

An Iowa Baseball Vacation

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REGISTER STAFF WRITERS

Dyersville, Ia. - New York City's Jeff Masopust and Jill Risucci pulled their vehicle into a gravel lot adjoining the most famous, most photographed, most visited cornfield in Iowa.

Nearly 20 years after the film "Field of Dreams" harmonized the relationship between Iowa and baseball, more than 60,000 fans a year tour a diamond carved out of farmland near Dyersville.

The movie site is a must stop on any vacationer's Iowa baseball-themed trip. Masopust, 26, and Risucci, 25, glanced at a map, then veered several hours out of the way on their cross-country drive from New York to Berkeley, Calif.

"Baseball is so American," Risucci said. "When you're driving across America it just seems fitting that you do something like this."

They aren't alone. A recent single-day guest register listed travelers from 26 states, Guam, Ontario and Puerto Rico.

As the summer enters its final full month, natives and out-of-staters are taking in baseball-related sights in Iowa:

- The Bob Feller Museum draws fans to Van Meter. Cascade's tribute to Hall of Famer Red Faber is so new you can smell the varnish on the hardwood floors.

- The State Historical Building in Des Moines and the Old Capitol Museum in Iowa City have baseball exhibits all summer.

- Across the state, fans are flocking to minor-league parks from Class-A in Clinton to triple-A in Des Moines. Attendance at the five affiliated franchises has spun past the 750,000 mark — equal to one quarter of the state's population.

- The "Field of Dreams" site has drawn more than 700,000 fans since the movie appeared in 1989. On deck is "The Final Season," - the story of Norway's high school dynasty and its bittersweet ending - scheduled for release in October; a third movie is being shot this summer in Davenport and Burlington.

A map, a vehicle and a dream, and you're on your way to a heavenly baseball vacation.

FIELD OF DREAMS: IS THIS HEAVEN?

Don and Becky Lansing may never know if longtime home run king Hank Aaron actually visited the "Field of Dreams" and took a few swings.

The Lansings, owners of the movie site near Dyersville, have had numerous famous visitors over the years. But a signature from March 5, 1995, understandably made them sit up and take notice.

The visitor signed his name as Hank Aaron, and included a comment about having hit home runs in ballparks all

over the country, "but I couldn't lob one out of your cornfield."

The Lansings say they have had opportunities to ask Aaron if he really stopped by, but choose to have the answer remain a mystery.

"The magic is in the belief and the dream that he did," Becky Lansing said.

The movie evolved from the book "Shoeless Joe" written by W.P. Kinsella, a former student at the University of Iowa's writers' workshop.

It is that sort of wonderment and mystique that helps draw an estimated 60,000 people a year to a place that is, for many, frozen in time.

"You could film the movie now," said Laird Davison, 59, of North Carolina upon seeing the field from the 1989 film starring Kevin Costner for the first time this month.

The site sends movie fans like Jeff Masopust, a first-time Iowa visitor, traveling back in time.

The images of the big, white farmhouse and six-foot high corn stalks matched with those from a movie he's seen more than 50 times.

"It's one of those things where you get a smile on your face as soon as you pull in," Masopust said.

NOW PITCHING: PLAYER MUSEUMS

Imagine if the diamond baseball Hall of Famer Bob Feller and his father William built near the family's Van Meter home in 1932 was still standing.

The Fellers' park, including a grandstand, is long gone. But fans can visit the Bob Feller Museum and see a treasure trove of memorabilia from one of Iowa's greatest sports figures.

The museum holds artifacts like Feller's bat that Babe Ruth leaned on during Ruth's retirement ceremony at Yankee Stadium in 1948. Uniforms and historic signed baseballs give tribute to Feller's legend.

Cascade's Tri-County Historical Museum has the state's newest collection of memorabilia from another Hall of Famer. The exhibit opened July 4 in a converted schoolhouse.

Urban "Red" Faber played with the Chicago White Sox from 1914-33. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1964.

The attraction drew about 300 people on opening day and has improved the museum's attendance, said Mary Lee Hostert, vice president of the local historical society.

"You've got to get them something new to keep them coming," Hostert said.

Visitors can see Faber's gold watch and a chair from Comiskey Park, and listen to his Hall of Fame acceptance speech.

In Des Moines, the Iowa Hall of Pride includes a baseball exhibit along with other extracurricular displays.

Cap Anson of Marshalltown is memorialized in Marshall County's historical museum. There's also a statue of Anson's father, the founder of the town, on the county courthouse lawn.

A tribute to Dazzy Vance can be found in Orient, near Greenfield in Adair County in an 1894 bank that has been converted into a museum.

FROM COOPERSTOWN TO DES MOINES

Fans could have traveled to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., last year to see the first art exhibition inspired by Negro Leagues Baseball.

But now you can see it at the State Historical Museum in Des Moines through Oct. 28.

“Shades of Greatness” uses artwork to give people a better understanding of the sport and its impact on American social and cultural history.

Iowa City also hosts a unique summer exhibition.

“Hometown Heroes: Iowa’s Baseball Legacy” runs at the Old Capitol Museum through Sept. 9.

John Liepa is the owner of an extensive collection of baseball memorabilia.

The chairman of the Iowa State Historical Society, Liepa mixes his passions of Iowa history and baseball.

Among the items:

- An autographed baseball card of Calvin McVey, Iowa’s first professional player, one of two known to exist.
- A card of the oldest known Iowa team, the Washington club of 1866.
- Babe Ruth’s rookie card - one of the most valuable treasures on the market — and a Ruth-autographed ball.
- A map marks the hometowns of 200 major-league players born in Iowa.

Liepa, of Indianola, has taught history at Des Moines Area Community College for 35 years.

“What more appropriate place to exhibit than the Old Capitol?” he said.

TAKING IN A GAME AT IOWA BALLPARK

Iowa offers five affiliated baseball stadiums for fans to view professional players who hope to be on their way to the major leagues.

In Clinton, they can scoop up an Orel Hershiser bobblehead in the gift shop.

In Burlington, they can hope to see the next Paul Molitor, who began his pro career there.

Davenport’s John O’Donnell Stadium offers a scenic view of the Mississippi River.

Spectators at Des Moines’ Principal Park view the state Capitol’s golden dome outside the outfield fence.

Cedar Rapids fans can sit in a stadium that was used for filming “The Final Season” last summer.

More than 750,000 fans combined have watched games in these five stadiums this summer.

Principal Park appears headed for a record-breaking attendance.

The Iowa Cubs have drawn 436,683 fans with 16 remaining home dates - an average of more than 8,000 a game.

Last year’s record gate was 546,554.

John O’Donnell Stadium and Veterans Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids have surpassed the 100,000 attendance mark.

Sioux City and Waterloo have unaffiliated minor-league teams.

Combining a game or two, a trip to a museum and a look at a collection of player memorabilia can provide travelers with an inexpensive late-summer baseball vacation.

Now play ball.