A Century of Opening Days

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On the last day of March, more than 31,000 fans filled Tropicana Field to participate in Major League Baseball's annual spring ritual, Opening Day. As the sun set near the downtown buzzed as a satisfied crowd celebrated the 9-2 victory of the Tampa Bay Rays over the Toronto Blue Jays.

Although the outcome did not favor the home team sixteen years ago, when the then-Tampa Bay Devil Rays lost to the Detroit Tigers in front of more than 45,000 fans at the first ever Opening Day at the Trop, a similar feeling of excitement gripped St. Petersburg and the Tampa Bay region. The early years of the Devil Rays had many forgettable moments, but the rechristened Rays have enjoyed six consecutive winning seasons and four years of October baseball since 2008.

Though longtime Rays fans may debate which Opening Day holds the best memories, residents of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County should always remember that it was another "opening day" of sorts, on February 27, 1914, that began our city's long love affair with professional baseball. This game featured a "home team" that had endured 100-plus loss seasons three of the previous four years, and played its games outside St. Petersburg city limits on a tract of land near Coffee Pot Bayou.

Al Lang left Pittsburgh in 1910 for a warmer climate arriving in St. Petersburg when the Sunshine City had fewer than 3,500 residents. The Pinellas peninsula remained part of Hillsborough County until 1912. By 1913, Lang had tried to persuade his old boyhood friend, then the owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates, to move its spring training facilities to St. Petersburg, only to have his friend laugh at the proposal and remind Lang that Hot Springs, Arkansas, the Pirates' spring training site since 1900, offered far more amenities than the remote town in lower Pinellas.

Despite this snub, Lang redoubled his efforts. He led the civic efforts to create the St. Petersburg Major League and Amusement Company, that raised money with hopes of attracting a team for spring training during the 1914 season. Although the group briefly courted the Chicago Cubs, that team chose to stay in Tampa, where the Cubs had become the first team to play a series of spring training games in the Tampa Bay region during the 1913 season.

Lang found a partner in the hapless St. Louis Browns, the westernmost American League team at the time that often was found at or near the bottom of the standings. Branch Rickey, the Browns' general manager, wanted to find a new spring home to help his team forget their losing ways. The city offered a generous plan that not only covered team travel expenses, but also paid for five reporters from St. Louis papers to join the team during the exhibition games.

Clearing the site for the ballpark began in October 1913, as crews "blasted" trees and stumps along the mainland near Coffee Pot Bayou. Lang's group joined Snell and Hamlet, a development company, to prepare the site. By early December 1913, workers finished the infield and began to build bleachers and prepare the outfield.

Excitement filled the city of just over 7,000 residents in January 1914. Newspaper stories offered biographical vignettes of the players for the Browns. By early February, the team had finalized a slate of twenty games, ten home at Coffee Pot Park and ten away. As players arrived on February 14, reporters traced every move of Rickey and his squad, filling columns of newpaper with nearly every conceivable fact and statistic possible. Most articles emphasized the positive, though a story on February 21 certainly raised eyebrows as the headline said members of the Browns "Clamor for More Food" when Rickey reduced the meal provisions as a way of getting his farm boys that had fattened themselves during the winter into better shape.

As the exhibition game with the Tampa-based Cubs loomed on February 27, the small city prepared to enter the big leagues. Lang worked with all notable city merchants in St. Petersburg to have their stores close at noon. On game day, streetcars ran every ten-minute from downtown to the then remote area of Coffee Pot Bayou, as steamboats sailed from downtown into the Bayou with other fans. Special railroad service, an early form of mass transit, brought fans to the park via downtown from Tarpon Springs, the Belleview Biltmore, and many other whistle stops along the way.

Yes, fans even came from Tampa, though they were mostly Cubs fans who had watched the "Tampa Team" (the Cubs) beat Rickey's Browns in an opening game on February 26 at Tampa's Plant Park. In a twist of irony, no Tampa fans complained about the drive across the Bay for the game at Coffee Pot Bayou, because no bridge spanned Tampa Bay at this time. These die-hard Tampa fans came to St. Petersburg the old fashioned way, on muddy and rutted roads around the Tampa Bay through Oldsmar.

On February 27, 1914, two major league teams played the first regularly scheduled spring training game in Pinellas County when the Cubs and Browns met at Coffee Pot Park just north of St. Petersburg. At a time when barely 7,000 people lived in St. Petersburg, more than 4,000 people attended this game. Attendance was an "issue" as the city's streets became vacant and thousands congregated amidst the pines in an area that remained largely undeveloped outside of these games until the land boom of the 1920s.

The Browns benefitted from their year in St. Petersburg. They finished the season 71-82, fifth in the American League but notably better than in the recent years before. The true winner of the 1914 spring training season was St. Petersburg. Although the Browns went elsewhere in 1915 and Branch Rickey later played a role in breaking the color barrier by recruiting Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers three decades later in the mid-1940s, St. Petersburg would enjoy spring training baseball as a rite of passage for nearly the rest of the twentieth century.

Today, we know the St. Louis Browns as the Baltimore Orioles, rivals of the Rays in the American League East. Coffee Pot Park fell into disuse after serving as a training site during World War I, though graceful homes on subdivisions planned by Perry Snell transformed the area as St. Petersburg annexed it. By the early 1920s, Lang and others secured a new site on the current parking lot between present-day Al Lang Field and First Avenue South that became Waterfront Park, home to the Boston Braves and New York Yankees. The "original" Al Lang Field replaced Waterfront Park after World War II.

As large hotels transformed the city's skyline in the 1920s, spring training baseball had become an important tourist attraction for snowbirds and seasonal residents, as well as the locals. While outsiders unfamiliar with our long history of baseball occasionally question the long-term viability of the sport in this region, we know better; The history of St. Petersburg is shaped by baseball. Long before the Florida Suncoast Dome (now Tropicana Field) on January 5, 1987, and we courted other teams and celebrated the arrival of our beloved Rays, on a patch of land near Coffee Pot Bayou a century ago, the yelling of "Play Ball!" started it all.

Editor's note: James Schnur, special collections librarian at the Nelson Poynter Library, USF St. Petersburg, also serves as president of the Pinellas County Historical Society.