

By Laura Smith

Workers: *Play Ball!*

From baseball games and bowling leagues to field days and variety nights, workers in Connecticut's industries have embraced a wide variety of activities promoted by their workplaces.

In their heyday between the end of World War I and the 1950s, sports teams and activities that brought workers together for fun were as much a part of the state's industries as the products the workers manufactured. The bonding that occurred through participation in leisure activities knit workers together and provided a respite from the drudgery of their jobs.

In the late 19th century business management in the U.S. often acted on the principles of welfare capitalism. This was a Progressive Era concept in which the upper classes believed they were responsible for the welfare of the lower classes both at work and in their leisure time.

Beginning in the early 1800s the Industrial Revolution brought sweeping changes to the ways Americans lived and worked as they moved from rural farms to factories in industrial centers. In the early 20th century immigrants, particularly those from southern and eastern Europe, arrived in

great numbers to Connecticut, providing workers for the burgeoning industries that produced the goods that were crucial to the development of a modern America.

Until the 20th century, federal and state government did not provide the many protections for workers that are common today, including unemployment insurance, safeguards against discrimination, and health and safety standards. Unions were weak and sometimes violently suppressed. *In Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism in the New Deal* (Princeton University Press, 1997), historian Sanford Jacoby writes that these unstable forces led self-made business owners to feel a sense of stewardship and paternal obligation to their employees: "Welfare capitalism was a good fit for a distinctive American environment composed of large firms, weak unions and small government."



Wauregan Company (Plainfield) workers at a summer party, c. 1899.



top: Three-legged race at a SNET employee field day at Savin Rock in West Haven, c. 1930s.
 above: SNET telephone operators from Norwich at a summer outing on the beach, July 1913.
 Southern New England Telephone Company Records

Welfare capitalism was implemented in many ways, including the development of “company towns” where employers provided housing and other services for employees, English classes for foreign workers, and medical and dental services. While welfare capitalism appeared benefi-

cial to the workers, there was a dark side to this arrangement. “In isolated company towns,” Jacoby writes, “—particularly in the textile and mining industries—welfare work verged on a feudal system whereby the employer controlled most aspects of a worker’s life.” Management oversight

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“was frequently condescending and manipulative. The hope was that firms could recast the intemperate, slothful worker or the ignorant immigrant in a middle-class mold: uplifting him.”

Company-sponsored leisure programs were another aspect of welfare capitalism. Management believed that good relations with workers would curtail union activity, control labor discontent, reduce time lost from illness, prevent employee turnover, promote productivity, and enhance loyalty and goodwill. Parties, dances, and field days would cement worker relationships and were a cost-effective way for employers to reward workers for jobs well done.

At a time when many factory workers were foreign born, companies hoped they would learn the principles of capitalism, self-sacrifice, and teamwork through their participation in sports and transfer these lessons to the workplace to produce more docile, efficient, and cooperative workers. Recent immigrants could join sports teams; they did not have to be literate or fluent in English to play. Charles Frederick Weller, who served as associate secretary of the Playground and Recreation Association of America in the 1910s, wrote in his April 1917 article “Recreation in Industries” for the association’s annual publication *The Playground: The World at Play*, that “team play or cooperation, binding together a differentiated group of workers...are fundamentally important in our industries.”

Companies also hoped that participation after work on sports teams would keep workers out of saloons and encourage sobriety, reduce gambling, and provide alternatives to other “immoral amusements.” Roy Rosenzweig writes in his seminal history *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1983) that “the saloon clashed with

the values of industrial America not just in its commonality and mutuality” but also that employers “depicted drinking as a major threat to steady work habits.”

Despite these many ulterior motives on the part of the business owners, workers participated in the activities with a joyous spirit. At this time in American history fewer leisure-time diversions were available, so workers had to “make their own fun.” Company-sponsored activities could offset the monotony and tedium of factory work or allow workers to develop a skill that enhanced their self-esteem. Some companies allowed workers time off to practice or travel to games in other cities; some provided bonuses to exceptional athletes on the teams. These circumstances helped make workers’ participation in athletics or leisure pursuits an integral part of their work life.

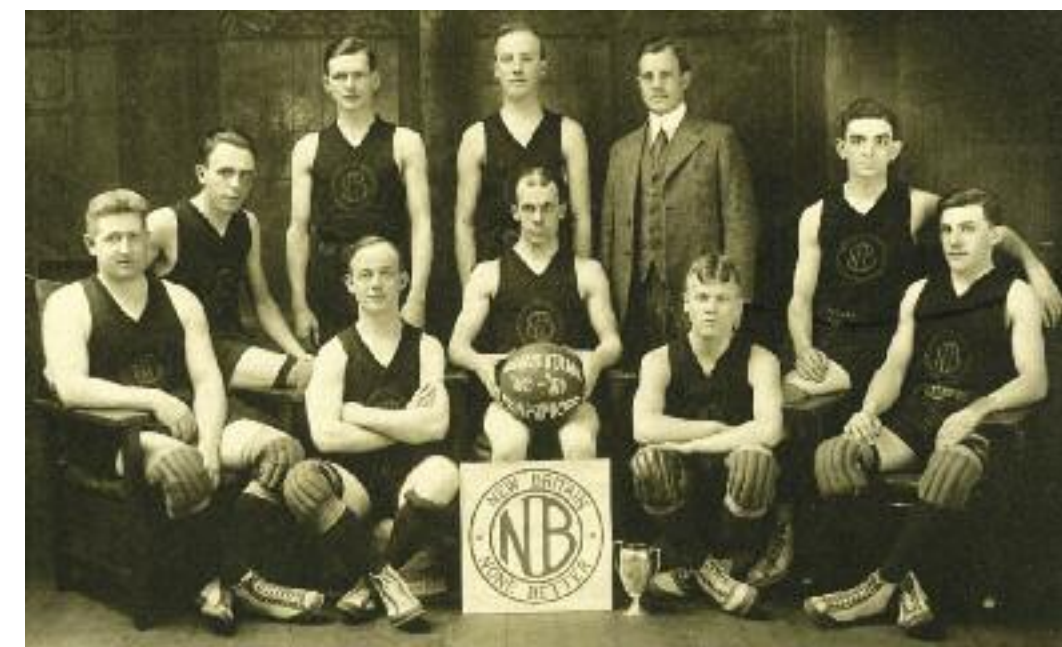
Larger companies in Connecticut produced company newsletters and magazines that kept employees aware of important company issues, promoted the company and its customers to its workforce, and gave employees a way to announce retirements, marriages, births of children, and other milestones. During World War II the magazines helped foster a sense of patriotism. They exhorted employees to selflessly contribute to the war effort by buying bonds or working overtime when needed, and they provided news of employees who were serving overseas in the armed forces. They described, often in fine detail, the many parties, dances, bingo games, variety nights, field days, and other pastimes enjoyed by employees. They reported teams’ latest scores and successes, the teams’ positions in playoffs and tournaments, and the antics of particular players.

The Cheney Silk Manufacturing Company of Manchester was an impressive model of welfare capitalism. Founded

in 1838 by five members of the Cheney family, by the late 19th century the company was one of the most successful manufacturers of silk cloth in the country. The company recruited workers from the textile centers of northern England and Ireland and hired many workers from

Italy and Poland. The Cheney family built a company town and provided almost all of the facilities and amenities, from housing, schools, parks, churches, and recreation centers to a police force, sewer and water systems, and medical and dental facilities. The Cheneys discouraged

below: Men’s basketball team of the New Britain Machine Company, 1920. New Britain Machine Company Records
 bottom: Thermos Company (Norwich) employees singing at a variety show, 1951.





top: Participants in a rolling pin throwing contest at an outing of Bristol Brass Company employees, 1950.
bottom: Thermos Company employees and their families at a showing of *The Vanishing Prairie*, Stanley Warner Palace Theater, Norwich, December 1954.

workers' efforts to unionize and successfully squelched attempted strikes in 1902 and 1923.

The Cheney Company encouraged and promoted sports teams. In 1920 the company published *The Miracle Workers*, a booklet aimed at recruiting skilled workers, particularly those from Europe. The booklet extolled the ideal working conditions the company provided and the benefits of living in their town: "For

summer there are two large playgrounds fitted with ball grounds, tennis courts and gymnastic apparatus. These grounds are under the supervision of skilled directors. They are open during the day to children and during the evening to young people and adults."

A July 1920 issue of the company's employee magazine *Eighteen Thirty-Eight* features an article about a recent game between the men's baseball team, the Silk

Sox, and the Foster's Colts of Colt Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company of Hartford. It reported in the colorful language of the times, "Graves at the bat for the Colts looked sweet, cracking out two clean bingles and holding down the first sack in good style." It provided the full box scores for each team and concluded with the cheery news that the Silk Sox won the game 12-4.

The New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, better known as the New Haven Railroad, was formed in 1872. By the end of the century it controlled almost all freight and passenger train traffic in southern New England, providing a link between the financial centers of New York City and Boston. At its peak in the 1920s the railroad line owned more than 2,100 miles of track throughout Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, southeastern New York, and New York City and had more than 30,000 employees system-wide.

The New Haven Railroad avidly promoted its sports teams and leisure activities. Under the Personnel Department, the Health and Recreation Division encouraged physical activity, saying, "the New Haven Railroad recognizes the relation of health and good fellowship to a successful industrial life."

The company formed an extensive intramural league across the four-state region consisting of teams organized by division and then shop, or railroad yard. The July 1924 issue of the company magazine *Along the Line* revealed there were four inter-divisional baseball leagues, two of them for the mechanical department employees (eastern and western divisions). The western division, consisting of teams from the railroad yards at Stamford, New Haven, Cedar Hill, Hartford, and Waterbury, plus Van Nest in New York, had games each week in a schedule that ran from mid-May to early August.

Founded as the District Telephone Company of New Haven on January 28, 1878, Southern New England Telephone Company (SNET) changed its name four years later and is best known as the first commercial telephone exchange in the world. SNET produced the first telephone directory three weeks after its founding, listing 50 subscribers in the city of New Haven. The company served the people of Connecticut through the 20th century, celebrating the installation of its one-millionth telephone in 1956, and in 1998 merged with SBC Communications. Soon afterward the company became part of AT&T.

SNET was particularly proud of its sports teams, and almost every issue of its monthly employee magazine, the *Telephone Bulletin*, had extensive information about their games. Other pastimes received equal coverage. The September 1925 issue included a description of the Hartford division's annual field day at Savin Rock Park in West Haven, featuring three-legged races, tug-of-war, the 100-yard dash, and a baseball game. The March 1952 issue proudly announced, "The Tel-Belles Have Done it Again! Our talented hoopgirls have again won the City Industrial League basketball championship—their seventh consecutive championship in seven consecutive seasons...." Another article proclaimed, "SNET's Annual Bowling Congress will be held at the Wooster Bowling Alleys in Hartford on April 19. Thirty-six men's and women's teams will participate."

The Thermos Company, maker of vacuum bottles, came to Norwich in 1913. In five years the company had nearly doubled its size, and after World War II it opened a second plant in Norwich's Taftville section. The Thermos Company became Norwich's largest employer. In 1969, the Thermos Company was sold to Household International, Inc., and in 1984, warehousing and manufacturing at

the original plant in the Laurel Hill section of Norwich was consolidated into the Taftville location. Thermos production in Norwich ended in 1988.

The company's employee publication, *The Thermos News*, included many articles about employees' sporting activities. The first inter-company golf match was announced in the September 1943 issue. The Factory Dubbs and the Office Duffers met at the Norwich Golf Club and "to the surprise of everyone the game ended up all even." The winner was decided when two players representing each team played three more holes. After the 1950s the newsletter ran fewer articles about organized activities, with only occasional news about golf and bowling leagues in the 1960s and a touch football team and softball teams for men and "girls" in the 1970s. Into the 1980s *The Thermos News* reported about the annual company picnic at Ocean Beach in New London, but that event appears to have been the only remaining regular activity organized for all employees.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression forced a decline in company-funded activities. During World War II the federal government encouraged manufacturers, many of which had shifted gears to produce the goods necessary to win the war, to promote "industrial" recreation as a way to increase patriotism and productivity among employees. Author Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, in "Industrial Recreation, the Second World War and the Revival of Welfare Capitalism, 1934-1960," *The Business History Review* (Summer 1986), refers to a Federal Security Agency flyer that declares recreational programs "an important resource of war" and "one of the stones constituting the mosaic which produces more guns, more tanks, more rifles and more parachutes." After the war, in the 1950s, many company-sponsored sports teams and parties continued and even expanded. While many

companies encouraged such activities, though, employees themselves rather than the business owners were more likely to do the organizing.

The prevalence of sports teams and leisure pursuits sponsored by companies has decreased in recent years. There are many obvious reasons for the decline, including that employees have far more leisure alternatives than were available 100 years ago. Employers are now less inclined to form baseball teams than to sponsor wellness programs to reduce illness and absenteeism and lower health-care costs. Fones-Wolf wrote that by the 1980s the nature of welfare capitalism had changed, with company-sponsored leisure activities replaced by "fringe benefits—pensions, child care, group insurance, improved working conditions, educational assistance, and paid vacations. The goal for the employers hasn't changed, though. They still hope to gain greater productivity, higher morale, employee loyalty, and prevent or undermine unionism through the use of fringe benefits." ◀

Explore!

The Connecticut Business History Collections in Archives & Special Collections of the UConn Libraries document the many and diverse sports teams, dances, parties, and pastimes at companies in this era, allowing us to imagine how people of that time spent off-work hours with co-workers and friends.

See more images in "Workers at Play," an online exhibition based on a 2012 exhibit coordinated by Kyle Lynes and Laura Smith for the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center Gallery on the UConn campus in Storrs. doddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/exhibits/workersatplay/