

Downtown Houston, looking west, ca. 1940.



NONYA GRENADER

# WEST SIDE STORY

## WHEN HOUSTON PLAYED BASEBALL AT THE WEST END BALL PARK

Before the Astrodome, even before Buff Stadium, the West End Ball Park provided a setting for professional baseball in Houston. Built about 1905 and located on what is now the edge of downtown at Andrews and Heiner streets, just west of the YMCA and Allen Center, the former ball park claimed an area now taken over by the Pierce Elevated segment of Interstate 45. Its location marked the intersection of two city grids, one formed by downtown blocks and the other by residential lots in neighboring Fourth Ward.

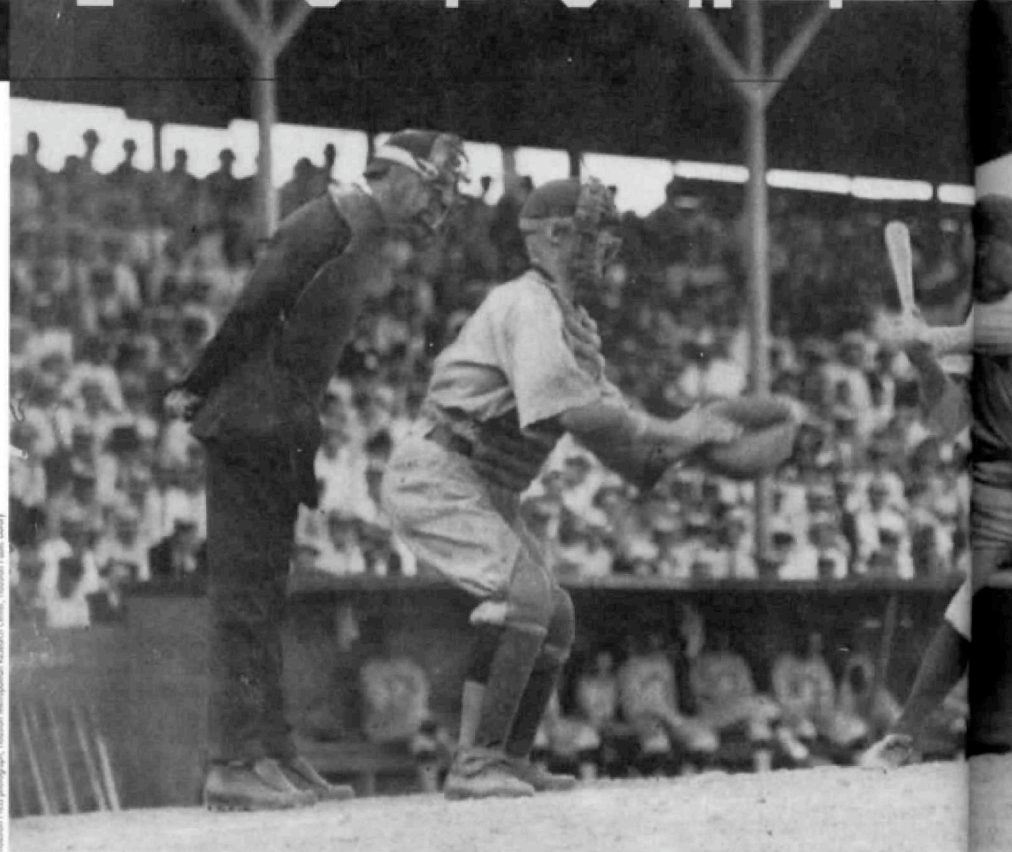
With the completion of the West End stadium, games no longer had to share the fairgrounds at McGowen and Milam. The new ball park was constructed entirely of wood and seated approximately 3,500. A central grandstand behind home plate was elevated over the concession stand. Slender columns supported a generous canopy that covered most of the seating along the first- and third-base lines. Home plate was in the northwest corner, so fans could catch the prevailing southeast breeze.

The Houston team was known as the Buffaloes, a name annexed from the bayou just blocks away and more integrally linked to Houston history than

those of such previous local teams as the Red Stockings, the Babies, or Moore's Marvels. The Buffs would endure for six decades, winning numerous Texas League pennants and spanning a period of profound change in the structure of both baseball and the society that embraced the game.

The West End stadium nurtured many players at the beginning of distinguished careers. Tris Speaker, who would spend 23 years in the majors and be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, signed a contract with the Buffaloes in 1907 for a record \$100 per month — then one of the highest salaries ever paid to a Texas League player.

Beginning in 1909, Houston spawned a pennant dynasty, winning championships in five of the next six years. As with most winning streaks, a lapse followed, and owners Otto Sens and Doak Roberts sold the club in 1919. The stock was dispersed among a variety of owners. Although some was retained locally, the St. Louis Cardinals quietly began acquiring a majority interest in the Buffaloes, with the result that Houston became the first Texas League franchise to be controlled by a major league club. Independent owners vehemently objected, and the



The West End Ball Park, ca. 1920.

Cardinal acquisition was not publicly admitted until 1925.

The park's equipment and policies underwent change as well. Unstructured gloves evolved into enormous modern-day mitts, enabling fielders to make one-handed catches with dazzling reliability. Spitball pitching was banned in 1923, following the national trend, but because

the Texas League permitted nine pitchers to continue the practice, the last (legal) spitball was thrown in 1932. Games were made more accessible to younger fans with the formation of the "Knot Hole Gang," which, as described by Buff officials in 1922, "admitted any white boy from age 7 to 16 to become a member by signing an agreement of clean sportsman-

ship and high ideals and morals. A membership card costing twenty five cents gave admittance to all games except Sundays and holidays.<sup>1</sup> America's pastime was not immune to prejudice; the game excluded as many as it included. Texas League teams, like the viewer seating, would remain segregated for years to come.

The park's long history was not limited to baseball. According to the WPA guide to Houston, published in 1942, "Collegiate football was inaugurated in Houston in 1912 when Rice Institute played its games in West End Park, the players 'furnishing their own shoes, socks, and uniforms, and doing their own laundry work.'"<sup>2</sup>

The West End Ball Park was superseded in 1928 by the new Buff Stadium, built on St. Bernard Street (now Cullen Boulevard) on a site just north of Interstate 45 where the Finger Furniture Company now has a showroom. The

In an attempt to pacify the many Houstonians upset at the loss of their stadium, the company installed a small baseball museum in its new building, purportedly at the location of Buff Stadium's home plate.

At a time when team owners are charging that the Astrodome is no longer adequate and that public money should be spent for a new facility, it is interesting to recall the simple West End stadium, a structure that typified the promise of a growing city. Today, downtown's edge is delineated by the irrefutable concrete barrier of the Pierce Elevated. How much more congenial it must have been when business district segued into neighborhood around the grassy diamond and wooden bleachers of the West End Ball Park. ■



West End field continued to be used and enjoyed for years by community teams and high school players. Buff Stadium — with its Spanish-style entrance, decorative buffalo motif, and seating for 14,000 — was thought by many to be a minor-league showplace; others complained that it was much too far out of town. Finger Furniture demolished the arena in 1963.

<sup>1</sup> *Four Score and More: The Autobiography of Fred N. Ankenman, Sr., 1887-1979*, ed. Stanley Siegel (Houston: Texas Gulf Coast Historical Association, 1980), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Texas, Houston: A History and Guide* (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942), p. 219.

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