

A love of baseball

COLIN BUDD STAFF WRITER

"I'm just floating on Cloud 9," said Jay-Del Mah from his home in Nakusp, B.C. Tuesday afternoon.

The reason? After close to two decades of meticulously chronicling the history of the sport of baseball in Western Canada, Mah had received word in May that he was going to be inducted into the Saskatchewan Baseball Hall of Fame.

Many around here will remember Jay-Del as Harvey Mah, the son of Jim, a restaurant owner – including the Elite Cafe, a hangout for ball players along with a gathering place for families in the 1950s and '60s.



Jay-Del Mah as a batboy with the Lloydminster Meridians in 1956. – Photo Courtesy Jay-Del Mah

It was here that Mah developed a lifelong passion for the sport and began the steps to developing what might be the largest database for semi-pro and amateur baseball in the country, if not North America – even if it would be decades until he would start inserting data into a computer with dialup internet, making posting big pictures impossible.

But the ongoing process is what Mah will be honoured for this weekend. Ongoing because even though he has spent countless hours scouring yellowed newspapers, carefully scanning old photographs and talking to hundreds of people on the phone hearing their stories and publishing them, his current project on his website www.attheplate.com is going through every single box score from the 1909 Western Canada Baseball League because no statistics were kept.

He will be in North Battleford on Friday night. He had hoped to drive down and pick up an old high

school friend in Lloydminster, but a back problem meant a 12 or 14-hour drive was out of the question. Still he will be surrounded by friends and family when he receives his place in the Hall.

"It's going to be just a marvellous event," said Mah.

To understand how Mah got to this point is to grasp his love of the sport and his love of his years in Lloydminster.

When he begins telling his stories you're taken back to a time when kids would race on their bikes to the local ball park and make their way through the crowds at the Legion Sportsman Park, hoping to get a glimpse of their favourite players donning the Lloydminster Meridians uniform. Names like Roberto Zuyas, Chuck McGuigan and Max Weekly were treated like

Big Leaguers as Lloydminster ushered in its highest level of baseball, joining what would ultimately be the Western Canada League, a semi-pro circuit.

"You have to remember we were maybe two or three thousand people at the time," said Mah of the city, who was now in a league playing against major centres like Edmonton, Calgary and Saskatoon. "We were the little guys. Thank God for guys like Slim Thorpe and Scotty MacNeil, we kept the team going."

There had been local teams for years but, in 1954 the team began bringing in imports – including Cuban import Roberto Zayas – ushering in what might be the Golden Age for the sport in the city. No longer was it just the best of the prairies, now there were young men from across the United States that had dreams of making a living in the game.

"It was very good baseball," said Mah. The Meridians lasted in the league until 1961, even combining with North Battleford Beavers to form possibly the clumsiest handle of all time – the Lloydminster North Battleford Beaver Meridians, at one point.

"Which everyone called it the Combines," said Mah.

The club was heavily supported in those days, in large part by the local service clubs, but also by the people in the community. And for many it was their first interactions with the talented black players that made their way up north, hoping to carve out their place in a game. A game that hadn't truly accepted them yet, despite Jackie Robinson breaking the colour barrier during this time. But players like Curly Williams, Collin Jones and Barney Brown all felt comfortable.

"(In Canada) we were treated so well up there that's why I stayed up there so long," Williams is quoted as saying on www.attheplate.com. "We had so much fun there and everybody was accepted, you know, didn't have problems going any place we wanted to eat. Just wonderful people. May not have made a whole lot of money, but people were excited and they enjoyed you and would invite you to their homes."

"And from talking to these guys over the years they were so enthusiastic about the treatment they received in Canada – especially on the Prairies, compared to what they had received in their home country," said Mah. "They loved Canada, people accepted them as human beings, they could go into restaurants, they could stay in hotels, they could travel on the trains, it wasn't a problem. But they couldn't do it in a lot of areas in the States at the time."

Young Harvey was in the middle of it all. He began chatting with the players in his dad's restaurant, eventually becoming the clubhouse boy before being batboy. Later he'd do statistics and gather information on the players before eventually writing about them for the *Lloydminster Times*.

"Before my Mom passed a couple of years ago she used to joke about the fact that I wouldn't do a lot of work around the home for the family, but there I would be in our basement washing sanitary socks for the players – by hand," he laughs. "I loved every minute of it. One of the best experiences of my life."

"It was just remarkable that one was able to take it all in and enjoy it to the extent that I did."

Just how closely tied are people from that era?

Chuck McGuigan was a second baseman, that stayed in the Mah residence, as happened over the years. McGuigan played a couple of seasons before departing in 1955. During his research for his website project, Mah gave him a call in 2001 – 46 years later – in Burlingame, California.

"Within maybe 10 or 15 seconds – and I didn't give him any clues, except that I was calling from Canada and it was about baseball – and he recognized who I was," said Mah.

"He knew my name, he said 'how's your family? Is your dad still alive? Is your mom still alive? How are your brothers, because I had two brothers. He knew all this immediately and I thought well isn't this stunning? The fact that you'd recognized the human voice after all this time and he remembered everything."

By the time the '60s roared in, good roads were being constructed so people were able to head to the beach and other hot spots to enjoy their summer, electrification came along and television gained

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