

Many Exciting Chases After the Ball
Nineteenth Century Base Ball in Bismarck, Dakota Territory
Terry Bohn

Introduction

Versions of base ball were played in the Dakota Territory since at least the early 1870s. When Bismarck was still known as Edwinton (the name was changed by the Northern Pacific Railroad to attract German investors), base ball was played in the city and at the military posts at nearby Fort Rice and Fort Abraham Lincoln. The ball playing wasn't of particularly high quality, but there was a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement among players and fans. Before North and South Dakota gained statehood in 1889, one of the ways in which settlers in the territory considered themselves a part of the United States was by playing America's "national game."

Settlers in the Bismarck area brought various versions of bat and ball games with them they had learned previously. In an 1886 game, a player named Moorhouse was quoted as saying "he hadn't played much of the new-fangled base ball, but when he went to school he was a dandy at three-old-cat." In the same game, Moorhouse called for a "hip ball"¹ indicating they were playing under rules which allowed the batter to indicate where he wanted the pitcher to deliver the ball. In 1889, two rural nines got together on the Bismarck grounds and played a game "for a liberal purse" under rules they knew as barn ball. The 65 to 33 final score was highlighted by "many exciting chases after the ball."²

Custer's Seventh Cavalry Plays Base Ball

The earliest baseball in the Dakota Territory was played at the military forts in the region that were established to protect settlers and the workers who were building the Northern Pacific Railroad westward. Soldiers learned the game as boys growing up in the East or during their service in the Civil War. Captain Fredrick Benteen was assigned to the newly-formed Seventh Cavalry, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer at Fort Rice, thirty miles down river from Fort Abraham Lincoln (near present day Bismarck, North Dakota) in the Dakota Territory. In 1873, he organized the Benteen Base Ball Club, representing Company H. Another base ball club was formed at Fort Lincoln called the Actives, made up of members of Company L. Between 1873 and 1876 the clubs played against other military squads as well as civilian teams.³

Benteen's soldiers purchased over a dozen bats and baseballs, and according to their own record, won twelve out of seventeen games with other units. The Benteens beat E Company's picked nine, which was made up of members of the infantry garrison at Fort Randall, Dakota Territory. The local *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, stated "Neither club played up to their standard owing to the high wind." When the Benteens lost a game featuring plenty of betting to the First Infantry, based in Fort Randall, the *Yankton Press* reported "It is hoped that these two nines will meet again soon, as a large amount of money will probably change hands in such an event."⁴

While on the Black Hills Expedition in 1874, the Actives defeated the Benteens 11 to 6 in a game of base ball on the site of present-day Custer, South Dakota, near Rapid City.⁵ Custer did not witness the contest as he and a small party of men were off climbing nearby Harney's Peak on

the day of the game. But, Trooper Theodore Ewert, a member of the Seventh Cavalry, wrote this account in his diary “The soldiers wiled away the long summer day with a game of base ball, a genuine Black Hills first, including a dispute over the umpire's impartiality.”⁶ On the same day, July 31, 1874, Brigadier General Joseph Green Tilford wrote in his journal “On the occasion of Custer and the press being absent from camp, the troopers had a ball game.”⁷

The July 31 game was the first of a series of three games between these two teams. The Benteens won the second game, also played in the Black Hills, by a score of 16 to 11, but there is no record of the third and deciding game having taken place. However, there are references to even earlier base ball games on military forts in the Dakota Territory. In May of 1874 the officers at Fort Buford (near present day Williston, North Dakota) put up a purse of \$100 for which the post base ball clubs were to play a series of games.⁸ There are no written records of the results of these ball games.

Captain Benteen, and Company H under his command, was transferred to New Orleans in 1875. During that summer, two teams calling themselves the “Alerts” and the “Nameless” played base ball at Fort Lincoln. Benteen and Company H returned to the Dakota territory, and in 1876 Custer led the Seventh Cavalry on another expedition westward, this time to quell an Indian uprising in Montana. Benteen was the commander of three columns of soldiers during the Battle of the Little Big Horn, also known as “Custer’s Last Stand” in June of 1876. Benteen survived the battle but his unit, and members of the post base ball clubs, sustained heavy casualties.

The best player on the Actives was First Sergeant John McCurry, a pitcher who reportedly had professional aspirations. McCurry suffered a gunshot wound to his left shoulder during the battle. A second baseman named Williams had signed a contract to play ball for Pittsburgh after his enlistment was up. He was also wounded, and never played for Pittsburgh. Two other ballplayers, Alex and Charlie Bishop, also sustained wounds that day.⁹ The only other known members of Benteen’s Base Ball Club were Private William Davis and a shortstop named Andrew Burt. Nothing is known of their fate at the Little Big Horn.¹⁰

After the Seventh Cavalry was decimated at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, there is no further record of the Benteen Base Ball Club. The Fort Lincoln Actives are not mentioned again until 1879 when they came into Bismarck to play the local team, the Blue Stockings, in a July 4 contest.¹¹ In this game there were several horse races going on near the ball grounds, and the umpire called time out before the start of each race to allow the ball players to place their bets on their favorite horses.

Base Ball in Bismarck and Mandan

After the discovery of gold in the Black Hills, Bismarck, on what was known as the “Custer Route”, became a major overland freight shipping center. Also, in 1873, the Northern Pacific Railroad reached the eastern bank of the Missouri River, and consequently the city grew very rapidly. The base ball teams at Fort Lincoln played against other military posts and local nines, implying teams from Bismarck were playing base ball against the soldiers shortly after the city was founded.

The first written record of a base ball game in northern Dakota Territory took place in Bismarck on August 10, 1873. The “Bismarck and Camp Hancock Base Ball Club” defeated the “D Company, 20th Infantry, Base Ball Club” of nearby Fort Abraham Lincoln. Camp Hancock, another of the military forts established to protect Northern Pacific Railroad workers, was located within the city of Bismarck. The score of the game remains unknown, but apparently the Bismarck club won the game as team captain A. J. Smith wrote a letter to the editor of the *Bismarck Tribune* congratulating the soldiers on their “gentlemanly conduct and good playing ... although unfortunate enough to be beaten.” It was implied that there may have been earlier games for the Bismarck club as the same story stated “... we have never before played a club with so little ill feeling being shown on either side.”¹²

On July 4, 1877, a team made up of local merchants defeated a team composed of county officers by a score of 27 to 2. M. B. Doyle, captain of the county officers nine, wrote a letter to the editor in both the July 9 and July 13 issues of the *Bismarck Tribune* in which he suggested one of the reasons for the defeat on Independence Day was that “the ladies of the picnic committee required the services of some of our most worthy officials and best players.” This game also offered the first suggestion of professionalism in the territory as Doyle accused the merchants of hiring six salaried professional players, one of whom reportedly drew a salary of \$1,400 from an Indianapolis club, and stated “a stranger would think that it was the White Stockings of Chicago that had come to display their skill upon the diamond.” He could offer no definitive proof to back up his claim, but suggested that in future games between the two teams, “the merchants nine will confine themselves to those in mercantile pursuits.”¹³

The first mention of a base ball team in neighboring Mandan comes from 1882 when they challenged Bismarck to a game but the *Bismarck Tribune* stated “No such organization exists in Bismarck” and further “All our active young men are too busy attending to business to make clowns of themselves upon the diamond.”¹⁴ But, once the Northern Pacific Railroad bridge was completed across the Missouri River, the Bismarck and Mandan nines would begin playing match games regularly beginning in 1883. This was also the first year the Bismarck team was called the No. 1 Hards, named for a group of city firemen.

In 1884, the Mandan base ball club embarked on an ambitious eastern trip in which they were to play clubs along the Northern Pacific line. They had scheduled games with Jamestown, Valley City, Fargo, Moorhead, Grand Forks, and even as far as Minneapolis and St. Paul. But, after being beaten badly in Valley City, they turned around and came home, and according to the *Bismarck Tribune* “will probably not recuperate sufficiently to go the states this season.”¹⁵

The Teams and Players

By 1885, Bismarck had teams called the Regulars or the First Nine, but they weren't made up of the best players in town. There were no set rosters, and players moved from one team to another, often on a weekly basis. Usually, someone would get nine players together, name himself the team captain, and issue a challenge to a rival, who would in turn get his team together. Then the captains would come up with respective team names, set a date and location for the game, and establish the amount of the wager or “purse.”

There were teams called the Palmer Aggregation, Holley's Invincibles, Ryan's Colts, Edgerley's Bronchoes, and the Irrepressibles. In 1887 alone, teams took the field with names such as the Rip Snorters, the Terrors, the Howlers and the Brick Bats. Such was the informal organization of base ball teams that in 1887 the Brick Bats played a “club picked up around town and not sufficiently organized to possess a name.”¹⁶ At different times the regular nine was called the Capital Citys or the Professionals, but it wasn't clear if they were referring to professional ball players, or professional men playing base ball.

In addition to the loosely organized clubs in the city, professional and social groups formed their own teams. The doctors, lawyers, and ministers had ball clubs with the creative names: the Aesculapians (named for the Greek God of medicine), the Blackstones (named for the famed British jurist), and the Divines. The “fats” and “leans” had teams called the Heavyweights and the Featherweights and there were games between the Muffers and the Butter Thumbs. The saloon keepers of the city organized a team and challenged “any class, profession, clique, or clan” but as they wanted to play only on Sundays (the only day the local watering holes were closed) they could find no opponents.

Games were played in the mid to late afternoon so that nine innings could be completed before darkness set in. Therefore, most of the early ball players were young professionals and businessmen who had the ability to leave work early. William DePuy, an early pitcher, was a prominent dentist in Bismarck. Outfielder Myron Hutchinson was the chief clerk at the local land office and John Tibbels was an attorney. John Homan was a baker and restaurant keeper who later held the position of city engineer and served a term in the state legislature. William Falconer, one of the most prominent early players in Bismarck, later served as manager of the team and even umpired from time to time. He held various government positions in the city and county including register of deeds, treasurer, and city assessor.

Alexander McKenzie was one of the most notorious early territorial and state political figures. Though he, himself, never held political office, his “McKenzie Machine” was widely accused of stealing votes, intimidating voters, and physically beating opponents. Later in life he was involved in a gold mine theft scheme in Alaska and a fictional character, based on McKenzie, was featured in a movie called *The Spoilers* and in James Michener's novel *Alaska*. But, as a young man in the 1880s, McKenzie was one of the best ball players in Bismarck.

The most spirited games in 1885 and 1886 were among the various boarding houses and hotels in Bismarck. Teams were formed from guests staying at the various lodging establishments and other players that could be found around town. Elaborate challenges from one team were printed in the local newspaper along with the response, accepting the challenge, from the opposing team. These boarding house games seemed to have a tone of good-natured fun as the *Bismarck Tribune* reported in 1885 “the Stewart boarding house celebrated the victory last evening by an impromptu strawberry and ice cream festival to which the Falconer nine were invited and all united in scientific and enthusiastic discussion of the national game.”¹⁷

Almost always there was some type of wager on the game, with each team putting up a few dollars, the “purse” being held by some trustworthy fan, and winner take all. Later, because of the inequity of the various pick up teams, the betting became more sophisticated with odds being

offered. In one game, the Regulars needed to beat the Reserves by at least nine runs to collect their winnings. More important than the money were the prizes put up for the winner. In 1887, two teams played for a “championship belt made by the young ladies of the city”¹⁸ and the next year, two clubs played for \$5 and “a league ball.” But, hospitality and good-will were more important than wins and losses and even prize money from the wagers. In an 1888 game, the final score was secondary to the fact that at the close of the game, the Bismarck club invited the Mandan nine to an elegant supper at a local restaurant and “the boys returned home feeling they had been well treated.”¹⁹

The Game on the Field

At times players in Bismarck appeared to have a firm grasp on the rules of base ball, and at other times were twenty years behind the eastern part of the country in understanding the game. Early score keeping was very rudimentary as in an 1885 game, when a runner crossed home plate he “chipped his tally on a stick of pine.”²⁰ But, there was also an interest in learning more about the game. An early player named Call took a trip to Chicago in 1887 to take in some National League games and returned with “the most modern kinks and maneuvers to paralyze an opposing nine.”²¹

Many rules appeared to have originated out of tradition or were made up to address a specific circumstance. A 1887 game ended due to darkness after 7 ½ innings. The umpire cited a rule that if teams had an uneven number of times at bat “the game shall be decided on the standing of the nines at the end of five innings.”²² In another game, when one team's catcher was injured and the other team's backstop had to catch for both teams, the umpire suspended the rule that allowed the batter to try to reach first base if the catcher dropped the third strike.

Professional base ball in the east was undergoing a transition at this time. Changes in the design of the base ball made it easier for batters to hit it harder and farther, resulting in higher scoring games and the decline of what was known as the scientific game. This appeared to be true in the Dakota Territory as well as in June 1886 the *Bismarck Tribune* editorialized “batting seems to be the great and paramount qualification for the base ballists now instead of the old fashioned idea of good fielding, good catching and throwing gaining glory. The man who can flatten the ball with one fell swoop and bring in three or four runs at a time is considered the artist.”²³

The earliest games in Bismarck were played at a site described as “the grounds east of the city” or “the race track grounds”, probably the same place. Later, there was mention of “base ball grounds north of town” and “Summit grounds.” The exact location of these playing fields is not known. By 1887, games were being played on the “hill back of” or “the grounds north of” the Episcopal church. Across the river in Mandan, the first reference to base ball grounds comes from an 1883 game with Bismarck played “near the stage stables.” But by 1888 the Mandan base ball club had initiated a fund raising effort to erect a grandstand on their grounds. These sites were likely somewhere near the Northern Pacific Railroad depot, but the exact location remains unknown.

Umpires in the Dakota Territory in the nineteenth century were usually a trustworthy fan selected from the crowd. They only needed a basic knowledge of the rules of the game and meet the

approval of both teams. In an 1885 game in Bismarck, a local judge was selected " whose lack of knowledge of some of the minor technicalities of the game was counterbalanced by his wonderful abilities as a harmonizer."²⁴ A description of this same game also noted "nine men on each side and an umpire in the middle" implying the umpire may have been positioned behind the pitcher. Umpiring a game in the nineteenth century could also be quite dangerous. In a later game in Bismarck, the umpire was struck in the nose by a foul tip (suggesting the umpires were now stationed behind the catcher) resulting in a broken nose and a tooth knocked out which "bled profusely." The *Bismarck Tribune* went on to say "The accident was a regrettable one, but one of those which sometimes befall an umpire."

In 1889, the Bismarck team was photographed in their new gray uniforms with black trimming, which were said to be modeled after the "Chicagos". In this picture, bats and balls were present, as well as what looked to be a catcher's mask and chest protector. No fielding gloves could be seen in the photograph and there was no mention of any in the base ball news reported in the *Bismarck Tribune*. It is likely they were still playing without gloves, as there were numerous reports of players injuring their fingers or hands from being hit by a liner or trying to field a hot grounder.

1889: The Championship Season

1889 was the high-water mark for base ball in Bismarck. Anticipating statehood that fall, a constitutional convention was to be convened in Bismarck beginning July 4. The local base ball association asserted that the team needed to be strengthened and the grounds placed in good condition because "the city will be crowded with visitors" and will "have a number of strangers and guests to entertain." The club also decided to "induce some of the best players in the northwest to become members of the team" - the first overt admission they needed to attract outside professionals to field a competitive team.

In April the base ball association embarked on a fund raising effort to fence in the grounds, build a grand stand, and buy new uniforms for the players, by offering anyone who would subscribe \$5 a season ticket. After obtaining permission from the city to "cross the street on the hill" construction soon began and by mid May the site, north of the Episcopal church, was called the "best in the northwest."²⁵ With the new fence enclosing the grounds, the club could for the first time charge admission – 25 cents for the grand stand and 15 cents general admission.

During the constitutional convention, even the delegates in town got into the act, and there was a series of games between teams called the "republicans" and the "democrats." One of the issues to be decided at the convention was whether the new state of North Dakota would be wet or dry. In a July game pitting the "prohibitionists" against the "antis" even the politicians placed wagers on the outcome of their games. If the prohibitionists lost, they had to buy champagne for the antis, but if the wets lost, they were to furnish lemonade for the dries. There was a comment made that it was difficult to find enough prohibitionists in town to fill a nine man base ball team.

In August the Bismarck club was notified that the base ball club from Aberdeen, in present day South Dakota, would be town the following week to play. Aberdeen had the first openly professional base ball team in the Dakota Territory; their team made up entirely of paid outside

players.²⁶ The team was organized by L. Frank Baum, who years later would write *The Wizard of Oz*. Baum was a shopkeeper in Aberdeen in 1889 and only took an interest in base ball because the club would have to purchase uniforms and other equipment through his store, Baum's Bazaar. The *Bismarck Tribune* billed the games as being for the championship of Dakota and as the "sporting event of the year." On August 8 Aberdeen beat the locals 14 to 2. The next day 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 to 7.

To conclude the 1889 season, in September the Bismarck team traveled to Grand Forks to play against the club of that city and "other leading teams in the Red River valley." After the first game on September 17, manager Falconer sent the following telegram to association directors back in Bismarck: Bismarck 8, Grand Forks 0, Battery, McGrade and Cannan. No Errors. According to the *Bismarck Tribune* "as soon as news spread among the sportsmen of the city, there was a great deal of jubilation and all drank merrily to the health of the victorious athletes."²⁷ Bismarck won two more games from Grand Forks the next day, September 18, by a score of 6 to 5 in the morning game, and 14 to 4 in the afternoon to complete the sweep. Rainy weather in Grand Forks cut into attendance resulting in an estimated loss of \$200 to the Bismarck club, but otherwise the trip was a success, and Bismarck declared themselves the champions of Dakota.

Conclusion

Influenced by the ball playing of the soldiers at the nearby military forts, baseball caught hold in Bismarck, the newly established capitol city of the Dakota Territory, in the early 1870s. Throughout the 1880s, there was great enthusiasm over the game in Bismarck and the Western part of what would become the state of North Dakota. But, primarily due to the the economic depression that affected the entire country throughout most of the 1890s, interest in baseball in Bismarck declined in the decade after statehood.

Another of the challenges faced by baseball enthusiasts in Bismarck, was the geographic isolation of the city. Mandan, the neighboring city on the west bank of the Missouri River, had fielded a team since the early 1880s and the Bismarck teams continued to play games against the soldiers at Fort Lincoln. But, after the Northern Pacific Railroad was completed into Montana, Fort Lincoln was abandoned in 1891. Other than local pick up teams, an assortment of rural nines, and the soldiers at another nearby military post, Fort Yates, there were no other baseball teams in the immediate vicinity.

Since those early days, many communities in Western North Dakota have supported amateur, semi-pro and, at times, professional teams in organized baseball. Bismarck-Mandan, an affiliate of the Minnesota Twins, fielded a team in the Northern League in the 1960s and Negro League stars and Hall of Famers Satchel Paige and Ray Dandridge also played in Bismarck. Although North Dakota, and Bismarck in particular, is not considered a baseball hotbed, there is a proud history that spans nearly 140 years.

- 1 *Bismarck Tribune*, January 19, 1886
- 2 *Bismarck Tribune*, October 13, 1889
- 3 Dr. Harold Seymour and Dorothy Z. Seymour, *Baseball: The People's Game* (Oxford University Press, 1990)

- 4 Seymour, *Baseball: the People's Game*
- 5 Gregory Lalire, "Baseball in the West," <http://www.historynet.com/baseball-in-the-west-2.htm>

- 6 Brian Dipple, Its Equal I Have Never Seen: Custer Explores the Black Hills in 1874, Columbia, The Magazine of Northwest History, 19 (Summer5) 2005
- 7 Chronological outline of the life and times of General Joseph Green Tilford

- 8 *Bismarck Tribune*, May 13, 1874
- 9 Gary Joseph Cieradkowski, "The Infinite Baseball Card Set: 7th Cavalry," <http://infinitecardset.blogspot.com/search/label/7th%20Cavalry>.
- 10 Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Big Horn* (Viking, 2010)

- 11 *Bismarck Tribune*, July 5, 1879
- 12 *Bismarck Tribune*, August 13, 1873
- 13 *Bismarck Tribune*, July 6, 1877
- 14 *Bismarck Tribune*, June 16, 1882
- 15 *Bismarck Tribune*, August 1, 1884
- 16 *Bismarck Tribune*, July 26, 1887
- 17 *Bismarck Tribune*, June 19, 1885
- 18 *Bismarck Tribune*, April 23, 1887
- 19 *Bismarck Tribune*, July 22, 1888
- 20 *Bismarck Tribune*, January 19, 1886 The winter of 1885-1886 was unusually mild in the Dakota Territory. Taking advantage of temperatures in the 50s, a base ball game was played on January 18th.
- 21 *Bismarck Tribune*, May 28, 1887
- 22 *Bismarck Tribune*, July 27, 1887
- 23 *Bismarck Tribune*, September 13, 1885
- 24 *Bismarck Tribune*, December 2, 1885 See Note 20
- 25 *Bismarck Tribune*, April 25, 1889
- 26 Michael Patrick Hearn, "Wizard Behind the Plate: L. Frank Baum, the Hub City Nine and Baseball on the Prairie", *South Dakota Magazine*, (Spring) 2000
- 27 *Bismarck Tribune*, September 19, 1889