

## Everybody Happy and Sober: The 1887 Red River Valley League

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### **Introduction: How the Game Was Played in the Dakota Territory in the 1880s**

During the later years of the nineteenth century, baseball rules were still undergoing several revisions, and the year 1887 was particularly unusual. This season, five balls were needed for a walk and 1887 was the only season in which major league baseball counted bases on balls as hits. Four "called strikes" was adopted for this season only and this was the first year in which a batter could no longer call for a high or low ball from the pitcher. The Red River Valley was an independent league, so it was unclear if they adopted the playing rules of Organized Baseball, or used their own

Instead of a mound and pitching rubber, pitchers in 1887 were delivering the ball from a 4 foot by 5' 6" box that was usually chalked. They were required to keep one of their feet on the back line of the box which was 55' 6" from home plate (the modern pitching distance of 60' 6" wasn't incorporated into the rules of Organized Baseball until 1893). Pitchers had only been throwing overhand since 1884; before that they either had to pitch underhanded or side armed (shoulder height restriction).

Consequently, pitchers at the time began developing more speed and the best hurlers had an assortment of breaking balls and off-speed pitches. In fact, the *Grand Forks Daily Herald* picked up a story in which a Dr. Leuf of Philadelphia, writing in a publication called The Medical News, warned of a phenomenon he called "pitcher's arm." Dr. Leuf described the damage caused to muscles, tendons, and bones resulting from "the introduction of modern curve pitching."

Catchers were routinely wearing some type of mask and protection for their hands by this time, but the padded catcher's mitt was still years away. Chest protectors weren't invented until the 1880s but they took while to catch on because most protective equipment was considered "unmanly". Shin guards weren't used until after 1900.

In 1887, a catchers ability to handle these more difficult pitches, and his skill in controlling the opposing teams running game, were highly valued. For these reasons, catchers were among the first professionals recruited by Red River Valley League teams and, besides the star pitcher, were usually the highest paid player on the team. Line scores and game accounts in league newspapers described the efforts of both the pitcher and catcher (battery) as being equally important in the outcome of a game.

An official league umpire, Dan Yorkey of Grafton, was appointed, but usually the umpire was selected by the home team. Often it was one of the substitute players (if they had one) or a fan, considered trustworthy and knowledgeable in the rules of the game, was recruited from the crowd. Sometimes, a man known to be partial to the home team was the only qualification needed to call the game. An early season game between Fargo and Grand Forks was delayed due to "some difficulty experienced in recruiting an umpire." According to game accounts, the umpire had more influence of the outcome of some of the games than the players did.

### **The League is Organized**

The Red River Valley League operated for three seasons; 1887, 1891, and as a class F circuit in 1897. The 1887 and 1891 leagues were not recognized by the National Association, but the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) Baseball Encyclopedia lists the Red River Valley as an "active league" in both 1887 and 1891 with a semi-professional designation. A team roster for the 1887 Fargo team is listed and each member "was a professional player." Both the 1887 and 1891 leagues are also included in the SABR Minor League Research Committee's catalog of minor leagues.

The first baseball league in the Dakota Territory (North Dakota did not gain statehood until 1889) with an organizational structure and playing schedule was the 1887 Red River Valley League. Originally, numerous towns were considered for admission including Jamestown, Valley City, Crookston and Larimore, but the distance between cities was deemed to distant to make admission economically feasible. Finally, the league decided on four teams; Fargo, Grand Forks, and Wahpeton, North Dakota, and Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

League play was made possible because expansion of the railroad and telegraph lines improved transportation and communication in the Red River valley. The St. Paul and Pacific Railway extended its line (through Fergus Falls) to Breckenridge, Minnesota ( a cross river neighbor of Wahpeton) in 1872. The St. Paul and Pacific later merged with the Great Northern Railroad and followed the river north through Fargo and Grand Forks by 1880.

Telegraph lines, which usually ran parallel to the railroad tracks, allowed teams to communicate with clubs from neighboring towns to schedule games and negotiate financial arrangements. Before the league was formed, teams offered other clubs a set guarantee or a percentage of the gate receipts to entice a club from a neighboring town to travel by rail for a match game. Another by product of the expansion of the telegraph was that now settlers in the territory could more easily receive baseball news from the eastern states. National League scores and standings printed in the Dakota newspapers helped stimulate interest and enthusiasm among baseball fans in the territory.

Early playing fields were usually a relatively flat plot of ground large enough to lay out a diamond and have enough space to spectators to congregate. Within a short time more permanent structures were built with seating and a fence surrounding the field. The fence was necessary because clubs needed to begin charging admission (usually 25 cents) and the enclosure served to "cut off access to the diamond for excited enthusiasts who don't belong there." Funds raised from admission fees were needed for equipment, travel expenses, and as will be detailed later, salaries for some of the players.

The first grounds where baseball was played in Grand Forks was in the infield of a horse racing track called Eschelmann Driving Park. By 1887 the team was playing at a site "near the Belmont school house", although the exact location is unknown. In preparation for the season, a players dressing room was erected near the ball park, and in order to attract ladies to the ball games (who were admitted free) part of the grandstand was covered and the seats cushioned. The Fargo ball park, whose location remains unknown, was said to have a separate gate for carriages.

On April 4, 1887, the *St. Paul Daily Globe* reported the "North Dakota has some baseball clubs that can compete with any amateurs and a conference has been called at Fargo for the North and Red River regions to form a league." Representative from the four member cities met in Fargo on May 12 to organize the league and then adjourned to Wahpeton to draw up the playing schedule. Officers elected were H.S. Hyatt, Wahpeton, president, J. Walker, Grand Forks, treasurer, and W. W. Smith, Fargo, secretary. A schedule of 24 games for each team (12 home and 12 away) was agreed upon and play would begin May 30 and conclude September 16.

In addition to the league schedule, Fargo and Grand Forks were to play eight additional games among themselves for a special trophy put up by A.G. Spalding & Bros. of Chicago. Albert Spalding's interest in an obscure independent league in the Dakota Territory was purely commercial in nature. He was interested in expanding into new markets for this growing sporting goods company. Ironically, a front page ad in the *Fargo Daily Argus* proclaimed that the Fargo Gun Store was the exclusive Dakota agent for A.J. Reach & Co. Sporting Goods, a company that was Spalding's chief competitor.

The visiting team collected 40% of the gate, except in Wahpeton, the town being the smallest in the league, where it was 60%, while the home team received the balance. In addition, local merchants put up bonus money for extra-base hits, strikeouts, and exceptional fielding plays. League rules called for "imposing a penalty on a player who uses profane or vulgar language on the ball field, and these rules will be enforced in every case." League rules also stipulated that each team could carry only two paid players (usually the pitcher and catcher) whose salaries were to be based on a percentage of gate receipts. Once the season began, both of these rules were largely ignored.

## The Season Begins

Fergus Falls was proud to announce that their opening game roster was comprised of "all home boys". But, on their first tour north, they were trounced by Grand Forks by a score of 23 to 4 on June 2, after which the *Herald* reported "the Fergus boys became discouraged by the fifth inning and gave up the sponge." Manager Clary of Fergus Falls decided they needed to bring in a new battery and telegraphed Jim Banning and Lee Frazee from the recently disbanded Winona, Minnesota team and arranged for the two men to meet the team in Fargo. However, by the time Fergus Falls arrived in Fargo, "the latter club [Fargo] had secured the men for \$70."

After the Fargo club had effectively stolen their new battery, Fergus Falls recruited a pitcher named McCarthy of St. Paul and catcher John Patton of the Chicago Stars. In Fergus Falls, "the management sized up the weak spots and proceeded at once to supply the remedy ... begun weeding out of the nine and the process has been kept up until the team is now composed of the best talent in the Northwest ... they are after the pennant, and propose to keep the other aspirants working hard to head them off."

By June 14 the *Herald* reported "the Fergus club is much stronger, being nearly all new men." By the middle of August Fergus Falls had "six or eight men under contract which became known when manager Clary ran away and the players began kicking for their salaries." But by August 19 "the hired Fergus Falls players have been discharged ... and the Fergus club is said to have disbanded and may not play any more league games this season."

Wahpeton also made efforts to improve their club but prided themselves on abiding by league rules. At one point, two salaried players were brought in, pitchers named Oestreicher and Favour. The *Gazette* went on to say "in the forming of the league it was stipulated that no club should hire more than two players, and Wahpeton has not yet violated this condition." But soon thereafter, Wahpeton management admitted it had "... given up her hopes of the pennant some time ago but she still claims she had the nest amateur base ball nine in northern Dakota."

For the most part, Fergus Falls and Wahpeton seemed content to engage in matches for the sake of recreation and sportsmanship. On July 5 the *Gazette* reported "the *Journal* (the Fergus Falls weekly) pronounces the Wahpeton nine the most gentlemanly of all who have visited that place, which is the best compliment that could be given them." Wahpeton returned the compliment saying in an August 5 story in the *Gazette* "the Fergus club is composed of very gentlemanly young men" and "it is a pleasure to see a well behaved ball club."

Since the Great Northern Railroad line was completed from Fargo to Grand Forks in 1880, and probably even earlier, base ball clubs from the two towns had been playing against each other, and a friendly rivalry had developed. After Fargo swept two early season games from Grand Forks in 1887, the *Fargo Daily Argus* provided a detailed description of the results, but also made a point of noting that "everyone was happy and sober." However, within a short time, both teams began making accusations against the other, and bad blood developed that lasted most of the rest of the season..

Fargo got off to a hot start winning eight of their first ten games and soon other league members charged that Fargo had violated league rules by "hiring" more than two players. On July 1 the *Gazette* wrote " ... at least five of the Fargo club are hired players who do nothing else, while the Wahpeton players are amateurs, who work for a living and play ball for a pastime." One July 21 the *Herald* reported "the association (Fargo) has invested a thousand dollars on three new men," and on July 29 "the Fargo nine has been strengthened by the addition of Visnor, Adams, and McNeal, all professionals, and powerful batters and fine players."

Fargo officials made no apologies about doing whatever it took, including arranging for outside employment, to put the best possible team on the field. On June 19, the *Argus* reported " ... Frazee and Banning ... the latest additions to the Fargo base ball team have become permanent residents of the city, Mr. Frazee being engaged in the office of the clerk of court, McConnell, and Mr. Banning having been appointed bailiff by Sheriff Benton."

In order to keep pace with Fargo, Grand Forks officials responded by also bringing in outside professionals to bolster their team. On July 6 the *Grand Forks Plaindealer* reported "the Grand Forks team is to be strengthened at all weak points and manager Wilder will give the city a club that will be close up to the frost." The *Herald* went on to say "the Forks came to Wahpeton on their first tour with two imported players, Bray and Cardno. Upon returning to Fargo, it was found that Fargo had strengthened her club. The Forks then followed suit and got new players and finally the Forks and Fargo had ten men under contract."

The only interruption in the early part of the season was a severe tornado that struck Grand Forks on June 16. Telegraph lines were blown down hampering communication up and down the valley for a few days. Fortunately, the Grand Forks team was in Fargo at the time and were beaten 12 to 2 the next day but the *Herald* explained "our boys were unable to play their best on account of the anxiety concerning the storm." Apparently their ball park sustained some damage during the storm because on July 7, in a *Plaindealer* story about an upcoming exhibition games against Hope, North Dakota, remarked "these are the first games on the grounds since they were re-built at a large expense."

The once friendly rivalry between Fargo and Grand Forks heated up over the summer and evolved into name calling and accusations. On July 27 the *Plaindealer*, in an obvious dig at their rivals to the south, reported after concluding a series with Fergus Falls, "The Fergus players are ball players, and when they have kicking to do they do it in a gentlemanly manner, so different from the Fargo aggregation." Fargo then fired back at Grand Forks. In a report on an early August game in which Fargo was awarded a 9-0 forfeit win, the *Argus* commented on "their [the Grand Forks team] propensity to slip into their costs and make a 'bee-line' for the Manitoba [railroad] depot the moment a decision did not suit them."

The hard feelings and "kicking" as it was called, came to a head a few days later when the umpire Dan Yorkey resigned in disgust during another Grand Forks – Fargo contest. It was only after the fans demanded their money back that the teams decided something needed to be done. On August 8 the *Argus* said "by an agreement between the clubs, the umpire will have the authority to impose and collect fines for all violations of the playing rules by the players. It is believed this will prevent the recurrence of the disagreeable features which have heretofore marred the contest between these two evenly matched clubs."

The *Argus* did admit "it should not be supposed that the Forks is the only club that has attempted this hoodlum role, all have done more or less of it." The teams apparently patched up their difference because Grand Forks agreed to play in Fargo for two benefit games to raise money for the Fargo Base Ball Association in early September.

It seemed Fargo would stop at nothing to hold off second place Grand Forks late in the season. According to the August 8 *Plaindealer*, Fargo hired a crack pitcher named McCallum from the Northwestern League for \$200, not to bolster their staff, but to pitch for Wahpeton in an upcoming two game series against Grand Forks. The *Herald* also caught wind of the plan saying "... accuse the Fargo team of hiring a battery for Wahpeton, so as to try and beat the Forks club there, and thus lower the standing of the latter club." Apparently Fargo's scheme backfired as Grand Forks beat Wahpeton 18 to 8 in the first game of the series. This may have been one of the few occasions in baseball history when a team brought in an outside ringer only to have him play for another team.

### **Welcoming Watertown to the Valley**

In the southeastern part of the territory (present day eastern South Dakota) strong teams emerged in Watertown, Sioux Falls, Huron and Aberdeen. Watertown, the self-proclaimed "Champions of South Dakota" made a swing through the Red River valley in mid-August so teams took a break from league play for games against the club from Watertown. At their first stop in Wahpeton on August 13, Watertown was defeated by the locals 14 to 12, reportedly their first loss of the season. Watertown got revenge the next day defeating Wahpeton 11 to 8.

One of the Watertown players “hired from other places” was a third baseman named Cantillon. Although he was not specifically identified, this most likely was Joe Cantillon who played with Eau Claire and Minneapolis in the Northwestern League in 1886. There is a gap in his playing record for the 1887 season meaning he may have been playing independent ball in Watertown that summer. Joe Cantillon, would go on to a career as a player, manager, and umpire in professional baseball that would span twenty-five years. Joe's brother Mike also had ties to the region as he served as president of the South Dakota League in the 1920s.

Watertown moved on to Fergus Falls and swept two games by scores of 20 to 11 and 21 to 6 on August 15 and 16. They next traveled to Fargo and were soundly beaten by the locals 28 to 14 on August 17, but edged Fargo 10 to 9 in the second game of the two game set the next day. The Watertown club took the train up to Grand Forks for the last leg of their trip and were pummeled 32 to 13 on August 19 and lost again to Grand Forks in the finale 9 to 7 the next day. The so-called South Dakota champions split their eight games against Red River Valley league competition.

After the Watertown games, the teams resumed league play. Exact team won-loss records were difficult to determine. First, in addition to the regular league schedule, teams often played each other in exhibitions or "challenge" games to settle some previous dispute. They also played a number of "benefit" games as fundraisers to help fellow league member raise extra cash to meet expenses. Second, the Grand Forks and Fargo papers often printed different standings on the same day based on games they felt the local team "deserved to win" or "should have won." By the end of the season, Fergus Falls and Wahpeton were so far behind the league leaders, their local papers didn't feel the need to print league standings.

On September 1, the *Plaindealer* printed the following league standings showing Fargo with a two game lead over Grand Forks. Note, however, that total league wins by all teams (36) does not equal their total losses (35).

Team	W	L
Fargo	15	4
Grand Forks	13	6
Fergus Falls	5	13
Wahpeton	3	12

A two game series between the leaders was played in early September to determine the league championship. In the first game, Fargo pushed across five runs in the tenth inning to defeat Grand Forks 12 to 9 and then won again the next day 4 to 3. The *Argus* never printed any final league standings and it wasn't until October 19 that the *Herald* printed the following standings. The Wahpeton loss total was probably a misprint, and instead was likely 12. Even so, total wins still do not equal losses so final, accurate standing of the clubs in the 1887 Red River Valley League may never be known.

Team	W	L
Fargo	19	5
Grand Forks	17	7
Fergus Falls	5	19
Wahpeton	3	21

Regardless, there was no dispute that Fargo had the best record and was declared league champion. The *Globe* wrote "Fargo has the champion base ball club west of St. Paul or any other place ... the professional ball team [Fargo] will be banqueted by the admirers of the game in the near future ... the lull in the base ball furor has been broken by an outburst of enthusiasm over the display of the pennant won in the Red River Valley League by the Fargos ... Fargo is proud of its laurels upon the diamond ... it is a strong club, and it is believed can hold its own on

the diamond with any of the leagues. They are in demand at fairs and can expect to take a tour through South Dakota ..."

### **The Players and Their Records**

Team rosters were very fluid, with teams trying out new pitchers and catchers on almost a weekly basis. The Fergus Falls club claimed to have carried just the two allowed salaried players (McCarthy and Patton) at any one time, and the only two professionals with Wahpeton were pitcher Oestreicher and catcher John Favour. But by the end of the season most of the players on the Grand Forks and Fargo clubs could clearly be described as professionals. On July 30, the *Globe* wrote "Most of them started the season with only batteries of non-resident professionals, but there are not more than two or three of either nine that have pursuits other than baseball." The Grand Forks team had an almost complete turnover of their roster by mid July and by the end of the season only catcher "Dad" Cardno and pitcher William Bray remained from the opening day lineup

At the end of the season the *Argus* provided a brief biographical sketch of the fourteen Fargo players who saw action during the year, and all but one had previous experience in other professional leagues. In addition, outfielder "Gentle" Willie Murphy had major league experience, playing with the Cleveland Blues of the National League in 1884 and catcher Jim Banning who would appear briefly with Washington, also in the National League, in 1888 and 1889.

In addition, attempts were made to compile individual batting, fielding, and pitching statistics for league players. This proved to be impossible due to the lack of complete box scores in league newspapers. No player statistics were ever printed in league newspapers, and those records that were available were sometimes highly suspect. For example, in a June 27 game Grand Forks pitcher Bray was credited with twenty assists, but that game's box score also had him recording 16 strikeouts so obviously the scorer gave him an assist for each of his strikeouts.

Most of the box scores in the *Plaindealer* and *Argus* had a consistent format commonly seen in the nineteenth century. However, box scores in the *Herald* listed the following statistics for each player; ab, r, lb, sb, po, a, and e. Given the rules at the time, it was unclear if the "lb" column represented singles, or times reaching first base. The inclusion of individual stolen base "sb" totals was assumed to reflect the importance placed on advancing around the bases after reaching first base by any means possible.

At times the *Gazette* used an alternative format to summarize Wahpeton games. One variation resembled a score sheet in which nine columns followed each player's name to represent each of the nine innings. Plate appearances were marked with either an "O" to indicate an out made or a "1" to indicate a run scored. On occasion the *Gazette* printed a game summary they labeled "Aggregate Bases." This provided a tally for the team for each of the following categories; by muffs, stolen off, base hits off, other bases on hits off, passed balls off, hits by pitcher off, called balls off, two base hits, and by grounders missed. The "Aggregate Bases" summary appeared to recognize the importance of more modern statistics such as on base percentage and total bases as a measure of offensive performance.

### **Fargo's Post-Season Challenge and the Close of Base Ball in the Valley**

Fargo did challenge Watertown, who despite their 4-4 record against Red River Valley League teams a month earlier, claimed to be the champion base ball 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. On September 6 Watertown defeated Fargo 20 to 14. The only account of the game comes from the *Globe* saying " ... there was loose and careless playing" and "the weather was very windy and disagreeable."

Fargo tied the series the next day winning 8 to 4 and took a 2 to 1 series lead beating Watertown 13 to 9 on September 8. Watertown had a 9 to 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." Watertown evened the series 13 to 8 the next day and won the series with a 28 to 10 drubbing of Fargo on September 10.

While Watertown could rightfully claim to be champions of all Dakota, the Fargo nine returned home disappointed. The *Argus* summed up the feeling in town by saying "The laurels of the Fargo champion base ball nine brought back from the contest in South Dakota were badly frost bitten, and no band or concourse of admiring who had much money staked on their success met and orated them on their quiet arrival. There is no satisfactory explanation of how the Watertown club did them up - but they are still champions of North Dakota and will remain such."

In addition to the losses sustained by the gamblers, investors in the Fargo club also lost money in 1887. Under the heading: "They Lost \$1,000", the *Globe*, in a byline from Fargo dated September 23 wrote "The base ball season fanned out Wednesday with the chief mourners those who put in the \$1,000 or so that the revenues failed to cover." As for the other league members, Grand Forks also claimed a loss of about \$1,000 and the financial situation in Fergus Falls was unknown due to the fact the team treasurer had skipped town. Wahpeton, which claimed to have had only two salaried players during the season, felt they would break even if all subscribed money was paid up.

Despite the leagues tenuous financial situation, and the various disputes and other problems, directors soon began planning to re-organize the league for 1888, and even expand to eight teams. It was felt Fergus Falls and Wahpeton would drop out, but Winnipeg, Manitoba (also on the railroad line from Fargo through Grand Forks) would join Fargo, Grand Forks and several South Dakota towns including Huron, Watertown, Mitchell, Aberdeen, and Sioux Falls and the circuit be renamed the Northwestern League. These plans never materialized and Fargo and Grand Forks fielded independent teams the new few years.

After Fargo returned from their series with Watertown, they were scheduled to play Grand Forks in a series of five games for a purse of \$500 at the state fair in Grand Forks. The local team beat Fargo 8 to 6 in the first game of the series on September 19 but neither the *Plaindealer*, *Herald*, or *Argus* mentioned any subsequent games. It remains unclear who put up the prize money and if either of the teams claimed it. In addition, after the May *Plaindealer* story about the Spalding trophy, none of the league newspapers made any further mention of it. In games between Fargo and Grand Forks that were clearly described as exhibitions, Fargo held a 4 to 3 edge. However, often game reports did not make a distinction between league games and exhibitions, so it was unclear if this series ever took place or if any of the teams ended up with the trophy.

### **Summary**

In 1887, an ambitious effort was made by baseball enthusiasts to organized a league among base ball clubs in the Red River Valley. What started out with high hopes quickly evolved into a bitter rivalry between the league's top two teams; Fargo and Grand Forks. Each club ignored agreed upon rules about the hiring of professionals in an attempt to field a better team than the other. As a result of the imbalance this caused, fan interest and attendance declined late in the season, and teams closed the season in the hole financially.

On September 5, the *Wahpeton Globe* aptly summed up the fate of the 1887 Red River Valley League. The league it said, "failed in its original intent of "amusing the people of the valley with amateur playing." The *Globe* accused every club (except Wahpeton of course) of violating the league agreement of having only two paid players per team and that they "violated it so shamefully and do not deny having done so." The *Globe* grudgingly said "If the championship can be given to any club, we suppose Fargo will get it, but under the stipulations, we fail to see that she is entitled to it. It certainly is no credit to the town."

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