

# CAPITAL PAST TIMES

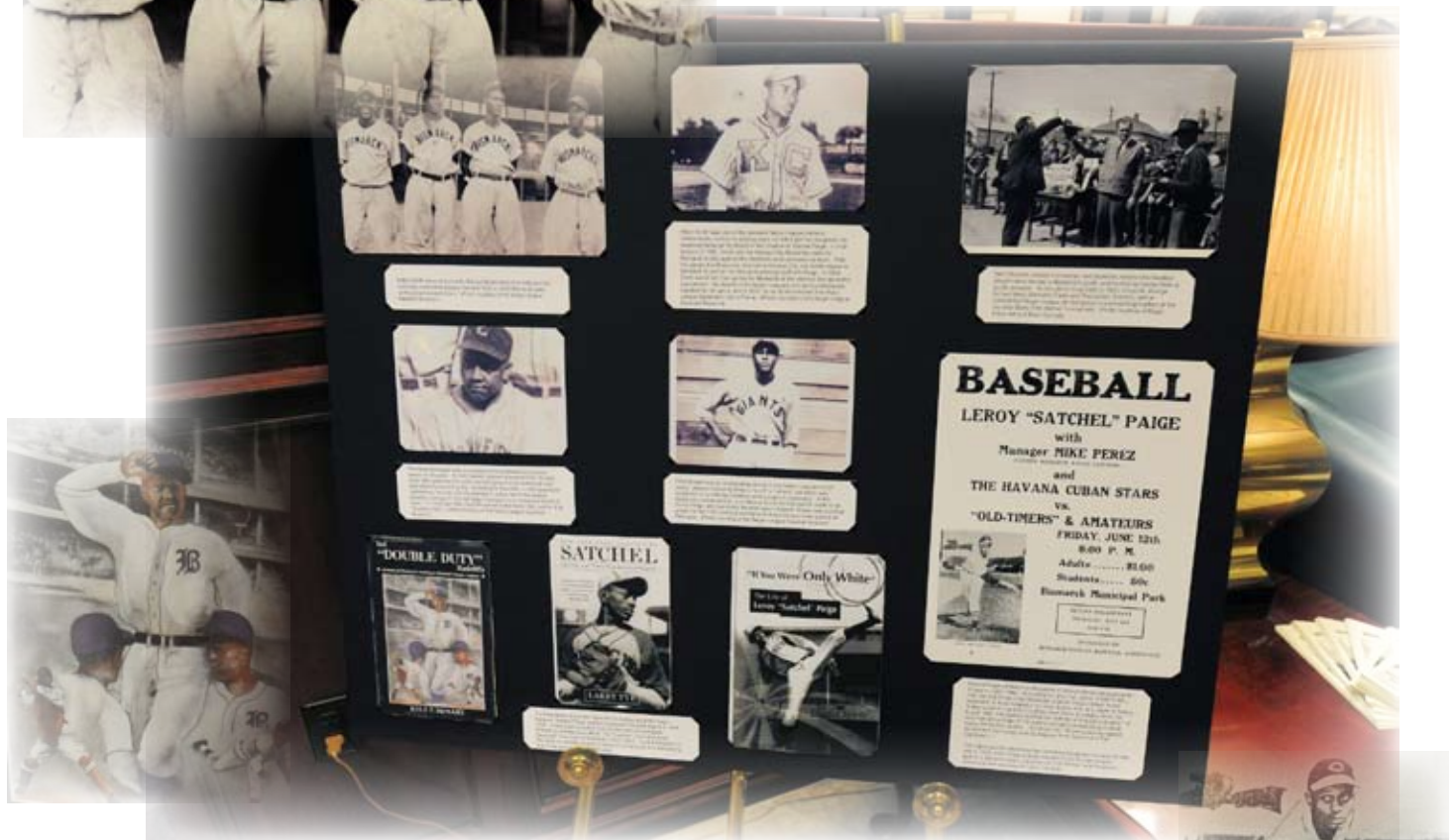
The Newsletter of the Bismarck Historical Society

November 2012

Vol. 6 No. 3

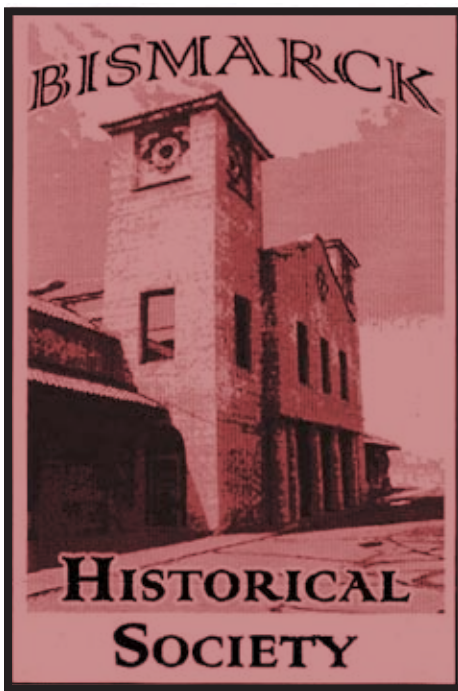


## “Bismarck Baseball -The Early Years (1889-1936)”



Photographic exhibit panel of “Bismarck Baseball (1889-1936)” on display in the lobby of BNC Bank, 322 East Main Avenue. The exhibit was produced by Bismarck Historical Society President Dennis Boyd and will be displayed at the BNC Bank until November 2. Please contact the Bismarck Historical Society if you have an interest in displaying the exhibit at your business.





## Capital Past Times

is published by  
**The Bismarck Historical Society**  
P.O. Box 47  
Bismarck ND 58502  
[info@Bismarckhistory.org](mailto:info@Bismarckhistory.org)

### President

*Dennis Boyd*

### Vice President

*Mike LaLonde*

### Secretary/Treasurer

*Jim Christianson*

### Immediate Past President

*Tim Atkinson*

### Executive Director

*Walter Bailey*

### Board of Directors

*Tom Mayer,*

*Tom Stromme, Mike McCormick,*

*Ann Vadnie, Marilyn Snyder,*

*Frank Vyzralek, Kate Waldera,*

*Ted Quanrud, Gary Gronberg,*

*Mary Baird, Johnathan Campbell,*

*Tom Hesford*

[www.bismarckhistory.org](http://www.bismarckhistory.org)

## President's Message:

Greetings.

There has been a fair amount of activity for the "Bismarck Historical Society" since our last newsletter including planning for our 2013 Founders Day program, creating a public exhibit on "Bismarck Baseball -The Early Years (1889-1936)," discussions on the potential production of a coffee table book containing photos of Bismarck, and two excellent public programs.

Our 2013 Founders Day program will be a re-production of Ev Miller's play, *Little Casino*. The play begins in the spring of 1873 with the arrival of the first Northern Pacific train. Waiting on the train platform to greet the arrivals are a group of prominent citizens. Among the passengers are Col. Clement Lounsbury, who has come to Bismarck to establish a newspaper, and Little Casino, a lady of dubious virtue who will soon operate a bawdy house at the current site of the *Bismarck Tribune*. All of the characters except one are actual people who lived in early Bismarck, and the play details their activities and interactions through July, 1875. There is great interest in the play, and when it was first produced, the show played to sellout crowds for three nights at the Belle. We are hoping for similar crowds next year, which will be the 150th anniversary of Little Casino's arrival in town.

In October the "Bismarck Historical Society" placed a photographic exhibit of "Bismarck Baseball (1889-1936)" in the lobby of BNC Bank. The centerpieces of the exhibit are the great semi-professional teams managed/sponsored by Neil Churchill, particularly the historic 1935 National Championship team featuring Satchel Paige, Hilton Smith, Quincy Troupe, and other Negro League All Stars. One baseball historian has suggested that team might have been the most dominant baseball team in the country that year, including the Major Leagues. Along the way of researching that project, it has been a real pleasure establishing a friendship with author Tom Dunkel, whose book entitled *Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball's Color Line* will be available next spring. Dunkel has been in Bismarck on several occasions to research his book. In addition it has been a pleasure to visit with former Bismarck resident Bob Myhre, who at the age of nine was the ballboy for the team in 1935. Myhre will be in Bismarck in late October, and we are hoping to interview him about his experiences and recollections.

While our discussions of a coffee table book are very preliminary, we are continuing to investigate the possibilities. The project will probably involve some heavy front end expenses, so we will move cautiously.

And finally, we had two very excellent public programs in September: Ken Rogers on the "Beginnings of the Bismarck Tribune," and Ann Vadnie on "Bismarck Trivia and Tidbits." Both were excellent and attracted good crowds. On November 20, Sister Thomas Welder will present a program on the "Benedictine Sisters' Contributions to Bismarck." The program starts at 7 p.m. at the Public Library and will be our final program for 2012.

*Dennis Boyd*



Find us on Facebook

Search: Bismarck Historical Society

## Operation Sky Watch – When Civilians Watched the Skies

Tom Atkinson

“It may not be a very cheerful thought,” the ominous voice said on the radio, “but the Reds right now have about a thousand bombers quite capable of destroying 89 cities in one raid.... Won’t you help protect your country, your town, your children?” In the 1950s, that brief radio spot moved hundreds of thousands of American citizens to sign up for the Ground Observer Corps.



Skywatch sticker circa 1957

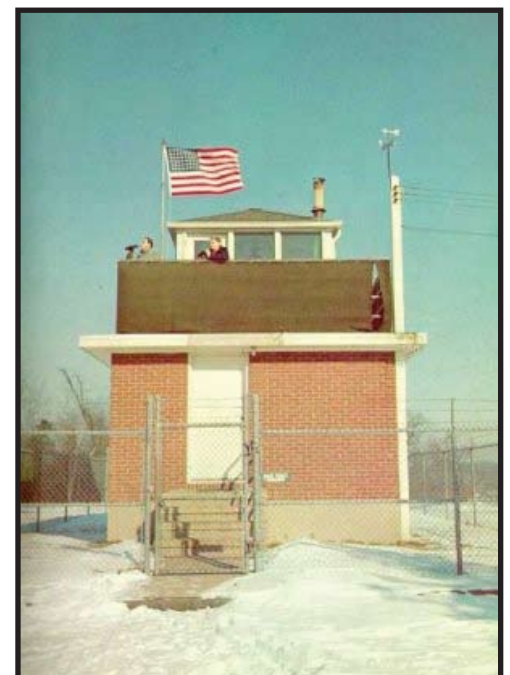
(Photo courtesy Air Force History Support Office)

In February 1950, six months after the Soviets’ first A-bomb test, the United States revived the civilian “Ground Observer Corps.” The Corps was first formed at the start of WWII to watch for Nazi and Japanese aircraft. The Corps was composed of a few active military and civilian volunteer observers. After a few hours of training in aircraft recognition and report filing, observers went on duty at outposts atop buildings, in church bell towers, forest ranger stations, racetrack grandstands; any place with an unobstructed view of the sky. Each local outpost was connected by telephone to one of 26 filter centers, operated by a joint civilian and an Air Force member. Bismarck was home to one of the filter centers. Along with a center in Fargo and 150 observation stations throughout ND, the “Ground Observers Corps” watched the skies. When an observer spotted a potential invader, he or she would call the center with an “aircraft flash”, giving the aircraft’s description, estimated course, speed, and altitude. The center staff used data from civilian flight plans and schedules to try and identify the bogey, but if there was an unknown bogey, a report would be passed to the nearest Air Defense Direction Center, which would scramble fighters from Minot, Grand Forks, or Ellsworth Air Force Base to investigate.

The Bismarck filter center was initially located at Ulmen Motor Sales at 114 West Main Avenue. The center used 1500 square feet of the backside of the building, and was up and operational on April 1, 1952. It was originally scheduled to be operational by November 1, 1951, but equipment and manpower shortage delayed the opening. The center was manned by 5 Officers, 10 airmen and 225 volunteers. The first group of 30 volunteers completed training on March 13, 1952. Volunteers received a set of wings and a patch, and by amassing long hours on duty, could earn citations. A training manual noted that anyone “looking for an easy job or with the intention of making anything other than an all-out effort” need not apply. In June 1952, the Air Force renamed the program Operation Skywatch, and operations went to a twenty-four hour per day pace. The Bismarck filter center outgrew its original space, so in September 1952, the center took over 2500 square feet of the second floor of the Piggly Wiggly grocery store, which was located at 225 West Broadway.

By the end of the 1950s, early warning radar had outstripped the abilities of observer eyeballs. The Bismarck filter center converted to a ready reserve status on January 1, 1958. 24-hour shifts were transitioned to regularly scheduled classes and alert team practices. The Air Force began closing down outposts, and on January 31, 1959, the Bismarck filter center was disbanded. A final awards banquet was held at the Municipal Country Club on January 22, 1959.

The Bismarck filter center was involved in two major incidents. One incident occurred on June 12, 1954, when an F-86 fighter crashed 8 miles east-north-east of Bismarck. The pilot was able to parachute to safety, but the crash left a crater 15 feet deep and 25 feet wide. Men from the Bismarck filter center were the first people to respond to the accident. The men secured the site until the military arrived. A group of sight-seers had come out from Bismarck, and there was a concern that explosives on the plane could ignite, so for several days after the accident, the *Bismarck Tribune* ran articles warning people about collecting souvenirs of the plane. The other incident became known as the Ellsworth Case.



Observation post near Williston

(Photo courtesy Air Force History Support Office)

## UFOs over Bismarck

On the evening of August 5 and the morning of August 6, 1953 the Air Force investigated a UFO incident over the skies of Bismarck. The incident is now

Continued

known as the Ellsworth Case and is one of the most significant radar-visual cases in UFO sightings. The event was witnessed by almost forty-five agitated citizens and military personnel. On duty at the Bismarck Filter Center that night were Lieutenant Charles Koontz, Sergeant Wesley Harry, Mrs. Gertrude Dahl, Mrs. Mike Owens, Mr. Charles Mandigo and Mr. Jack Wilhelm. As reported in the Air Force Project Blue Book report "The object was first sighted by Miss Kellian at 8:00 P.M. on August 5. The description was of a red glowing light making long sweeping movements. The information was transmitted to the Bismarck Air Defense Filter Center. Sometime later Sergeant Harry spotted the objects from the roof. He observed, paying close attention to the irregular movement, as it danced between telephone lines. Others on duty saw the moving light which would be visible in the night sky for approximately three hours. Sergeant Harry described his observance in the following manner: "It would remain stationary--then hop up several degrees very quickly--almost simultaneously." Another witness commented, "It would stop...move to the left and then swerve down in a sort of slanting motion, repeating these maneuvers several times." At midnight, three additional objects appeared in the sky above Bismarck. At 1:09 A.M. an Air Force Globemaster flew over Bismarck. As the plane neared, the object closest to the plane appeared to emanate a signal by blinking red and green. This signaling was picked up by the other three objects. All four objects then disappeared.

The *Bismarck Tribune* carried a small story on the front page of the August. 7 edition, talking about strange objects over Bismarck, but not much more was said about it. The story received national attention with the release of the Blue Book Project files in January 1970. The official Air Intelligence Information Report was number AFD -10067-041.

The complete account, with eye witness reports, can be found at:  
<http://www.secretsdeclassified.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-100617-041.pdf>

**Annual Meeting**  
**November 20, 6:30 p.m.**  
**Bismarck Public Library**

**Program at 7:00 p.m.**  
**The Benedictine Sisters' Contributions to Bismarck - Sr. Thomas Welder**



BISMARCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
- Membership Form -

- Student \$10.00    Individual \$25.00    Family \$40.00
- Patron \$100.00    3-year Patron (with web page)

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
Email \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

GIFT MEMBERSHIPS

Student \$10.00    Individual \$25.00    Family \$40.00

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
Email \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Make Checks payable to:

Bismarck Historical Society  
P.O. Box 47  
Bismarck, ND 58502

Join or renew online at:  
or [www.BismarckHistory.org](http://www.BismarckHistory.org)  
Questions: 701-255-2586