Written by Carol Pomeday
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as it was meant to be played (and spelled)

Cory Dimmer of the Greenbush Dead Citys vintage baseball team will play Sunday to celebrate the 100th birthday of St. Nicholas Catholic Church. *Photo by Sam Arendt*Vintage 1860s base ball (it was two words then) will come alive Sunday, July 17, at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Dacada.

The Greenbush Dead Citys, who play every third Sunday at the Old Wade House in Greenbush, will face the Dacada Red Lions, a group of local Luxembourgers who formed a team to celebrate the church's 100th anniversary.

The Dacada Red Lions include Mickey Sabec, Phil Jacoby, Neal Jacoby, Sam Jacoby, Ryan Noll, Boofer Klas, John Feider, Chad Keller, Tom Schinner, Lowell Barrington, Bruce Birenbaum and Joe, Nick and Jake Horstmeier. Ron and Dave Weyker will coach the team and Dave Hubing will be the umpire.

The game starts at 1 p.m.

The audience — which is encouraged to dress in vintage outfits, bring lawn chairs and arrive in

pre-1950s vehicles — is an important part of the game that became America's favorite pastime in the 1860s and was played mostly by farmers.

"The camaraderie and sportsmanship is way different than modern baseball," said Cory Dimmer, 23, of Plymouth, a 2005 graduate of Cedar Grove-Belgium High School who joined the Wade House team last year and will be playing on his home turf Sunday. His parents Sue and Dennis live nearby and Dimmer works for his father's electrical company.

"This is truly a gentleman's game. The umpire's only job is to decide if a ball is foul. We make the calls in the field," Dimmer said.

"If there is a dispute, we put it to the audience and they vote."

It would seem the home team would have the advantage, but Dimmer said 1860s audiences were impartial and applauded every good play, regardless of the team.

"The teams applaud each other," Dimmer said.

When his brother-in-law got two home runs — one a grand slam — in one game, everyone cheered and congratulated him.

No foul language, booing or poor sportsmanship is allowed. Players are fined five cents to 25 cents for such behavior.

If there is a tie after nine innings, the teams decide if they want to continue, then ask the audience if they will stay for more innings.

"The first game I played went 14 innings in 90-degree heat, but they usually go nine innings," Dimmer said.

"If it's really hot, we must ask permission of the ladies in the audience to roll up our sleeves. It's impolite to show too much skin."

The umpire is addressed as "Sir" and was usually a doctor or lawyer. No one questions his call, Dimmer said.

Team members talk to his each and the audience as if they were in the 1860s, assuming a polite, gentlemanly demeanor.

The game ball, sometimes called the apple, is handmade by Betsy Urven, a historian at the Wade House who organized the vintage team six years ago.

She makes a new ball for each home game. The old ones are used for practices. Urven wraps wool around a hard rubber ball, then wraps cotton string around it until it's the right size. She then stitches the leather skin to the ball.

Urvan also made most of the team's clothing, hand stitching shirts, caps and pants.

Dimmer wears a white, collarless, long-sleeved shirt, white suspenders with black leather toggles and brown pants. All clothing and equipment are as authentic as possible.

"The ball is really hard for the first few innings. By the fifth to ninth innings, it's started to get soft and really changes the game," Dimmer said. "You want to get your big hits early because it's a lot harder to get the soft ball to go far."

Similarly, he tries to protect his bare hands in the early innings by letting the ball bounce once rather than catch it on a fly if there is no one on base or it's the last out.

The batter (called the striker) is out if the ball is caught on the fly or after one bounce.

No one wears gloves, not even the catcher (called the behind), which may account for the one-bounce rule.

"Gloves weren't invented until 1890 and not allowed until 1894," Dimmer said. "The home team provided the gloves. The fielders left them at the bases when it was their turn to bat."

In the underhand, slow-pitch game, the pitcher (called the hurler or sometimes bowler) is supposed to get the ball across home plate (called the dish) where the striker wants it.

There is no such thing as a strike zone, ball or strike. The striker can stay at the plate as long as he wants waiting for the right ball. The striker is out if he swings and misses three times.

The bat is no specific length, but shorter than today's metal and wood ones and usually made of willow or ash. Reproduction vintage bats sell for $100, but Dimmer bought his at a Belgium garage sale for $2.

In vintage baseball, the infield is referred to as the garden. The outfield is the outer garden. Dimmer plays in the outer garden. A short scout can play anywhere on the field.

There is no home-run fence or line. The player must run the bases.

On Sunday, the teams will play on the church's ball diamond, but vintage teams usually play in open fields, Dimmer said. The outer garden is often an alfalfa field. There may be a tree within the fair ball line or an implement in the field.

If the ball hits a tree or other obstruction and is caught before it hits the ground or after one bounce, the striker is out.

"In the 1860s, it was common for people to picnic in the outfield beyond game play, but there are stories of balls landing in picnic baskets," Dimmer said.

At the Wade House, the Greenbush Dead Citys play home games every third Sunday of the

month from May to September against the Old World Wisconsin Eagle Diamonds, Milwaukee Cream City and Milwaukee Grays.

Other Sundays they travel around the state for exhibition games at historical sites, such as Villa Louis in Prairie du Chien for its Carriage Classic in September, or historical celebrations like the Dacada church's centennial event, Dimmer said.

After watching her son play, Sue Dimmer inquired if the Wade House team would play for the church's centennial.

The vintage team is a volunteer educational outreach program.

"Some places give us a local beer. If somebody brews their own, they may bring some for us," Dimmer said. "Usually, it's water and hot dogs. It's very family friendly."

The St. Nicholas Centennial Committee will hold a 50-50 raffle, with half the money going to the Wade House and the other half to the winner.

Urven said she was hesitant to form a vintage team until she learned Greenbush had a team in 1871. The name, she theorized, was a result of the Sheboygan to Fond du Lac railroad being routed through Glenbeulah rather than Greenbush. The community's economy suffered.

The Wade House team is one of the charter members of the 19th Century Base Ball Clubs of Wisconsin.

Vintage baseball is one of the fastest-growing sports in Wisconsin and is popular in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio, Dimmer said.

"It's a fun game to play," he said.

More information on the game is available at www.wadehouse.wisconsinhistory.org.

Information on the 100th anniversary celebration for St. Nicholas Church can be found on the Belgium page in Section B of today's Ozaukee Press.