (1995-2004, 2013-PRESENT), STARS LIKE JOE GIRARDI (1986), GREG MADDUX (1985 — HALL OF FAME, 2014), RICK ANKIEL (1998), RYNE SANDBERG (2007-08, MGR — HALL OF FAME, 2005), ALBERT PUJOLS (2000), YADIER MOLINA (2002), KERRY WOOD (2005, 2007), JOSH DONALDSON (2008), DJ LEMAHIEU (2009), RYAN HELSLEY (2016), SANDY ALCANTARA (2016), BRENDAN DONOVAN (2019), MASYN WINN (2022), AND MANY MORE, ALL TOOK THE FIELD IN PEORIA ON THEIR JOURNEY TO STARDOM.

THE BACKBONE OF CHIEFS BASEBALL HAS ALWAYS BEEN ITS ABILITY TO SHOWCASE YOUNG, TALENTED PLAYERS GROWING UP IN FRONT OF PEORIANS' EYES. FOR CHIEFS GENERAL MANAGER JASON MOTT, WHO'S SPENT OVER 20 YEARS IN THE SPORTS WORLD, CREDITS A STRONG COMMITMENT AND PASSION FROM THE COMMUNITY FOR THE TEAM'S POPULARITY AND SUCCESS.



"PEORIA AND CENTRAL ILLINOIS HAVE A RICH BASEBALL TRADITION THAT CONTINUES TO GROW EACH YEAR, WITH HOMETOWN NAMES LIKE JIM THOME AND JOE GIRARDI," MOTT SAID. "THE CHIEFS HAVE BEEN AFFILIATED WITH TWO OF BASEBALL'S MOST STORIED FRANCHISES — ST. LOUIS AND CHICAGO. TO DATE, 239 MAJOR LEAGUERS HAVE WORN A CHIEFS JERSEY, AND THAT NUMBER WILL ONLY CONTINUE TO RISE. WE'RE PROUD TO BE SUCH AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE PEORIA COMMUNITY, AND WE LOOK FORWARD TO BUILDING ON THAT FOR DECADES TO COME. THE SUPPORT WE RECEIVE FROM THIS COMMUNITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN INCREDIBLE, AND WE WANT TO KEEP STRENGTHENING THAT CONNECTION EVERY YEAR."

BASEBALL SUPPORT CONTINUES TO REMAIN STRONG IN PEORIA AND THE CHIEFS ARE PROUD TO BE A PART OF THE COMMUNITY IN NUMEROUS MEANINGFUL WAYS.