

KALISPELL'S HISTORIC SPORTS FIGURE NEARLY FORGOTTEN

When the Kalispell City Council changed the name of Thompson Park in 1915 to Eastside Park, historic aficionados quickly objected. It turns out that the park, located near Cornelius Hedges Elementary School, is named a local celebrity.

Gus Thompson, a long-time Kalispell resident, had entered the history books when as a pitcher in the first World Series in 1903.

John Gus Thompson started his career as an attorney. Born in Iowa in 1877, he pitched in the school team while attending the University of Iowa. Romance led to his decision to move to Montana.

"I was sweet on a girl back there at Iowa, and she came from this country," he told the Inter Lake sports reporter. "His name was Edna Knapp." He followed her to Kalispell, where they were married in 1902.

In 1902 he practiced law in Helena with U.S. Senator Thomas Carter. One day Carter took him aside, noted he had tried only two cases, and said, "This isn't the game for you, you'll never make any money as a lawyer," according to Thompson. "I gave up law right then and there," he said, and took up professional baseball.

He first pitched for the Helena team in the Northwestern League in 1902 and 1903. At \$140 a month, "I was the highest paid player in the league," he said.

The Pittsburgh Pirates recruited him in August of 1903. That year the first World Series between the American League and the National League, with the Pirates up against the Boston Americans, later the Red Sox. Boston had suffered a three-game deficit early in the series, but its luck changed in the second half.

In the third inning of the seventh game, Thompson stepped in to relieve pitcher Sam Leever. "The Red Sox had a 6-0 lead and there were some men on the bases," Thompson recalled. "One run scored before I got them out, but they didn't get any more runs the rest of the game. We scored three runs and lost the ball game 7-3."

Boston's success continued, and it won the last four games to cinch the title.

Thompson moved back to the Flathead Valley after the series and homesteaded west of Tally Lake. However the next year he returned to baseball, pitching for the Pirates and St. Louis Cardinals. In 1907 he played for the Omaha in the Western League, with Aberdeen, Washington in 1908, and then with Seattle, winning 32 games out of 39. His salary was \$2,700 for the season.

The Detroit American League recruited him in the winter of 1910. "They sent me a contract for \$1,800," he said. "I sent it back and they sent me another one for \$2,400 saying it was their final offer. I sent it back to them and wrote on it, 'This is my final word, too -- no'," said Thompson, and he quit professional baseball.

Back in Kalispell, he ran a cigar store and billiards hall on Main Street. He started in the Montana Hotel building, and in 1925 moved his business to the former Heller Saloon at 140 Main and added a lunch counter in the rear. During the Great Depression, he employed approximately 50 men in a logging camp near Tally Lake.



1910 team

Kalispell's 1910 professional baseball team. Pitcher Gus Thompson is reportedly the only Kalispell player ever to participate in a World Series.

This is the only photo of Gus Thompson in the NW MT History Museum archives. The unanswered question is which one is Thompson.

In 1953, on the 50th anniversary of the first World Series, Baseball Commissioners invited all the living participants to attend the games. They missed Thompson.

"I'd like to know why they can't find me," the 78-year-old told the Inter Lake. "I've been living here in Kalispell for a good many years."

Thompson died in 1958 at age 80. He was survived by daughter Iola Thompson and son B.F. Thompson, four grand children and two great grand children.

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