Stitches in Time

The little-known story of one borough's important place in baseball and softball history

BY J. F. PIRRO

For years, the covers of many of the baseballs used in major league games were stitched together in Perkasie, Bucks County, where residents performed the time-consuming task by hand, often from the comfort of their homes.

The best of the stitchers could cover six balls in an hour.

"That was fast," states 93-year-old Dave Hubbert, who began stitching major league balls as a 16-year-old for 25 cents an hour. Four or five balls per hour were a more typical rate.

Bucks County

In all, more than 2,500 Pennsylvanians were trained on how to sew the double-thread, two-needle stitch through a cover of horsehide to produce the regulation flat seam required on the ball's surface. After the baseball-stitching

COURTESY OF THE DAVID HUBBERT COLLECTION

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left) **Employees stitching baseballs at Edward Hubbert and Son Company in Perkasie. Most of the workforce, however, did their labor at home.** (above) **A worker cuts softball covers at the 4th Street operation in Perkasie.** (below, left) **The Edward Hubbert and Son baseball factory.**

enterprise was moved out of Perkasie in 1950, this experienced workforce was reemployed to stitch softballs.

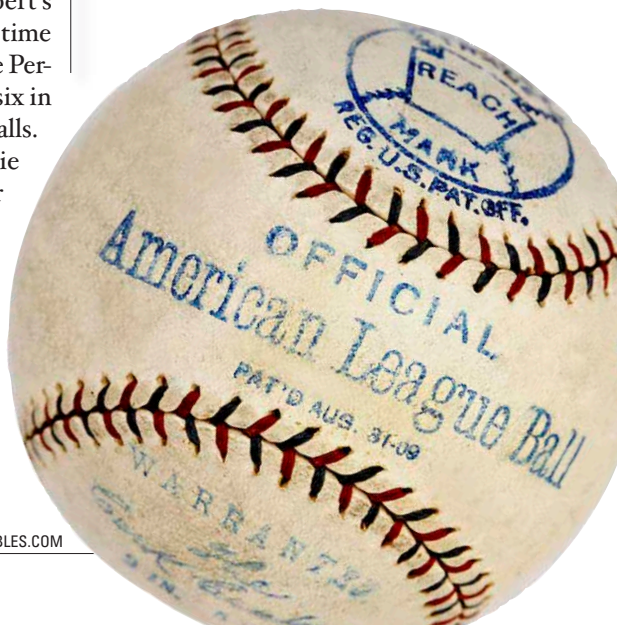
The story of ball stitching in Perkasie spans seven decades. It begins with two brothers—Hubbert's father and uncle—and the significant cottage industry they developed in Perkasie. Upon Hubbert's reengineering of the softball, just in time for that sport's rise in popularity, the Perkasie business became one of just six in the nation capable of making softballs.

In 1990, ball stitching in Perkasie came to an end. Today, all major league baseballs are hand stitched in a Rawlings factory in Costa Rica, and softballs are produced mostly in China. And, if not for several exhibits on display throughout the borough, Perkasie's place in baseball and softball history would be nearly forgotten.

Stitching Baseballs

OUR STORY BEGINS in 1920 in Philadelphia where Hubbert's father, Walter, and Walter's brother, Edward, worked as baseball stitchers for the A. J. Reach & Co., which manufactured baseballs for the American League. The company owner, Alfred James Reach, was also a founder of the Philadelphia Phillies and had served as president of the National League team from 1883 to 1899. When the Great Depression struck, the Hubbert brothers moved to south Perkasie, and continued hand-stitching baseballs for the Reach company. Soon, neighbors joined in, and people were stitching baseballs together in houses up and down Main Street.

COURTESY OF THE DAVID HUBBERT COLLECTION



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WHEN YOU GO

The **Perkasie Historical Society Museum** is located at 513 W. Walnut St. in the former Lehigh Valley Transit Trolley Station in Perkasie, Bucks County. The museum is open to the public during Perkasie Olde Towne events and by appointment. The museum will be open April 23 and 24, from noon to 4 p.m., and a new display, Stitches in Time: Past and Present, will feature needlework in Perkasie, taking the place of the baseball/softball exhibit.

Probably the most famous baseball stitcher was Philadelphia-native John T. "Jack" Clements, who was the last significant left-handed catcher in the major leagues and the first of either hand to catch 1,000 games and wear a chest protector. After a 17-year career playing major league ball, including for the Philadelphia Phillies from 1884 to 1897, he spent some of his retirement years working in the Perkasie factory.

The baseball supplies and finished products were transported by train to and from Philadelphia once a week. The Hubberts would receive baseball cores (cork wrapped in wool and string) along with leather horsehide covers stamped from patterns. Using waxed thread and 2½-inch saddle-stitching needles from England, workers laced the covers around the cores using 108 stitches.

"It was a laborious job," Hubbert recalls.

As production grew, the brothers purchased a Model-T truck to transport the balls back and forth, and the family home was expanded to accommodate 15 more stitchers.

In 1934, A. G. Spalding & Bros., the sole producer of the National League baseball, purchased A. J. Reach & Co. and continued its contract with the Hubberts, which in 1938 expanded its stitching operations in Perkasie to an actual factory on Chestnut Street under the name E. Hubbert & Son, Inc.

The company employed 350 stitchers, with 300 working from their homes. During this heyday of the business, Hubbert recalls, the Philadelphia Phillies would visit Perkasie to see if the American League ball was different—lighter somehow—than the National League ball. It was a contentious point in a city that had two major league teams at the time with the American League's Athletics the more successful of the two.

"Spalding shipped us the balls for covers and stitching in separate vats," Hubbert explains. "But, the balls were exactly the same. Still, the Phillies insisted the American League ball was livelier, even if it was all in their minds. They would leave for Philadelphia shaking their heads in disbelief that the balls were exactly the same—except for the color of the stitching."

RICK DOLL, PERKASIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

The family of Earl Hager, who worked as a ball stitcher, stands around a display that the historical society museum showing the various tools used in putting a cover on a softball.

Originally, the American League baseballs produced by Reach were stitched in red and blue, while Spalding's National League ball was finished in red and black. After Spalding bought Reach, an accountant figured that the company could save money by purchasing red thread in bulk, and both leagues switched to red-stitched balls.

After serving 3½ years in the Air Force during World War II, Hubbert returned to Perkasie in 1946 to become secretary-treasurer of the family business. Four years later, Spalding decided to centralize stitching operations in a post-war factory in Chicopee, Mass., and Perkasie's role in producing major league baseballs came to an end

The Reengineered Softball

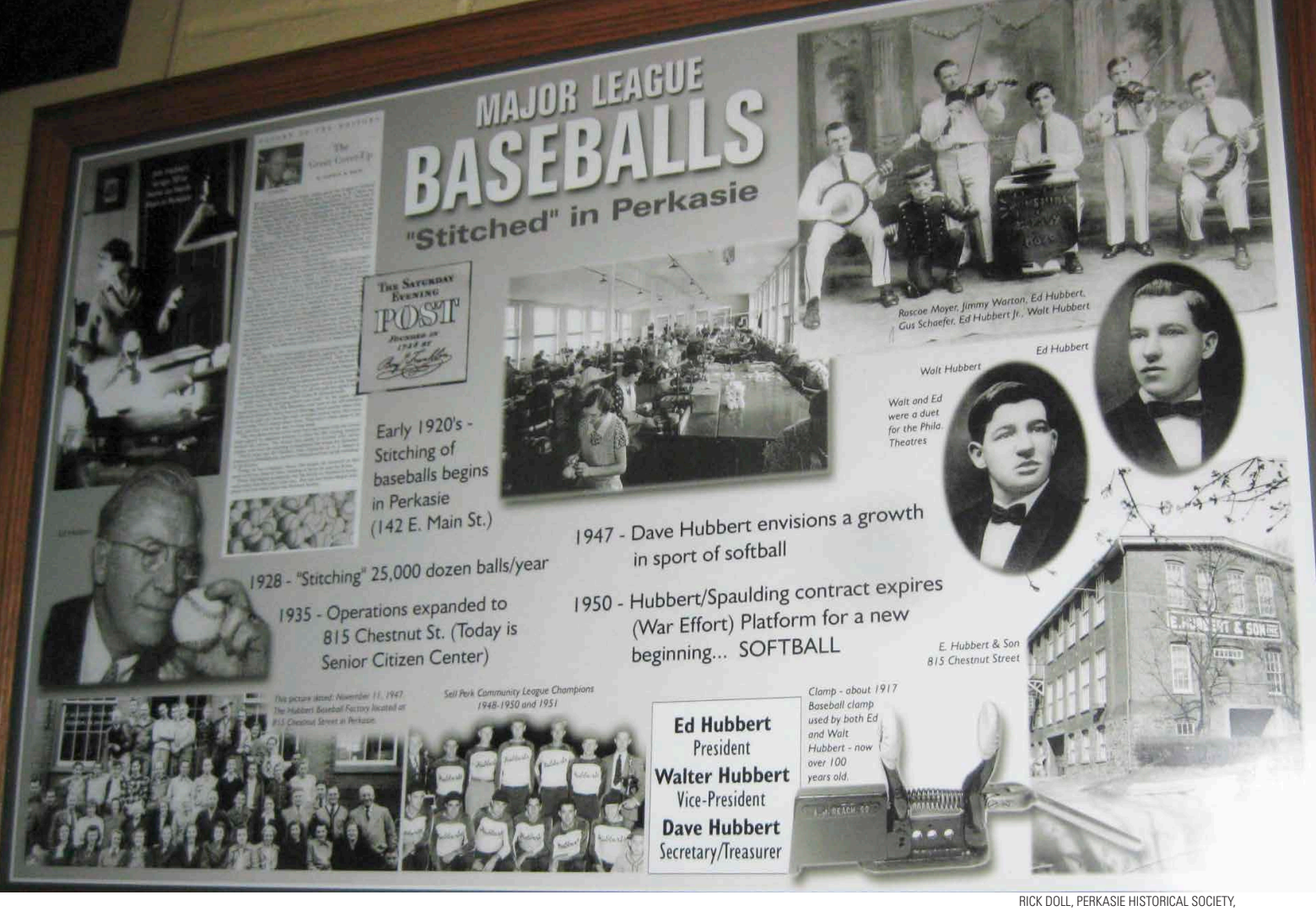
AROUND THIS TIME, Hubbert, who was an innovator, revolutionized the softball by designing one that he swore would last forever. Industrial and church leagues had popularized the sport, which later surged with Title IX federal legislation requiring equal funding for female sports beginning in the early 1970s.

Hubbert claimed his softball, and its original core of granulated cork, did not go "soft" after an inning or two like its predecessors. He perfected the product after learning the tanning process during a stint as vice-president (and brief partner) at Pechin Fansler Leather Tannery in Philadelphia, where lead tanner Bill Fansler once tanned all the leather for major league baseballs.

To sell the softballs, the Hubberts teamed up with marketing-sales specialist George "Dudley" Full. Hubbert can recall how he and Full came up with the name, Dudley Sports Company.

He relates the story: "I said, 'What should we call it? My middle name is Walter; what's your's?'"

When Full replied "Dudley," Hubert says, "I raised an eyebrow. We shook hands, and I said, 'We've got it.' I told



RICK DOLL, PERKASIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

A display at the Perkasie Historical Society Museum shows the timeline of Major League baseballs being stitched by workers in Perkasie.

him, 'I'll make them. You sell them.'"

Within 10 years, 6 million Dudley softballs were sold per year, and the company controlled 60 percent of the market with plants in Perkasie as well as neighboring Sellersville and Dublin in Bucks County.

"It grew into a crazy monster," Hubbert says. "We were capable of using over a million feet of leather a year."

Plants were later moved to Georgia and Haiti after union lobbyists invoked an archaic Pennsylvania law called the Industrial Homework Act of 1937 in an effort to prohibit cottage, or in-home, shops.

At the height of the softball-making business, the Dudley Sports Company employed 1,000 workers, before the business was sold to Spalding. After three more years of working for Spalding, Hubbert retired. Since then, he occasionally shares his family's ball-stitching legacy, usually at several open-house days held at the Perkasie Historical Society, where an exhibit pays tribute to the little-known manufacturing hub once located in the borough.

Keeping the Memory Alive

JOHN FURLONG WAS 16 years old when he started working for Hubbert and Dudley softballs. Now 62, he has been going to China for 24 years as a manufacturer and distributor of Year Flow Sports Company baseballs and softballs, including Dudleys, which remain a top seller in the sport.

"I'm fond of telling him, 'John, you son of a gun, you've helped keep the names of Dudley and Perkasie alive,'" Hubbert says.

The Perk, the old South Perkasie Hotel and now a popular pub, is a photographic shrine to local sports history. With walls and menus full of photos, including those highlighting the town's ball stitching and manufacturing history, owner-general manager Larry Nacarella has created a "memory lane" of sorts featuring the area's heyday in baseball and softball history.

One photo shows workers outside the E. Hubbert & Son factory; just four of the workers photographed that day are still alive. In addition to Hubbert, who is wearing his Air Force flight jacket in the shot, there are Perkasie's Julia Holzerman, now 86; Ernie Frederick of Red Hill; and Arnold Hendricks, who today lives in Naples, Fla.

Holzerman recalls working for the Hubberts, handling payroll on a Comptometer, during her junior and senior years at Sell-Perk High School.

"The machine took two hands," she says, "but don't even ask me what it looked like anymore. You probably have to go to the Smithsonian to find one."

She had known the Hubberts from church and remembered they were a musical family.

Walter and Ed had powerful, projecting voices, and during baseball's summer months when the factory windows were open, a passerby might hear songs echoing inside.

"Suddenly, my dad and uncle would start with, 'I've been working on the railroad...' and others would join in," Hubbert recalls. "They'd be working and singing like mad."

—J. F. Pirro is a regular contributor from Philadelphia.