



*The Millard Fillmore Theatre could not legally show movies on a Sunday when this photograph was taken in 1914. New York State lifted the ban on Sunday movies in 1919, but local communities could enact bans of their own. The Fillmore Theatre was located just east of the present-day Aurora Theatre. (From the archives of the Aurora Town Historian's Office).*

# EA Decided Fate of Sunday Baseball and Movies in 1922

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**D**ebate raged over Sunday baseball and movies even after a statewide ban was lifted in 1919. In East Aurora and other villages, the issue came to a head in 1922, when voters headed to the polls to put the issue to rest.

So-called blue laws, which purportedly got their name from the color of the books in which religious laws were bound, date back nearly 2,000 years and were transplanted to the American colonies.

“There shall be no traveling, servile laboring and working, shooting, fishing, sporting, playing, horse racing, hunting, or frequenting of tippling houses,” a 1695 colonial statute declared, “or the use of any other unlawful exercises or pastimes, by any of the inhabitants or sojourners within this province, or by any of their slaves or servants, on the Lord’s Day.”

New York State’s Sabbath laws, enacted in the 1780s and 1790s, continued to restrict Sunday activities throughout the 1800s. Baseball, football, boxing and other forms of sport and entertainment, as well as various forms of commercial enterprise, were prohibited.

The law wasn’t always obeyed, and the definition of “official” games was often tested by professional and amateur sports organizations. As other states began loosening their rules, allowing professional baseball teams to host games—and raise revenue—on Sundays, pressure grew on New York to follow suit.

In 1907, Assemblyman Alfred E. Smith unsuccessfully sought to legalize Sunday baseball, arguing that he'd rather see young men engaged in the sport than in other, less-savory activities on a Sunday.

On April 19, 1919, the now-Gov. Smith signed a law lifting the statewide ban on Sunday baseball and motion pictures. The law allowed both activities only after 2 p.m., as to not interfere with church services, but it specifically continued the Sunday ban on "all shooting, hunting, playing, horse-racing, gaming or other public sports, exercises or shows, upon the first day of the week, and all noise unreasonably disturbing the peace of the day are prohibited."

According to reports and advertisements in the *East Aurora Advertiser*, Hamlin Park soon began hosting Sunday games (although most match-ups continued on Saturdays), and the Millard Fillmore Theatre, which was located just east of the present-day Aurora Theatre, began charging admission for Sunday afternoon matinees. (However, it appears from newspaper advertisements that the theatre skirted the previous Sunday ban by not charging an admission fee for Sunday shows).

For several years, groups such as the Lord's Day Alliance pressed the state to repeal the 1919 law. Religious leaders also pressured village, city and town leaders across the state, because a provision of the law allowed local communities to adopt their own Sunday baseball and movie bans.

By 1922, villages and towns across New York were debating the issue and holding public votes. In East Aurora, the question went to village voters on March 21.

According to the results published in the *Advertiser*, local residents overwhelmingly favored keeping Sunday baseball and moving pictures. Sunday moving pictures were approved, 456-308. However, the largest vote that day was registered on the Sunday baseball proposition, which was approved, 555-215.

Despite pressure from religious leaders, several Western New York villages saw similar approval at the polls.

After residents of Franklinville voted nearly two-to-one in favor of Sunday baseball, "The American Legion had a parade in celebration of the victory," according to the June 15, 1922 issue of *The Buffalo Express*.

Three years earlier, the trustees of the Allegany County village of Bolivar voted to allow baseball on Sundays, after more than 300 village residents signed a petition favoring it; less than 100 signed a separate petition against it.

In the Hudson River city of Beacon, N.Y., in February 1922, city commissioners got an earful from both sides of the argument regarding Sunday movies.



***New York State had lifted its ban on Sunday baseball games by the time this game was played on the Hamlin Park diamond in the 1920s. Even after 1919, games could not start until 2 p.m. on Sundays, to avoid conflicts with local church services. (From the archives of the Aurora Town Historian's Office).***

A petition signed by Protestant clergy in that community stated that “Sunday motion pictures were a flagrant violation of the laws of God” and encouraged “rowdy-ism,” according to a report in the *Beacon Daily Herald*. However, a petition from more than 500 residents favored Sunday movies, according to the newspaper.

In Corning, a tie vote of the city council on the showing of motion pictures on Sundays was broken by the mayor, who decided in favor of allowing movies. “The fight against Sunday motion pictures has been strong, with the ministers of the city taking an active part in the movement,” the local newspaper reported.

There was minimal debate on the pages of the *Advertiser* leading up to the March 1922 referendum in East Aurora. However, an anonymous letter to the editor, entitled “A Plea for Sunday Baseball,” offers insight into the debate that occurred among the people of the village.

The letter writer pointed out that Sundays were often the only time the young men of the village could play baseball.

“The amateur teams can play baseball only on Sunday afternoons, since the members work all week,” the writer noted. “Some (business) firms have Saturday afternoons off, but all of them do not. Therefore, a player who has to work every weekday has only Sunday afternoon to play his country’s national game...These Sunday baseball games are not called until three or three-thirty in the afternoon so that all players and fans may and should attend church in the morning. People who live near Hamlin Park object to the noise of the cheering. I think that they have forgotten the fact that they were young once and full of vitality, when they object to the excited cheering of baseball fans at a close game. Therefore, for the good of the boys who will be the future citizens of our town and village, let us have Sunday baseball.”

However, Sunday baseball and movies were not as well received in all New York communities.

More than a decade later, in 1933, aldermen in the City of Newburgh rejected the local fire department’s request to show a Sunday motion picture as a fundraiser. “The decision of the council puts an end for the time being to the Sunday movie question in Newburgh,” the *Saugerties Telegraph* reported.

The 1919 law only lifted the statewide ban on Sunday movies and baseball games. Limits on other sports and forms of recreation continued for several decades.

According to a 2016 article in *The New York Times*, “In 1937, bowling was allowed. In 1949, the Legislature decriminalized football, basketball and soccer after 2 p.m. In 1952, bans on stock car racing, circuses, hunting and golf were lifted. In 1973, Sunday horse racing was legalized.”

Sunday dancing remained illegal in 1932, when the Aurora Town Board adopted an ordinance to meet the requirements of a state law.

In part to ensure that Sunday dancing didn’t occur, all dancing venues, including churches, were required to obtain a dance license from the Town Clerk’s Office. “Even dancing classes must be conducted in a licensed hall,” the *Advertiser* reported.

“Dancing between the hours of 12 midnight Saturdays and 7 o’clock Monday mornings, except in private homes, in the Town of Aurora is now a misdemeanor,” the newspaper noted in July 1932, “with a penalty of a fine of up to \$50 and, in addition, imprisonment in the county penitentiary for a period of up to six months.”

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*Robert Lowell Goller is the eighth Aurora town and East Aurora village historian since the office was created in 1919. The Historian’s Office is open for research Wednesdays and Thursdays from 1-4 p.m. Visit [www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian](http://www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian) for more information. The Town Historian’s Office can also be found on Facebook at “Aurora Town Historian” and on Instagram at “auroratownhistorian.”*