

Long Grove History

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The Long Grove Crackerjacks

In this cracker jack of an article — town ball, a circa-1908 squad with mismatched hats, and a Chicago popcorn revolution that gave them their name.

By Aaron Underwood · Long Grove Historical Society



CIRCA 1908 The Long Grove Crackerjacks in jerseys reading LONG GROVE. By the looks of it they certainly were attempting some level of professionalism — though clearly a few of them didn't see the email about bringing your hat for team photo day.

At the turn of the century, a popular pastime was known as *town ball*. It was baseball — and it pitted one town against a neighboring town. There were specific rules governing residency, so towns couldn't hire "out of town" professionals to bolster their squad and the players were truly "town folk."

Like many small towns at the time, Long Grove fielded a team — known as the Long Grove Crackerjacks. Newspapers of the day report results of games against Palatine and Lake Zurich. They seemed to have been competitive — about as many wins as losses.



Why "Crackerjacks"?

It's not really known why they called themselves the Crackerjacks, though I'll explore a couple of ideas. What's a *crackerjack*, or a *cracker jack thing*?

Ignoring the popcorn-based candy you're probably all familiar with for a minute — the phrase was a colloquialism meaning "excellent" or "of high quality." For example, an accomplished pianist might be referred to as "*a real cracker jack piano player*." In naming the team *The Crackerjacks*, they could have been simply referring to their high level of baseball skill. But the candy was enjoying great popularity at that time, so the name probably had a bit of a double meaning.

A Chicago popcorn revolution.

Up until 1893, popcorn was cooked in a wire basket over an open flame. While the result was healthy, it was unevenly cooked and pretty dry. A Chicago entrepreneur, **Charles Cretor**, solved both issues — albeit with a likely health downgrade — when he came up with a machine that would cook the popcorn in clarified butter, lard, and salt.

Another Chicago entrepreneur, German immigrant **F.W. Rueckheim**, did him one better when he took Cretor's popcorn and mixed it with molasses and peanuts. He christened his concoction with the snappy name "*Candy Coated Popcorn*." Both pushed their creations at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and popcorn went mainstream.



THE FAMOUS CONFECTION

"Why, that's Cracker Jack!" — the salesman's exclamation that turned a colloquialism into a brand. Trade mark registered 1896.

But "Candy Coated Popcorn" wasn't perfect — it was sticky and tended to clump together. Rueckheim's brother **Louis** fixed this by adding an oil to the molasses. (It seems the food inventor's motto of the day was: *when in doubt, add more oil or sugar.*) It worked. When the new formula was tested, an excited salesman is said to have exclaimed, "*Why, that's Cracker Jack!*" While he simply meant the new formula was excellent — the old colloquialism had just become a product name.

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME · 1908

The popular candy was frequently sold at large gatherings, such as baseball games — and the connection was immortalized in 1908, with the line "Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack..."

CRETOR · RUECKHEIM · A CHICAGO CONFECTION

A new name for the team.

By the 1920's, Long Grove's baseball team had a new name — the Long Grove **Lancers**. But that's a story for another day...



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