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PITCHING FOR ST. PETERSBURG: SPRING TRAINING AND PUBLICITY IN THE SUNSHINE CITY, 1914-1918

by Melissa L. Keller

Branch Rickey, manager of the St. Louis Browns, talked about his team's spring training home in St. Petersburg, Florida, in a 1914 interview with the *St. Louis Times*. "It's the greatest place in the world," Rickey claimed.¹ For a tourism-based economy like St. Petersburg's, this was more than a compliment – it was the kind of advertising city leaders craved for their growing town. Between 1914 and 1918, St. Petersburg officials became very conscious of baseball's publicity potential. The two local newspapers, the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, devoted enormous attention to the city's hopes for spring training. Enthusiasm and anticipation filled article after article on the area's spring training facilities and baseball's ability to draw flattering publicity to St. Petersburg.

The real prize for hosting spring training proved to be the free promotion provided through press coverage. "Its value," according to baseball historian Harold Seymour, "could not be estimated in dollars and cents."² St. Petersburg leaders believed this promotion was critical to the city's growth, and they discovered in the spring of 1914 that professional baseball, if only in town for a few weeks out of the year, meant an incredible opportunity for publicity.

In 1914, St. Petersburg's population stood at 7,186.³ Like many towns around the nation, the city's image and economy developed from the wealth of its natural surroundings. Unlike other growing communities, however, St. Petersburg's identity formed without establishing an industrial-based economy. With the absence of traditional industry, tourism emerged as the city's primary source of economic stability; advertising, therefore, played a critical role in St. Petersburg's development.⁴ Indeed, historian Raymond Arsenault suggested that any visitor to the area during the early part of the century "could sense that St. Petersburg's life's blood was good publicity."⁵

Lew B. Brown's "Sunshine Offer" exemplified the value of clever promotion. As editor of the *Independent*, Brown devised an advertising promotion in 1910 that testified to St. Petersburg's warmth and sunshine. Brown offered free newspapers every day the sun refused to shine in St. Petersburg, thus giving the community the nickname of the Sunshine City. In thirty-seven years the newspaper had to fulfill its promise only 173 times. Local historian Karl Grismer observed that St. Petersburg's nickname was invaluable to the city's growth and ability to attract visitors.⁶ The "Sunshine Offer" and spring training emerged during a critical phase in the city's history when local leaders, such as *Times* editor William L. Straub, worked to polish St. Petersburg's image as an inviting and progressive town.

Baseball's arrival in St. Petersburg followed a period of rapid growth in the community. The city spent thousands of dollars on local improvements between 1909 and 1913 for such projects as road paving and better water and sewer systems, and in 1912, officials broke ground for Waterfront Park, today known as Straub Park. Real estate development also increased during this period with new subdivisions appearing throughout the city.⁷ Part of St. Petersburg's growth

included the establishment of new buildings such as the Municipal Pier and La Plaza Theater.⁸ Aimed at enhancing the city's aesthetic appeal and entertainment, these improvements benefitted many of St. Petersburg's citizens, but the changes also encouraged tourism.

By the mid-1910s, St. Petersburg's leadership, headed by Mayor Al Lang, placed tourism at the top of the city's priorities. His two terms in office marked the beginning of St. Petersburg's official commitment to attracting visitors – a course the city has maintained ever since.⁹ With the agenda for the future set, St. Petersburg began to shed its village image, and the arrival of baseball accelerated that transformation.

Today, Florida ranks as the undisputed home of spring training. Nonetheless, the Sunshine State worked hard and long for this coveted title. For many years baseball owners and managers travelled to southern states other than Florida for spring training. Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, and the Carolinas headed the list of favorite training sites.¹⁰ Arkansas, however, became baseball's first spring training camp. Cap Anson, manager of the Chicago White Stockings, selected Hot Springs as his team's training site in 1886. Too many seasons of overweight and out-of-shape players convinced Anson that the saloons of Chicago did nothing to improve the condition of his team. Players displayed little eagerness for training away from home, but Anson's idea paid off. The Stockings enjoyed a successful season, and by the spring of 1887 other teams headed south for training.¹¹ Although some questioned the need for spring training, most deemed the annual trek an essential element for winning. Florida was not completely absent from the list of baseball's earliest spring homes. The Washington Statesmen ventured into Florida for training in 1888, making Jacksonville the state's first spring training site.¹² For the most part, however, teams rarely made an appearance in Florida before Al Lang arrived in St. Petersburg from his native Pittsburgh.

Albert Fielding Lang stood at the center of baseball activity in St. Petersburg. "Lang was a one man chamber of commerce when it came to big league baseball," according to the *Independent*.¹³ When Lang died in 1960, Yankees manager Casey Stengel remembered Lang's inseparable association with St. Petersburg and baseball. "Al Lang certainly had the betterment of baseball and St. Petersburg on his mind daytime and nighttime," Stengel stated; "he knew baseball was great advertisement for city and state and he carried that thought through to the fullest."¹⁴ Indeed, Lang's life epitomized dedication.

Born in 1870, Lang lived in his native Pittsburgh for forty years before coming to St. Petersburg. By the time he left Pennsylvania in 1911, Lang had emerged as a prominent figure in Pittsburgh's industrial world. With less than an eighth grade education, Lang had moved from laundry worker to laundry owner when he founded the Lincoln Laundry in 1895. Like many others, however, Lang came to Florida after his health began to deteriorate, and doctors told him he had less than six months to live. With that bleak diagnosis, Lang sold his business and eased into retirement. Seeking a warmer climate, he visited such places as Fort Myers, but the shores of Tampa Bay lured him to St. Petersburg in 1911. The transplanted Pennsylvanian adopted the Sunshine City as his new home, and immediately immersed himself in the activities and welfare of the city. Lang's involvement in St. Petersburg affairs took many forms. Local citizens elected Lang mayor for two terms only five years after he arrived in St. Petersburg. He also acted as the president of the West Coast Telephone Company and the St. Petersburg Country Club.¹⁵



Al Lang.

Photograph from *The Story of St. Petersburg* by Karl H. Grismer.

Baseball, however, clearly shaped Lang's revered position in St. Petersburg. In order to bring spring training to the Sunshine City, Lang, known as "Mr. Baseball," coupled his previous experience as a businessman with his baseball connections in Pittsburgh. More important, Lang's love for the game and his devotion to his new hometown helped to channel his energy into making spring baseball part of St. Petersburg's appeal and economy. Lang's efforts to move the city into the premier spot of spring training sites cannot be overstated; he added structure, experience and personality to St. Petersburg's relationship with baseball. Many people within the formal ranks of professional baseball recognized Lang's impact on St. Petersburg. Indeed, one New York Yankees general manager declared that "modern day St. Petersburg is [Lang's] monument."¹⁶ Nonetheless, Lang was not alone in the effort to bring spring training to St. Petersburg; other city leaders supplied fervent support for baseball.

Like Lang, these boosters foresaw myriad values of hosting spring training. One Board of Trade member, A. W. Fisher, explained the significance of having spring training in the area: "Winter baseball is essential for the entertainment of our visitors. . . . Baseball is the national game and it is absolutely necessary that we give the tourists some good games."¹⁷ Urban rivalry also spurred attempts to attract a team, for in 1913 the Chicago Cubs trained across the bay in Tampa. Like the city boosters in St. Petersburg, Tampa leaders also hoped baseball would draw tourists to their area.¹⁸

St. Petersburg's quest for a team commenced in 1912 when the Board of Trade aimed its sights on the St. Louis Cardinals. Board member H. B. Smitz tried to persuade the Cardinals' manager, Miller Huggins, to bring the team to the Sunshine City. The Cards, however, declined the opportunity.¹⁹ In another attempt, Al Lang talked to the Pittsburgh Pirates' manager, Barney Dreyfuss, about bringing the team to St. Petersburg. "That will be the day," Dreyfuss responded, "when the Pirates train at a whistle stop."²⁰ Undaunted by these disappointments, the city pursued other organizations.

Attracting a team became so central to St. Petersburg's agenda for the future that the city created an organization dedicated to baseball and other attractions. Formed in August 1913 and financed for \$50,000, the St. Petersburg Major League and Amusement Company focused mainly on baseball.²¹ Many of the city's local leaders contributed to the formation of this group. P. W. Coe headed the organization as president; Paul R. Boardman, a local real estate agent, was vice-president; and in February 1914, officials appointed Al Lang to the position of financial manager.²² In the late summer of 1913, the organization prevailed in signing a contract with the American League's St. Louis Browns. Manager Branch Rickey (best known for signing Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 and thus breaking baseball's strict racial segregation) felt the team needed a change of scenery from its 1912 training site in Waco, Texas, which was followed by a last place finish in the regular season.²³ In St. Petersburg, Rickey found city leaders eager to provide a baseball team with everything needed for training.

St. Petersburg's baseball company made the Browns an offer that was hard to refuse. It included free round-trip transportation, all expenses paid, as well as accommodations in the Fifth Avenue Hotel.²⁴ More important for successful training, the city agreed to provide the Browns with a new baseball diamond and training facilities. The Browns' owner was not obligated to pay rent for the field during the first spring. The baseball company stipulated, however, that if the



Branch Rickey.

Photograph from *The Ultimate Baseball Book* by Daniel Okrent and Harris Lewine.

Browns decided to return to St. Petersburg, the team would pay \$8,000 for the field, with a \$3,000 down payment.²⁵

Although contemporaries often referred to the ball field as Coffee Pot Bayou Park, the site received the official name of Sunshine Park soon after a frenzy of work began to clear the area.²⁶ Laborers transformed the woods near present day North Shore Drive and Thirtieth Avenue Northeast from a wild array of trees, stumps, evergreens, and brush, into “one of the best training grounds in the country,” according to Branch Rickey.²⁷

St. Petersburg prided itself on the professional work and attention to detail used to build the field. Special clay from Jacksonville, which cost the Major League Company nearly \$700, filled the base lines and pitcher’s mound. Carpenters worked furiously to build a grandstand and bleachers capable of holding 5,000 people and booths for refreshment and souvenir sales. The same craftsmen also constructed one hundred local advertising signs that covered the outfield walls. Especially innovative were the batting cages, sliding pits, and sprinting lanes requested by Manager Rickey.²⁸ The Browns’ owner considered Sunshine Park among the finest sites in the nation for spring training because of all the modern conveniences.²⁹ Reports in two St. Louis newspapers confirmed all the talk about St. Petersburg’s baseball field. The *St. Louis Republic* told its readers, “No big league team has as complete and as well arranged training grounds as

the Browns.”³⁰ And the *St. Louis Times* quoted an experienced Browns pitching coach as stating, “It’s the best place I ever saw for a club to train at.”³¹ Indeed, the ball field has been called “baseball’s first all-purpose training camp, the most novel to date and one of the most rugged of all time.”³²

When the Browns arrived in town on February 16, 1914, St. Petersburg’s yearning for baseball seemed ready to burst. The *St. Petersburg Times* announced a series of daily articles on Browns players,³³ and organizers scheduled a special train to bring fans to St. Petersburg from as far north as Tarpon Springs.³⁴ The *Evening Independent* considered the occasion so extraordinary the newspaper issued an extra edition.³⁵ Branch Rickey’s biographer called the opening of spring training in St. Petersburg “a holiday occasion.”³⁶ Four thousand fans watched the Cubs beat the Browns 3 to 2 on opening day, February 27, and the *Times* described the eclectic crowd that witnessed St. Petersburg’s inauguration into spring training:

Everybody went to the game. Every profession and every class was represented within the enclosure, and every type of the genus homo was there. Railroad magnates, famous authors, footlight favorites, gentlemen of the cloth, “sporty” men, doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers, merchants, clerks, hash hustlers, cab drivers, chauffeurs, negro laborers: they all turned out to see the opening of the season. When the first whoop went up the voice of a cosmopolitan crowd – a regular baseball crowd – made the pine woods and the shores of the tranquil bayou reverberate with the welcome to the national game.³⁷

Even before the Browns settled into their routine workouts, St. Petersburg newspapers and officials understood perfectly baseball’s appeal and publicity possibilities. St. Petersburg’s image, however, displayed a few rough edges when viewed from the perspective of a large city like St. Louis. Nonetheless, this did not deter St. Petersburg’s leaders from believing, that with a little work, spring training could draw favorable publicity for the community.

One of the city’s earliest episodes with out-of-state advertising had a sobering effect on the people of St. Petersburg. In December 1913, a national magazine, *Sporting Life*, had published the upcoming training camps around the leagues. To St. Petersburg’s alarm the publication announced Petersburg, Florida, as the Browns’ training site. The *Evening Independent* stressed the significance of this error, calling it, “an example of zero advertising for this city.”³⁸ Though the bulk of attention St. Petersburg received due to baseball placed the city in positive favor, local newspapers rarely, if ever, mentioned any negative publicity the community attracted in out-of-state newspapers. St. Petersburg’s good reputation relied most heavily on the natural features of the area, while uncomplimentary comments hinged on the unavailability of wide-ranging activities.

Although a new baseball field figured heavily in the Browns’ decision to train in St. Petersburg, nature played a critical role in bringing the team to the area. One local editor felt so confident about the salubrious effects of St. Petersburg’s weather, he haughtily told his readers, “Any town, even Jacksonville, can take care of champions, but it is the exceptional place in climate and environment that can shape ordinary players into pennant contenders.”³⁹ St. Petersburg’s climate and semi-tropical setting created the context for nearly every article

pertaining to spring baseball. Local weather and the new baseball diamond impressed the Browns so much that the team doctor and the reporters covering the ball club consented to sign a statement calling Sunshine Park the “ideal training ground.” The *Evening Independent* responded by stating, “this is a fine recommendation for St. Petersburg and is certain to attract attention all over the country.”⁴⁰ Although the newspaper agreed that the Browns gained from the healthy environment, the daily emphasized the report’s significance for St. Petersburg’s tourism: “This [endorsement] means a lot to the Browns and it also means a lot to St. Petersburg to have the Browns spread that kind of report over the country.”⁴¹

Such out-of-state coverage appeared in the *St. Louis Times*. Early in the team’s training season, the newspaper described the balmy temperatures of Florida’s west coast and how that weather benefitted the Browns. “If the same weather keeps up that was on tap yesterday, when the thermometer hovered around the 75 mark,” the daily declared, “the Browns should be one of the best conditioned teams that ever went into the spring series in St. Louis.”⁴² The same newspaper, however, criticized St. Petersburg’s few uncooperative days of weather. “It never rains in this ‘ere Sunshine City – it pours,” reported the *St. Louis Times* after heavy rain suspended a game in early March. The daily added, “when the sun does shine, though, which is almost always, it is hot.”⁴³ Despite the threat of torrential downpours and hot weather, out-of-state tourists and locals headed to Sunshine Park to see the Browns in spring action.

Many tourists came to St. Petersburg for the main purpose of watching the Browns. C. O. Patterson of Illinois had wintered in the South for a number of years, and when the Browns came to St. Petersburg, he followed them to the Sunshine City. In a 1913 interview with the *St. Petersburg Times*, Patterson explained his views on baseball and tourism in St. Petersburg. “I believe that there will be many people brought to the city . . . that would go to other cities of the state if they could not get the sport here.”⁴⁴ Patterson’s prediction of spring training’s drawing power was exactly what St. Petersburg leaders hoped for, and as one St. Louis newspaper told its readers, the Sunshine City’s dedication to baseball could be counted in sheer numbers. Covering the Browns in Tampa and St. Petersburg, the *St. Louis Republic* reported, “The first day at Tampa the attendance was scarcely more than 1,000, while the succeeding day in St. Pete the stands were packed and it was estimated 4,000 fans paid their way to see the game.”⁴⁵

Although local and visiting fans filled Sunshine Park, the behavior of many players disappointed and even shocked the conservative Florida community. Because prohibition possessed a dry hold on St. Petersburg, many players visited Tampa for excitement. But too many drinks, late nights, and carousing resulted in sloppy games on the diamond. The *Times* censured the players’ actions by stating: “The teams are down here to practice; but they have enough time to practice all their foolishness on days when the public is not paying good money to see good ball.”⁴⁶ Some people remembered the Browns players not for baseball, but for their off-the-field antics. “They must have ruined fifteen girls while they were in town,” one fan complained.⁴⁷

Although the Browns raised the eyebrows of some fans, spring training in St. Petersburg received praise from local editors and baseball company officials. In St. Louis, local newspapers continued to treat readers to an assortment of conflicting reviews on St. Petersburg. For example, the Sunshine City received great publicity when the Browns’ manager told the *St. Louis Times*



Fans at Sunshine Park watching a game between the Philadelphia Phillies and the St. Louis Browns in February 1915.

Photograph from *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream* by Raymond Arsenault.

about the incredible fishing available in the waters surrounding St. Petersburg. “Such fishing! My goodness!” Rickey exclaimed, “You can’t throw in the lines fast enough to pull out the fish.”⁴⁸ Only a few months later, however, the St. Louis newspaper reported that over thirty members of the team had gone on a fishing trip that resulted in no fish, but plenty of seasickness. Although the players may have been better with a baseball bat than a fishing pole and were unable to admit it, the article placed the blame on mediocre fishing in the St. Petersburg area. Fish, according to the *St. Louis Times*, “are not so plentiful, even in the Sunny South, where there are supposed to be many.”⁴⁹ This was not the kind of publicity St. Petersburg wished to attract.

Another example of mixed attention the city received centered on the activities the area offered. “I never knew there was so much pleasure in winding one’s watch. That’s about all there is to do in St. Petersburg,” one Browns player commented.⁵⁰ Then in early March, a St. Louis newspaper told its readers that the attractions in St. Petersburg consisted of “an ostrich farm and two moving picture shows.”⁵¹ Only days later, the same daily described how the baseball players spent their free days strolling along the beaches of Pass-a-Grille and Johns Pass, choosing “armloads” of souvenirs from among myriad seashells scattered along the coast.⁵² This latter activity, of course, was the image that St. Petersburg officials hoped to establish in the minds of potential visitors.

By the end of the season, local enthusiasts felt assured that spring training had a bright future in the community. City boosters even believed that two baseball teams would call St. Petersburg their spring home in 1915.⁵³ Branch Rickey told reporters during the Browns' departure from St. Petersburg that he hoped to return for the following spring season. "We've been treated royally here," the manager declared, "and there is no other place on earth the Browns would rather have for a training camp than St. Petersburg."⁵⁴

Although the Browns left without a contract, many believed the inaugural spring training was a smashing triumph and a valuable lesson. The *Times* conceded that transportation to the ball park needed improvement and that the weather could have cooperated better around game time. Overall, however, the newspaper declared St. Petersburg's first season of spring training a marvelous success.⁵⁵ Bothersome details like poor transportation and player indiscretions were constructive lessons according to the *Times*. "No doubt," the paper explained, "in many more or less important ways the local management acquired experience this first time that will prove helpful next year."⁵⁶

St. Petersburg's hopes to lure two teams for the 1915 season were only partially fulfilled. Financial matters troubled the Major League and Amusement Company which found itself nearly \$1,000 in debt.⁵⁷ While Colonel Hedges procrastinated in his decision on whether to return to St. Petersburg for 1915, Al Lang worked tirelessly during the summer to attract another team. He travelled throughout the country talking to different team owners and managers.⁵⁸ However, he had his eye on one particular team, the Philadelphia Phillies.

Sunshine Park and St. Petersburg originally had captured the attention of the Phillies in 1914. Captain William Neal, the Phillies' scout, enjoyed a few weeks of rest in St. Petersburg during the 1914 winter. Always the scout (the Phillies desperately needed more players at this time), he made his way to Sunshine Park to see the Browns in action. While the players may have interested Neal, Sunshine Park truly impressed him. He talked to Al Lang about possibly training in St. Petersburg. Because further negotiations with the Browns remained unclear, Lang promised to contact the Phillies when matters with the Browns were settled. By the end of the summer, the Browns decided to go elsewhere, and Lang was free to pursue the Phillies.⁵⁹ The Phillies manager later told the *St. Petersburg Times*, "Give all the credit to Al Lang. The town owes it to him that we are here."⁶⁰ Once the Phillies selected St. Petersburg for a spring training site, the city delighted in the attention the team brought to the area.

In October 1914, when Lang announced the coming of the Phillies, local newspapers talked about advertising almost as much as they did baseball. "In securing the Phillies to train here," stated the *Times*, "St. Petersburg will receive a lot of the best kind of publicity." The daily continued, "The Sunshine City as a training camp is certain to get the kind of advertising which results in benefits."⁶¹ Nonetheless, articles on spring training proved valuable to the area's tourism only if the contents illustrated the city in a favorable light. When reporter James Isaminger of the *Philadelphia North American* arrived in St. Petersburg to cover the Phillies, the editor of the Independent recognized the magnitude of such an opportunity.

As the advertisement that St. Petersburg would get out of the big leaguers being here to train is the main object in getting the club to this city, it is important to have good newspaper men do the work of corresponding for the Philadelphia papers, and the local boosters are much pleased that men like

Mr. Isaminger are to come with the team. They will write “stuff” for their papers that will be read and that will draw attention to the city.⁶²

Isaminger referred to St. Petersburg in many of his articles as, “the Naples of America,” a designation the people of St. Petersburg relished.⁶³

The Sunshine City welcomed the Phillies in 1915 by declaring a holiday for the opening game against the Chicago Cubs. Hundreds of local businesses closed for the afternoon on March 8, in order for more than 2,500 fans to watch the Cubs defeat the Phillies 8 to 5.⁶⁴

The Phillies’ first spring training season ended too soon for the fans in St. Petersburg. By March 25, the team headed back to Philadelphia. However, the Phillies president, William Baker, expressed confidence that the Phillies would return in 1916. He told the *Times*, “I am very much pleased with St. Petersburg as a training camp, in fact our team never had better training quarters I see no reason at the present why the Phillies should not return here next year.”⁶⁵ City boosters also believed the team would be back the following season, and they hailed the Phillies’ first year in St. Petersburg as a grand success. Indeed, St. Petersburg’s confidence ran so high at the end of the Phillies’ first spring in the town that the *Times* arrogantly editorialized, “if [the Phillies] will pardon us for saying so, they would do well to come back.”⁶⁶ The team returned to the city in 1916, but this time as the National League pennant winners. After leaving St. Petersburg in 1915 and heading into the regular season, the team won fourteen of its first fifteen games and clinched the National League pennant.⁶⁷

Over 2,000 fans greeted the Phillies at the train station when the team pulled into St. Petersburg to begin its 1916 training season.⁶⁸ The *Independent* welcomed the pennant winners in an editorial that stressed the city’s relationship with baseball as “a mutual advantage plan; the Phillies advertise St. Petersburg and St. Petersburg furnishes the best climate ever and the park at which the men train.”⁶⁹ Clearly, a team training at Sunshine Park thrilled local boosters, but having a championship team train in St. Petersburg multiplied the opportunity for advertising and excitement. For example, publicity of a more modern kind enveloped St. Petersburg when a news crew captured the Phillies on film during a practice session in 1916. “The taking of these views of the activities in the Sunshine City and its attraction,” the *Times* explained, “will be a valuable advertising asset to the city.”⁷⁰ The National League Champs also heated up the Tampa-St. Petersburg rivalry because the Sunshine City felt the Phillies constituted a much stronger draw than the Cubs. The *Times* threw a jab at Tampa by teasing:

Tourists in St. Petersburg are baseball fans as indicated by the crowds which have turned out to see “our Phillies” in action. Over at Tampa the best they could do in the way of mustering up a baseball crowd was only 1,500. In the Sunshine City, however, the attendance last week reached 3,000 In addition to that, 123 automobiles were parked about the grandstand. A baseball crowd the size of the one which greeted the teams here would scare the Tampa folks half to death.⁷¹

Although the Phillies visited the Sunshine City for only a few weeks a year, the organization contributed to St. Petersburg’s effort to draw visitors in other ways than baseball. Hoping to make things a bit livelier during spring training, Phillies scout, Captain Neal, assisted Al Lang in the creation of the Festival of States Parade in 1917.⁷² Today, the celebration continues to be an annual event attracting thousands of people to St. Petersburg.



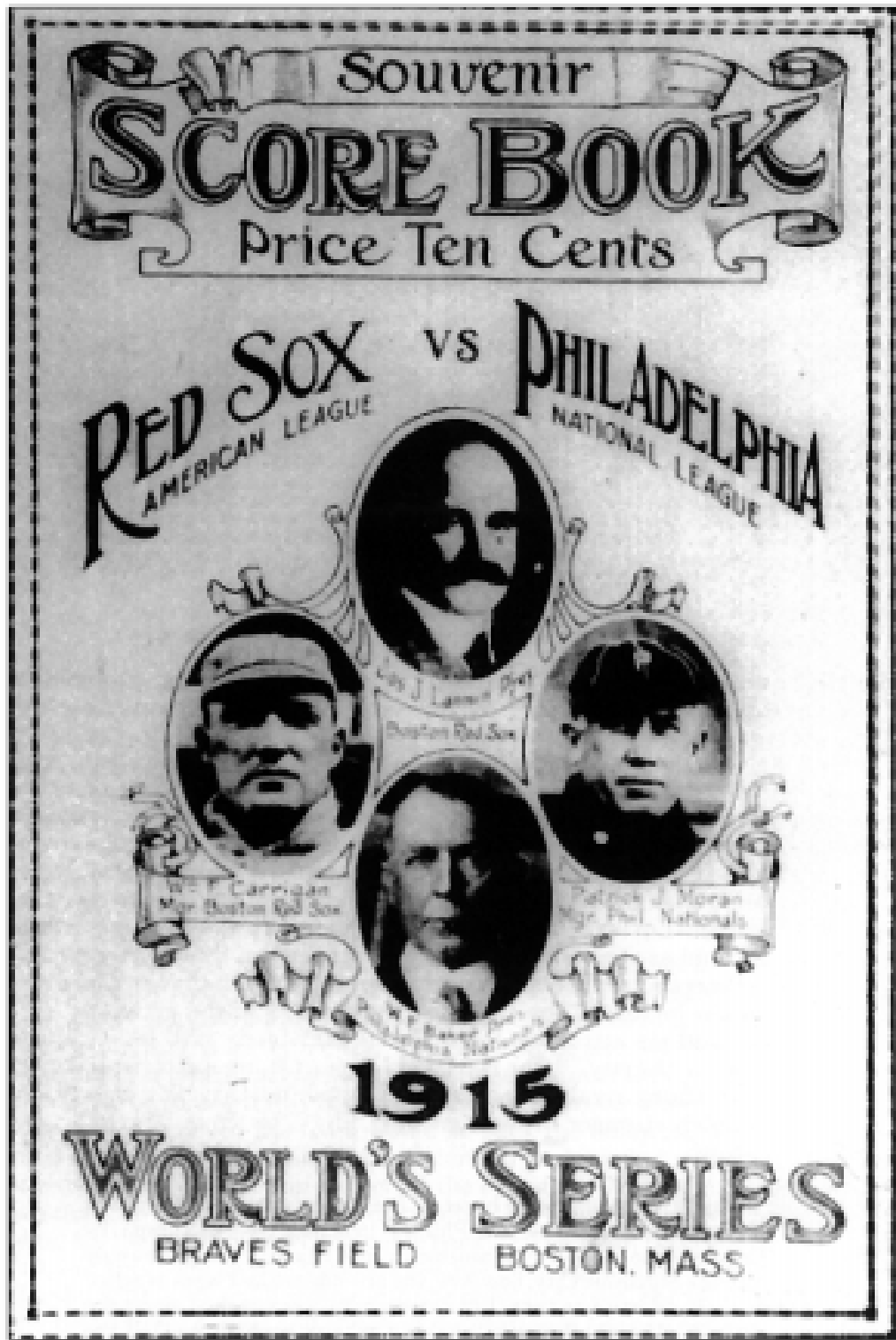
The 1915 pennant-winning Philadelphia Phillies.

Photograph from *The Ultimate Baseball Book* edited by Daniel Okrent and Harris Lewine.

Although the Festival of States provided visiting baseball players with diversions from sometimes relentless practices, training remained the top priority for teams. Managers, therefore, considered good weather critical to a successful spring workout. In 1916 and 1917, St. Petersburg's weather fulfilled all the expectations of team coaches and all the promises of local promoters. During those two spring seasons, the Phillies did not lose a single day of practice to harsh weather. For this reason, the *Times* boasted that more teams would head to St. Petersburg or other nearby communities for future spring training.⁷³

The newspaper's prediction began to materialize by the 1918 season. Just five years earlier, teams had virtually ignored Florida for spring training. By 1918, four of the sixteen major league clubs trained in Florida. Only Texas equalled Florida in the battle to attract teams.⁷⁴ Other events, however, transpired that undermined the city's hopes for becoming a permanent spring training site.

Amid the newspaper articles welcoming baseball and discussing the publicity the sport would bring St. Petersburg, the war in Europe slowly edged out all other concerns, including baseball. In April 1917, the United States entered the war. Despite this action, baseball officials decided in December of the same year to continue with plans to play a full season of games. They also continued to limit the number of players on each team, although this meant taking the risk that the military draft might deplete the reserve of players. These decisions were short-lived, however. By early 1918, baseball owners agreed to cut the number of games from 154 to 140. They also decided to eliminate player limits, cut back on the spring training season, and relocate many training sites closer to home in order to diminish railroad travel.⁷⁵ The Phillies returned to train in St. Petersburg in 1918, but the atmosphere had changed.



Cover of the 1915 World Series Souvenir Score Book.

From *The Ultimate Baseball Book* edited by Daniel Okrent and Harris Lewine.



St. Petersburg's Central Avenue in 1916.

Photograph from *St. Petersburg and Its People* by Walter P. Fuller.

After the United States had entered the war, attendance at major league games plummeted; 1,283,000 fewer fans attended games during the 1917 season.⁷⁶ St. Petersburg was not immune to the war's impact. When the Phillies closed their final game at Sunshine Park in 1918, the zest that once laced articles on the team all but disappeared. "A fair size crowd witnessed the match. Nothing of an exciting nature attended the windup of the training work," the *Times* halfheartedly reported on the Phillies' last spring training game.⁷⁷ The effect of the war was so immense that local newspapers found it unnecessary to cite the fighting in Europe as the reason why the Phillies did not sign a contract for training in 1919. "No arrangements have been made to return next year," according to the *Times*, "due to the uncertain conditions now existing."⁷⁸

In May 1918, the government inflicted another blow on professional baseball. The work-or-fight order demanded that men eligible for the draft had to find employment aiding the war effort or join the service. Baseball owners tried to no avail to have players exempted from the order. Nearly 330 professional baseball players served in the Great War, while scores of others found full-time jobs in war industries.⁷⁹ After the hostilities ended in November 1918, baseball team owners worked frantically to bounce back from the revenue losses they had experienced. The Sunshine City also tried to recoup.

For St. Petersburg, its trial period with spring training abruptly ended in 1918. In March 1919, rather than players hitting and catching on the clay and grass of Sunshine Park, laborers

demolished the field that so many had called the ideal training spot. Several small fires had erupted at the abandoned field, and nearby neighbors grew concerned that the blazes would rage out of control. City officials, therefore, decided to tear down Sunshine Park.⁸⁰ Recollecting the advantages of the field and spring baseball, the *Times* referred to the ball field as a “city institution” that had delivered “favorable publicity to the city.”⁸¹ As Sunshine Park vanished under the hands of demolition crews, some wondered about St. Petersburg’s future as a spring training site.

Nonetheless, faith ran high in St. Petersburg, and most locals felt confident that spring baseball would soon return. When the Phillies departed the city in 1918, St. Petersburg’s relationship with baseball had been consummated. Four years of spring training in the Sunshine City gave city leaders a new sense of what baseball could offer tourists and hometown citizens. Between 1919 and 1922, city leaders pursued major league teams and also reevaluated what they had learned from the years the Browns and Phillies trained in St. Petersburg.

Al Lang led the way, but others joined him. Robert Carroll, head of the St. Petersburg Athletic Club, was indispensable in attracting the Boston Braves to the city in 1922. He rallied St. Petersburg behind the support of a new baseball stadium situated near present day Al Lang field.⁸² Local newspapers continued lauding baseball, and as in the past, editors linked spring training with the advertising benefits St. Petersburg received from the game. The *Times* implored local residents to make donations toward the cost of the new baseball field. “Already this ball field has earned for St. Petersburg column after column of publicity in the northern press.” The daily continued, “It is worth many times the cost of the ball field to get this publicity alone.”⁸³

When the New York Yankees set up training in St. Petersburg in 1925, the city truly felt it had made the big leagues. The arrival of the Yankees meant St. Petersburg was the spring home to two teams which, according to some, meant double the advertising for the Sunshine City.⁸⁴

For St. Petersburg, the experience with spring training in 1914-1918 offered new opportunities for advertising and tourism. City promoters considered baseball a powerful source of publicity. Although local leaders praised spring training’s ability to attract visitors, actual figures on tourism generated from spring baseball are nonexistent. Tangible numbers, even if available, would not likely change the evidence. St. Petersburg city leaders, including editors and elected officials, clearly believed spring training could attract more favorable publicity than nearly any other inducement St. Petersburg had to offer, except perhaps, sunshine.

In addition to forming a part of the city’s economic structure, spring training also contributed to the city’s sense of identity. One editor made this clear during the 1920s when he stated, “So well known is St. Petersburg that in Boston and New York newspapers the name of the state is not carried in their telegraphic datelines. There is only one St. Petersburg to the baseball fans.”⁸⁵ For St. Petersburg, this statement epitomized everything local leaders and private citizens wanted from spring training – national recognition and publicity.

¹ Branch Rickey quoted in “Browns May Break Training Rules to go Fishing, Says Branch Rickey,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, January 31, 1914, 1 (reprinted article from *St. Louis Times*).

² Harold Seymour, *Baseball*, vol. 2, *The Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 131.

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⁵³ “St. Petersburg Has the Best Training Camp,” *Times*, 29.

⁵⁴ “St. Louis Americans Bid Good-bye to St. Petersburg and Her People,” *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 23, 1914, 9.

⁵⁵ “Our Big League Baseball,” *Times*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg*, 143.

⁵⁸ “Phillies Will Establish Camp Here in Spring,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 23, 1914, 1, 6.

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⁸⁰ “Old Coffee Pot Ball Yard Will be Demolished,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 7, 1919, 2.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² “Baseball and Publicity,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 9, 1922, 4.

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Chronology of spring training teams in St. Petersburg:

St. Louis Browns	1914
Philadelphia Phillies	1915-1918
Boston Braves	1922-1937
New York Yankees*	1925-1961
St. Louis Cardinals*	1938
New York Giants+	1951
New York Mets	1962-1987

* From 1943 to 1945, World War II prevented the Yankees and Cardinals from training in St. Petersburg due to travel restrictions.

+ In 1951, the Yankees switched camps with the Giants. While the giants trained in St. Petersburg, the Yankees trained in Arizona.

⁸⁵ “Big-League Baseball Here,” *St. Petersburg Times*, no date, in baseball clipping file, St. Petersburg Historical Society.