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PHOTOS BY CHUCK LIDDY - cliddy@newsobserver.com

Hicks Field is home to the Edenton Steamers of the Coastal Plain League. Roberto Duran of the visiting Peninsula Pilots takes a break from a game on July 11 to get an Italian ice from the a concession stand.

Throwback stadium brings town together

OLD-FASHIONED CHARM ON DISPLAY AT HISTORIC HICKS FIELD

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E DENTON For residents in Edenton, baseball is more than just a game – it’s a reason to gather, a way of life and a symbol of the town’s rich history.

The small, waterfront town nestled off of Albemarle Sound is home to a preserved baseball gem – Hicks Field.

Historic Hicks Field, a Works Project Administration project finished in 1939, remains in nearly the same condition as it was when originally constructed – with wooden bleachers and a manual scoreboard. Most importantly, it has a summer league baseball team – the Edenton Steamers. The Steamers’ average attendance is about 13 percent of the town’s 5,500 residents on a given night.



Scoreboard volunteers Ted Weimer, left, and Emile LaPierre await the next change to the manually operated wooden scoreboard. Hicks Field also features a wood grandstand that can accommodate about 500 people.

Roger Slack is a scoreboard operator, which means he sits by the scoreboard and manually changes the numbers.

“The Steamers are probably the primary source of outsiders knowing about Edenton,” he said. “And when you consider that Edenton has a population of 5,500 and the average attendance is about 700, it says a lot.”

John Barrow grew up in Edenton, left once, and returned for

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See more photos from Historic Hicks Field at nando.com/sportspics

good in 1995. He is the Steamers’ official groundskeeper and scorekeeper, and unofficial team historian. He has seen a lot of changes over the years. One constant, aside from the wooden bleachers, is the relationship the town has with its teams.

“The team provides the city a lot of good summertime entertainment,” he said. “It brings the people in the city together.

“I think people are impressed by the old-time look of the stadium. They’re impressed by the charm of the place. You’re sitting on the field as well, you’re right up there. It’s not like other stadiums where the stands are really separated from the field.”

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Volunteer David Noble lines the batters box in front of the wooden grandstand at Hicks Field. The bleachers were reinforced along with other improvements at the ball park thanks to grants received after the field was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Old-time Hicks Field offers history and community

EDENTON

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Where the stars played

The N.C. landmark is built on what originally was a horse racing track. Robert Hicks owned the land and donated 3 acres to the town's school system in 1723. After he died in 1733, the school system was free to use the land however it wanted.

In the spring of 1939, Edenton joined Elizabeth City, Oak Town, Plymouth, Perrytown, and Scotland Neck to form the six-team Albemarle League. Originally without a nickname, the team became the Colonials in 1946 and joined the original Coastal Plain League in 1952, before the league and the team folded after the season.

During this time, though, Hicks Field made its mark in N.C. baseball history. The Yankees' affiliate, the Binghamton (N.Y.) Triplets, and the unaffiliated Pocomoke (Del.) City Chicks and Reading (Pa.) Chicks used the field for spring training in the 1940s.

The field's most notable moment came on April 16, 1942, when Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller came to Edenton. Feller, who had become a star with the Cleveland Indians before enlisting in the Navy in December 1941, led the Norfolk Naval Reserve team to Hicks Field to play against Binghamton.

The stands were full, leaving more than 1,000 spectators without a seat. Although Feller didn't play in the game, major leaguers Fred Hutchinson, Sam Chapman, Ace Parker and Max Wilson all contributed for Norfolk in a 10-inning nailbiter that the Chowan Times said "provided fans with everything that they could expect in a ball game." Binghamton won 4-3 and Feller, dressed in uniform, signed auto-



Members of the Edenton Steamers sit on top of the team's dugout during a game against the Peninsula Pilots on July 11. Edenton, which has finished second in the CPL the last two seasons, won the game 7-5.

graphs for fans.

Four years later, in 1946, the Edenton Colonials hosted a select group of North Carolina born major league All-Stars from the New York Yankees, Chicago White Sox, Pittsburgh Pirates, and Washington Senators. In front of a record crowd of 4,500 at Hicks Field, the Colonials fell 13-0.

Saving the field

When the Colonials organization folded in 1952, Hicks Field began without a signature team for more than 40 years, threatening the field's existence and almost resulting in its destruction.

Local high school teams continued to use the facility, along with the American Legion team and a

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JOHN BARROW

EDENTON STEAMERS' OFFICIAL GROUNDSKEEPER AND SCOREKEEPER

professionally unaffiliated African-American league team called the Edenton Sluggers, but the field deteriorated without the presence of a team that was popular throughout the town.

In 1995, residents formed a committee to discuss the field's future and the new Coastal Plain League seeking franchises in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. Wallace Evans, a graduate of Chowan High and a life-long resident, was named committee chairman.

Evans' goal was to make Hicks Field suitable to host minor league baseball again.

His idea to apply to list the facility on the National Register of Historic Places, where grant money would be available, saved the field.

"We found out that in the manner it was built and the fact that it was more than 50 years old might qualify the facility as historic site," Evans said. "So we went to bat and put together some paperwork, and sent in an application."

Hicks Field was placed on the Na-

tional Register, and the committee received grants to rebuild and reinforce the grandstands, the outfield fences, and to enlarge the bunker-style dugouts.

On May 29, 1998, the Edenton Steamers began their first season in the new Coastal Plain League, a collegiate summer league that uses wooden bats. A board of directors representing the town's residents purchased the franchise from the league in 2000, and the team is supported privately by ticket sales, donations, and advertising revenue.

The ownership of Hicks Field remains in the hands of the Edenton-Chowan School District, but is on a 10-year lease to the Edenton Steamers for a friendly price of \$1. "Just to have some money involved," said Evans, who became team president this year.

The Steamers won league titles in 2004 and 2005 and finished second each of the past two years.

Matt Duncan, a relief pitcher for the Steamers, grew up in Brownsburg, Ind., about 10 miles from Hinkle Fieldhouse, one of the nation's most historic basketball gyms. The movie "Hoosiers" was filmed at Hinkle, and it's also Butler University's home court. More than most of his teammates, Duncan appreciates the legacy of his new home ballpark.

"It's nice looking at the history of the place and some of the people that have actually played here," he said. "It's pretty cool. We usually get a decent crowd and they support us. It's nice to know they love us and we try to play hard for them."



Neil Wood, 4, left, and Jordan Harris play a between-innings game at the Edenton Steamers game July 11. The object of the game was to see who could unroll the toilet paper first. Harris was victorious.