

Fun While it Lasted

In the mid-2000's I worked for a long-time minor league baseball operator named **Van Schley**, managing the front office of his ball club in Brockton, Massachusetts. Van's passion was so-called "independent baseball" – minor league clubs that signed their own players and paid all of their own expenses and were thus unmoored from the traditional Major League farm system. As a young man in 1977, he describe the conventional minor league structure to *New West Magazine* as a "Master/slave relationship".

Over the years Van owned numerous independent ball clubs, often partnered with his friend, the actor Bill Murray, and helped more than 100 players earn contracts with Major League organizations, including **Kevin Millar** and **Steve Delabar**. But his first ball club was the Texas City Stars, playing in a ramshackle organization called the Lone Star League that lasted only a single season back in the summer of '77. 30 years later, a Texas City Stars schedule poster still hung in a black frame in our stadium office halfway across the country in Brockton.

When I created an entry for the Texas City Stars on *Fun While It Lasted* I stumbled across a remarkable collection of candid color 35mm photos of the team on the blog of a man named **Red Shuttleworth**. Red seems to be a sort of frontier renaissance man – a playwright and poet of the American West and, it turns out, a former professional baseball coach with the Stars and the Durham Bulls (later the inspiration for *Bull Durham*, of course).

I got in touch with Red and asked if he would share a few memories of his summer in Texas City. Within a matter of hours, he sent back the essay that follows after the page jump.

Enjoy.

Red Shuttleworth

(1977 Texas City Stars / Lone Star League)

The Lone Star League, which had one year of existence, 1977, was one of the first contemporary independent professional baseball leagues. The league was a poorly attended zoo/circus performed in falling-apart ballparks. It was enema baseball... a place where most of the players could try to get baseball out of their systems.

One franchise, owned by **Van Schley**, represented Texas City. The Stars were the first of numerous teams that Schley would own. Schley was pretty young when he founded that Stars, so it must have been a brutal eye-opener. It was rumored that Schley lost well over \$50,000 on the Stars. But he was generous at the end of the season when a hurricane caused the cancellation of the play-offs... graciously gave the players an end-of-the-season bonus so they could flee the weather-threatened Gulf Coast.

Schley hired former San Francisco Giant 3rd baseman “**Dirty Al**” **Gallagher** as the Texas City Stars manager. What a coincidence for me! Gallagher and I had known each other since he was twelve and I was thirteen... we’d grown up playing baseball on San Francisco’s baseball fields. We had been teammates and had played ferociously against each other. I was already in Texas City... getting fired from the College of the Mainland after punching-out a dean for being otiose. Gallagher laughingly helped move books out of my college office and hired me as a coach.

The Stars roster was filled largely with players released by Major League teams... guys whose careers had foundered in the minors, like second baseman **Steve Verban** who’d made it to double-A with the Cubs, **Jeff McKay** who’d hurled in the Giants system, and the endlessly amusing **Rhod “The Stork” Wallace** who’d once been a hot prospect in the Angels’ organization. When pressed on several fronts, Gallagher activated himself ... both as a position player and as a pitcher. The Stars had a dismal first half and made the play-offs by winning their division in the season’s second half.

A couple of Texas City Stars went on to sign with Major League organizations after that season, **Mike Brooks** and **Gary Sarno**. But most of the Stars went on to live their “real lives”.

The music from the speakers at Texas City’s Robinson Stadium was pure Texas (Willie, Waylon, Jerry Jeff Walker) plus Jimmy Buffet’s *Margaritaville* (a song that provided an accurate sound track for our season).

One rival manager, the Corpus Christi Seagulls’ **Leo Mazzone** went on to coach in the Atlanta Braves organization. Mazzone, Gallagher, and I briefly shared a three-bedroom luxury apartment (no towels or sheets) in Durham, North Carolina three years later, in 1980.

I have lost touch with just about all the Texas City Stars players, though every so often I hear from Rhod “The Stork” Wallace. Al Gallagher (my best friend and my son Luke’s godfather) talk on the phone with some frequency. Geez... Gallagher and I have known each other for more than half a hundred years.

For years I was an assistant baseball coach at Big Bend Community College in eastern Washington. But I am closing-in on age seventy and have not thrown a ball or swung a bat in five or so years. One night, drinking good Irish whiskey, I remarked to my son that I thought that I could still hit, so we walked into the pre-dawn darkness, coyotes yipping-‘n-howling not too far off, set up out behind the house and my son threw a bucket of rainbows. Half-drunk I hit (out of fifty tosses) maybe six grounders and one soft line drive into the sagebrush beyond our backyard.

Funny game, baseball: it never leaves the blood.