

Tober Baseballs, Manufactured in Manchester, CT

By Susan Barlow, Manchester Historical Society, notes 2014-2019

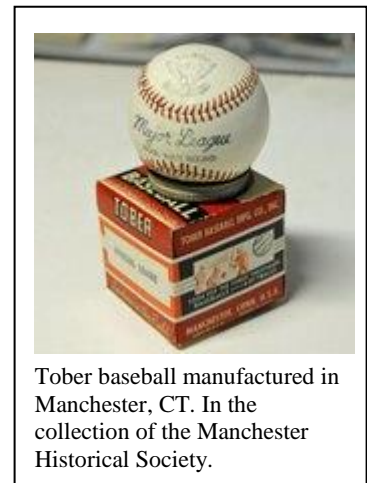


Tober baseball, this one from Springfield, MA.
Tober manufactured in many locations.

Meyer Tober (1882-1964) manufactured baseballs in Manchester from about 1938 until about 1955. The Tober operation began in Hartford as early as 1902, according to a May 26, 1956 article in *The Hartford Courant*. The Tober Brothers – Meyer, Israel, and Louis – had a manufacturing operation in Springfield, MA in 1911. A billhead shows that American League baseballs cost \$8.00 per dozen. Tober also made softballs, playground balls, and baseball gloves. In 1938, the baseball operation was in a Cheney building (the Clock Tower mill), according to a *Hartford Courant*, October 19, 1938 article, which says, "...Cheney Brothers has leased the third floor of Mill Four, part of the spinning mill group on Elm Street, to Meyer Tober of Hartford, doing

business as Tober Baseball Manufacturing Company. The plant will be used for manufacturing athletic goods and as a warehouse. The silk firm [Cheneys] has already leased several of its vacant factories to small manufacturing concerns."

Tober also employed "home workers" to stitch baseballs, and had plants in Hartford, Connecticut, as well as in South America, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and other locations. With the "home workers," Tober ran into trouble with the federal Wage & Hour division. *The Courant* reported on August 24, 1945 that Tober was charged with not paying minimum wage to home workers in Vermont. Tober was fined \$2,600 (\$1,600 was suspended provided he paid all the employees their wages). Regarding this cottage industry, Georgie LaFranchise remembered visiting the Slisz family in the early 1950s and watching two sisters sewing baseballs. "The sisters were very fast with the red yarn! Their long steel needles would fly as they stitched the baseballs – the holes were already punched in the leather. As they finished each baseball, they put the baseballs in peach baskets." The family lived at the corner of Union and Jefferson Streets in the North End and were members of the Polish church.



Tober baseball manufactured in Manchester, CT. In the collection of the Manchester Historical Society.

An October 9, 1945 legal notice in *The Courant* says, "City of Hartford Zoning Board of Appeals...Meyer Tober for permission to use premises known as 1127 Main Street [Hartford] to sew covers on the cores of baseballs and softballs, employing about fifty people."

In the 1950s, Tober manufactured balls on the second floor of Building #2 at the Hilliard Mills. Peter Bonzani, Jr., current owner of the Hilliard Mills complex, said, "I have heard it was the first place softballs were mass-produced in the U.S.A."

In 1955, Tober opened a plant in Rockville at the former National Print building on Brooklyn Street, doubling his space. Tober also had plants in South America, Cuba and other Caribbean nations, according to an August 10, 1955 *Courant* article, which goes on to say, "In addition to baseballs, the company makes softballs and playground balls." "Credit for bringing the company to Rockville was given by Tober to Nat Schwedel, Treasurer of the American Dying Company and Vice President of the Rockville Industrial Association....His sons Sidney and Richard are connected with the firm."

A June 15, 1956 *Courant* article (about a terrible accident at the Rockville baseball factory) quotes Meyer Tober, "The mishap is the first with a cutting machine since the company was organized in 1912." We are not sure if **1912** is a typo, or whether the **1902** date was a mistake. The accident involved Alberto Rodriguez, age 35, of East Street, Hartford, who had been working "only a few days at the plant...had a skull fracture and was in critical condition."

On June 17, 1964, *The Courant* reported that a "berserk employee" shot a gun (that he bought Monday in Hartford) at the baseball plant, and that the attacker, Carmelo Reyes, spoke only Spanish, but discussed personal problems at length with Tober. The newspaper characterized him as a "disgruntled employee," who "had worked at Tober five years." The article's sub-headlines said: "Already on probation in Hartford. Fired 7 shots." One shot went through a table and struck Arlene Rose of Stafford Springs. Tober was struck in the chest and died two days later. *The Courant* says Tober was "born in Russia in 1882; lived on Cone Street with his wife. They had two sons." Reyes was eventually convicted of manslaughter because an autopsy showed that Tober, age 82, had died of a heart attack. Reyes pleaded innocent of intent to kill.

Tober items can be found on e-bay and at antique shows. There are several in the collection of the Historical Society.