



## Simmons Field history

With the Simmons Bedding Company headquartered in Kenosha and the factory's baseball team in need of a field, Simmons Field opened in Kenosha in 1920 with a seating capacity of 7,000. It was the perfect venue for the Simmons Bedmakers and the city's flourishing baseball rivalries.

The 1919 Chicago White Sox -- the team later known as the Black Sox -- even made plans to hook up against the Simmons team during the summer of 1920. But a mysterious fire destroyed the wood grandstand in its inaugural season, and rumors persist to this day that supporters of the Nash Motor Company team started the Simmons fire.

The concrete grandstand was built as it stands today in 1930. By that time, however, the city's baseball teams had begun to decline despite a Midwest League championship for the Bedmakers in 1924.

In 1947, the Simmons Company sold the ball field and the city rededicated the field to the Kenosha Comets the next year. The Comets, of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, had played in Kenosha at Lakefront Stadium since the league was founded in 1943. The team played at Simmons Field from 1948 until their final season in 1951. The AAGPBL folded three seasons later.

Throughout the ensuing decades, Simmons Field was used by little leagues, amateur leagues and for exhibition games. Warren Spahn, Bob Feller and Satchel Paige pitched there. The Kenosha Pirates, a local semi-pro team, also played at Simmons Field during this era. But the stadium fell into disrepair without a major tenant.

Then in 1984, Kenosha native and former minor league pitcher Bob Lee transformed the old venue when he purchased the Minnesota Twins Single-A Midwest League affiliate and moved the team into Simmons Field. The move meant about \$350,000 worth of improvements to the historic field, including a new clubhouse, new in-ground dugouts, a new wood outfield fence, a new electronic scoreboard, concession facilities and aluminum bleachers along both baselines. Of these improvements only the clubhouse building, the concession buildings and the aluminum bleachers along the third base line remain today.

The Kenosha Twins called Simmons Field their home for nine years, winning two Midwest League championships and producing more than a dozen major leaguers, including four players on the Minnesota Twins 1991 World Championship team. That World Championship team included American League Rookie of the Year Chuck Knoblauch and long-time Kenosha resident and current University of Wisconsin-Parkside head baseball coach Jarvis Brown, who played for the Kenosha Twins in 1987 and 1988. Current Carthage College head baseball coach Augie Schmidt also played at Simmons for the Twins in 1986, before retiring from professional baseball.

In July of 1991, Chicago Cubs legend Rick Sutcliffe pitched nine innings in an injury rehab start for the Peoria Chiefs against the Twins at Simmons Field. A crowd of 4,387 attended that game, producing the largest crowd of the Bob Lee-era at Simmons. However, a decline in overall attendance and higher standards for minor league baseball facilities forced Lee to sell the team after the 1991 season. New ownership moved the team to Fort Wayne, Ind., after the 1992 season.

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The Kenosha Kings, a local semi-pro team, also took up residence at Simmons Field in 1984. The Kings currently compete in the Wisconsin State League and won the league's championship in 2006. The Kings are in their 25th consecutive season at the stadium, the longest run of any team during the history of the ballpark.

During the 1990s, Simmons Field was home to amateur teams comprised of high school and college talents, as well as the Kings. The locally-run Kenosha Chiefs semi-pro team also were the stadium's primary tenant in 1993, and the Kenosha Kroakers, of the Northwoods League, called Simmons home from 1994 to 1999.

In June 1998, Green Bay Packers players also appeared at Simmons Field for a charity softball game that also drew thousands of fans. And in August 1999, chart-topping pop group 'N Sync also played a charity softball game at Simmons in front of roughly 2,800 screaming fans.

In 2000, AAGPBL players returned to Simmons Field for a reunion and dozens of the former players dedicated a plaque to commemorate the AAGPBL's time in Kenosha.

Simmons Field was home to professional baseball once more in 2003 when the Dubois County (Ind.) Dragons of the independent Frontier League moved and became the Kenosha Mammoths. However, the Mammoths failed to attract large crowds and the team moved again after one season in Kenosha.

In 2007, ownership of Simmons Field was transferred from the Kenosha Parks Department to the Kenosha Unified School District. The district has since leased the field to the Kenosha Simmons Baseball Organization (KSBO), a non-profit group working to upgrade and restore the stadium. Initial improvements included a rebuilt infield, which was completed last fall, and a new electronic scoreboard behind left field.

Today, Simmons Field continues to be used by various high school, recreational and amateur baseball teams, including MSBL Kenosha, the Kenosha Kings and Kenosha American Legion Post 21.

Despite its changes through the years, Simmons Field retains its classic feel. The historic grandstand behind home plate looks much like it did during the days of the AAGPBL and still evokes memories of the women's baseball greats who played in front of it. Indeed, Simmons Field is believed to be the last remaining field in its original configuration from the days of the AAGPBL.

Take a seat in the genuine wood box seats, listen to a train running on the tracks adjacent to right field, and you will feel yourself in an unmistakable old-time baseball atmosphere.

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