

## Brown Counties, Invincibles, and Hub Cities: Baseball in the 1880s

After the great Missouri River flood of 1881, there is no record of baseball being played in the river cities of Yankton or Vermillion, Dakota that summer. In 1882, a “Boarding House Nine” (Mrs. Dawson’s Boarding House) played a picked nine of Yankton during the city’s July 4 celebration. The location of the new grounds was described as “the open space at the head of Walnut Street, north of the Rhine”.<sup>1</sup> Walnut Street runs north and south through Yankton and is bisected by Marne Creek<sup>2</sup>, a tributary of the Missouri River. The Yankton Nine edged the Boarding House Nine 36-34 before a crowd estimated to number nearly two thousand. It was also noted that comfortable chairs for the ladies were available at the grounds.

The Yankton ball club formally organized in September of 1882 and, in an obvious overestimation of the earlier success of the club, the Yankton paper said, “The old Yankton club was organized in 1873 and played for four consecutive seasons, playing about two hundred games in southern Dakota and Iowa, with the loss of only one game, the first played with the Custer regiment nine in 1873.”<sup>3</sup> Membership for the club was fixed at fifty cents, a committee was appointed to solicit new members, and practice was scheduled for four o’clock p.m. each day.

The club played their first match game a few weeks later at St. Helena in Nebraska, and their excursion was described in great detail. The team was scheduled to leave at seven a. m. on the morning of the game but many of the members were tardy and the entire club was not rounded up until nearly nine o’clock. They were to cross the river by ferry and go overland by wagon to St. Helena, but upon arriving at the ferry it was discovered that one of the players forgot his banjo “an implement of great importance in a game of ball.” He went back to retrieve the instrument, delaying the group another hour. They encountered wheel trouble with the horse drawn wagon and had to borrow a lumber wagon from a nearby farmer “pulled by two of the slowest plugs of horses ever hitched up” for the rest of their journey. They finally arrived in St. Helena around one o’clock, had some dinner, and beat the local club 28-6 before 500 spectators.<sup>4</sup>

Huron hosted one the earliest base ball tournaments inviting a club from Hand County, another from the small town of Cavour, and the Brown County (Aberdeen) nine to join their own home-town club in a four-team, two-day event in late August of 1883. It seemed to be sort of a round-robin format with each team playing the other entrants once. Despite committing seventeen errors, Brown County defeated host Huron 14-5 in their opener, and downed Cavour and Hand County on their other two games. Brown County then took on a picked nine from the other three clubs entered and beat them to win the \$200 first prize

The Huron paper said that “a great deal of betting was done in the forenoon; but there was no value either created or lost, the money only changed hands.”<sup>5</sup> Coverage of the tournament also noted that complimentary passes would only be issued to members of the contesting clubs and band members “...correspondents of the press are even obligated to pay the necessary 25 cents before entering the grounds.” This implied that this may have been one of the earliest occasions in

the Dakota Territory in which an admission was charged to baseball games as a means to raise funds for tournament expenses and prize money.

By this time, the Brown County (Aberdeen) club, "had gained quite a reputation ... by beating several clubs in that section,"<sup>6</sup> and planned an extended tour into northern Dakota Territory in early September to play the first known games between teams from what would later become North and South Dakota. Their first stop was in Fargo, reportedly strengthened with "new men and steady practice", but Aberdeen defeated them twice 9-7 on August 31 and 18-6 on September 4. Aberdeen then traveled north and beat Grand Forks 6-4 on September 6. The Grand Forks *Plaindealer* reported that "considerable money had changed hands on the game, most of which was won by the home men" but also added "the Aberdeen boys are good fellows, from first to last."

Aberdeen downed Valley City and beat Fargo again before dropping their final game 12-10 to Grand Forks. Brown County backers were reportedly up \$1,500 after the Fargo games and apparently bet heavily on their team against Grand Forks, because afterward it was reported they were "hardly even". The unexpected defeat prompted an accusation that Aberdeen's pitcher Roberts and catcher Burdick had "sold out" (took money to lose) the last game at Grand Forks. In the game in question, Grand Forks took a 9-2 lead, but Aberdeen rallied to go ahead 10-9 before eventually losing 12-10. Some of the Aberdeen players offered this as proof that the game was on the up and up, but according to a reporter with the *Aberdeen Sunday Pioneer* "some of the boys offer proof otherwise," although the nature of the evidence was not specified.

At the same time, the St. Paul, Minnesota Red Caps were conducting their own tour through the Red River Valley and they played Aberdeen while the two teams happened to be in Fargo at the same time. St. Paul won 20-9 and afterward Aberdeen continued their tour by accompanying the Red Caps back to St. Paul. The two clubs played at least one more game, the Red Caps winning 20-10, but no record has been found of these two teams playing any more games in the Twin Cities. However, there is evidence the Aberdeen club did get to St. Paul. On September 19, the Red Caps wrote a letter to the editor of the *St. Paul Daily Globe* answering allegations that they had been offered \$300 to throw their game against Aberdeen in Fargo. If they needed corroborating evidence to back up their denial, the Red Caps offered "... there are also men from the Aberdeen club in town."

Afterward, the Aberdeen club disbanded for the season. Many of the players were likely local residents as it was reported they "returned to their homes in this county." Others may have been outside professionals, or at least talented enough to attract offers from professional teams, as the battery that was accused of selling out the Grand Forks game, Roberts and Burdick, were offered employment by St. Paul, and another member of the club, shortstop Herrick, joined the Fargo club. The same story noted that another member of the Brown County nine, Cotillion, had signed with the St. Paul club while in the city. On September 16, the name Cantillon appeared in a St. Paul box score<sup>7</sup> and he continued to play for the Red Caps the rest of the season. Aberdeen's weekly, the *Saturday Pioneer*, reported on September 20 that "Cotillian" had signed with the St. Paul club.

The next year, 1884, Aberdeen still fielded a team but baseball in town was still mostly played for fun and amusement. Games between the “Phats” and “Leans” and the “Longs” and the “Shorts” were played in Aberdeen and the hardware dealers in town issued a challenge to the dry goods and grocers for a match game that summer. Even the small-town teams that organized didn’t take the game too seriously as evidenced by their nicknames. Wessington Springs called their club the “Pumpkin Huskers” and there was a game between the “Pansie (sic) Blossoms” and the “Rocky Mountain Beauties” in Pierre.

Although these matches were mostly light-hearted affairs, the game could be quite dangerous for the players. After a Clifton-Onida game in July, the game notes reported the following: “Bert Lilly, catcher of the Onida club, was badly used up during the game at Clifton last Saturday. Early in the game one of his fingers was put out of joint by a ‘hot ball’ but Dr. Vesey put it in place and he kept on as though nothing had happened. Later he got a hard one in the throat and one in the breast without flinching, but when his right eye caught one which swelled up as large as a hen’s egg, he was compelled to retire. His pluck was commendable and all regret his misfortune.” In the same article, it was noted that the Clifton club decided to order a mask for their catcher.<sup>8</sup>

An all-female team was formed in the small town of White Lake and a writer in the *Kimball Graphic*, making light of the team in the sexist attitudes of the day, suggested the following rules be adopted.

1. Any player stopping to pull up her stockings while running between bases will be fined nine sticks of gum.
2. Any player calling the umpire “a nasty mean thing” more than three times in a game will be fined one bottle of pickles.
3. Any player who loses her bangs must not stop to recover the same under penalty of one box of chocolate creams.
4. Sliding in on bases strictly prohibited.

The rest of the article went into a lengthy discussion on the style of the suits, or costumes, to be worn by the women. “The blondes want to wear blue and the brunetts (sic) red, and some say they won’t wear any suits at all. We hope the latter number will change their minds however, for while their appearance on the ball field might make the game intensely interesting, yet there are some people just ‘too awfully mean enough’ to make remarks.”<sup>9</sup>

Teams still challenged one another for bragging rights and the closest thing to a championship series in 1884 was a three-game series between the Clifton “Browns” and the Blunt “Reserves”, for the championship of Hughes and Sully Counties. In game one in Blunt, the home team took a 26-7 lead after four innings but Clifton scored thirty-five runs over the next four innings and the visitors escaped with a 42-30 win. The Reserves added two new players for a return game at Clifton played on, “The dandy diamond of the county. It is level and smooth as a floor”,<sup>10</sup> and the Browns prevailed again 40-21.

The two teams took a break before resuming their series because “The Clifton nine will probably take a rest for a few weeks on the baseball business as some of the boys have wells to put down, harvesting to do & etc., but will be on deck for the fall campaign.”<sup>11</sup> When they met again in Blunt in early September, Clifton took a narrow 28-27 win to sweep the series. Now the undisputed champions of Sully County, the Clifton club then traveled to Pierre to play the “Reds” of that city and were soundly beaten 32-0. No excuses were made but it was emphasized that it was unwise for the club, in a time when fielder’s gloves were not yet used, to play so soon after the Blunt game as three or four of the best players were crippled and used up, “...their hands were so swollen and tender that they could not hold to a ball.” Although the local paper said of the Clifton club, “Listlessness characterized their efforts generally”, they also added, “...the Clifton boys are as honorable and gentlemanly set of fellows as ever handled a ball and bat...”<sup>12</sup>

By the mid-1880s there were indications that baseball was becoming a little more serious. The *Yankton Press and Dakotian* wrote, “Baseball seems to have taken the majority of the towns of southern Dakota by storm this season.”<sup>13</sup> First, financial incentives were a part of more and more match games, with either prize of some sort or a “purse” being offered to the winning club, or games being played for a certain amount “a side”, meaning each team put up an equal amount of money with the winning club taking the entire pot. Secondly, clubs were trying to establish a system to determine the best club, either within a county or a larger section of the territory, by inviting other clubs to a tournament, or by challenging a rival club to a series of games. The club winning the tournament, or the majority of games in a series, could then rightly claim to be the champion.

“Geo. Harrington made one of those rare plays of chasing a man from one base to another, then hitting him in the back with the ball, claiming the man was out. By hard work the umpire convinced George that baseball was not played that way now. George said that was the way he played it the last time.”  
*Dakota Huronite*, June 11, 1885

In 1885 the mayor of Canton offered a red cedar bat “with silver trimmings and appropriate engraving” valued at \$50, to any club that could beat the local Gate City club of Canton, with the stipulation that the winner would retain the bat “until wrested from some other club in South Dakota.”<sup>14</sup> It was not clear if they were referencing the same bat or not, but a couple of weeks later the captain of the Yankton “Clippers” challenged the “Young Yanktons” to a match game on July 4 for a silver bat, but no result of the contest could be found. Apparently, another prize was also offered because later that year the Queen City club of Sioux Falls won a “...champion silver ball” by defeating Salem in a game that ended in controversy and the umpire awarding a forfeit win. In their last game of the season, Queen City put the silver ball on the line against Canton. The game was called after six innings due to darkness with the teams tied six all, so therefore, “...this places the bat permanently in the possession of the Sioux Falls nine.”<sup>15</sup>

“It is almost impossible to pick up a Dakota exchange and not find a report of a baseball game. Nearly every town has a club, and we might add, nearly all of them claim to be the champion club of Dakota.”  
*Kimball Graphic*, July 16, 1886

As betting became more commonplace, thus raising the stakes in ball games, teams began hiring outsiders, either a top player from a neighboring town, or a professional ball player from larger cities. The ball club in the small town of Clark reportedly secured a league pitcher and catcher from Oshkosh, Wisconsin for the 1886 season.<sup>16</sup> When Yankton showed up for a game at Wakonda on July 4, they were refused admission to the grounds unless they played without the three new players they had recently added. Yankton, “believing it the right of a baseball club to improve itself and become more effective in its field work” refused and decided not to play at all, and consequently, “the boys came home in bad humor at the repulse.”<sup>17</sup>

At Elk Point, in a rural versus urban matchup, the farmers “Hayseeds” defeated the Elk Point city slickers, the “Dudes” 39-12. The Dudes accused the Hayseeds of using a professional pitcher named Strong in their lineup. The two teams played five more innings, but without Strong playing for the Hayseeds, and this time the Dudes won 19 to 3, which according to the Dudes, was all the proof they needed that Strong was the reason for the earlier win.<sup>18</sup> On Independence Day in Elk Point, a friendly game pitting the Lawyers and Printers versus the Merchants and Clerks ended in controversy, “it being charged that several professionals were wrung in that were not legitimately clerks or merchants.”<sup>19</sup>

The Sioux Falls Queen City club lost an early season game to the little town of Hawarden, Nebraska, whom they claimed used a professional pitcher during the game, prompting them to beef up their squad as well. They brought in a catcher named Joe Raycraft from Chicago and moved their regular catcher, George Crosby<sup>20</sup>, to the pitching box. With the revamped lineup, they ran off a number of victories and challenged the club in Huron, who also employed hired players, to a series of games to decide supremacy in the southeast corner of the territory. After defeating Woonsocket 33-3 in August, a dispatch from the *Woonsocket Times* reprinted in the *Huronite* said, “Huron is bound to have the best there is even of she has to put her hand down in her pocket to hire it.”<sup>21</sup> According to the *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, Huron was strengthened with five men (including a pitcher and catcher) from Harwaden and “The other four are Huron men, or so called. The team includes several well-known professionals.”<sup>22</sup> They took the first game played in Sioux Falls 6-3 but the Queen City club squared the series the next day 4-1. The series was scheduled to shift to Huron a couple of weeks later and it was said, “...it is quite safe to predict that some heavy betting will be done.”<sup>23</sup>

In game three, Sioux Falls led 4-0 after eight innings but Huron scored five runs in the bottom of the ninth to take a 5-4 win. Two of the Huron runs scored when the crowd broke through the ropes separating the fans from the field of play and prevented Crosby, the Sioux Falls pitcher, from making an out. Umpire Fred Gunkle let the play stand which led to an accusation that his calls were made, “..for the purpose of winning bets in which he was alleged to be interested.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, apparently most of the betting, said to exceed \$1,000, was on Huron and Gunkle may

have placed bets of his own on Huron. The game report in the *Daily Huronite* also noted “All talk of hippodrome<sup>25</sup> is bosh”<sup>26</sup> suggesting that the players may not been on the up and up either. Huron replaced Gunkle with a new umpire from Dubuque, Iowa for game four but Crosby struck out twelve and Sioux Falls won again 6-3 and had now won three of four games. Huron took the final game 23-8 but the result was blamed on the fact that many of the Sioux Falls players had to play out of position because Rayburn’s hands were sore and swollen<sup>27</sup> and he could only catch three innings.

While the series was going on, the St. Paul club of the Northwestern League<sup>28</sup> planned a tour west and arranged for a series of games<sup>29</sup> in Sioux Falls. Before a crowd estimated at 1,000, the professionals easily beat the Queen City nine 24-5 in early August. The game report remarked that Sioux Falls didn’t expect to win and, “...to be beaten by a strong professional team is no disgrace.”<sup>30</sup> They next day St. Paul had to score four ninth inning runs to edge Sioux Falls 6-3. St. Paul returned for two more games in early September and Sioux Falls, “strengthened by a change battery and faithful practice” again played St. Paul tough. Queen City outhit St. Paul in the first game, but poor fielding, including a costly throwing error by Crosby allowed St. Paul to escape with a 10-9 win. In the final matchup between the two clubs, before a small but enthusiastic crowd, St. Paul won 6-3. It was said that large bets, at two to one odds against Sioux Falls, “gave a spice to the contest which otherwise might have been wanting.”<sup>31</sup>

Later that summer the Milwaukee franchise in the Northwestern League was having financial difficulties and the manager of the St. Paul team sent a telegram to Sioux Falls management to inquire about the Queen City possibly replacing Milwaukee in the league. St. Paul flattered Sioux Falls by calling their team the best nine in Dakota and predicted they would make a creditable record in the league if they joined. The Sioux Falls team and their fans were excited about joining a professional league, saying the scheme “will reflect great honor on the baseball enterprise of the Queen City”<sup>32</sup>, and began raising the necessary funds, even securing sizable financial backing from private citizens, but the plan never materialized. The main reason given was that the Queen City nine had three professional players<sup>33</sup> and the other six members of the team were local men employed by businesses in town and it would have been difficult for them to leave their jobs to travel for league games. It was felt Sioux Falls would need to employ at least four more professionals, a nearly impossible task this late in the season.<sup>34</sup>

### The Kimball Streak

During the summer of 1886 the ball club in the small town of Kimball claimed to have not been defeated on the diamond in the last four years. The game story of a 13-2 win over White Lake in late July also described the details of the other activities that often preceded and followed ball games during this period. “Both clubs were transported from the Kimball House to the ball grounds by a Buffalo Pitts traction engine, kindly furnished and operated by Carmichael Bros. The engine gaily decorated, drew two new wagons furnished for the occasion by Bockfinger & Co. and Kinsella Bros., in the forward one of which was the Kimball Cornet Band, the rear one being

occupied by the ball teams. The novel turnout excited much amusement. The band discoursed fine music enroute (sic) and at the grounds. In the evening, the visiting club were tendered a banquet at the Kimball House by the Kimball club, and a hop was also gotten up for their benefit at the opera house in the evening.”<sup>35</sup>

Kimball’s reputation had grown to such an extent that their opponents often added “ringers” to their line up in hopes of breaking the streak. In a game against Pukwana, their opponent’s lineup included five players from Chamberlain, a catcher named Watts from Plankinton, and only three local men prompting the local paper to print the team name as “Pukwana (?)” in the line score. Nonetheless, Kimball won easily 14-2 to extend their streak.

The streak finally came to an end in late August in Plankinton when Kimball was defeated 23-17. As was customary, the visiting team was allowed choice of umpire and Kimball brought a man with them to call the game. When they arrived in Plankinton, it was discovered that another man named Cook, a more experienced umpire, was in town, and both teams agreed to have him umpire instead. After a few innings both clubs raised objections to Cook; Kimball alleging he was allowing the Plankinton pitcher a “false balk” but Cook also later admitted to favoring Plankinton because he “did not want to see them beaten too badly.”<sup>36</sup> A third man, Fred Stephens, was finally brought in to finish umpiring the game.

The local paper noted that Plankinton was strengthened by the addition of three new players but placed the surprising loss squarely on the poor play of the Kimball nine, claiming they made “no less than thirty errors.” The game story went on to say, “The *Graphic* has no explanation to make aside from this. Those who saw the game and who have seen the Kimball’s play ball gazed upon their actions that day with astonishment. Perhaps there was a nigger in the woodpile, who knows?”<sup>37</sup>

“Mr. Joseph Bechner, a farmer living near White Lake, issues the following edict to the White Lake ball players; ‘You are hereby requested that next time you are out on Sunday in the country playing ball to keep the road when on your way home and not prowl around my premises like sneak thieves after night when all peaceable citizens are in bed. The gun which was discharged in the air in my watermelon patch will next time be aimed at the moving objects, whoever gets hit will suffer the consequences’”

*Kimball Graphic*, September 9, 1887

### The Watertown Invincibles

The citizens of Watertown were late in organizing their ball club in 1887. It wasn’t until mid-June when they announced they had secured a battery, pitcher M. C. Randall from Groton and a catcher named Ward from Estelline. A new baseball organization was formed and M. O. Fraser was hired to manage the team. \$1,000 in capital was quickly raised and members got busy getting the grounds in shape including the addition of “comfortable” seating and fencing surrounding the field (so that fans could leave their carriages in their barns and pay their way in).<sup>38</sup> Two more men

from Iowa were hired and the club announced they would play at home during the first month and then take an extended road trip.

The club easily won games against local competition by lopsided scores such as 37-3 and 23-4 including three from Aberdeen, “by scores so large as to be unfit for publication”.<sup>39</sup> In early August they beat a club from Marshall, Minnesota three straight to claim the championship of South Dakota and southwest Minnesota. Seeking stiffer competition, the club, now using the nickname “Invincibles” won three more from a club from Spirit Lake, Iowa and now claimed to have won all but two of the 38 games played and to be the champion club of northwest section of Iowa as well. In mid-August, the undefeated Invincibles<sup>40</sup> added pitchers Denny McGinley and Clarence Watts, the latter from the Spirit Lake club they just beat and began a “sojourn to fields unknown” with scheduled games in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, Fargo and Grand Forks, North Dakota, and “other points not determined”.

Their first stop was in Wahpeton on August 13 and the locals defeated Watertown 14-12 in ten innings. However, the game was not without some controversy. One of the Watertown players “hired from other places” (acknowledging that at least some of their players were outside professionals), third baseman J. F. Cantillon,<sup>41</sup> insisted on having the umpire replaced during the game. Cantillon was described by the local paper, the *Wahpeton Times*, as “impudent, blatant, and loud-mouthed”, and “who disgraces the captaincy of the Watertown team”. However, the *Fergus Falls Journal* blamed Watertown's defeat on the “rank decisions of the ... umpire”, the same man they claimed robbed them of an earlier game against Wahpeton. Watertown got some revenge, winning the second game of the series 11-8.

Watertown moved on to Fergus Falls and swept two games by scores of 20-11 and 21-6 on August 15 and 16. They next traveled to Fargo and were soundly beaten by the locals 28-14 on August 17, but edged Fargo 10-9 in the second game of the two-game set the next day. Although the second game was described as “some of the finest ball playing ever seen in Fargo”, the game account mentioned the poor play of outfielder Willie Murphy, as one of the reasons for the Fargo defeat. Murphy was a talented player who had briefly played in the major leagues in 1884 but had a reputation as a drinker. The *Fargo Argus* stated, “It was generally whispered in the grandstand that Murphy's playing was about on parallel with that of a nine-year old schoolboy, and the confidence of a great many who have seen him play heretofore was considerably shaken.”

The Watertown club, who the *Grand Forks Herald* noted had “five paid men on the team, the rest being residents of Watertown”, took the train up to Grand Forks for the last leg of their trip and were pummeled 32-13 on August 19. Watertown pitcher McGinley pitched the entire game, including surrendering 11 runs in the ninth inning, but 15 Watertown errors contributed to most of the Grand Forks runs. The next day, Grand Forks won a much closer and better played game 9-7. The so-called South Dakota champions won just two of six games against North Dakota competition.

Watertown then challenged Fargo, the champions of the Red River Valley League, to a post-season series to determine the “champion baseball team of all Dakota Territory”. Originally, nine games were scheduled, three in Watertown, three more in Huron during the encampment of



the Dakota National Guard, and the final three back in Watertown. They ended up playing a best three out of five series at the Watertown grounds September 6-10. Local management added extra seating and arranged for special excursion rates from the railroad for the anticipated out of town fans coming for what was advertised to be "the finest ball playing ever seen in the territory." Fargo had strengthened with two of Grand Forks' best men but Watertown was not in good shape, their catcher, LaMarr, having broken a finger during the northern trip. Watertown took the first game 20-14; the series being followed in papers from as far away as the Twin Cities with the *St Paul Globe* noting "... there was loose and careless playing" and "the weather was very windy and disagreeable."

Fargo tied the series the next day winning 8-4 and took a two to one series lead beating Watertown 13-9 on September 8. Watertown had a 9-3 lead in the fifth inning but "they [Watertown] went to pieces and the visitors got the lead and kept it to the close of the game." The Watertown paper blamed the loss on LaMarr's injury, as he dropped several balls leading to Fargo runs. Watertown shuffled their lineup, putting John Richter behind the bat in place of LaMarr, and won the next game 13-8 to square the series. The fifth game, scheduled for Saturday was washed out by rain and postponed to Monday. When the Watertown club built a large lead by the fifth inning, Fargo's manager Walker decided he wanted to extend the series to a best four out of seven games, as had been the original agreement. Watertown's manager Fraser said that there had been no such agreement, and "after much arguing", the game proceeded with Watertown coasting to an easy 28-10 win. The local paper suggested that one of the reasons for the Fargo defeat may have been extracurricular activities saying, "...ball players cannot spree half the night and expect to play good ball the next day as the Fargo boys attempted to do."

The tour into northern Dakota and the hosting of the Fargo club, along with coverage of the Red River Valley League in local papers, helped familiarize the Watertown baseball association and fans with league play. In late September 1887, Watertown management initiated a plan to form an eight team league for the following year that would include themselves, Fargo, and Grand Forks of the RRVL, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and four other southern Dakota towns, Huron, Mitchell, Aberdeen, and Sioux Falls and a meeting was planned for Watertown in October. It's not clear if that meeting ever took place, but a meeting was held in Fargo on October, 23. Delegates discussed possible league officers, umpires, a salary limit, and seeking protection under the National Agreement<sup>42</sup>, but no formal action was taken. Members present were aware that the Northwestern League was about to fold, and they decided that if a league was formed, they would take that name for their new league.<sup>43</sup>

"The base-ball craze is growing with a fierceness that threatens the very foundation of society. Politics, even, have gone clear to the background. Base balls are used for paper weights and bats for walking-sticks by those who cannot participate more actively."

*Mitchell Capital*, August 14, 1888

While many neighboring communities were organizing their best nine players in town into competitive teams, often supplemented with paid outsiders, baseball in Mitchell in 1888 was all about recreation and participation for all who wanted to play, regardless of their ability. Fifty-four men joined the Mitchell Base Ball Association when the organization was formed in mid-August and they were “distributed evenly” into six nine-man teams. Originally, the teams were named for the captain, but when the schedule came out a couple of weeks later, the teams had taken the names of major league clubs. Chicago, Boston, Washington, New York, Pittsburg, and Detroit, played a ten-game schedule which each club facing the other five opponents twice.

The association met on August 29 and approved a constitution and by-laws, which was printed in full, taking up half the front page of the *Mitchell Capital*.<sup>44</sup> In Article 1, Section 1, the stated object of the organization was for the “mutual enjoyment of the national game and for the development of baseball players.” In addition to describing the duties of the officers and committees, the by-laws accounted for special circumstances such as a clause stating that any outside nines wishing to use catcher’s equipment may do so by consent of an executive officer upon guarantee of its safe return and payment to the association of \$1 per game.

Despite their desire to keep the league free of such activity, gambling crept into the games. After a contest for first place between Boston and Chicago, the paper editorialized, “...it is to be hoped, however, for the credit of the association and in behalf of the gentlemen who went into it for pleasure merely, that the result of yesterday’s game will do away with the demoralizing practice of betting on the part of the players. It injects an element into the games which destroys in a measure the original intent of the association and changes friendly contests for supremacy into struggles which are liable to lead to bitter personal feeling.”<sup>45</sup>

However, for the most part, the association functioned as intended, in a spirit of light-hearted fun and enjoyment. In one game, Boston’s R. N. Kratz, “attempted to catch a hot liner with his right eye and has since carried that orb in a sling.”<sup>46</sup> Chicago finished their schedule with a record of six wins and four losses and Boston’s record stood at five wins and four losses with one game to play. Scheduled games were postponed due to the county fair, so it wasn’t clear if all games were played or not, but at the association’s year-end meeting in mid-October, it was noted that an assessment of twenty-five cents was levied each member “to clean up loose ends.”<sup>47</sup>

### The Hub City Nine

The foundation for Aberdeen’s powerhouse professional nine of 1889 began a couple of years earlier. The city nine lost a game to the small town of Frederick at Aberdeen’s July 4 celebration in 1887 so in early August the baseball club was reorganized. Stock subscriptions were sold, a new ballpark was built, and although there would be no paid players, week points on the team would be strengthened. The intent was to be able to compete with the strong club at nearby Watertown. The two clubs agreed to play in late August and in what the *Aberdeen Daily News* called a “contest between professional and amateur nines”, Watertown won easily 27-5.

In the spring of 1888, fifty shares of stock were sold at \$10 each, and new ball grounds that included a six-foot board fence, located on the “polo site”, one block east of Main Street on Fourth Avenue, were acquired. Several professional players wrote to manager George Outcelt expressing an interest in joining the team and by May, Smith Harrington and Charley Armstrong “two professional ball tossers well known in this city” arrived from Minneapolis. The club soon added pitcher Jack O’Donnell and catcher Bud Jones from Flandreau and cleaned up on area competition from Aston, Redfield and Milbank.

Outcelt went looking for stiffer competition and scheduled a series of games in Wahpeton and Fargo, considered the two top teams in North Dakota. On Friday July 6 Wahpeton hosted Aberdeen and won 6-1 behind 13 strikeouts by Oestreicher. Wahpeton's star pitcher was on the mound again on Sunday July 8 and struck out 11 in a 9-6 Wahpeton win, the second straight over Aberdeen. The *Wahpeton Times* commented “Aberdeen came up with a great deal of assurance, and were much astonished to be knocked out two games” but added “The boys [Aberdeen] for the most part are gentlemanly on the diamond and play very good ball ...” The same story made note of the fact that the Aberdeen players “dropped their wad” (lost money they had bet on the games).

While in North Dakota Aberdeen also played two games against Fargo, and also lost both by scores of 16-5 and 9-5. Manager Outcelt of Aberdeen blamed the losses on injuries to his best players while the *Aberdeen Daily News* stated, “the absence of their mascot doubtless accounts for their ill luck abroad.”<sup>48</sup> When the team returned home, they were met by the town band at the train depot that “discoursed a number of fine selections to revive the drooping spirits of the boys.”

In their first game after returning from their road trip, Aberdeen committed thirteen errors in a 12-5 trouncing by Redfield. This prompted a complete reorganization of the club, including new management, with the hired players sent packing and new men added. A makeshift club played a few more games the rest of the year but their season was clearly over when in early October, the board fence around the grounds was sold off, transported across town, and used to build stalls and fencing for the livestock exhibits at the Brown County fair.

In the fall of 1888, a young merchant named L. Frank Baum<sup>49</sup> moved to Aberdeen and the fortunes of the town’s baseball team changed. He had been in show business on the east coast and later worked as a traveling salesman. His brother-in-law had moved to Aberdeen in 1881 and established a general store and Baum decided to pay him a visit. He saw great opportunity in the growing community and decided to relocate and open a novelty store called Baum’s Bazaar. He quickly became involved in Aberdeen civic affairs, including the town’s reorganized baseball club, and Baum was elected secretary of the organization. He understood that a good baseball team would be good for the town, which in turn would benefit his business. Not coincidentally, the ball team’s uniforms – gray flannel with maroon piping and “Hub City” written across the chest - and other baseball equipment would be purchased through his store.

When the Aberdeen Base Ball Association met on March 30, it was thought that there were already plenty of good players in town and that only two or three outside men would need to be secured. It was felt that those hired would agree to play for “fair wages” and would be glad to “sign for any sum reasonable”. It was also acknowledged that the home players would also need

to receive some recompense as well. The goal was to field winning team but the priority was to have a group of gentlemen that represented the town in a positive manner and earned their salaries playing ball, "...not perpetually disgusting the spectators and driving the ladies from the field by their unseemly kicking and quarreling."<sup>50</sup> A canvassing committee was formed to sell stock subscriptions at \$10 each (with 10% down and the rest on installments) as a start-up fund, with the expectation that the team, through ticket sales, would be self-supporting thereafter.

\$1,000 was quickly raised, and by mid-May more than 200 shares had been sold with the expectation that 300 shares (\$3,000) was within reach, and so it was decided to hire the top players they could secure to form the best team possible. Baum and Henry Marple, president of the Northwestern National Bank, and the ball team's manger, were in charge of securing players and they received some 60 applications. The contract offered third baseman Bud Jones of Flandreau, South Dakota, called for a salary of \$50 per month, including board, through September 1, and may have been typical of the contract for other players. The second key signing was team captain Thomas Pearce (or Pierce), who was a Princeton University graduate from New York and had recently played professionally with Minneapolis in the Western League

Other team members included catcher Mike Cody, a long-time professional originally from Pennsylvania, pitcher J. W. Gibbs from Minneapolis, and players named Barrett and Greenwell were brought in from Ponca, Nebraska. Some of the players were familiar to Aberdeen fans. John "Jack" McDonald, who played in town the previous season, was the second baseman and third baseman Judson "Jud" Smith, who would later play in the major leagues, had been in Ashton, South Dakota last year. Right fielder H. C. Fisher, left fielder Pat Ward, William Ebinger, and Alton, all local men, rounded out the roster.

Aberdeen laid out new grounds on the outskirts of town near the roundhouse for the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad. The diamond was leveled and rolled, a grandstand seating 500 was erected and "bleaching boards" (bleachers) were installed along the first and third base lines. A high board fence encircled the enclosure. Once completed, the grounds were said to be superior to those even found among professional teams in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Martin Kuehule was awarded the concessions contract to sell fruit and lemonade, and to rent seat cushions to patrons. Local businesses advertised on the fence and the sign in center field for Thompson & Kearney, proprietors of a local dry goods store, read "Hit Me For \$25"<sup>51</sup>

One problem was that many fans would sit atop the fence or watch the game from the hillside or roofs of nearby buildings instead of playing their way in to the ballpark. Lester Ives, who owned property east of the grounds charged people 10 cents (compared to the 25-cent admission fee) to sit on his roof and watch the game. The baseball association responded by installing latticework on top of the fence to obstruct the view, but Ives then elevated the seats on his roof so spectators could see over the barrier. The ball club then added canvas on top of the lattice and even threatened to turn a water hose on the offenders if they still tried to see the games without paying.

The Aberdeen club spent the month of June playing against area small-town amateur teams such as Redfield, Ipswich, and Groton, winning all of them easily. The only blemish on their record

was an upset by Claremont by a score of 12-11 that was blamed on poor umpiring and overconfidence on the part of Aberdeen. They even invited Fargo down for a four-game series mid-month, and won all four, although two of the games were somewhat competitive. Their batters easily hit Fargo pitcher Hollis McLaughlin, while Aberdeen's star pitcher J. W. "Jimmy" Murnane held down the Fargo hitters. However, another Fargo pitcher, Harry Howe, impressed Baum so much he was signed on the spot and instead of returning to Fargo with his teammates, played in Aberdeen the rest of the year. Fargo manager Bayard said his club "have made many friends and enjoyed their visit" and proclaimed the Aberdeen club the "strongest altogether in Dakota."

The salaried men were often "lent" to other teams to help them keep in practice, but the lack of enough games to keep them busy led to a number of disgruntled and dissatisfied players. As a result, the roster had a major overhaul. Gibbs, who was described as a complainer, Alton, Barnett, and Greenwell were all released. Along with the addition of Howe, a new shortstop, Frank Hough was brought in as were two new pitchers, William Eddy of Philadelphia and the aforementioned Murnane of the St. Paul Western League team.

Back in May, several towns in the state, Aberdeen among them, expressed an interest in forming a league for their baseball teams. Representatives met in Huron in early June but only four towns, Huron, Redfield, Parker (Watertown replaced Parker when the schedule was made), and Aberdeen put up the \$100 entry fee to join the South Dakota League. Baum was elected chair of the league's executive committee and he was in charge of hiring salaried umpires and developing the schedule, which, for some reason, wasn't to begin until July 2. However, things got off to a bad start and the whole league seemed to fizzle out. The opener between Aberdeen and Redfield was rained out and both Watertown and Huron failed to appear for scheduled games in Aberdeen. Teams went back to scheduling opponents independently.

The new league decided to adopt the rules of the National League, the only major league at the time. Fans in Dakota knew about professional baseball in the eastern states and had access to rule books (Spalding and Reach Guides were advertised in local newspapers) but the rules were undergoing constant changes during the 1880s and 1890s, so it was sometimes hard to keep up. For example, nine "called balls" were required for a base on balls in 1879. It was gradually lowered to eight in 1880, six in 1884, five in 1887, and four in 1889. Until 1889, substitute players were allowed to enter a game only if there was an injury, or the opposing team consented. There was no pitching mound; pitchers were throwing from chalked box measuring 4' x 5 1/2' and from only fifty feet from home plate, not the 60' 6" of today. Bats could be any length, weight or design the hitter wanted, and even could be flat on one side. Specifications for bat design and composition weren't regulated until the 1890s. Local stores advertised baseball equipment for sale, but it was primarily spiked shoes, bats and balls. The only fielders that wore a glove was the catcher, and they only wore face masks, chest protectors or shin guards if the club could afford to buy them.

A crowd said to number "several thousand" gathered to watch the Aberdeen and Wahpeton ball clubs parade down Main Street before their July 4 doubleheader. In the morning game, Aberdeen scored twelve first inning runs and easily beat the visitors 24-8. The Hub City nine again scored a dozen runs in the first inning of the afternoon contest and beat Wahpeton 35-2 in a game

that was mercifully ended after five innings. The local paper wasn't shy in their criticism of the visitors saying Wahpeton, "...gave the rankest display of chump playing ever seen on the Aberdeen grounds", and, "...it is doubtful if they could hit a balloon with a twelve inch board." The paper went on to add, "...what they [Wahpeton] don't know about playing ball would fill several volumes the thickness of Webster's unabridged."<sup>52</sup>

During the early years of baseball, it was common for teams in professional leagues to travel to small towns to play exhibition games against amateur and semi-pro teams during breaks in their schedule, or after the league season ended. They usually required a fairly substantial guarantee, enough to make a little profit after covering their travel and lodging expenses. Baum made several contacts with teams, trying to entice them to stop off in Aberdeen. He even reached out to the major league Boston Beaneaters (now Red Sox) who were planning a post-season western tour, but those negotiations fell through.

Baum was able to arrange for the St. Paul Apostles, members of the professional Western Association, to come to Aberdeen for a double header on July 25. All of the town's principal business houses closed for the day and special trains on the Milwaukee line were arranged from Redfield, Ellendale, North Dakota and Ipswich, bringing hundreds of fans to town. Harry Howe, Aberdeen's starting pitcher in the morning game was pragmatic about his chances against the pros, but apparently not intimidated, saying, "Of course, St. Paul is not Claremont, but I shall face them just as easily, and if they hit me hard, it will be because they are good men."<sup>53</sup> St. Paul scored a run in the second inning but Aberdeen tied it up in the third. The Apostles got another run in the bottom of the third to take a one-run lead, but Howe and St. Paul starter Willard Mains matched shutout innings the rest of the way with St. Paul holding on to win 2-1.

Although they came out on the short end, Aberdeen felt good about giving St. Paul a scare, and "entered the field much encouraged"<sup>54</sup> for the afternoon game. Starting pitcher Jimmy Murnane, who had played with St. Paul earlier that season, felt confident going in saying, "I'm always in condition and always ready to do my best."<sup>55</sup> However, the "visibly nervous" Murnane was wild, and a throwing error by Howe, playing shortstop for Aberdeen, led to five first-inning runs for St. Paul and the Apostles never looked back, winning 17-3. Murnane had walked eight and thrown three wild pitches by the time he was relieved by William Eddy in the seventh. The baseball association raised ticket prices from 25 cents to fifty cents, and although they dropped both games, the day was a success because, after expenses, the revenue "replenished the association's treasury."<sup>56</sup>

Baum then arranged for a week-long tour of the north beginning August 7 with scheduled stops in Jamestown, Bismarck, Mandan, Fargo, Grand Forks, Grafton, Wahpeton, and Oakes but noted that he would only bring his team to towns that offered a guarantee large enough to meet expenses. The Aberdeen club's ability to travel for games was greatly enhanced by the recent completion of the Aberdeen, Bismarck and Northwestern Railroad. The connection linked Aberdeen with Bismarck directly (and the east/west Northern Pacific Railroad). Securing a \$250 guarantee from the home team, Aberdeen started out with a win over Jamestown<sup>57</sup>, and then moved on to Bismarck for three games; the *Bismarck Tribune* billing the games as being for the

championship of Dakota and as the “sporting event of the year.” Aberdeen took the first two games easily, winning 14-2 behind 17 strike outs by Harry Howe, and 18-9. In the final game, the two clubs played what was called a “novelty” game in which the teams switched batteries. Bismarck's Claude Holley (pitcher) and Thomas Cannan (catcher) played for Aberdeen while Murnane and Cody pitched and caught for Bismarck. Nonetheless, Aberdeen defeated Bismarck again 23-7. Despite the losses, the *Bismarck Tribune* noted, “The Aberdeen men are not only good ball players but are gentlemen with which it is a pleasure to meet.”

The team moved on to Grand Forks and won a tight game 7-3 on August 12, with Murnane holding the local team to three hits. The second game of a doubleheader was rained out. They went down to Fargo and crushed that team 16-3 before going back up to Grand Forks and winning again 7-0 on August 14 with Harry Howe recording 12 strike outs in the shutout. After the game the *Grand Forks Herald* acknowledged, “The Aberdeens have fairly earned the title of champions of Dakota.” Before returning home, the club stopped in Jamestown and beat the locals 18-8 in a game the *Jamestown Alert* said, “lacked every element of interest.” Aberdeen went undefeated on the tour, pushing their record to 29-1 against Dakota competition.<sup>58</sup> After the second Fargo game, their manager presented each Aberdeen player with a broom and ribbon reading “North Dakota to Aberdeen – a clean sweep 1889”<sup>59</sup>, and the ball team returned to town with a hero's welcome. They were met at the train station by the town band and hundreds of Aberdeen citizens on foot and in carriages and paraded through town from First Avenue to Main to the Sherman House for a banquet; “the streets lined with the enthusiastic populace and the gratification over the boy's great success was universal.”<sup>60</sup>

After returning from North Dakota Baum hoped to keep the team together for games during the South Dakota State fair in September. However, Bud Jones left to take a job at an elevator back in Flandreau and William Eddy was released, and a couple of new players were added from Redfield. The club had had trouble scheduling games because most of the teams in South Dakota had either disbanded by this time, or agreeable financial terms could be negotiated. He put feelers out to several clubs in Minnesota, and even professional teams in Omaha, Milwaukee, and Denver, but nothing materialized. As a result, players were still drawing a salary, but had little to do, and the excess in the organization's treasury soon evaporated.

Baum next arranged for another team from the Western Association, the Minneapolis Millers, to come to Aberdeen for two games on August 27, which would be the first on the home grounds in several weeks. On a hot, windy, and dusty day that felt like a, “...torrid breath of a furnace” to players and fans alike, Murnane was wild again and several Aberdeen errors contributed to an 11-1 win by Minneapolis in the morning game. A home run by Howe in the first inning accounted for the only run for the home team. Aberdeen played a little better in the afternoon contest, but McDonald and Smith muffed fly balls in the sixth inning leading to four Miller runs, which turned out to be the difference in an 11-10 Minneapolis win. To make matters worse, the Millers signed Smith and took him back to Minneapolis with them for the rest of the season.

The club was now running a deficit of \$1,000 so all the players were released on October 1, paid off, and left for their respective homes. Cody and Murnane went to St. Paul and Howe to his home in Iowa. Smith, after spending the last month with the St. Paul club, decided to come back to South Dakota to spend the winter. McDonald took a job on the Kentucky railroad, Fisher went into the newspaper business, and Ward went back to his job as a plumber. Captain Pearce, who decided to retire as an active player, thought he also might take up a trade such as plumbing. As for Baum, after putting a great deal of time and money into making baseball successful in Aberdeen, found that he had neglected his business. The Bazaar was deep in debt, and he closed the store and sold out that winter and moved to Chicago. He announced he was done with baseball and took up the writing vocation that made him famous.

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<sup>1</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, July 3, 1882.

<sup>2</sup> Marne Creek was originally called Rhine Creek but the name was changed due to anti-German sentiment during World War I.

<sup>3</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, September 6, 1882.

<sup>4</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, September 16, 1882.

<sup>5</sup> *Dakota Leader* (Huron) August 28, 1883.

<sup>6</sup> *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, August 27, 1883

<sup>7</sup> *St. Paul Daily Globe*, September 16, 1883

<sup>8</sup> *Sully County Watchman*, July 19, 1884.

<sup>9</sup> *Kimball Graphic*, July 25, 1884.

<sup>10</sup> “Base Ball Notes”, *Sully County Watchman*, July 26, 1884.

<sup>11</sup> “Base Ball Notes”, *Sully County Watchman*, July 26, 1884.

<sup>12</sup> *Sully County Watchman*, September 6, 1884.

<sup>13</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, July 23, 1885.

<sup>14</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, June 6, 1885.

<sup>15</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, September 9, 1885.

<sup>16</sup> *Daily Huronite*, July 27, 1886

<sup>17</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, July 6, 1886.

<sup>18</sup> *Union County Courier* (Elk Point, D. T.), June 30, 1886.

<sup>19</sup> *Union County Courier* (Elk Point, D. T.), July 9, 1886.

<sup>20</sup> Crosby later pitched briefly in the major leagues.

<sup>21</sup> *Daily Huronite*, August 5, 1886.

<sup>22</sup> *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, July 3, 1886.

<sup>23</sup> *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, July 14, 1886. 1

<sup>24</sup> *Huron Times*, July 20, 1886.

<sup>25</sup> Hippodrome, the Greek name for a horse racing track, was the term used for a game that is fixed; the result altered to suit gamblers.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Huronite*, July 15, 1886.

<sup>27</sup> None of the players, including the catcher, wore fielding gloves at this time.

<sup>28</sup> The Northwestern Baseball League, made up of cities in the Upper Midwest was organized in 1883, functioned again in 1884, and after not operating at all the next year, was reorganized in 1886. The six member teams that year were the Minnesota cities of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth, and Eau Claire and Oshkosh, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The league disbanded after the 1887 season, but many of the franchises were absorbed into the new Western Association.

<sup>29</sup> The Northwestern League had an uneven schedule and when teams weren't playing league opponents, they often scheduled exhibition games with area amateur and semi-pro teams as a way of raising extra money.

<sup>30</sup> *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, August 10, 1886.

<sup>31</sup> *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, September 3, 1886.

<sup>32</sup> “The league. The Northwestern League Invites Sioux Falls to Join It – Milwaukee Withdraws”, *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, July 29, 1886.



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- <sup>33</sup> The three players were never identified but it is highly probable that the battery of pitcher George Crosby and catcher Joe Raycraft were paid professionals.
- <sup>34</sup> "S. Paul Going to Sioux Falls", *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 31, 1886.
- <sup>35</sup> "Another Victory!", *Kimball Graphic*, July 30, 1886.
- <sup>36</sup> "Their Record Broken", *Kimball Graphic*, August 27, 1886.
- <sup>37</sup> "Their Record Broken", *Kimball Graphic*, August 27, 1886.
- <sup>38</sup> By the mid-1880s, many towns were investing in a fence to enclose their ball grounds. Whereas previously fans just showed up to watch the game, now they were charged a fee (usually 25 cents) to enter the park. This was an important source of revenue for the club.
- <sup>39</sup> *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, August 3, 1887.
- <sup>40</sup> Another source said that they had won all but one of their 38 games played so far.
- <sup>41</sup> James Cantillon, older brother of Mike and Joe.
- <sup>42</sup> "A Base Ball Scheme. A League Composed of Dakota Clubs to be Organized", *Aberdeen Weekly News*, September 30, 1887.
- <sup>43</sup> Base Ball for 1888. Will Aberdeen be Represented in the New League?", *Aberdeen Weekly News*, November 4, 1887.
- <sup>44</sup> "The Mitchell B. B. Association", *Mitchell Capital*, August 30, 1888.
- <sup>45</sup> "Base Ball Gossip", *Mitchell Capital*, September 9, 1888.
- <sup>46</sup> "Base Ball Gossip", *Mitchell Capital*, September 23, 1888.
- <sup>47</sup> *Mitchell Capital*, October 14, 1888.
- <sup>48</sup> *Aberdeen Daily News*, July 10, 1888
- <sup>49</sup> Several years later Baum wrote The Wizard of Oz.
- <sup>50</sup> *Aberdeen Daily News*, April 20, 1889.
- <sup>51</sup> Jud Smith hit the sign during a game against Groton and collected the \$25.
- <sup>52</sup> *Aberdeen Daily News*, July 5, 1889.
- <sup>53</sup> "On The Diamond", *Aberdeen Daily News*, July 25, 1889.
- <sup>54</sup> "Afternoon Game", *Aberdeen Daily News*, July 26, 1889.
- <sup>55</sup> "On The Diamond".
- <sup>56</sup> "Aberdeen vs. St. Paul", *Aberdeen Daily News*, July 26, 1889.
- <sup>57</sup> The *Jamestown Alert* reported the score 18-8, but the *Aberdeen Daily News* said it was 21-9.
- <sup>58</sup> The only loss being Claremont, didn't count St. Paul losses.
- <sup>59</sup> "The Dakota Champions", *Aberdeen Daily News*, August 6, 1889.
- <sup>60</sup> "The Champions", *Aberdeen Daily News*, August 6, 1889.