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The "Wicket"-est Game in the West

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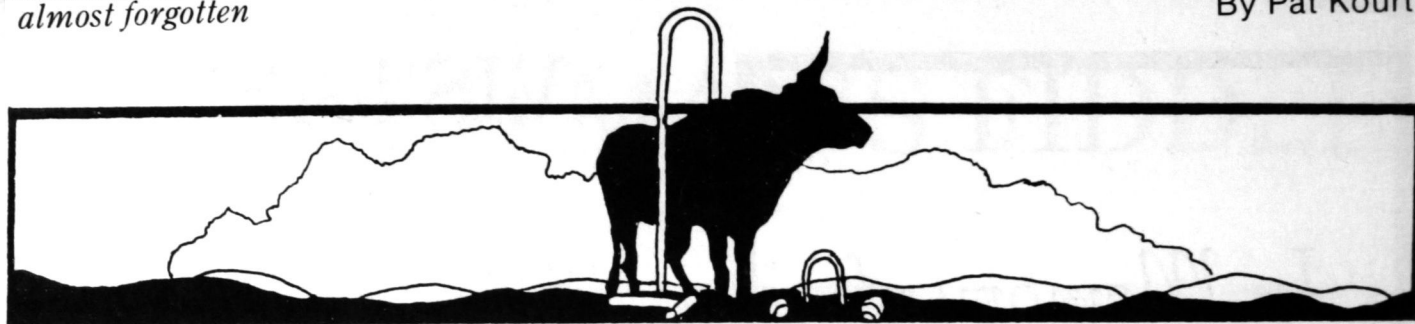
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The “Wicket”-est Game In The West

Just nineteen miles north of WESTVIEW's publishing home lies the farming community of Thomas. Better known for its high-school sports, however, it has been publicized frequently as “home of girls’ basketball teams” as well as “home of number 1 ranked boys’ football squads.” What most Western Oklahomans and many Thomas citizens do *not* know is that the National Croquet championship was held in downtown Thomas for several years.

In the early 1940's men, women, and children clustered around the croquet courts located on the corner of Main and Orient streets. Kenneth Roof, then a young man, recalls that there were “two excellent courts and one good one. They were among the nicest in the United States.” The father-son team of Bruce and Clyde McNeill played often on the courts for which they helped to provide money.

Great pains were taken to keep the courts manicured. Strained sand was watered; then drags and a broom sweeper were used to level the playing area. Wickets, through which the balls were hit, were imbedded in cement. The court was protected by short cement walls. Ultimately, a “perfect” court was expected by all of the croquet participants. Too, Roof remembered the game as “very scientific; a dime would wedge the ball.”

John Jones, who drove to the matches from Weatherford, was an especially good player of the area. His wife, Ruby, remarks that she never cared to watch the competitions. Women just didn't seem to have the necessary amount of patience to see their men through hours of the tournaments. Since there was no real physical danger involved in croquet, most wives and daughters preferred to stay at home.

Patience? Yes. During the three-day national tournament, coin-operated lights kept the action going twenty-four hours a day. Many players and spectators played and watched all night. A three-hour game wasn't uncommon at all. None of the players, however, were women. Most were older or middle-aged men.

Like today's professional golfers, local croquet competitors traveled around the states of Oklahoma and Texas. Because they, too, had city croquet courts, players from Loyal, Anadarko, Weatherford, Lawton, and Oklahoma City played annually in the Thomas competitions.

With an entry fee of approximately \$10, costs for lights, court upkeep, and large trophies were maintained.

Playing techniques varied among the men. Several players shot by holding the croquet mallet down between their knees. On the other hand, a few “showy” players shot backwards mainly with wrist action. As in golf tournaments, silence lingered throughout the matches to insure total concentration. Most tense moments involved players hitting the ball through the “basket” of two crossed wickets in the center of the court. The ball was declared “dead” until a player made a wicket, but it was “live” while in play. There were ten wickets in all.

Most players seemed quite possessive of their croquet equipment. R. L. Cline remembers his uncle, Arthur Lawter, as an avid player who might have “fudged” a bit while he played and who was handy in wielding his ball and mallet. Lawter's equipment is still considered among “prized possessions” of his family today.

Also, Cline laughs about another veteran player, Jake Fender, whose car was stolen one day. No, he didn't grieve for his car — but for his lost ball and mallet!

Who were the champion players? Most recollections include the names of John Scott, Charlie Gardner, Herbert Hansen, Raymond Williams, Milt Herring, Fred Foust, Earl Glazier, and many others. Kenneth Roof declares that Merle Spain was “the best I ever saw!”

Few recorded statistics have been kept of the croquet mania in Thomas, which helped to lessen the seriousness of wartime. Unlike other sports, croquet wasn't seasonal. It was played year round unless the weather was too wet or too cold.

Like many activities that reach their peak of excitement, interest in competitive croquet declined; a Masonic lodge was built on the site of the courts. Even though the courts were moved two blocks east to the city park in Thomas, the enthusiasm was gone. Only memories remain.

In 1986, however, sports enthusiasts, according to CURRENT CONSUMER AND LIFESTYLES STUDIES magazine, predicted that the “gentle sport of croquet” may be rebounding as a popular sport. But it will be more than a picnic pastime. There are already croquet coaches instructing country club members in several Eastern cities. Mallets cost up to \$300 each, and balls cost \$160 a set.

Yes, history does repeat itself. Who knows? Western Oklahoma may see a revival of croquet — the “wicket”-est game in the West! ♣