

FIRST AT BAT

THE LEGACY OF THE EUGENE LARKS

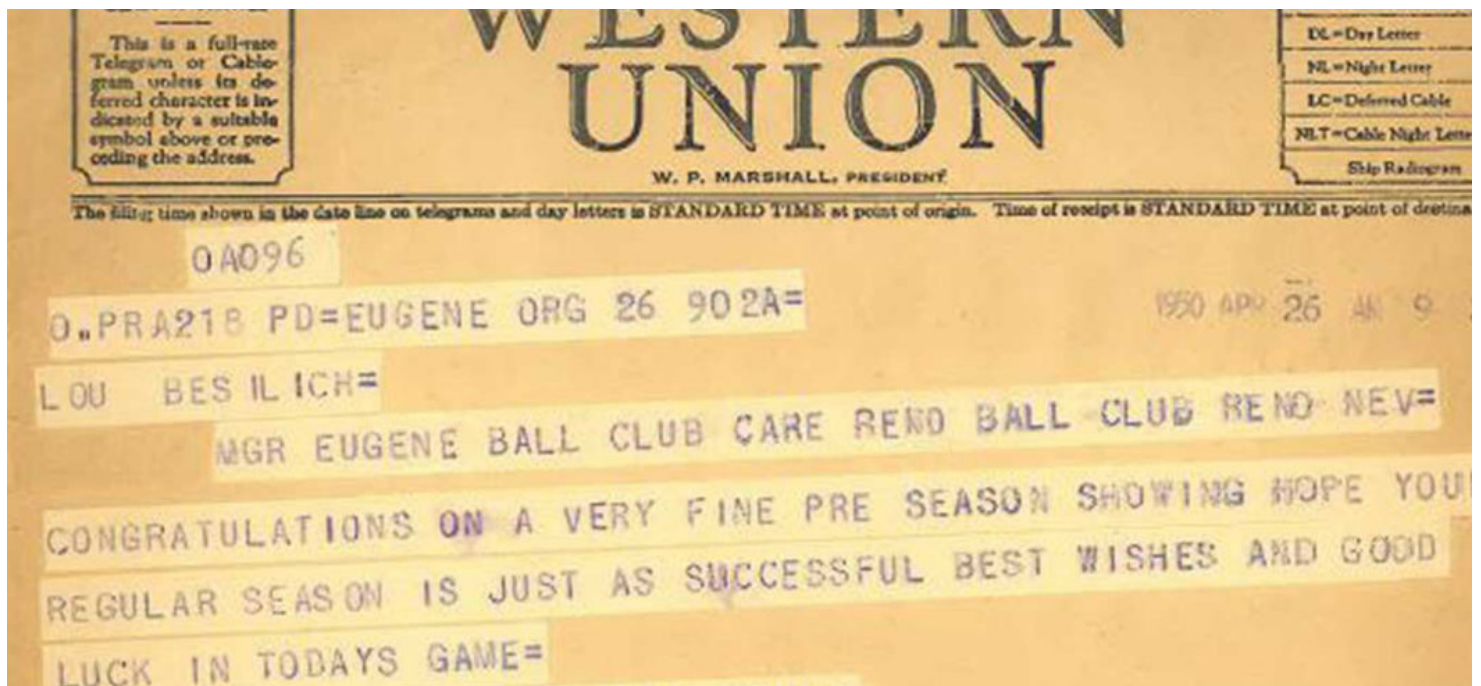
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By Mike Wolfe

Summer means baseball in Eugene. Every year, thousands of excited fans cheer on the Emeralds, Eugene's minor league team. But the Emeralds were not the first professional baseball team to call Eugene home. Before the Emeralds, the Eugene Larks took the field as members of the class D Far West League, an eight team circuit centered mostly in northern California and southern Oregon.

A.A. "Art" Hadler, an experienced California baseball team owner, brought the idea of professional baseball to town late in 1949. He had noted Eugene's history of community support for the highly entertaining and well-played amateur baseball in the area and believed the southern Willamette Valley, which at the time had a population nearing fifty thousand potential fans, was ready to move to the "next level" as the home of a professional team.

Hadler promised Eugene a brand new ballpark and a team that would compete for championships, and community members enthusiastically formed a booster club to spread interest in the team. Construction began just west of Maple Street and north of Roosevelt Boulevard on what would eventually become known as "Bethel Park."



To lead the Larks, Hadler hired Lou Vezilich as player-manager. Vezilich, a veteran minor-leaguer, was known as a strong batsman around whom a solid team could be built. Vezilich and Hadler signed the players, and the Larks prepared for action.

Professional baseball officially opened in Eugene on May 12, 1950 when a capacity crowd of over 3,300 fans watched Eugene win a thrilling 10-9 victory over the Marysville Peaches. Soon afterward though, the bats quieted and the slumping Larks found themselves in last place.

About the same time the Larks landed in the league's cellar, there was more bad news, as the construction company that had built Bethel Park threatened to sue Hadler for back payments. Fans began to wonder if Hadler had been honest with them. Fortunately, the Larks began to win more often, attendance rose, Hadler sold some stock in the team, the debt was paid, and by the end of that 1950 season the Larks found themselves in sixth place and just barely profitable. Bethel Park, which at one point during the financial negotiations looked as if it might be snatched from the team and turned into a dog racing track, was securely in the hands of the Larks' management.

Although the Larks grew more profitable and secure in 1951, new problems challenged the Far West League. Two teams folded before the season started, and another club dropped out mid-season. Additionally, the military draft for the Korean Conflict took some of the league's players and left teams scrambling for high quality replacements.

Then came the blow that would lead to the end of the Larks. In early 1952, the Far West League's office decided the challenges were too many and announced the suspension of the league's operations. Having lost their league, the Larks had to accept reality and disband after only two seasons.

Support for professional baseball in Eugene continued after the Larks posted their last out, and community leaders rallied to bring another team to town. The Emeralds were chartered in 1955 as members of the Northwest League, and Eugene's fans have faithfully backed the Ems ever since.

As for the Larks, although they were Eugene's first professional team, they are not well remembered. They weren't around long, and none of the players ever made it to the major leagues. Bethel Park was torn down in 1968. Only one small reminder of the Larks remains: northwest Eugene's Lark City Park is built on what used to be Bethel Park's outfield.