



Kokernot Field located in Alpine, Texas. The field has been called "the Yankee Stadium of Texas" by Texas Monthly magazine, as well as a historic landmark. An estimated 6,000 attended a 1951 exhibition featuring Satchel Paige's St. Louis Browns versus the Chicago White Sox. Future Major Leaguers Norm Cash and Gaylord Perry also played on Kokernot Field.

The stadium was constructed in 1947 by Big Bend Region rancher Herbert Lee Kokernot Jr. for his semi-professional baseball team. Red clay for the infield was hauled in by boxcar from Georgia. Native stone quarried from

the Kokernot Ranch was used to construct the outfield wall and grandstand. The Kokernot Ranch "06" brand was incorporated into numerous decorations throughout the stadium along with intricate ironwork of baseballs complete with painted threads.

The stadium was built to seat 1,400 people. Lighting was installed in 1958. Ownership of the field was turned over to the Alpine Independent School District in 1968 after Sul Ross discontinued their baseball program and semi-pro play ceased in Alpine after the 1961 season. Sul Ross' baseball program was revived in 1983. The field is currently home to the Sul Ross State University Lobos, Alpine Bucks and the Alpine Cowboys in the Pecos League, formerly the Big Bend Cowboys of the Continental Baseball League through a lease arrangement. The Big Bend Cowboys doubleheader on May 17, 2009 marked the first



professional baseball played at Kokernot Field in 48 years.





Article from Sports Illustrated July 31, 1989 by Nicholas Dawidoff

The Best Little Ballpark In Texas [or Anywhere Else]

Travel with us to beautiful Kokernot Field, a gem of a place where time has stopped and small-town baseball has been elevated into a work of fine art.

One hundred and forty-three miles into the range country southwest of Odessa, Texas, lies the hamlet of Alpine, a cow and college town that 6,800 residents call home. "We're so far out here that nobody thinks anything of driving 100 miles to get some dinner," says cattle rancher Chris Lacy. Alpine is the seat of Brewster County, the largest county in Texas in size (6,169 square miles) and one of the smallest in population (8,000). It is also the heart of the Big Bend region of Texas, so-called for the hard left turn the Rio Grande makes around the Chisos Mountains. The Big Bend is mostly open range, full of javelinas, cactus roses, mule deer, desert willows and legends, lots of legends.

There is the legend of the Twin Sisters, the pair of notched peaks three miles west of Alpine, named for the two Indian women who loved the same man and quarreled over him so bitterly that the Great Spirit turned them into a two-topped mountain to teach them better manners. And there is the legend of Bobcat Carter, a trapper who put pepper in his shoes to keep his feet warm, subsisted on a diet of prairie dog stew and lived to be 97 years old.

And there is the legend of the wealthy Alpine cattle rancher who loved both the game of baseball and his hometown with such consuming passion that in 1947 he built what is quite possibly the world's most beautiful ballpark. It was an idea dusted with magic, a summertime daydream of a ball field, surrounded by a 10-foot-high fence of native red stone, with a lush Bermuda grass outfield, rows of rosebushes, a luxurious manager's bungalow behind third base and a spectacular vista of the Davis Mountains rising beyond the fences. Like William Randolph Hearst's mansion, San Simeon, the Alpine ballpark was furnished with the choicest materials. Some 1,200 wooden chairs, complete with armrests and the ticket holders' names embossed on the backs, filled the bright green grandstand. The concession stands had roofs made of Spanish tile, and everywhere there were wrought-iron lanterns inlaid with baseball designs. Some of America's famed ballplayers—among them Satchel Paige, Norm Cash and Gaylord Perry—played there from time to time. But what made all this unusual in terms of West Texas legends is that Kokernot Field is real—as real as its builder, Herbert Kokernot Jr.—and every bit of the story you are about to read is true.

In the 1940s and '50s, most any small town you visited in this part of the country was sure to have certain things: a wide thoroughfare called Main Street, a diner, a honky-tonk bar with Hank Williams songs on the jukebox and a baseball team. The mid-20th century was the heyday of American baseball; never were there more teams or more ballplayers. Where now the lowest minor league classification, excluding Rookie League, is Class A, in the late 1940s the professional talent reached all the way down to Class D teams. And baseball's popularity was by no means limited to the professional ranks. Towns that weren't big enough to support, say, the Brooklyn Dodgers' third-best Class D team still had baseball of their own in the form of semipro town teams.

Today, semipro baseball has almost vanished from the land, but 40 years ago it was the best game in many a town. In the West, it meant something truly special. To this day there is an isolation about living in some parts west of the Mississippi. Wide-open spaces can breed an urgency in people to be a part of something—almost anything—social. Attorney Ken Sparks, who grew up in Oklahoma and spent weekends watching games between Alva and Woodward, Okla., recalls, "There was a craving for live entertainment. All week you were out there alone with the land and animals. Come the weekend you were ready to head into town for Saturday night dancing or Sunday afternoon baseball. I still remember the names of all the best ballplayers in Alva."

Some of the players on semi pro teams were kids from the local college who hung around for the summer, playing ball and taking dates to the diner. The rest of the team was made up of men who had spent their lives in the town. Having a good town team was a major source of local pride. Baseball as the national pastime was taken with the utmost seriousness, so that having a team that was best in the region or the state was an exciting proposition—like having an extra portion of the American Dream dished out to your hometown.

For some, a winning town team became an obsession. If a man happened to be both extremely wealthy and fervently concerned with the fortunes of the local nine, he might be inclined to help it out a little, perhaps by paying a star pitcher from two counties away to suit up for crucial games. This was perfectly legal in semipro baseball, so if this rich man took it one logical step further and began hiring the best players from the state's colleges to spend their summer vacations playing ball for him, come August he might find he had bought his town a juggernaut. Right there on the local diamond would be a semipro team capable of beating everyone in sight, even capable, perhaps, of holding its own at the annual National Baseball Congress tournament in Wichita. If he kept this up—maybe even went outside the state to lure big-time semi-pro players to his little town, maybe even plunked down a few hundred per game for a faded major leaguer or two—well, that's how legends were made.

And, the truth was, legends were pretty much the coin of the realm in semipro baseball. The game certainly didn't generate any profit. In fact, there wasn't much to be gained from it unless you liked giving people the pleasure of watching a good game on Sundays and enjoyed the idea that your town might come to be known all across America for its marvelous baseball team.

Of course, if your name was Herbert Kokernot Jr., that was reward enough. Especially if one day 42 years later an old Texan like Flop Parsons would put his feet on the desk in his dusty Alpine real estate office and declare with authority, "Back in the early '50s, semipro baseball in Alpine, Texas, was raised as high as you can get."

It began one summer day in 1946. Kokernot, owner of the O6 (pronounced oh six), one of the largest cattle ranches in Brewster County, had recently agreed to take over the management of the Cats, Alpine's semipro baseball team, and on this day, as he drove the 15 miles from his ranch to Alpine, he was feeling pretty good. He felt good as he passed the white-faced Herefords that grazed on some of the O6's 320,000 acres. He felt good as he surveyed the odd, beautiful shapes of the mountains, greenish-brown in the summer heat. He always felt good about his visits to Alpine. On the hill above town was Sul Ross University, to which Kokernot annually donated bushels of scholarships—one year he handed out 52—so that young Texans might have the opportunity to make something of themselves. In the center of town was the post office, where Kokernot, or Mr. Herbert, as everyone called him, caught up on local news and gossip and received mail related to his substantial

holdings in the Pearl and Lone Star breweries and the Fidelity Union Life Insurance Corp. On the edge of town—which in Alpine was very close to the post office—was the ball field he had just taken over.

It hadn't been difficult for Mr. Herbert to convince himself that he should take charge of the team. Since his days with the Alpine Independents, when he had been a smooth-throwing infielder and a .300 hitter, the game had always meant a great deal to him. "He wasn't one of those big, cigar-smoking Texas millionaires," says Byron Brooks, 37, psychology professor and baseball coach at Sul Ross. "Just a little, quiet, unassuming man who didn't feel comfortable in public if he didn't have a necktie on and who loved watching baseball." Mr. Herbert liked it well enough that he bought the Cats to keep baseball in Alpine. The ballpark wasn't much of a structure—crude wooden planks, corrugated tin roof and chicken wire—but he was so pleased to own it that he painted the red and white O6 brand on the fences.

That day in '46 was special because his father, Herbert Sr., was making his annual summer visit to Alpine. Herbert Sr. had founded the O6 in 1912 and had made it one of the most respected cattle operations in Texas. Herbert Jr. was shy by nature, and he was slightly in awe of his dad. He was a little worried about what Herbert Sr. would think of the ballpark.

Herbert Jr. met Herbert Sr.'s train at the depot, drove the old man through town, past the ballpark and out to the ranch. If Herbert Sr. had any thoughts regarding his son's purchase, he kept them to himself. Finally, two weeks later, just as Herbert Sr. was about to board a train home, he looked his boy in the eye and said, "Son, if you're going to put the O6 brand on something, do that thing right." Then he climbed on the train and was gone.

It was as though Herbert Jr. had been waiting for those words. He decided Alpine needed a new ballpark, and he chose a tract of O6 land just west of the Sul Ross campus to put it on. He filled his architect's ear with intricate instructions and set him loose. On a visit to Georgia, Mr. Herbert had admired the state's rich, red clay, and so he ordered enough for an infield and had it shipped to Alpine by boxcar. At one point during the four months of construction, a street lamp was in the way of some part of the project. Rather than fuss with the politics of petitioning the town to move the pole, Mr. Herbert bought the whole street and summarily ordered the lamp removed.

Meanwhile, explosives experts blasted red stone out of a makeshift quarry at the O6 ranch, and trucks lugged the stuff to the ballpark. Workmen combed creek beds all over the region, looking for the thickest grass to use as outfield turf. Metalworkers in San Antonio turned out decorative iron baseballs; stitches were painted on them in red. The balls were hung in clusters of three over the swinging red entrance gates to the ballpark. Gardeners planted flowers and ivy outside the stadium, and painters covered the outfield wall with a bright blue.

The chief builder was a local man named Junior Gray, who knelt on the Georgia clay and flattened it by hand to make the infield as smooth and seamless as a ballroom floor. One day, a visitor watched Gray laboring on his knees like a scullery maid, and mocked him. Junior looked up calmly and said, "Mr. Herbert told me to do it this way, and if that man told me to make him an infield with an ice cream scoop, I would."

Mr. Herbert stopped by often to see how things were progressing. One day he drove up clutching an envelope. "Twenty thousand dollars from my daddy," he told the workmen. "Guess he thought I was going broke on the ballpark." By the time the last red and white O6 was embedded in the concrete walls of Kokernot Field, the place had cost \$1.25 million, a cool million more than had been spent to build Wrigley Field 33 years earlier.

The ballpark was ready in May 1947. Attached to the handsome brick facade at the front entrance to the stadium was a small bronze plaque that read: KOKERNOT FIELD. DEDICATED TO THE PROMOTION OF A CLEAN AND WHOLESOME SPORT, OUR NATIONAL GAME, BASEBALL. On Opening Day, most of Alpine lined up in front of the pretty little ticket booths that stood beside the first and third base stands. The town's wealthier citizens drove their Cadillacs and Lincolns through the automobile entrance in rightfield and parked in a special area along the foul line. There they could watch the game through the windshields and feel

secure in the knowledge that if they opened their flasks for a gargle of whiskey, they wouldn't offend any neighbors.

Meanwhile, in the spacious home clubhouse, a group of strapping Texans slipped into crisp red and white uniforms with the team's new name, COWBOYS, sewn across the chest. In previous seasons Alpine players wore the gray and blue uniforms of the Cats, and the team consisted mostly of local ranch hands. But Mr. Herbert, determined to supply Alpine with ballplayers who measured up to his new stadium, had regularly left town in '47 to go talent hunting. He did well, turning up a galaxy of semipro stars such as flashy shortstop Matt Lamarque from Mexia in East Texas and fleet-footed right-fielder Billy Ward, who was discovered playing softball up in Corsicana. On Opening Day, the Cowboys defeated the Carlsbad (N. Mex.) Miners. The handwriting was on the wall. Soon the Fabulous Alpine Cowboys, as they came to be known, stood among semipro baseball's elite.

In its very first year the team became the dominant semipro club in the Southwest, winning the two-state regional championship in El Paso and earning a trip to the national tournament. The Cowboys won two and lost two that first time at the nationals, but the fact that such a successful team had emerged from such a small town earned Mr. Herbert the trophy as America's No. 1 sponsor of semipro baseball.

Alpine became so good a baseball town that in 1949 the Cowboys and the Junior Cowboy team, which Mr. Herbert had created so that less talented players from the former Cats wouldn't feel left out, became the two top teams in the Southwest. Over the next decade Alpine was the perennial Southwest champion. The Cowboys never finished higher than third at Wichita, but they were usually in contention.

Meanwhile, Kokernot Field's spring tenant, the Sul Ross Lobos, developed a formidable collegiate program, winning the first NAIA World Series, in 1957. A synergy developed between the Lobos and the Cowboys. The best Sul Ross players, including Cash, a future Detroit Tiger first baseman, played college ball in the spring and then suited up for the Cowboys in the summer, joining other college stars Kokernot had recruited—Baylor's Adrian Burk and Larry Is-bell, and Texas A & M's Yale Lary, later a Hall of Fame punter with the Detroit Lions. Mr. Herbert also gave his college players well-paying jobs on the O6 ranch so they could earn tuition money. Word of this arrangement spread far beyond Sul Ross, and soon Alpine was attracting collegians from all over the country.

Many semipro owners hired good players in the hope of eventually selling them to major league teams at tidy profits. This practice didn't sit well with Mr. Herbert, whose motto was always. "I sell my cattle, but not my ballplayers." He lost thousands of dollars annually, but the professional teams that came knocking always received the same answer from the little man in the cowboy hat: "You pay my players what they deserve or they stay here." Scouts came to respect this attitude. They also respected the fact that Mr. Herbert hired excellent instructors and that he fed and housed his players well.

Eventually, Mr. Herbert developed a nationwide network of contacts who tipped him off about talent. In 1955, for example, Milwaukee Braves scout Gil English telephoned Cowboy manager Tom Chandler and told him about a North Carolina farm boy who could throw hard but needed some seasoning. "Gil," said Chandler, "we have the finest college players in the country playing for us here, and you're asking us to pitch a high school boy?"

"I know," said English. "The Braves will pay his way down, and you just have a look." Soon the Cowboys witnessed the arrival of the greenest, gangliest rookie righthander Chandler had ever seen. However, the moment the rube got up on the mound everyone forgot about his awkwardness, for Gaylord Perry was a true diamond in the rough. After his season in West Texas. Perry moved up through the minors and eventually racked up 314 major league victories before he retired in 1983. He remembered his summer with Mr. Herbert's Cowboys with gratitude: "I was only a high school kid, playing on a very good team. Some of those guys were

former major leaguers. Playing out there in Alpine and staying in the Sul Ross dormitories, that was a special summer."

Mr. Herbert made it worth a ballplayer's while to make his summer home on the range. Besides giving him a job, he set up a standing reward of \$100 for a home run, \$75 for a triple and so on. "When he shook hands with you after a game, he usually left something in the handshake," says Parsons, who played shortstop for the Cowboys in 1953 and '54. Following home games Mr. Herbert almost always threw a barbecue and dance for the players and their families at his ranchhouse. "Of course," says 75-year-old Wally Davis, who managed the Cats from 1942 to '45, "if you made an error, you didn't dare go to that barbecue."

Chandler, a former Texas A & M coach, managed the Cowboys from 1952 to '58 and quickly became almost family to Mr. Herbert. Shortly after Chandler took over the team, Mr. Herbert built his new manager a comfortable cottage beyond third base at Kokernot Field. Says Chandler, 64, who is now a scout for the Cleveland Indians. "One day Mr. Herbert came out to the stadium and saw my car parked outside the house in the rain. He said, 'Tom, you need a garage,' and he built me one of those, too." His generosity extended well beyond baseball. "If I had to guess, I'd say he put more than 700 kids through college, and he never counted the ones who didn't finish four years," says former Cowboy general manager Bud Richards. "There probably wasn't a school in the state that didn't receive money from Mr. Herbert. Of course, he helped anybody who needed it. Once at the El Paso livestock show, he heard about a boy who'd spent a year raising a prize pig only to have it die when the boy got it to the show. Mr. Herbert said, 'We can't have this,' so he bought it for \$200. Paying \$200 for a dead pig! I guess helping young people kept him young."

On game days the lonely roads from Marfa to the west and Marathon to the east were filled with baseball fans flocking to Kokernot Field to see the Fabulous Alpine Cowboys, and Mr. Herbert did all he could to make it worth the trip. In 1953, when Dodger pitching star Don Newcombe and St. Louis Browns righthander Bob Turley were stationed at the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Mr. Herbert flew the entire Brooke team to Alpine to play the Cowboys. Recalls Newcombe, "Mr. Herbert would give me \$100 an inning. Sometimes my arm was very sore, but I made sure I always pitched at least five innings. Later, when I got out of the Army, I used to leave him World Series tickets."

Mr. Herbert sometimes hired major league teams to play one another in exhibitions in Alpine. In 1951, Paige and the Browns took on the Chicago White Sox. Some 6,000 people jammed the place to see Paige. "He only pitched an inning," says Brooks, "but even now I can find you 20 old-timers around Alpine who will swear Satchel Paige struck them out that day." Before the game Paige told Mr. Herbert that he very much liked his cowboy hat. Shortly thereafter all the Browns players were quietly asked their hat sizes. A phone call was placed to Fort Worth, and a load of quality headgear was flown to the O6 in time to be passed out at the postgame cookout. "It wasn't a show of wealth," says Chandler. "Mr. Herbert was actually very timid. He just loved to make people happy."

When slick-fielding White Sox shortstop Chico Carrasquel heard Mr. Herbert announce his customary monetary prizes for hits, he asked, "How much for an assist?"

"Twenty-five dollars," Mr. Herbert replied immediately. He then turned to a friend and asked, "What's an assist?"

Chris Lacy, Mr. Herbert's grandson, says, "I think he liked baseball people even more than he liked the game."

That may have been true, but there was no question about Mr. Herbert's competitive nature when it came to the game. After Alpine qualified for the 1956 tournament at Wichita, Mr. Herbert heard that several other teams were padding their rosters with major leaguers picked up from military bases around the country. So Chandler was given permission to sign righthander Jack Sanford of the Philadelphia Phillies, future White Sox pitcher Joel Horlen and future Dodger slugger Carl Warwick.

At the same time Mr. Herbert also delivered on a promise he had made in the Brooklyn clubhouse after the Dodgers' 1955 World Series victory. He had pushed his way up to the Series hero, pitcher Johnny Podres, congratulated him and said, "I want you to come down to Texas sometime and pitch for us."

"I can't just pitch for every hick town in America that wants me to," Podres responded. Whereupon Mr. Herbert informed him, "I'll make it worth your while," and whispered some figures in his ear.

"When do you want me?" asked Podres.

The answer turned out to be the summer of '56, when Podres was due to go into the Navy. "He flew me out to Wichita and gave me a thousand bucks, plus 100 dollars a strikeout, to pitch for him," says Podres. "That was more money than I made with the Dodgers. I struck out seven guys in four innings, and they wanted me to pitch again, but the Navy wouldn't let me."

In general, though, Mr. Herbert disliked the idea of putting major leaguers in Cowboy pinstripes. "I was mostly restricted to using college kids," says Chandler. "He told me, 'If I wanted to run a pro team, I'd buy the Yankees.' "

In 1958 Mr. Herbert decided to put lights in Kokernot Field. Before installing them, he toured lighted ballparks all over Texas to be sure that his field would have more bulbs than any other in the state. "He told the contractor, 'I want lights better than Yankee Stadium's,' " says Cats second baseman Ray McNeil. "It didn't matter to him what they cost."

The following year, against his better instincts, Mr. Herbert became the president of a professional minor league baseball team. Southwestern semipro baseball was dying. With the end of the Korean War, the Army had ceased sponsoring the service teams that had long been an important element of semipro competition. Bad times in the oil business eliminated another major group of sponsors. The Cowboys were running out of teams to play. When the Boston Red Sox offered to make Alpine the smallest town to have a pro team by giving it a franchise in the Class D Sophomore League, Mr. Herbert said he would give it some thought. The Red Sox were willing to call the team the Cowboys. They even agreed to keep the outfield fences free of advertising, which would make the field perhaps the only ballpark of its kind in the minors.

So Mr. Herbert gave it a go. With future Angel All-Star shortstop Jim Fregosi and Red Sox third baseman Dalton Jones on the roster, the Cowboys won the first Sophomore League title. There were things, however, about these 'fessionals, as he called them, that Mr. Herbert couldn't abide. In the old days when a slight rainfall softened his infield, Mr. Herbert had simply called the game off, telling ticket holders to use their stubs the next day. You couldn't do that with pros. McNeil remembers, "He told me, 'I'm fed up with this 'fessional baseball. Why they trade these boys right and left, selling them off like cattle.' "

Mr. Herbert wasn't entirely displeased when the league folded after three years. Before this happened, however, he and his ballpark spun their usual spell over ballplayers. "It was amazing," says Fregosi, who played 18 years in the majors. "The best ballpark I ever played in."

With the Cowboys defunct, for the next seven years Kokernot Field was the exclusive home of the Sul Ross Lobos. In a sense, Alpine adopted the Lobos as their new town team. Mr. Herbert, of course, became their most enthusiastic supporter. Then in 1968, as the team returned from losing in the first round of the NAIA World Series, word was passed down the bus aisle that Sul Ross president Norman McNeil was discontinuing the baseball program. McNeil had never had much use for athletics, or for Mr. Herbert. "Apparently he thought a college ought to concentrate everything on academics," says Brooks. "He also might have been a little jealous of Mr. Herbert and the attention he got."

In Alpine there was outrage. "Mr. Herbert never interfered, never made his donations with strings attached." says Chandler. "He gave tuition money to people who needed it whether they could play baseball or not. He gave that school so much, and all he ever cared about was a boy's education, seeing a good game and being sure that his cows were eating." Despite howls of protest, the school held firm. So Mr. Herbert gave the field to Alpine High School, making it the nation's most lavish high school diamond. After that he wasn't seen around town as much.

Fifteen years went by. Without Mr. Herbert, the ballpark fell into disrepair. "He was just sick about it," says Chandler. "The lamps were falling down, everything needed paint, and seats were in disarray. He was hurt and offended that nobody kept it up. He was really down."

Then in the fall of 1983, wonderful news arrived with the cactus roses. President McNeil was gone, and the weekly *Alpine Avalanche* reported that college baseball was returning to the Big Bend. Sul Ross leased the ballpark again and spent \$150,000 planting, painting, polishing and generally restoring things to their former splendor. The school also hired Brooks, a coach who appreciated Alpine baseball wisdom and the adage that went, "Visiting teams never do very well the first time they come to Kokernot Field. Their mouths are hanging open at the sight of our ballpark."

Mr. Herbert consented to throw out the first ball at the Lobos' home opener in 1983, but he was reluctant to get his hopes up, and he stayed away after that. In 1987, at age 87, he died and was buried on a knoll on the O6 range in view of the ranchhouse, the fences and the cottonwoods that chase along toward the mountains and beyond to the ballpark he had built 40 years before.

These days, after the college season is over, the loveliest ballpark in America becomes home to the Alpine Pony League team, coached by Scotty Lewis, who, like his father before him, went to college on a baseball scholarship paid for by Herbert Kokernot Jr. On Lewis's squad is a hard-hitting, smooth-fielding first baseman named Lance Lacy. He is the great grandson of Mr. Herbert and the first Kokernot to play for a team on the family field. Lance, 14, is a freckled little fellow with a bright grin. Watching him smack a line drive or deftly field a twisting grounder would have brought joy to his great-grandfather's heart. As former Cowboy shortstop Pete Swain says, "Mr. Herbert would have been so elated to actually have somebody in the family playing there, where Gaylord Perry and Norm Cash played. That would have made all the time and money and hurt worthwhile. People in Alpine still talk as though he's looking down on Kokernot Field, protecting it, and if he is. I think he's smiling again."