

The History Corner
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The Perfect Catchers Mitt

The catcher's mitt was lying in a bin on a bottom shelf of Dunham's Sports Store. Caleb and I had gone to Dunham's for one reason, to buy a bag of practice baseballs. But when I saw the mitt it was hard to resist not trying it on. Stepping past a display of bats, I pulled the mitt from the shelf and slowly slid my fingers into its leather sleeves. They fit perfectly. That's an omen when it comes to gloves. A new baseball glove hardly ever starts out fitting "just right". But for whatever reason, this glove was different. It felt all ready broken in, as if someone had spent ten years catching balls with it before deciding to throw it back into the bin, leaving it for me to find. I tried on three or four other gloves but none were as comfortable, none felt right. I picked up the catcher's mitt and again tried it on, took it off, tried it again and took it off again. I must have repeated that exercise twenty times and each time it felt just the same. Like my hand was made to be in it. I told myself I really didn't need another glove. After all, I already had a perfectly good one, a well broken in fielders model that I had bought back in 1967. But, then again, a catcher's mitt is different.

This spring Caleb's Little League coach had switched him from center field, a position he had played for five years, to pitching. My old fielders glove had worked perfectly well for just throwing a ball around but since he was now actually pitching, "playing catch" with him had become a slightly more serious matter. This spring I had already repaired and retied the lacing on my old glove several times so I was quite aware that a well thrown ball could easily split the glove in half, sending a hard and unwanted projectile straight into me. If I were actually going to play "catcher" maybe a glove appropriate to the position, with strong laces and adequate padding wouldn't be a bad idea after all. I recalled that my dad had always used a catcher's mitt when we played together and earlier this spring I had run across the old mitt in one of the boxes I had collected from his apartment after his death. It had probably been over 40 years since it had been used and I tried tossing the ball a few times to Caleb with it. After all the years it was pretty unusable as a glove but just holding it in my hand rekindled great memories of mosquito filled nights throwing a ball back and forth to my dad those many years ago.

When I was a kid baseball truly did seem to be everywhere. Not just in the cities where I grew up but out here in the country as well. In fact one of the more closely followed team sports in this area was the local baseball league, which began playing in the early 1920's. Nearly every settlement able to round up enough young men fielded a team. Adolph, Greysolon Farms, Normanna, and French River along with four or five other teams participated in the league. Most baseball diamonds were little more than converted farm fields and often as much time was spent clearing and preparing them as was dedicated to the art of fielding grounders or catching flies. The French River team practiced on a three acre field located along Shilhon Road a little over a mile west of its intersection with the Homestead. For nearly twenty years, once daily chores and farm work were completed, the league provided a welcome break of sport and entertainment for our community members.

I had just about finished working "Dr. Franklin's Professional Glove Conditioner" into my new mitt when Caleb stepped into the kitchen wondering when we could play catch. I grabbed a ball, threw it into my glove, and headed out. As we started to leisurely toss the ball back and forth the memories of my dad flooded back. Him, holding that old glove, cupping his bare hand over the ball as it smacked into the mitt. It all seemed as if yesterday. In my mind I could see the white picket fence that bordered our back yard

and the red '57 Plymouth station wagon parked in the alley. I could see him pull the white handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe his forehead and hear him complain that the mosquito's would soon drive him inside. Caleb was warmed up now and as I squatted down to begin catching it became clear to me that not much had changed in all these years. I still enjoyed tossing a ball back and forth as much as I ever did but now, as Caleb fired another fast one at me, it became clear that it had become my time to hold the catchers mitt.