

FROM THE WHEATFIELDS TO THE INFIELDS

NOTHING COULD
STOP THE ...

108

108

108

108

CELEBRATING BASEBALL

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CELEBRATING BASEBALL

CELEBRATING BASEBALL

ATTACK OF THE GRASSHOPPERS

108

108

108

108

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*No one in Hollywood
could have scripted
a horror flick
with this ending*

◊ By Jeff Merron ◊

Illustration by Dennis Dittrich

In the early 1970s, former Cub and Royal Pete LaCock was the leading hitter for the Midland Cubs, spending most of his days and nights prowling the outfield at Christensen Stadium. This was an old ballpark but the new home of the Cubs Double-A affiliate, which was playing its first season in the Texas League.

There he experienced his share of Texas-style wildlife. Outfielders like LaCock especially had to watch out for tarantulas: "They were there all the time," says LaCock. "We used to stand in the outfield and they used to climb up the walls. We'd throw balls and hit them." And as for rattlesnakes: "They had to stop the game a couple of times because rattlesnakes would come up through the fence. And they would run out with a .410 shotgun—BOOM!—shoot it, throw it over the fence, and the game would continue."

LaCock talks tarantulas and rattlesnakes for only one reason—to put perhaps the strangest game cancellation in minor league history into perspective. LaCock seemed to imply that if a movie script required a baseball game to be called because of a plague of grasshoppers,

Midland, Texas, would be a logical choice for the setting.

On August 6, 1972, the Midland Cubs were playing a typically slow Sunday twilight doubleheader. Ted Battles covered the twin bill as sports editor of the *Midland Reporter-Telegram*. The Amarillo Giants had won the first game, 5-4, in extra innings, and Battles made his way to the clubhouse to get his information in order for the nightcap. "I remember I went down to get the line-ups between games and somebody said, 'Do you think they'll play the second game?' And I said, 'Sure, why not? It's a beautiful night.'"

Battles hadn't been aware that just beyond the center-field wall a cluster of grasshoppers had been huddling,

the temperature went down into the 80s." Dunn has a good memory—a UPI report that appeared the following day said that the grasshoppers were "chased across Texas by a cool front and farmers' insect sprays."

When Christensen Stadium's mercury-vapor lights were turned on for the second game, at around 9 p.m., the grasshoppers literally leapt up and flew toward the new heat source.

"We began to see these bugs going up into the light fixtures, then they'd dive into the stands, and dive towards the fans," said Midland manager Al Spangler. "They weren't hurting anybody, but it was more or less frightening. You'd look up and whole light fixtures would be covered."



Pete LaCock, shown with the Midland Cubs during the 1972 season, was perhaps best known as the son of game show host Peter Marshall. In 1972, LaCock patrolled the outfield for Midland while avoiding tarantulas, rattlesnakes, and grasshopper hordes. ◊COURTESY TEXAS LEAGUE, TED BATTLES COLLECTION

trying to stay warm. They'd been out in the fields for weeks, according to Bobby Dunn, who was a spectator that night (he would later become the team's official scorer). But after 10 days of dry heat, Dunn recalls, "It cooled off, and

The Associated Press reported that the orthopterans "dimmed the lights. They hopped into the hair of women and invaded their clothes ... resulting in wild screams of feminine anguish." The *Odessa American* described "play-

Grasshoppers

Millions Fly In Ahead Of Blustery Front

A photo and headlines from the
Midland Reporter-Telegram
in early August, 1972.



Swarming Grasshoppers Rout Cubs, Giants, Fans

McBride Gasses 'Hoppers,
Fans Survive, But Barely

PESKY INVADERS — Raymond Jenkins, owner of Jenkins Jewelry & Luggage Co., sweeps away grasshoppers which invade his business. The pests moved into Midland by the millions Sunday night and many were still around this morning.

ers and fans frantically fighting [the grasshoppers] off."

"I'm 66," Cubs business manager Will Carruthers told the *Odessa American*, "and never in all my life have I seen anything like it. I was in the box office when I heard screams such as I have never heard."

The attack would have been a surprise in any situation, but baseball has rules, and none of them say anything about grasshoppers. Faced with an unprecedented situation, the players, coaches, and umpires tried to keep on keepin' on. Current Orioles pitching coach Leo Mazzone was one of the

Texas League's top hurlers that year, making his way up through the Giants organization. He took the mound for the visitors from Amarillo in the bottom of the first.

"I started that game. It got so bad the ball was hitting grasshoppers 60 feet, 6 inches to home plate. You couldn't

see. We had to change balls every pitch." Mazzone, clearly distracted, surrendered two free passes. "I didn't walk anybody that year, [but] you just couldn't concentrate on your target. You couldn't see it, and you had all these damn things flying in your face and up your ass."

"They were so thick," remembers Denny Sommers, Mazzone's manager, "the ball could hardly make it to home plate."

After Mazzone walked two men, the manager decided to pay his ace a visit. But Sommers had trouble with the short trek; he "squished his way to the mound," reported *The Sporting News*, "to find out what was wrong because Mazzone usually has excellent control."

LaCock was the next-to-last batter to face Mazzone that evening. "You're at the plate and you're trying to hit, and the grasshoppers are hitting you in the face, they're hitting you in the arms. When the pitcher was throwing you could hear the ball hitting the grasshoppers as they came to the plate. You'd hear them go 'tick tick tick tick tick tick' all the way to the plate. I remember I fouled a ball off and I followed it. You'd see them dropping, and I'm sure the ball had to have guts and stuff all over it. It got so bad you couldn't see the outfielders."

With the grasshoppers dropping like flies and covering virtually every surface in the stadium, there seemed to be no solution to the problem. Dimming the lights didn't dissuade the grasshoppers, and the idea of turning

the lights off entirely, then back on again, was quickly scrapped because the mercury vapor bulbs would take nearly an hour to cool. After a while, the situation became ludicrous, and some players took the opportunity to take batting practice using what Dunn describes as "big grasshoppers, jumbo" (they were reportedly about four inches long). At that point umpires Bill Finnegan and Ted Hendry decided to postpone the game, and it would be continued as the first part of a twilight doubleheader the next day.

"On the way home I could remember the grasshoppers were all over the city," says Spangler. "They stayed about two days, and then they were gone."

But they didn't go easy. Midland officials fogged the city five times during the next day. They were also on guard at the park when the game resumed as the first half of Monday's doubleheader, which was played, according to UPI, "between blasts of repellant from fogging trucks." Unfortunately the wind,



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"It got so bad the ball was hitting grasshoppers 60 feet, 6 inches to home plate. You couldn't see. We had to change balls every pitch."

— Leo Mazzone (above, with the Amarillo Glams), about pitching through the swarming grasshoppers

which usually blew out of Christensen Stadium at a near-gale force, turned around, so fans — on "Family Night," no less, with kids getting free passes — were also gassed resulting in "some gasping and coughing," according to the *Midland Reporter-Telegram*.

The slaughter left its mark. "You can sweep them up by the thousands," said one town official. A sheriff's deputy added, "They're still stacked up in the streets where people ran over them."

After the aborted doubleheader, Spangler, as part of his normal duties, called Chicago to report on his club's results. "I told them what happened the first game and the start of the second game. And I said, 'So-and-so happened, this happened, and the

game was called because of a plague of grasshoppers."

Though Spangler doesn't recall how the home office responded, no one was probably all that surprised. At some point, their scouts must have described Midland's tarantulas, for example, in their reports. Because even though the ballplayers feigned fearlessness, they must have been aware that the spiders could inflict a poisonous bite. LaCock remembers one that attacked left fielder Jim Tyrone. "It jumped right up on his shoulder. He was rolling on the ground and trying to get this thing off of him. I'll guarantee you he remembers that as long as he lives."

"In Midland, Texas," says LaCock, "there were some strange things."

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Strange stoppages

Midland would see better times, of course. It would also see other times that had players and fans scanning the seats for Moses or Noah, like when the great 1975 team, led by a crack pitching staff that included Mike Krukow, Bruce Sutter, and Donnie Moore in the starting rotation, fought their way to the Texas League title. Unfortunately, they had to share it with their Championship Series foes, the Lafayette Drillers. The series had been tied at two games apiece when the fifth and final game was cancelled due to torrential rain.