That Championship Season Baseball is Back and New Berlin is Best

by Tom Walker

After the war, in '45 and '46, the boys—now men—returned home. They put down the tools of combat and picked up their lives. Some traded military khakis for baseball flannels.

In Union and surrounding counties, young men who had answered their country's call now answered the call of the diamond. Play in the West Branch Baseball League (WBBL) resumed in 1946.

Back then, most towns had a team that played serious hardball. West Branch League games were as close as many residents could get to big-time baseball. The nearest major league teams were in Philadelphia: the Phillies and the A's, who moved to Kansas City in 1955. You might say the WBBL teams flourished because they played the only game in town.



The banner honoring New Berlin's 1946 and 1948 championship teams is displayed proudly in the town's Heritage Museum

According to *The Standard Journal*, Milton, Pa., May 11, 2011, the West Branch Baseball League was founded in Milton in 1924. Dale E. Ranck, was the founding president and Harry Dyer was secretary. Clyde S. Krebs drew up the first rules and bylaws. The league, divided into the Lower Circuit and the Upper Circuit, grew to 12 teams by 1926: Milton, Lewisburg, Watsontown, Mifflinburg, Hughesville, Selinsgrove, New Columbia, Picture Rocks, Turbotville, Montgomery, Sunbury and Northumberland.

The league played its first post-war regular season in 1946. Interest among the sporting public was considerable, so much so that *The Sunbury Daily Item* published the league's master schedule prior to opening day.



The Photo is displayed in the New Berlin Heritage Museum. It appeared in The Item on September 19, 1946. There was also a print among Spencer Walker's effects, indicating that the team members each received a photo. Rosedale Dairy sponsored the team, which explains the name on the player's uniforms.

New Berlin baseball lives on in the town's Heritage Museum, where visitors are greeted by a large red banner honoring New Berlin's 1946 and 1948 championships. A case beneath the banner is chock full of baseball memorabilia, including gloves, balls and scorebooks. Vintage New Berlin uniforms hang on a rack. The most interesting artifact on display is "The Photo": in stunning black and white, a picture of the 1946

New Berlin championship team that appeared in *The Item* on September 19. My father, Spencer "Billy" Walker, is in the front row.

The players' names are enshrined on a hand-written note. And what names they are! Names of friends I heard my father talk about 50 years ago. Names of friends that peppered the letters he sent home in '44 and '45 from his Army Air Corps postings. There were the Solomons: Whitey, Donald and Stan. Kenny, Louie and John Sauers. Lew Sassaman. Donnie Kline. Kenny Crook.

Kenny Crook, Lou Sauers, Harold "Whitey" Soloman and Spencer Walker were members of Lewisburg High School's Class of '42. Other LHS grads on the New Berlin team included Lou Sassaman ('42), Donnie Kline ('44) and Kenny Sauers ('45).

The story of the 1946 West Branch season is told on the pages of *The Item*, but never on Sunday. In those days, The Item was published Monday through Saturday. The newspapers from so long ago are preserved on microfilm stored at the Degenstein Community Library in Sunbury.

In 1946, the WBBL had 16 teams in two divisions. New Berlin played in the lower division, along with Freeburg, Herndon, Hummel's Wharf, Lewisburg, the Middleburg Middies, the Mifflinburg Comets (Mifflinburg was known as the Senators before WWII)



The author displays a vintage New Berlin baseball jersey.

and the Selinsgrove Seals. The upper circuit included Milton, the Montandon Giants, the Montgomery Chiefs, Montoursville, Muncey, the Turbotville Cyclones, Picture Rocks and the Watsontown Millionaires. New Berlin completed the season with a record of 32-9-1 (5-1 in the playoffs and 3-1-1 in non-league games).

Non-League Games

In early May, New Berlin played two games against Bucknell University. New Berlin won the first game, 9-5; the second ended tied, 8-8. New Berlin played a homeand-home series against non-league McAlisterville, winning the away game, 9-3, on July 19 and losing at home, 7-6, on July 26.

On August 4, New Berlin defeated a team of inmates from the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, 14-10. I recall my father telling me that the Lewisburg Pen team played all its games at home. He also said the guards searched the New Berlin equipment bags before and after the game.

WBBL All-Star Game

The Lower Circuit All-Star game, played July 14 in Middleburg, pitted the league-leading Middies against a team of 23 players representing the seven other clubs. New Berlin's all-stars included Kenny Crook, pitcher-infielder; Johnny Sauers, shortstop; Earl Soloman, catcher; and Billy Walker, pitcher. Chappie Reidell, Mifflinburg, and Stan Soloman, New Berlin, were co-managers.

The game, played before an estimated 650 fans, proved to be a dispiriting affair for the All-Stars. They trailed 7-0 after five innings. An error-filled sixth inning led to eight Middleburg runs and a 15-0 lead. The Middles pounded out 12 hits in the 15-2 rout. Six All-Star errors led to 13 unearned runs. Only Walker and Reidell managed to escape with scoreless pitching performances for the All-Stars. Middleburg played errorless ball as three hurlers limited the All-Stars to four singles and two doubles.

Bad breaks

In the first game of a doubleheader against New Berlin on August 3, Charley Fasold, Selinsgrove's playing manager, fractured his left leg while sliding into first base in the sixth inning. He was taken to Community Hospital in Sunbury for treatment. New Berlin won the first game, 9-0, with the Seals taking the night-cap, 3-1. Hunter Osman, a Sunbury resident who played for Hummel's Wharf, also suffered a broken leg during the 1946 season.

Rotering's No-hitter

Mifflinburg clinched a playoff berth in grand style on August 14, when right-hander Bill Rotering pitched a no-hitter as the home-standing Cyclones downed Freeburg, 11-0. Rotering fanned three and hit two batsmen. Two other Freeburgers reached base on errors.

The Benefit that Wasn't

On August 17, The Item reported that officials of the lower circuit proposed a benefit game between all-star teams representing the two circuits. The game would raise money to help injured players, including Fasold and Osman, pay their medical expenses. The managers of the lower circuit teams favored the proposal. They were awaiting word from Paul "Baldy" Phillips, president of the upper circuit, who was seeking approval from the team managers in the upper circuit.

There was no report of the game being played.

The Middleburg Jinx

New Berlin dropped three of four regular season games to Middleburg. They lost a heart-breaking 11-inning game, 8-7, at Middleburg on May 25. Middleburg led 6-0 after two innings. New Berlin rallied with three runs in the fourth and two each in the fifth and sixth frames to take a 7-6 lead into the seventh. The Middies tied the game with a run in the ninth on doubles by Ramer and Snyder and took the victory with a two-out, bases-loaded 11th inning single by Bilger, making his only plate appearance of the game. Despite allowing 14 hits, Lefty Mitchel, Middleburg's ace hurler, pitched all 11 innings for the victory. He kept the 11th inning alive for the Middies with a two-out, two-on single, setting the table for Bilger's game-winning heroics. The Middies pounded 20 hits against the New Berlin pitching trio of Earl Soloman, Kenny Crook and Percy Benfer.

Middleburg swept a July 4 home-and away doubleheader, winning 6-4 at home and 8-3 in New Berlin.

New Berlin's lone win was a 3-1 home game on July 9. Kenny Crook pitched New Berlin to victory in the 7-inning tilt, allowing only three hits. New Berlin scored its runs in the 5th inning with singles by Johnny Sauers, Louie Sauers, Kenny Sauers and Jack

Soloman; New Berlin's base hits including three bunts. Middleburg's lone run came in the 3rd inning on doubles by Stetler and Lou Soloman, a former New Berlin player.

The Middies finished the regular season with a splendid 23-2 record.

The Playoffs-First Round

New Berlin opened the first playoff series against fourth-place Lewisburg, a team with a mediocre 14-14 record. The Middies faced a sterner challenge in Mifflinburg at 16-11. New Berlin won the best-of-three series easily, taking the first game 9-2 on August 21 before more than 500 fans at their home field. Spencer "Billy" Walker pitched a six-hit, six-strikeout complete game. He closed out the series on August 25 with a four-hit effort, New Berlin taking a 2-1 win and a 2-0 series sweep.

Mifflinburg surprised Middleburg in the first game with a 2-1 win, aided by six Middleburg errors. The Middles evened the series with a 6-1 game 2 victory. The Miffs could not hold back the Middleburg tide, falling 14-4 in the deciding game 3 on August 28. For some reason, the game was played in New Berlin. The Middles rode a 15-hit onslaught to the final series against New Berlin.

The Championship Series

The best-of-five championship featured traditional rivals New Berlin and Middleburg for the lower circuit crown and the Montandon Giants versus the Montgomery Chiefs in the upper circuit clash. To reach the finals Montandon (19-8) defeated Watsontown (14-11) and Montgomery (16-11) ousted Muncey (14-13).

The Item published a preview on Friday, August 30, under the headline, "W-Branch Playoffs Expected to Draw Capacity Crowds."

From that August 30 article:

"Interest in the New Berlin-Middleburg series is running at a high peak in the two communities as well as in the other towns in the circuit. A record crowd is expected to be on hand when the [Stan] Soloman-coached team takes the field against the Middies, who led the league throughout the regular season.

"Lefty Mitchell, Middleburg ace and one-time Sunbury, Inter-State League flinger, will get the assignment against New Berlin, with righthander Billy Walker likely to start for the home team. The Middies rule as slight favorites to win the series, but records count for absolutely nothing when these two teams collide."

New Berlin Wins Game 1

Mitchell did not face Walker in the first game, played August 31 at New Berlin. Lou Soloman, a former New Berlin resident and player, took the hill. Walker held the Middies to nine hits, pitching a complete game in the 5-3 New Berlin win. New Berlin trailed 3-1 but rallied for a run in the seventh inning and three in the eighth. Walker struck out three and walked one.





Top: New Berlin's field where dreams came true as it appears today. In 1946, the infield was at the far end and today's diamond would have been in deep center field.

Below: These grainy photos, taken from an 8mm home movie, show the New Berlin field as it appeared in 1958. The outfield fence and the ridge on the west side of town are clearly visible in the background.

A Doubleheader Split

The teams played a morning/afternoon doubleheader at Middleburg on Labor Day, September 2, before an estimated 1500 fans. With Lefty Mitchel holding New Berlin to five hits, the Middles took the first game, 6-2. New Berlin came back to win the afternoon tilt, 7-2.

New Berlin takes the title.

Here's the headline from Thursday, September 5: "New Berlin, Chiefs Win West Branch Loop Titles." New Berlin took the lower-circuit series with a 4-2 win on September 4, played in New Berlin before what The Item described as "650 wildly cheering fans." Not a bad turnout in a town of about 500 residents.

From The Item, September 5:

"At New Berlin, right-hander Billy Walker pitched New Berlin to the throne room with a neat 8-hit effort against the pre-tourney favorite Middleburg club. New Berlin took the game, 4-2, and the series, three games to one.

"Walker stopped Middleburg with eight scattered hits to gain his fourth pitching triumph in the Shaughnessy series. [Note: The name comes from Frank Shaughnessy, general manager of the Montreal Royals minor league baseball team, who in 1933 created a playoff scheme that pairs the first- and fourth-place teams and the second- and third-place teams in the first round. The winners then meet in the final round to determine the champion.] He bested three Middie flingers to cop the first game of the final play-offs, after grabbing a pair of decisions in the semi-final series with Mifflinburg." [This is in error; New Berlin played Lewisburg in the first round.]

"Singles by Cornelius, L. Sauers and Ken Crook accounted for a pair of tallies and gave New Berlin a 3-1 lead in the third frame. From this point, Walker settled down and, given brilliant support, held the Middies to four hits and only one run the rest of the way.

"J. Sauers caught a line drive at shortstop and turned it into a twinkilling in the ninth to end the game and the series. [First-baseman Kenny] Crook also came through with an unassisted double-play in the 5th frame. Two Middleburg runners were on the sacks when the brilliant individual efforts were executed.

"Walker whiffed five while southpaw Lou Soloman, one-time resident of New Berlin and member of the [Stan] Soloman-managed outfit, fanned two. L. Sauers, Cornelius and Crook had two hits apiece for the new champions, while Ramer collected a pair of singles for the Middies."

Oh, the Irony

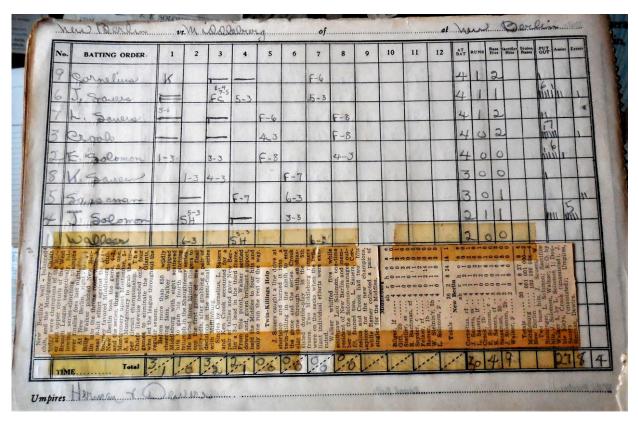
The line drive that Johnny Sauers turned into a game-ending unassisted double play came off the bat of Lou Soloman, a former New Berlin resident and member of that town's team.

New Berlin overcame four errors in the clinching game win. The Middies could have cracked the game open in the sixth inning when the home team committed three errors, two by the third-sacker Lou Sassaman. They could plate only one unearned run, scored on a fielder's choice by R. Backman. The Middies stranded two when New Berlin's Walker ended the inning by whiffing Felker, the right fielder.

Walker's five strike-outs were well placed. He began the first and third innings with strike-outs and ended the fourth, fifth and sixth with strike-outs.

Thus ended the series but not this story.

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The scorebook charts New Berlin's 1946 season. These two pages tell the story of the championship game, played September 4 at New Berlin. The game story from The Item is taped to the page. The players' statistics for the season are at the end of this article.

Soloman's Challenge

As reported in The Item on September 5, New Berlin's manager Stan Soloman

"...issued an open challenge to the Montgomery club of the upper division to play a best three-out-of-five 'Little World Series' to determine the overall champion of the amateur league.

"The manager said his boys wanted a crack at the Chiefs to demonstrate once and for all the superior caliber of ball played in the lower circuit. He made the challenge through Francis C. Hatton and E. R. Bolig, president and secretary-treasurer respectively of the lower division of the W-Branch loop.

"'Baldy' Phillips, president of the upper circuit, said he would make an effort to contact player-manager Eddie Koziol, of Montgomery, regarding the matter of the final playoff series.

"He pointed out that many of the Montgomery players work in Williamsport during the week, and that the Chiefs may not wish to prolong their playing schedule into mid-September.

"Inter-league competition between leaders of both circuits used to draw record crowds prior to World War 2, and a 'Little World Series' this year would likely attract overflow crowds to both parks." The Item reported no more about the challenge; it seems the games were not played. But that was not the end of the 1946 WBBL season.

On September 12, The Item published an article stating that the first of a fivegame series between Middleburg and Montandon would begin that evening at Memorial Park in Sunbury.

"The Middies and Giants wound up first in the lower and upper circuits, respectively, at the end of the regular season but were eliminated in the playoffs. The clubs have agreed to split the \$600 light bill for the contests."

Middleburg won the first two games, 7-1 and 5-4. Montandon came back to take games three and four by scores of 12-2 and 6-3. That's as far as the series went. Game five, scheduled for Friday, September 20, was rained out. Because the teams were unable to agree on playing dates, and what with the lateness of the season, the teams' managements ended the series. The announcement appeared in The Item on Monday, September 30.

New Berlin Double-Dips

New Berlin baseball players may have won two championships in 1946. Post-war Union Countians' were starved for baseball, as was evident by the formation of the Community Baseball League, as reported in the weekly *Mifflinburg Telegraph*, July 18, 1946.

The new league encompassed one team from New Berlin and three from Mifflinburg: the Vets, the Business Men and the Scholastics. Only schoolboys were eligible for the Scholastics but all other players, except those regular members of West Branch League teams, were welcomed to join the other teams. The games were played on Monday and Thursday evenings at 6:15 in Mifflinburg and New Berlin. Each team was scheduled for six games between July 18 and August 8. August 15, 19 and 22 were reserved for playoff games.

The Telegraph mentioned a few participants in its Community League coverage. New Berlin players included Reigel, Don Kline and Jack Wetzel. There was a Don Kline on New Berlin's West Branch team; he appeared in only four games, going 1 for 8 at the plate. This is curious because West Branch League players were prohibited from joining

Community League teams. The Vets had Roy Stahl, manager; the Business Men featured Fred Walter and Harry Haney, managers, Bob Ruhl, Tom Houghton and Virgil Yearick; while the Scholastics were managed by Earl Thomas and Theron Dersham and had Bob Boyer, a pitcher.

A Telegraph article of August 1 described the caliber of play as "...very interesting. The brand of play does not measure up to West Branch standards but the interest is just as keen." New Berlin won its first two games, 8-3 over the Scholastics, and 12-0 over the Business Men. The Scholastics and Vets played their first two games against one another, each game ending in a tie, 10-10 and 3-3.

From the Telegraph, August 8: On Monday, August 5, the Vets and Business Men tied, 3-3, while New Berlin, unbeaten in two games, lost to the Scholastics, 6-4, in New Berlin. New Berlin had two games remaining: August 8 against the Vets and August 12 against the Business Men. The best-of-three playoff series was scheduled for August 15, August 19 and, if required, August 22. The games were to be played at Mifflinburg's Memorial Field at 6:15.

From the Telegraph, August 15: The first of a best-of-three playoff was set to begin in New Berlin, which went 4-1, losing only to the Scholastics. The Scholastics and Vets tied for second place, but the Vets entered the playoffs because many of the Scholastics' players were set to begin high school football practice on August 19.

The Telegraph reported on August 22 that the relatively short Community Baseball League season ended on August 19, with New Berlin defeating the Business Men, 10-6. According to the article of August 8, the first playoff game was scheduled for August 15 but the Telegraph did not report a result for a game on this date.

The August 22 article is at odds with previous articles in the Telegraph which stated that New Berlin would face the Vets in the playoff series. No explanation was offered for why they played the Business Men. With no more Telegraph articles about the Community Baseball League in 1946, it appears that New Berlin won two baseball championships that year.

A Team Effort

I am fortunate that my father, Spencer "Billy" Walker, a member of the '46 New Berlin team, told many stories about West Branch League baseball. For some reason, these tales of diamond derring-do stuck in my youthful brain, from which they emerged after 50 years of dormancy.

Special thanks to Jim Lengle, who provided access to documents in the New Berlin Heritage Museum and to the patron I met who helped me figure out how to use the microfilm reader at the Degenstein Community Library in Sunbury.

Sources

- *The Item*, Sunbury, Pa.: May 26 and 27; June 4, 6, 16, 23, 26 and 30; July 3, 45, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 28, 29 and 30; August 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 26, 29 and 30; and September 5, 12, 19 and 30, all 1946.
- The Mifflinburg Telegraph: July 18, August 1, 8, 15 and 22, 1946.
- The Standard Journal, Milton, Pa.: May 11, 2011
- The Oneida, the 1942 Lewisburg High School yearbook
- New Berlin West Branch Baseball League 1946 scorebook preserved in the town's Heritage Museum.

New Berlin's 1946 Season

Results reported in the 1946 scorebook kept by John Spangler, the official scorekeeper. The book is in the New Berlin Heritage Museum.

May	New Berlin 9 Bucknell 5	at Lewisburg	Cold and windy
May	New Berlin 8 Bucknell 8	at Lewisburg	Sunny and windy
May 10	Watsontown 2 New Berlin 1	at Watsontown	Cloudy
May 11	New Berlin 22 Mifflinburg 4	at Mifflinburg	Cloudy and fair
May 13	New Berlin 8 Lewisburg 4	at Lewisburg	Cloudy
May 15	New Berlin 10 Milton 1	at Milton	Fair
May 25	Middleburg 8 New Berlin 7 (11)	at Middleburg	Clear and warm
May 26	New Berlin 10 Herndon 5	at Herndon	Humid with showers
May 30	New Berlin 18 Lewisburg 1	at Lewisburg	Fair and warm
June 1	New Berlin vs Mifflinburg	at Mifflinburg	rained out
June 3	New Berlin 6 Lewisburg 4	at Lewisburg	Cloudy
June 5	New Berlin 7 Mifflinburg 6	at Mifflinburg	Fair and sunny

June 15	New Berlin 9 Selinsgrove 0	at Selinsgrove	Fair and warm
June 22	New Berlin 5 Freeburg 3	at Freeburg	Warm and overcast
June 23	New Berlin 15 Freeburg 3	at Freeburg	Fair and warm
June 25	New Berlin 15 Mifflinburg 6	at Mifflinburg	Fair and warm
June 29	New Berlin 3 Herndon 0	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
July 2	New Berlin 8 Selinsgrove 7	at Selinsgrove	Fair and warm
July 4	Middleburg 6 New Berlin 4	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
July 4	Middleburg 8 New Berlin 3	at Middleburg	Fair and warm
July 5	New Berlin 15 Hummel's Wharf 4	at Hummel's Wharf	Fair and warm
July 9	New Berlin 3 Middleburg 1	at New Berlin	Cloudy
July 10	New Berlin 8 Lewisburg 0	at Lewisburg	Fair and warm
July 11	New Berlin 6 Hummel's Wharf 1	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
July 13	Lewisburg 8 New Berlin 4	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
July 17	Mifflinburg 9 New Berlin 8	at Mifflinburg	Fair and warm
July 19	New Berlin 9 Macallisterville 3	at Macallisterville	Fair and warm ¹
July 20	New Berlin vs Mifflinburg	at New Berlin	rained out
July 26	Macallisterville 7 New Berlin 6	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
July 27	New Berlin 5 Hummel's Wharf 1	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
July 29	New Berlin 16 Hummel's Wharf 0	at Hummel's Wharf	Fair and warm
August 3	New Berlin 9 Selinsgrove 0	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
August 3	Selinsgrove 3 New Berlin 1	at New Berlin	Cloudy
August 4	New Berlin 18 Lewisburg Pen 14	at Lewisburg	Fair and warm
August 10	New Berlin 20 Freeburg 2	at New Berlin	Windy and warm
August 11	New Berlin 17 Herndon 3	at Herndon	Fair and warm
August 14	New Berlin 9 Herndon 2	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
August 17	New Berlin 6 Mifflinburg 3	at New Berlin	Warm and humid

Play-Off Games

August 21 New Berlin 9 Lewisburg 2	at New Berlin	Fair and warm
August 24 New Berlin 3 Lewisburg 1	at New Berlin	Fair and warm

 $^{\scriptscriptstyle 1}$ Correct spelling for the team name is McAlisterville.

New Berlin wins series, 2-0

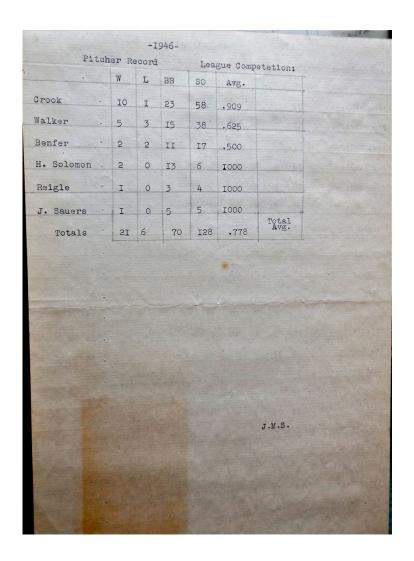
August 31	New Berlin 5 Middleburg 3	at New Berlin	Fair and cool
Sept 2	Middleburg 6 New Berlin 2	at Middleburg	Cool and cloudy
Sept 2	New Berlin 7 Middleburg 2	at Middleburg	Cool and cloudy
Sept 4	New Berlin 4 Middleburg 2	at New Berlin	Fair and warm

New Berlin wins series, 3-1

1946 Batting and Pitching Statistics, New Berlin

A notebook in the New Berlin Heritage Museum includes players' batting and pitching statistics from the 1946 championship team. The initials JMS appear on the pitching page. This is most likely John Spangler, who was identified as the official scorekeeper in *The Item*, September 19, 1946.

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Lou Sassaman	6	16	I		3	0	-)	0	I	17		.188	
Don Kline	4	8	3		I	I	0		0	I	3		.125	-
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Frank Reigle	6	10	2	1		0	0	1	0	0	3		.100	1
Wen. Smith	I	2	0	I		0	0	1	0	0	0		.500	Floor
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ACCOUNTS Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017 Union County Historical Society