

BASEBALL'S DIRTY SIDE



First they used the juice of chewing tobacco, then mud made of water and dirt from the playing field, to remove the sheen from new baseballs so pitchers could get a better grip following the death of Ray Chapman from an errant pitch in the 1920s.

Russell Aubrey "Lena" Blackburne, a coach with Connie Mack's old Philadelphia Athletics during the 1930s, heard some umpires griping about that nasty tobacco juice they had to apply to the balls.

As the story goes, Blackburne later was fishing on a Delaware River tributary in New Jersey when he scooped up some mud from the creek. He tried it out on a shiny new ball — an experiment that would alter the course of our National Pastime.

The mud, described as "smooth and creamy, but with a fine grit," worked better than the juice.

Today, "Lena Blackburne Baseball Rubbing Mud" is still used throughout Major League Baseball to rough up the six or seven dozen new balls prepared for every game. All minor league clubs and a few colleges use the mud, too. In fact, a team will go through about three or four pounds of it every season.

It has been reported that pitchers seem to like the balls dark, especially ones "well done." They claim the brownish texture makes it harder for batters to figure out a ball's rotation.

"Nolan (Ryan) liked 'em black," noted one clubhouse manager referring to the all-time major league strikeout pitcher.

Blackburne died in the 1960s and a close friend took over the task of "harvesting" the mud from its secret Delaware River Basin location.

Now, that friend's grandson carries on the tradition.

Companies have tried to offer their own rubbing mud over the years. But in the words of the grandson, "The other mud doesn't come close."



A bit of History brought to you by the Delaware River Basin Commission www.drbc.net

