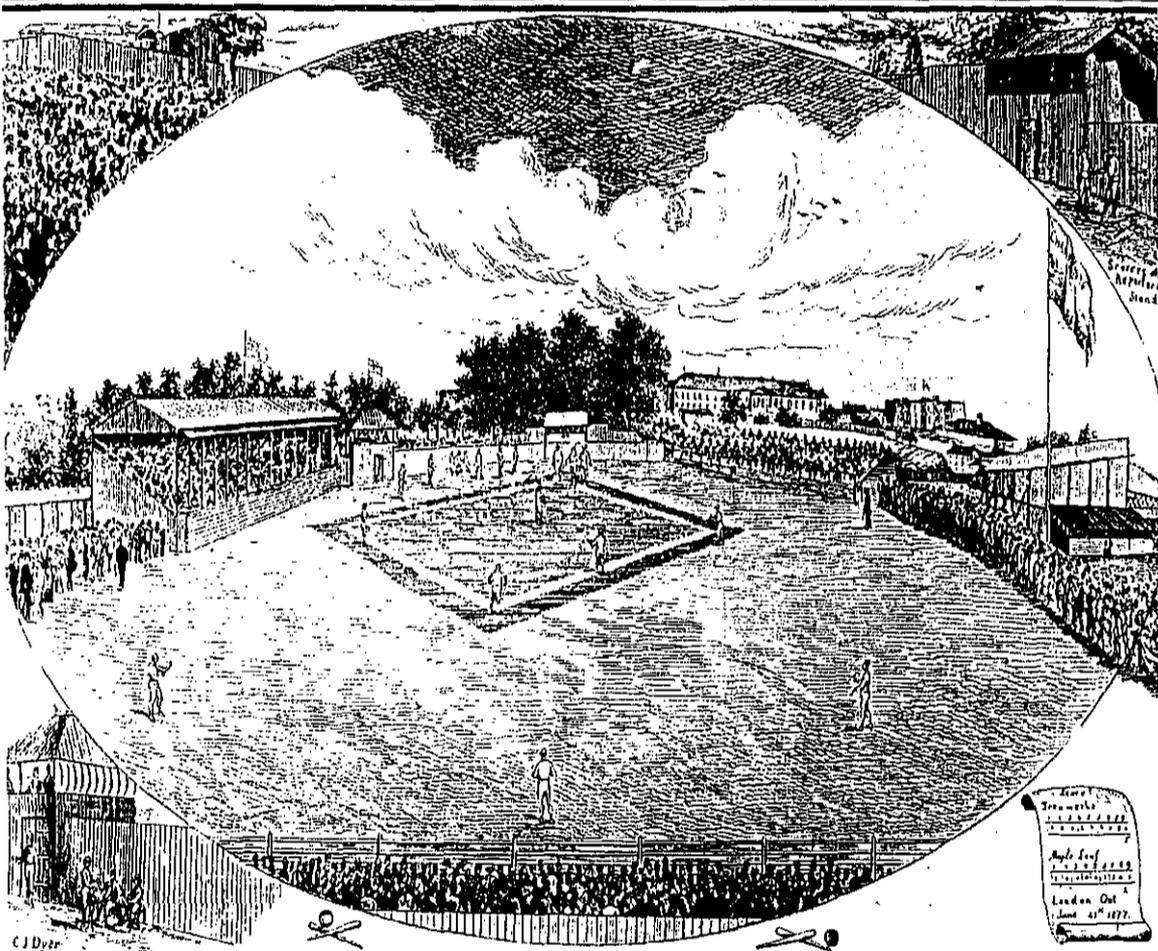


# HERITAGE BASEBALL

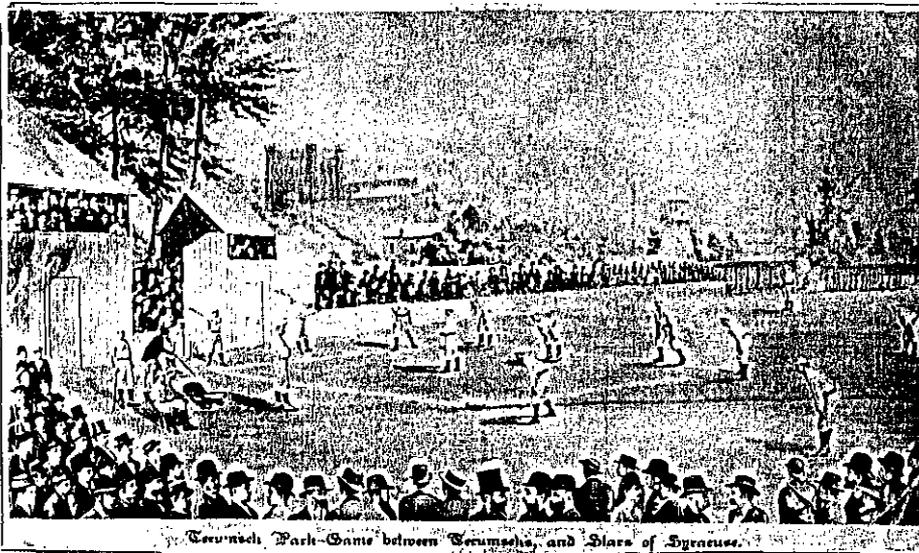


LONDON, ONT.—INTERNATIONAL BASE BALL MATCH BETWEEN THE TECUMSEH CLUB OF LONDON, AND THE MAPLE LEAF CLUB OF GUELPH.  
FROM A SKETCH BY C.J. DYER

# CITY OF LONDON

# Origins of the London Tecumsehs and Base Ball in London

By Barry Wells



Tecumsehs playing the Syracuse Stars, c.1878 Museum London

ADAPTED FROM THE BRITISH GAME of rounders — and by extension, cricket—the game of base ball or “townball” became popular in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in Southwestern Ontario (then the western portion of Upper Canada/Canada West), New York and New England. The first documented evidence of a base ball game in Canada comes from a letter by Dr. Adam Ford, formerly of St. Marys, published in an 1886 issue of the magazine *Sporting Life*, about a game 48 years earlier in Beachville, Ontario, on June 4, 1838 — Militia Muster Day. Originally, the rules of the game were informal in nature and often modified to reflect regional preferences.

Later, rules were codified as formal leagues were formed with professional players, such as the fledgling five-team Canadian Association of Base Ball (the London Tecumsehs, Hamilton Standards, Guelph Maple Leafs, Kingston St. Lawrence and Toronto Clippers) in 1876, and the 16-team International Association (made up of London, Guelph and 14 U.S. teams and created as a rival to the National League) in the winter of 1876-1877. A plethora of information about early Canadian base ball came to light in 2002 when the National Library and Archives of Canada purchased (for \$10,000 from an Ottawa bookseller) *Bryce's Base Ball Guide of 1876* and *Bryce's Base Ball Guide of 1877*, two hand-coloured, 75-page booklets published by William Bryce of London, Ontario, which were originally sold for a dime. The two, four-inch by seven-inch guides are considered the first significant publications on Canadian baseball. Bryce, a Scottish-born bookseller, news agent and sporting goods distributor in London, had a small stake in the Tecumsehs, considered by many to be the finest ball team in the Dominion.

According to George Rallton's 1856 London directory, the "London Base Ball Club," comprised of 22 members with John K. Brown, Dr. J. Wilkinson, Joshua D. Dalton, H.P. Brown, George Garth, William Wilkinson and George Westland as its officers, played regularly on the military reserve, now Victoria Park.

The merger of the Forest City and London Base Ball clubs, both originating in the summer of 1867, to form the Tecumseh Base Ball Club of London (a team named after the Tecumseh House Hotel on the southwest corner of York and Richmond streets, immediately north of today's CN railway tracks) occurred in June of 1868 with John Brown as president.

In 1868, the Tecumsehs lost to the Woodstock Young Canadians 89-46 in a five-hour game. Woodstock later defeated Guelph Maple Leafs 36-29 to win the Canadian Silver Ball Championship. During the early 1870s, the major rivals of the London Tecumsehs were the Guelph Maple Leafs who were sponsored by brewer/sportsman George Sleeman, proprietor of Silver Creek Brewery, and the Woodstock Young Canadians. The Guelph Maple Leafs was the first Ontario team to hire professional ball players from the U.S. to strengthen their team. When Jacob L. Englehart, a wealthy pioneer London oil refiner, became the president (and financial backer) of the Tecumsehs in late 1875, he too began looking for professional players from the U.S., later signing four Americans: first-baseman/ manager George "Juice" Latham, pitcher Fred Goldsmith of New Haven, Connecticut, catcher Phil Powers and infielder/outfielder Joe "Dutchy" Hornung from Carthage, New York.

After the military reserve was donated to the City for a public park in 1874, public protests in 1875 against the Tecumseh's use of a fenced area of the park prompted the club to move its games to the old Fair Grounds northeast of Richmond and Central, where they played until the end of the 1876 season, during which they defeated Guelph for the Canadian championship.

Goldsmith's first complete game with the Tecumsehs occurred on May 24, 1876, when London played Guelph before 6,000 spectators at the Fair Grounds, a contest that London won 8-7 in 10 innings, largely owing to Goldsmith's "scientific pitching," using his "skew ball." (Goldsmith is believed to be the inventor of the curve ball.) For the 1877 season, the Tecumsehs moved into the newly outfitted, six-acre Tecumseh Park in the village of Kensington at the forks of the Thames River (now the City-owned Labatt Memorial Park) with Richard Southam, brother of William Southam, founder of the Southam newspaper chain, the team manager. (London-born George "Mooney" Gibson, catcher for the 1909 World Series Champions, was a nephew of the Southams). The first regular season game played in the new stadium took place on Saturday, May 5, 1877, against the Hartfords of Brooklyn, New York. The new field was lauded for its many amenities, including a 600-seat grandstand, piped-in water for maintaining the grass and facilities for scorers, telegraph operators and reporters. London won the International Association championship series in October 1877 by defeating the Pittsburgh Alleghenies 5-2. Although the 1878 Tecumseh home opener attracted 4,000 fans, the crowds started to drop off and the team fell into debt.

Despite a *Free Press* account about the Tecumsehs on June 21, 1939 ("Fred Goldsmith Invented The Curve Ball"), that stated the team defeated the Chicago White Sox in three straight games to win the title series in 1878, it appears the writer was in error, instead referring to a two-game series in 1877 between the Tecumsehs and the Chicago White Stockings. On August 22, 1878, the club folded due to insufficient patronage. A new Tecumseh team was resurrected in 1888 and 1889, and later in the 1920s. Despite the absence of professional teams in London during these lapses, the park remained in use by a variety of city league teams, much in the way the Majors of the Senior Intercounty League continue on in the absence of pro ball clubs such as the London Tigers, Werewolves or Monarchs. Today, Labatt Park is believed the world's oldest baseball park in continuous use in its original location.

*Barry Wells is a London freelance writer and the founder of The Friends of Labatt Park.*

## ∞ Majors — a team for the ages ∞

By Bruce Huff



SPORTS HERITAGE? You have only to look to baseball and Labatt Park.

Labatt Park — that neat layout hard by the forks of the mighty Thames — has been home to baseball in various forms since the mid-1800s. Many a championship has been won and lost on these historic fields.

The London Tecumsehs set the tone in 1877 by winning the "world" championship. What has followed is a litany of titles as teams of all calibres and ages have brought glory to the city. In the mix are the London Majors who for 80 years have been a leading proponent of amateur baseball. Of course, the 1948 version that captured the National Baseball Congress North American championship is indelible in the book of memories.

Only three players remain from that team that beat the Fort Wayne General Electrics in a thrilling seven-game series at Labatt Park. They are outfielder Joe Bechard and catchers Jack Fairs and Gil Robertson. The others have gone to that big playing field in the sky but my, what stories they could tell if they were still here.

With Bill Farquharson at the reins as president/owner and the wily Clare VanHorne as field manager, the Majors galvanized this city like no other team before them. They say 9,000 people jammed the park to watch the venerable Tommy White mow down the U.S. champions from Indiana 5-0 in Game 7. He also won Games 3 and 6.

London teams also spawned some outstanding individual talent. Three players would go on to be honoured in both the Canadian Baseball and London Sports halls of fame.

Catcher George (Mooney) Gibson won a World Series with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1909 and became the only Canadian to manage in the big leagues. Heck, he even threw out the Detroit Tigers' irascible Ty Cobb who was attempting to steal second.

Later there was Frank (Lefty) Colman who played for the Pirates and the New York Yankees. He was a reserve first baseman-outfielder when the Yanks beat the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. When he returned from an 11-year pro career he bought the local team and won an Intercounty championship in 1956 and a Great Lakes title in 1958.

Tom (Tim) Burgess spent 28 years in pro company as a player, manager, coach and hitting instructor with time in the bigs as an outfielder-first baseman with the Pirates, St. Louis Cardinals and Los Angeles Angels. He was also a coach with the New York Mets, Atlanta Braves and Kansas City Royals. He was the Intercounty home run leader in 1951 with eight. In recent years he has been a coach and advisor with Team Canada.

Counting the championships the Army seniors won in 1943, London teams have won eight Intercounty titles, the last of which was in 1975. Always a threat they have won seven IBL pennants as the Majors, three as the Pontiacs and one as the Avcos.

The Army team before reverting to the Majors name also won Canadian Congress championships in 1943 and 1944.



Frank Colman (left) with Dave Hastings of Guelph, May 30, 1959 at the Majors opening game at Labatt Park.  
*London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives, UWO Archives*

Above left: London Major Bill Slack c. 1951  
Left: London Major Ted Alexander  
*UWO Archives*

Larry Haggitt batted .412 to lead the IBL in 1975 while ex-major league lefty Mike Kilkenny was unbeaten in the regular season (9-0) and playoffs to earn MVP honours. That the Bradford-born Kilkenny isn't in the Canadian and London sports halls remains a mystery.

Other MVP winners include Colman (1936), outfielder Stan (Gabby) Anderson (1959), pitcher Rolf Scheel (1964) and pitcher Al Greenburg (1965).

The 1975 Majors were managed by the late Roy McKay for whom the historic old clubhouse is named. It seems fitting that they are part of London's 150th anniversary.

And if you listen quietly, you can hear the ghosts of yesterday — guys answering to names such as Males, White, Evon, Wacky, McFadden, Slack, Coop, Simpson, Mayes, Deakin, Creighton, Czerweinic, Pearen, McLain, Jenkins, Gourley, Byers, Fenlon, Thonupson and the redoubtable Eddie who rewrote the record books.

They are saying Happy Birthday London. We are saying thanks for the memories.

*Bruce Huff is Chairman, London Sports Hall of Fame.*

# 128 Golden Summers of Baseball at Labatt Memorial Park

By Barry Wells

**A**S INTERCOUNTY LEAGUE FANS enjoy another season of fast-paced London Majors' baseball at historic Labatt Memorial Park, London's 150th anniversary as an incorporated city is the perfect time to revisit the history of our municipally-owned baseball "paradise gardens."

Labatt Park (nee Tecumseh Park in 1877) is believed to be the "World's Oldest Baseball Park in continuous use in its original location. The closest our American cousins have to Labatt Park, is Rickwood Field in Birmingham, Alabama, which was built in 1910. Still, on several official U.S. baseball Web sites, Rickwood Field is mistakenly referred to as the "World's Oldest Ballpark" on the specious rationale that the stadium still retains some of its original 1910 grandstand.

While Labatt Park is currently using its fourth main grandstand, the site and field is the oldest known ballpark in continuous use in the world (baseball was invented in North America). Nineteen-ten isn't even close to 1877. Nestled at the Forks of the Thames River, our landmark field has been the centre for London and area's sports, recreational and cultural activities for 128 years. Over the years, the park has been used for motion pictures, political rallies, civic receptions, public skating, soccer, baseball, fastball, softball, boxing, football, horse-jumping, the RCMP Musical Ride and even a 21-Gun Salute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II during to her visit to Victoria Park in 1997. In the summer of 2001, Labatt Park was the main baseball venue during the Canada Summer Games.

**1870:** According to Canadian baseball historian/author William Humber, it's likely that this "commons" pasture land in London West was used for baseball (an adaption of the British game of "rounders") as early as 1870.

**1877:** The land was purchased by china merchant W.J. Reid as the new home of the semi-pro London Tecumsehs and named Tecumseh Park. The Tecumsehs, with star pitcher Fred Goldsmith (referred to in several newspaper accounts as the inventor of the curve ball), won the International Association title, beating the Pittsburgh Alleghenies.

**1878:** The Tecumsehs started the season with 4,000 spectators but the crowds started to drop off and the team fell into debt.

**1884:** Pitchers were now allowed to throw "overhand."



The Tecumseh's Base-Ball Club, 1876  
J. J. Talman Regional Collection,  
D. B. Weldon Library, UWO

**1890s:** Tecumseh Park was home to the London Alerts of the amateur Canadian League and a variety of City league teams. The Tecumsehs were resurrected in 1888 and 1889.

**1892:** A brick-dust track was built for amateur and professional bicycle racing.

**1895:** The first motion picture was shown in London after a bicycle race at Tecumseh Park.

London-born and raised catcher, George "Mooney" Gibson (1880-1967) went on to a stellar playing career with the Pittsburgh Pirates, winning the World Series in 1909.

**1911-15:** London joined the professional Canadian League, producing Earl "Greasy" Neal, who later starred with Cincinnati.

**1919-22:** The Tecumsehs join the Michigan-Ontario League, winning the pennant from 1920-1922.



**George "Mooney" Gibson**  
Several early major league stars got their start playing in the old Tecumseh grounds, George "Mooney" Gibson was the most famous. He was born in London in 1880 and, after a few seasons of local ball, went to the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1905 as a catcher. He stayed with them until 1917. Their best year was 1909 when they defeated Detroit in the World Series. He spent two years with the Giants and then managed the Pirates (1920-24 and 1932-34) and the Cubs for one season. He was the last Canadian-born manager in the majors and was elected to the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 1987.

**1924:** Charlie "Mechanical Man" Gehringer, who went on to become a star 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman with the Detroit Tigers, plays for the Tecumsehs.

**1936-37:** The park is purchased by the Labatt brewing family and donated to the City along with \$10,000 for improvements on the condition that the park be renamed the "John Labatt Memorial Athletic Field" and remain a public recreational park in perpetuity. The Great Flood of 1937 washes away the grandstand; A new grandstand and clubhouse (still standing) is constructed.

**1940s:** London ball hero Frank Colman makes it to the Bigs. During the war years, women's ball flourishes at the park. The London Army team wins the Canadian Sandlot title in 1943 and 1944. Renamed the London Majors, the Majors win the Intercounty title in 1947 and 1948. The 1948 Majors also win the Ontario title, the Canadian Sandlot title and the World Sandlot title in September of 1948, beating the Fort Wayne (Indiana) General Electrics in a seven-game series at Labatt Park.

**1950s:** The Majors, starring Stan and Bill Slack, win the Intercounty title in 1951 and 1956.

**1960s:** Russ Evon's London TV Cable fastball team, with star pitcher Dick Hames, is one of the best fastball teams in Canada. The London Pontiacs win the Intercounty title in 1969.

**1970s:** The Majors win the Intercounty title in 1975. Wallaceburg native

Arden Eddie, a Majors player since 1967, purchases the Majors in 1976 and moves the team back into the old clubhouse in 1977.

**1980s:** Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins pitches for the Majors in 1984-1985.

**1990:** The London Tigers AA team wins the Eastern League title, the same year the park wins the Beam Clay Award as the best natural grass, minor league field in North America.

**1994:** The City designates the park under the Ontario Heritage Act with a special plaque unveiling on July 1 (Canada Day).

**1996:** The by-law "Reasons for Designation" of the park are amended to include the "Roy McKay Clubhouse."

**1999:** (September) The London Werewolves win the Frontier League title during their first of three years in London.

**2000:** During the Werewolves' home opener on June 3, Wolves' pitcher Brett Gray pitches a record 25 strikeouts against the Chillicothe (Ohio) Paints. Following the season, the main grandstand (circa 1937) is demolished.

**2001:** A new, \$1.97-million grandstand is completed in the spring, prior to the Canada Summer Games. An interpretive plaque detailing the park's history is installed on the new grandstand.

**2002:** The 1948 Majors are among the inaugural 10 inductees into the London Sports Hall of Fame at the JLC.

**2003:** The London Monarchs of the fledgling Canadian Baseball League play part of the season at the park before folding due to financial difficulties.

**2004:** On Feb. 15, 2004, it's announced that longtime Majors owner-player Arden Eddie has sold the team to 36-year-old mortgage consultant, Scott Dart. Under Dart's tutelage, the London Majors enjoy an outstanding playoff run, finally bowing out to the Guelph Royals in the league final.

**2005:** Former Intercounty umpire Joe Serratore gets married at home plate on Saturday, June 18, a first for the ball park.

## Vintage Base Ball Rules

Vintage base ball clubs in America play by the rules dating from as early as 1845 to as late as 1924. The recreation of vintage base ball in the United States first became popular in the early 1980s, and by the late 1990s there were over 70 programs in the United States playing by vintage rules.

Base Ball is a gentleman's game, so:

- There shall be no bunting, sliding or running out of the base path
- Uncivil language, ungentlemanly behaviour, spitting, alcohol consumption, chewing of tobacco, and wagering are not tolerated
- Balls and strikes are not called unless the umpire finds it necessary
- The ball is delivered underhand in a shallow arc to allow good striking

Fielders play the following positions until the hurled ball has crossed home base:

- 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman play on or within one foot of their respective bags
- Short scout (shortstop) can position himself anywhere on the playing field
- Behind (catcher) plays not more than 45 feet behind home base
- Left, middle and right scouts (outfielders) play in the middle of their respective outfields

A striker is dead (out) when:

- A batted ball is caught on the fly, fair or foul
- A batted ball is caught on one bound, fair or foul
- Three hurled balls are swung at and missed

A baserunner is dead (out) when he is:

- Forced out at base
- Tagged out
- Runs three feet or more out of the base path

Other rules of the gentleman's game include:

- Foul ticks (balls) are not considered strikes
- When fielding, the ball must be caught with the HANDS – gloves, hats, or other items may not be used
- The umpire's determination if a batted ball is fair or foul is made by where it first hit the ground
- A base runner may advance at his own risk when a batted ball is caught on one bound, but must return to his base on those caught in the air
- A base runner can lead off at his own risk and steal if the behind (catcher) muffs the ball (makes an error)
- All disputes are arbitrated by the team captains and the umpire. An umpire's decisions are final. He is always to be treated in a respectful and gentlemanly manner

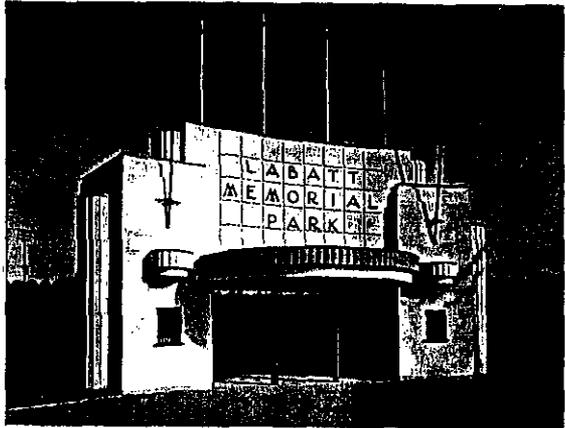


J. J. Talman Regional Collection,  
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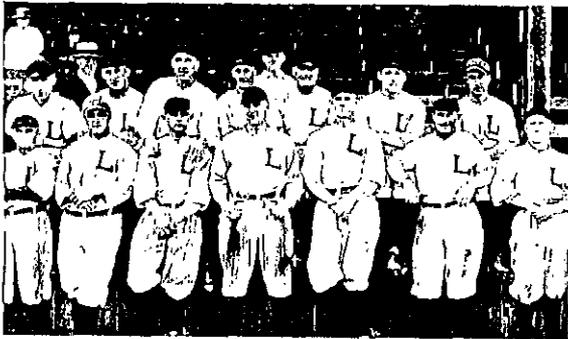
Reproduced from the 2000 Programme of the Akron Black Stockings Base Ball Club



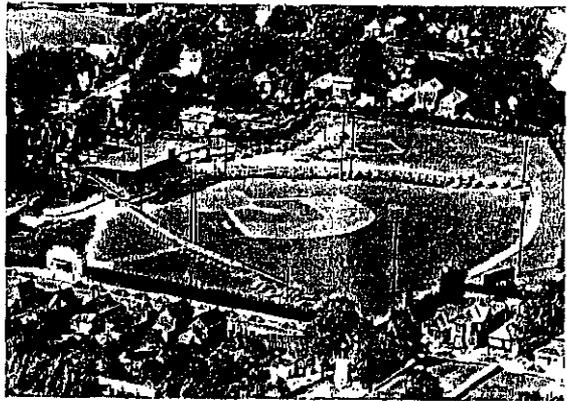
Beck Memorial Trophy, won by the R.C. Struthers dry goods team, c. 1900  
George "Mooney" Gibson was a member of the team.  
Museum London



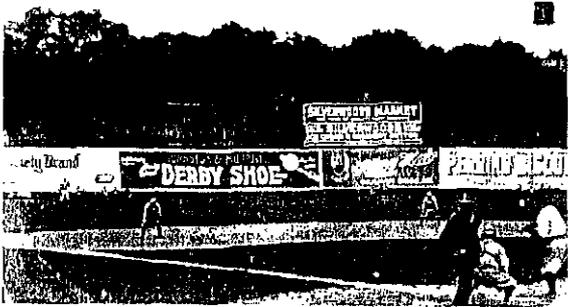
Labatt Park gate, 1946  
London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives, UWO Archives



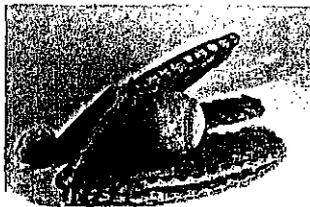
London Tecumsehs, Michigan-Ontario League Champions, 1920  
Museum London



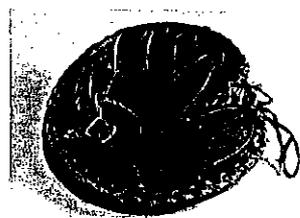
Labatt Park, c 1950  
London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives, UWO Archives



Game at Tecumseh Park, c. 1920s  
Courtesy, Alan Noon



Early baseball glove  
Private collection



Catcher's Mitt c. 1920  
Museum London

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Autographs

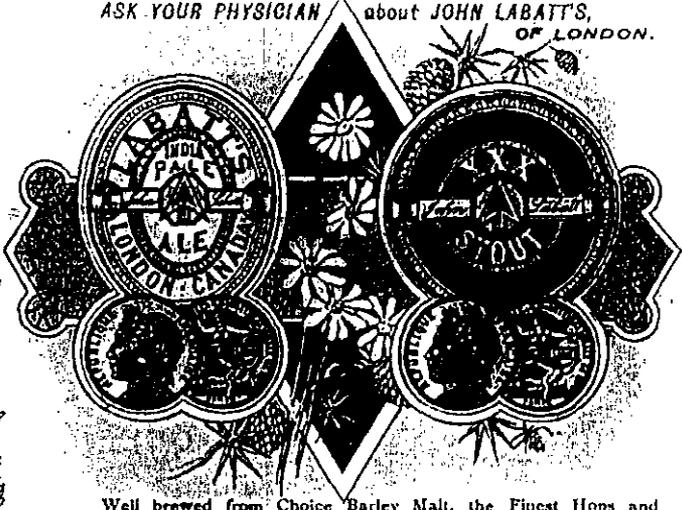


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