

Railways & Crossties Connect Baseball & Fruit To America

By Camille Galdes

By the early 20th century, a shared national identity was emerging in America. Fresh fruit and baseball would become a part of this new reality, fueled by the railroads and crossties that increasingly connected Florida to the rest of the nation.

In the first half of the 19th century, commodities and experiences in the United States were localized, varying greatly from town to town and state to state. But localization was not to last, as newly minted railroads and their

creosote-treated ties were moving people and goods over land much faster and more effectively than their predecessor, the horse and buggy.

Not only could people travel more easily, but even when they stayed at home, Americans started receiving products and experiences from far-flung parts of the country they had never heard of before.

While hundreds of miles of shortline railroads connected population centers and industries in the mid-19th century, the end of the Civil War allowed entrepreneurs to take advantage of the network of creosote-treated ties that tied the country together.

In 1850, residents outside of New York had never attended a match of a new sport evolving there called “Base Ball,” nor had residents outside of the Spanish peninsula that had just been incorporated as a state tasted its citrus fruits. By the 20th century, Americans across the country were drinking Florida citrus juices and attending baseball games; a shared national identity was starting to emerge.

Oranges For All! They’re Not Just For Floridians Anymore

After its official incorporation into the union, Florida began developing transportation infrastructure to support the shipping routes

that surrounded the peninsula. Railroad track mileage would expand 10 times from 1880 to 1920.

For example, the state invested in a land route from Cedar Key in the west to Fernandina Beach in the east, crossing diagonally from what is now considered North Central Florida to North Florida. After suffering destruction during the Civil War, entrepreneur Henry Plant rehabilitated the line in 1865 when he returned to Florida (after

absconding to Europe and Canada during the war to avoid demands from Jefferson Davis). He extended the line to a small village called

Tampa, taking advantage of a state subsidy in 1883. The project included orders “for hundreds of thousands of crossties; workers in logging camps worked from dawn to dusk, and new mills were brought in to cut the timber.” By the turn of the 20th century, creosote empty-cell wood treatment processes were taking over from the full-cell Bethell method, with a report on 1920s crosstie replacement stating, “Treated ties are now almost universally recognized as a necessity.”

Plant built an array of beautiful properties at waypoints across what became known as “The Plant System.” This included his most famous property, the Tampa Bay Hotel, which was built in a Victorian and Moorish style with an elevator and phones in each room—the likes of which the region had never seen.

By the 1870s, orange growers in Florida suddenly had access to northern cities. Refrigeration was adapted to rail cars using heavy insulation and ice bunkers.

Thus, in less than a decade, oranges went from a regional fruit that risked spoilage to

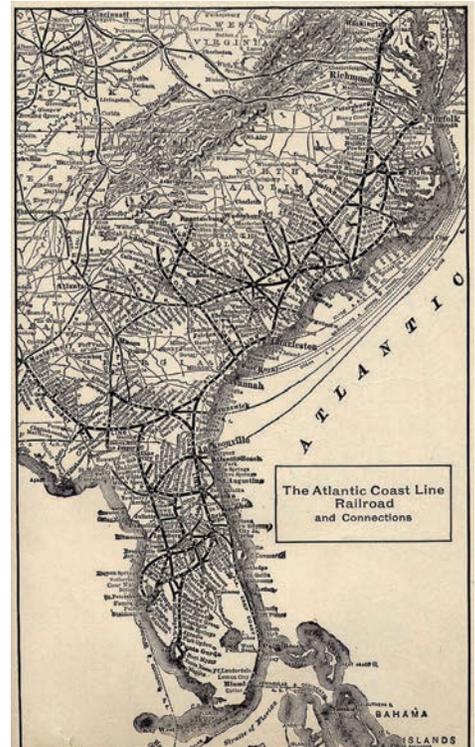
a national fruit that could be moved to many corners of the growing country. Indeed, for Northerners, receiving one’s first juicy oranges from Florida must have felt like the beginning of a new era.

Baseball, Not “The Great New York Pastime” But “The Great American Pastime”

Much of America had also never experienced the sport of baseball until the early 20th century, as baseball was a local sport that originated in New York in the 1840s. More teams cropped up in the mid-19th century, until the National League was established in 1876. The sport “relied almost exclusively on the railroad for nearly 80 years” to facilitate matches. But for decades, only the North’s big cities had official baseball teams: New York, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia.

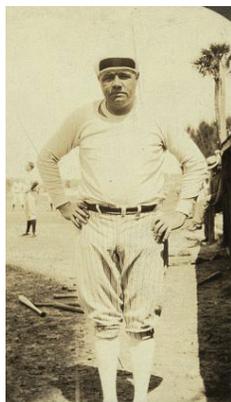
Around the turn of the century, teams started exploring warmer parts of the nation by rail in hopes that practicing in a beautiful

“In the late 19th and early 20th century, railroads carried oranges north and baseball south, making both a greater part of the American identity.”



climate would improve their performance.

The earliest trips for off-season baseball training included trips to a mix of Southern destinations, including Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina and Arkansas. The first exploratory spring training visit to Florida was made by the Washington Nationals in 1888, but what is considered official spring training started in 1914 when the first baseball facility, Sunshine Park, was specifically built



for the off-season in St. Petersburg, Fla. That year, four teams came at once to the Sunshine State: The Cubs to Tampa, St. Louis Browns to St. Petersburg, St. Louis Cardinals to St. Augustine, and Philadelphia Athletics to Jacksonville.

Major League Baseball continued to come to the Sunshine State in the winter months, solidifying spring training as a Florida tradition.

Citrus Meets Baseball With A Bang

Florida now had a critical mass of teams arriving in the state to establish an off-season



league of play. In 1915, aviator Ruth Law inadvertently named the league of teams that had established Florida as their spring home. While performing a routine advertising gimmick for a Daytona Beach golf course in which she dropped a golf ball from the air, she planned to also throw a baseball to Brooklyn Dodgers manager Wilbert Robinson to help promote their games. Legend has it that once in the air she realized she had forgotten the baseball—instead she threw down a grapefruit she had in her cockpit. When Robinson caught it, it exploded in his

face! The name “Grapefruit League” was born.

Creosote-treated infrastructure such as railroad crossties served the United States throughout the Industrial Revolution. For 70 years (the average life of creosote-treated wood, in fact), railroads connected the country. In the late 19th and early 20th century, railroads carried oranges north and baseball south. By the end of the Industrial Revolution and the start of World War II, Florida oranges and baseball were part of what it meant to be American. ■

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