

Brea Historical Society

Supports Local Eagle Scout Project

Historical Marker “Brea Bowl”

The highlight of the day at the Brea Museum & Heritage Center was a visit from a local Boy Scout of Brea Troop 870 named Matthew Breneman, who was investigating the famed baseball game that took place on Friday, October 31, 1924 at the “Brea Bowl” in the City of Brea, Orange County, California. This amazing exhibition game, which featured a good old local Brea boy named Walter Johnson, who was considered the “big train favorite” and grew up in the neighboring oil town of Olinda and the famous New York Yankee Babe Ruth, both played against each other in an outstanding all-star baseball game that went down in history as the biggest and most important sporting event in Brea’s history and has also become part of the local folklore of both Brea and the surrounding region.

The Brea Bowl, which is now long gone, was located at the very place where the Boy Scout now lives on Saint Crispin Avenue in Brea—a tract of homes just down slope from the intersection of Brea Boulevard and Lambert Road; then, Pomona Avenue and Deodora, respectively. Further, in the estimation of the young Boy Scout, his house now resides in the exact same spot of the Brea Bowl somewhere approximately where home plate used to be. Furthermore, although the events and physical evidence of the barnstorming game are now buried beneath the cul-de-sacs of the residential homes; nevertheless, the memories of this honorable and historical baseball game are now on display at the Brea Museum & Heritage Center located at 125 W. Elm Street, Brea, CA 92821 for public view and private tours.

The Boy Scout who initially came to the museum to conduct research on the major league all-stars of Walter Johnson and Babe Ruth, as well as to confirm the location of the Brea Bowl, ended up not only confirming all historical information as authentic and historically accurate but also received unanimous support and guidance from both the Brea Historical Society and City of Brea, alike. Moreover, local Brea historian Brian Saul has also given the Scout his blessing and approval for this project as well!

Notwithstanding, certain on-line and written publications such as the Roadside Baseball book written by Chris Epting and others have claimed that the “Ralphs” area of Birch Street was the actual area that originally encompassed the Brea Bowl. However, after careful examination of old photographs, street maps, plot maps, anecdotal evidence, and confirmation from local historian Brian Saul, the Brea Historical Society overwhelmingly confirmed that the location of the Brea Bowl was not the adjacent Birch Street area but was rather nonetheless the modern-day residential track of homes off Saint Crispin Avenue where the Boy Scout lives.

This event was truly historical! “All Roads lead to Brea for Monster Athletic Contest” The Los Angeles Times dubbed the event “Babe in boomtown” and Walter Johnson “brought a friend: Babe Ruth”, as well as “the greatest de luxe sandlot game Southern California has ever seen”. The Orange Coast Magazine described the Brea Bowl as a “natural amphitheater” located at 280 St. Crispin Avenue, which was then maintained by the Union Oil Company for its semipro baseball team and on Halloween of 1924, it became the barnstorming charity baseball game of hometown Walter Johnson vs. Babe Ruth.

In that day, there were at least 5,000 fans that attended the game at the Brea Bowl field; the biggest thing to happen to Brea since oil! 2,000 seats were erected at the Brea Bowl to accommodate the fans. Bill Kozersky, Matthew Breneman's father-in-law, testified that he discovered concrete structures in his back yard and neighbor's yards that may have been the foundation of the baseball field seating. Moreover, some estimated a crowd of 15,000 total to have circulated at the Brea Bowl in a time when the local population was approximately only 1,500 citizens in Brea and only 2,000 citizens in Anaheim. School was cancelled; the Boy Scouts directed parking and the American Legion policed the grounds while the local churches supplied refreshments and Babe Ruth provided the punch. Walter Johnson's team included local teammates from his Olinda days along with Bob Meusel; Babe Ruth's team had future Hall of Famer Sam Crawford, who had retired in 1917. Other Such greats such as Ken Williams, Tuffy Tyrell, Ernie Johnson, and Jimmy Austin joined the competition. Walter Johnson would throw for the Anaheim Elks and the legendary Babe Ruth pitched for the Ruth All-Stars.

Babe Ruth swatted two home runs against Walter Johnson in the baseball game. Babe Ruth's team won, 12-1 or 11-1, depending on what story you've heard or read. The game lasted some 90 minutes. Walter Johnson admitted to having grooved a couple of balls to Babe Ruth, certainly the one that traveled some 550 feet to center field. Walter Johnson also struck out Babe Ruth at least once. Babe Ruth reportedly hit a boy in the head with a ball. Moreover, W.E. Griffith, a local Brea resident, recounted the same story of how Babe Ruth "hit a foul ball that bounced off a car and hit a boy in the head. He started bawlin' and Ruth walked over to him, handed him a silver dollar and said: 'Don't cry kid – here.'"

Matthew Breneman is now working on an Eagle Scout project and is required to plan, develop and provide leadership to others in a community service project. Pursuant to the positive findings that he has ascertained at the Brea Museum & Heritage Center and with support and approval from the City of Brea and Brea Historical Society, the Boy Scout intends to erect a plaque to commemorate this monumental historical event at the epicenter of the famous barnstorming base ball game known as the Brea Bowl and to honor the all-stars that played so valiantly and sportsman-like in Brea that day including Walter Johnson and Babe Ruth, which will go down in history as the greatest baseball game ever to be played in Brea.

The Los Angeles Times interviewed several residents that live off of Saint Crispen Avenue, the Brea Museum & Heritage Center, and the local historical legend and Brea resident Mr. Bob Bickel, who turned 81 in June of that year and has lived his entire life in Brea. Bob Bickel diligently studied old and large panoramic pictures of the game, shot from right field looking toward home base. He noted that the left-field foul line ran parallel to Brea Boulevard. He also identified a building in the picture that still stands today, which is today "Ron and Wayne's Automotive".

The game was reportedly spectacular and has been recounted many times from generation-to-generation to the present day. Walter Johnson, who was considered one of the true gentlemen of Baseball, had returned to his hometown to play a charity game at the Brea Bowl. Babe Ruth, who was a national baseball legend, drew thousands of spectators to a young, small boomtown, considered an "oil patch" of Orange County, and the result was an outstanding, historical, monumental, and life living sports events that tops no other and remains embedded in the roots, culture and history of Brea and the baseball hall of fame world-wide! Although there are no known living survivors of the game today; the physical proof—Babe Ruth and Walter Johnson's signature on a baseball, previously owned by Ted Craig and now on exhibit at the Brea Museum & Heritage Center is all that is left from a far gone era of baseball—good old competition, sportsmanship, and local/national rivalry as well as good old Brea history! This Eagle Scout project is timely and will provide a public benefit that is good to society, the City of Brea, and history.