

The Story of the 13th Street Crew

John Pinkman

The culture created around the CWS is barely seen by out of towners and rarely if ever viewed on ESPN. Many in Omaha believe that the NCAA wants to, as they say “sanitize” the event. They point to the elimination over the years of tailgating areas; pushing the local tailgate parties further away from the stadium. As many can remember, not so long ago there was a camp ground parking lot in the area behind left field with electric hooks ups for RV’s. No more.

The faithful have fallen back to the west side of 13th street and beyond. They are loyal; to the CWS and each other. 13th Street is like a boardwalk without water. It’s a two week combination of Key West, Mardi Gras, and the Super Bowl. The local kids come to cruise, just to be seen. The added attraction of Fan Fest just outside the stadium on 13th is a kid magnet. With all the sports represented, it adds flashing color and sound to the CWS. Many kids never go to any game. They just hang out for two weeks.



From one end of the street to the other an all day long into the night party

Across 13th is a world of vendors and constant parties. The parties go deep into the neighborhoods with catered meals and even air conditioned enclosed tents. You can buy a hand rolled cigar while you wait, or baseball jewelry or myriads of fan clothing. Famous restaurants like Starsky’s and Zesto’s have served loyal customers and their families for 50 years. There are bands playing, bar-b-ques’ smoking, kegs pouring, fans cheering, and shared stories of the Glory Days. Yes there are so many of them. Most of all, this is the safest, friendliest place any baseball fan could want to be.



Many would not even consider going to Rosenblatt without a stop at Zesto’s.



Radio Talent and Sport Psychology Coach, Jim Meier who has lived in Omaha all his life grew up for a time in a place just a block away from Rosenblatt, now called Starsky's. His uncle owned it and his dad ran it back when. The original place opened in 1929. Jim's not that old..... I think!

These tailgate groups are serious and well planned. They're all over the place. Down back streets, in allies, garages, roof balconies, anywhere they could find a flat spot. There are many stories full of memories but I'd like to tell you about one of the many.



A Rosenblatt Oasis

They call themselves the 13TH Street Crew

They started 15 years ago..... maybe. It took me three days of asking who and how it started to get a vague answer at that. Not because it was any military secret, they just never thought much about it. It seems it has always been there and they all became the best of friends.

They are the most eclectic of groups. They rent the front lawn of a lady named Marilyn (last named withheld for her social protection) for the entire CWS. Now the lawn is big, so there are two other groups there too, on the side and in the back yard. Well the 13th Street boys are really a mix of grand dads to young folks. It's hard to believe they all get along, but it's true. Some are from LSU. Others are from Mississippi State, Texas, Virginia, Iowa, Arizona. Every school is welcome; even the guys from Clemson!

You might wonder how people know what to do when they come to Omaha. The beauty, the magic of this special place can be seen in the answer to that question. "Don't worry... someone will help you!"

You can quote me. This is how many of the new fans and visitors started. They just came and figured it out when they got here. To my knowledge there is not a travel bureau that will sell you a whirlwind CWS vacation package. I know it sounds a bit intimidating, but just come and ask for help...from anyone. That is how many of the 13th Street Boys came into town as well!



Dare to Run the Gauntlet? You may be thrown some beads or you may be asked to stay for years! They have the best time leaning over the fence yelling at people walking by. It's all in good fun, not mean or degrading. You can't help but laugh, these are funny people. In proper LSU form, they toss the kids and "special" ladies Mardi Gras beads. They yell for their school and kid the fans from other schools. The passersby yell back. Some were invited to stay and did.... for many years to come. Twelve years ago this fine looking woman who lives down the block was dared to jump over the fence. They bet a beer on it. She did and never left. She was there this year to tell me the story; although she admits her fence jumpin' days are long gone! They share the moments of life, the births, deaths, sicknesses, divorces; even if they don't get to see each other but once a year. They bring their sons and daughters, proud parents as they should be. This father's day was special to the Haydens, the Noonans, and for me too. (My son Jeff and I drove to Omaha from VA and shared the 10 days together.)



A Very Special Fathers Day

Dan Noonan and Famous Dad - Bob Barker (just kidding). His dad's name is Don. Both are lifelong



The Hayden Clan - Gary (Thibodaux) Hayden is joined by his son's Keith, Cole, Ken, Kyle. Where else would you see an LSU Tiger, posing in front of a Mississippi State Banner?

Was that The Dinner Bell?

And food, well I'm here to tell you this is not a ham sandwich from the 7/11 crowd. They have a buffet line! The Louisiana and Mississippi Boys make stuff I never heard of, like Boudin, pronounced Bo dan. It's sausage stuffed with rice, meat, and spices. They won't tell you what meat is in it, probably best not to know. But it is darn good. The grills, and there are several, are cookin' all sort of stuff. One day someone was a bar-b-q-in this chicken stuffed with a full can of beer. The chicken was standing up on the grill you'd expect it to start dancing any moment. They even had a band there recently; nothing to do with the chicken.



The Anatomy of a World Class Custom Built CWS BAR-B-Q.

After two test models!

- The bottom 3 drawers for coals independently open.
- The next two middle drawers open independently for small grilling close to the fire.
- The top tier is a large grill for slow cooking with smoke.

Patent Pending!!!

Chef Norvell – a true Mississippi State fan held captive year round somewhere in South Florida is out on good behavior! (right!)

Boys will be boys... at any age. One afternoon.....

Across 13th from the tailgate was a 5 gallon bucket that someone used to hold up a parking sign. Now, there is a large tree at the tailgate by the fence with these green nuts that looked like and were the size of a lime. So a contest starts with the fellas throwing the nuts across a very busy 13th Street, about 30 yards, in between people walking and cars passing with the target being the empty bucket. This went on as long as the fellas could reach the low hanging nuts on the tree. My son Jeff came close but a well known local named Jim Meier grabs but two nuts and sinks the second throw, to the dismay of the crew. On father's day in between games, Jim (pictured at the right) gave a moving speech and asked the Crew to share great memories about their dads. Hardly a dry eye was seen.



I don't know what happens to people when they get to Omaha. But a rash of friendliness breaks out. It may take a hardened northeasterner a few days to get the fact that everyone there is so friendly, generous, and caring. But they'll break you down with kindness. There are no Yankees or Rednecks, political lefties or righties, suits or blue collars; just people who love the spirit of college baseball. I'm in love with it all!



Here a few stories

Ronnie Fulton (pictured) lives in Diamond Head Mississippi. He and his buddy Darryl Berryhill are huge Pat McMahon fans and truly believe his departure to be the most tragic event in Mississippi Baseball lore. I hooked Darryl up on a phone call to Pat but only to get voicemail. Didn't stop his enthusiastic message though!

Anyway I asked Ronnie how he made out in Katrina, "I have a slab at the beach; still." He said. I asked him when he started coming to the CWS. He said he started in 1979 and about 12 years ago Sam Wilkes asked him to join the group. Why do you come, Ronnie? "Well, it's the great people here, from Omaha and the ones that come to the CWS that keeps me coming back. I'll give you an example. The other day we went to eat at Stulley's Restaurant. As you know it has rained real hard here for days. The owner overheard me talking about trying to find some hay to lay down on the ground at the tailgate. Well he said, 'Hold on a minute here', and sent his wife to go get some hay for the boys. That's the kind of people we meet up here and why we keep comin' back!" said Ronnie. The funniest quote in many days was when someone asked Ronnie why he was spreading the hay. In his most devilish "State" voice, "Well, we are expecting some coeds from the "University" of Mississippi to drop by!" I'm still laughing as I write this!



The Mayor of 13th Street,
The Honorable Sam Wilkens

Legend says that Sam Wilkens started it all about 15 years ago, when he moved from the school across from Zesto's, down the street to Marilyn's house to find parking for his car as the concessionaires took more space. But no one, least of all Sam, will take credit for starting this annual gala event! "It just happened over the years. Some would come by and we'd bring 'em in for a beer. Then they knew someone and they came next year and it kept growing." Sam recalls. "They are all really nice people and Omaha is a very special place, that's why we coming back," his Honor adds.

Everyone is sad, but determined about next year!

I know many of you know nothing of about the true happiness that the CWS has brought to the residents of Omaha, it's as much a part of them as the great Missouri River that flows so close. You can no longer experience it; it vanished in the 11th inning of the last game. You must understand,

generations of families, the *people* of Omaha, and its loyal visitors, created this wonderful town and the environment surrounding the CWS. Years ago the men's service clubs would volunteer in the concession stands. They desperately do not want to lose the neighborhood ball park values that they have all come to share with the nation. Hard to believe it will not change as Club Level seats in the new stadium will tack on an additional \$1500 PER SEAT premium for the series, renegotiable every year.

The 13th Street crew knows that moving the park downtown, which if voted on by the citizens would have overwhelmingly failed, will change the entire event. They just don't know how. They are determined to keep their tailgate going; each year renewing old friendships. They talk about a shuttle from 13th Street to Downtown. But they realize there will be no people on 13th. We'll see; maybe they will return.

They, as well as most, are sure that the city officials and the NCAA will drive prices through the roof and keep out the special tailgate parties they have cherished for so long. They dearly hope that those officials take the time to really look at the faces on TV at the games and see who really comes to support the CWS year after year. I constantly heard these sentiments and comments from the people of Omaha: *This is not NYC, Chicago, Atlanta, or LA; it's Omaha. The CWS is not corporate entertainment; it's how we raise our families.*

The games will be played in 2011, the fans will welcome and support the boys from all over the country. But in Omaha they all are reminded of the fable - don't kill the goose that laid the golden egg!