Baseball usually is thought of as a simple, straightforward game that is, after all, America's pastime. However, a complex undercurrent of politics, social agendas and manipulation was at play among the teams that flourished in Mount Airy and other textile towns during the 1930s and 1940s, according to a baseball historian who spoke here Saturday.

"Mill-town baseball was much more than a game — it gave meaning to life," Robert Billinger told an audience at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History during a presentation that included images and colorful stories from a long-ago chapter of the sport.

Baseball was vitally important not only to residents of a town, but the mill owners who used it as a source of control, added Billinger, a retired professor from Wingate University who is part of a "Road Scholar" program of the North Carolina Humanities Council. He was the final speaker in a six-part History Talks series hosted by the local museum. Before the Great Depression, there were 26 different leagues around the country, Billinger said in described the prevalence of minor league baseball at that time. But similar to a Louisville slugger, the sport wielded a huge clout in the so-called "Textile Belt," an area encompassing Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama where that industry was prevalent. "Everybody had a dog in the fight," Billinger said.

In Mount Airy's case that was a team known as the Graniteers, which competed in the Bi-State League and was among numerous Class D squads dotting small towns at the time. The Graniteers played against clubs with other colorful names such as the Winston-Salem Twins, Danville Leafs, Reidsville Luckies and Tri-City Triplets (of Draper, North Carolina). "Bigger places like Concord had numerous mill teams," the speaker related. Yet the same dynamics were prevalent regardless of venue. Those who owned the textile companies footed the entire bill for fielding a team, including paying players. The 1929 budget of the Concord Weavers, for example, was $350 per week for the total team salary, and no player could make more than $40

weekly. While that is nowhere near the exorbitant salaries earned by baseball players today, Billinger said it must be remembered that the average textile worker made only about $10 per week in 1929. Ostensibly, players came from within a mill's employee base, but that didn't keep "ringers" from joining teams at times when the price was right. Billinger related one case in which a coveted player on a particular team secretly offered his services to another for $50. But when the management of his regular team found out about it, concern spread because that would interfere with a big game against the Kannapolis Towelers. So it upped the ante by paying the player $75.

Manipulative Owners

Those in charge of textile firms that sponsored teams didn't do so for the betterment of the world, but had their own agendas, Billinger added, which involved more than just what occurred on the diamond. Mill owners not only sought enthusiastic workers, but loyal town residents as fans. "Mill owners, of course, had an interest in getting people to support their mill team, or home team," the historian said. Baseball also influenced what went on in the workplace, Billinger said, with mill owners using it as a way to build unity, cohesion — and discipline — there. "If you could train a country boy to do that," Billinger said of mastering baseball skills, he also could be taught to rapidly remove and replace bobbins on machinery, or similar tasks. And when strikes or other labor issues arose, owners would threaten to withdraw funding for teams as a bargaining chip. The small-town fans also had their own special reasons for backing a team, the baseball historian said. "During the Depression, it was fairly good enjoyment," he said. "It was a diversion…people could be proud of." That sense of escapism was a huge factor especially for those who lived in company-owned neighborhoods sometimes resembling the worst kind of slums. "You couldn't go to Disney World," Billinger said of one's entertainment options at the time. "But to go to a baseball game is to kind of get out of the back yard." Collectively, a winning team allowed a community to achieve a sense of pride by beating other towns' teams through a mindset not unlike warfare, according to Billinger.

The historian referred to a quote by Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general and military theorist who lived from 1780-1831: ""War is the continuation of politics by other means." For the North Carolina mill towns, the message was that "baseball was the pursuit of

power/empowerment by other means," according to Billinger's presentation. "And there were a lot of winners," he said, with baseball a game people often would play or watch to seek empowerment. Fans pursued a sense of excitement or group identity, while the players sought self-esteem and personal glory, Billinger said.

Graniteers' Glory

The Mount Airy Graniteers achieved a measure of success during their tenure, Billinger said. This included capturing the Blue Ridge League championship in the late 1940s. But the club also gained a bit of notoriety in 1948 in the form of a written reprimand from a national governing body for the sport. A leader of that association fired off a letter to Dr. Otis Oliver, the president of the Mount Airy Baseball Club, complaining about the bad treatment of umpires by individuals involved with the Graniteers. The local team also produced some interesting players, including Bobby Byrne Jr., Billinger said. After signing his first pro contract with Knoxville of the Southern Association in 1939, Byrne was assigned to the Mount Airy Graniteers. But just as his playing career was taking off, World War II broke out and Byrne found himself a fighter pilot in the Army Air Corps, who built a distinguished military record that included shooting down German planes in Africa. The Graniteers folded after the 1950 season.

TV Aided Demise

Mill-town baseball thrived in an era when many people didn't even have radios in their homes for listening to Major League games, which motivated many to take in a live contest of their local team. In turn, the advent of television in the 1950s would spell its demise, Billinger said. For the first time, fans had something to compare their hometown teams to by being able to watch clubs such as the New York Yankees and St. Louis Cardinals perform. "Then the local teams sort of looked like amateurs," Billinger said. People also had more money in the post-World War II years and could drive to larger cities with big-league teams, he mentioned. "Baseball was THE game."