

The Howe/Keefe Battery

As the practice of employing outsider players became more commonplace, the battery most in demand in southeastern South Dakota and northwestern Iowa during the early 1890s was pitcher Harry Howe and catcher Tim Keefe. Howe first came to the area in 1889 as a member of the Fargo, North Dakota club for games in Aberdeen in 1889 and decided to stay on and finish the season in here. Howe may have pitched briefly with Milwaukee of the Western Association early in 1890 but played most of the summer near his home in Fayette, Iowa. At some point he crossed paths Tim Keefe, a catcher in Estherville Iowa and both men were hired by Sioux Falls for a big game against Parker and LeMars, Iowa in September.

The following season both men played for the LeMars Grays but they started the 1892 season in the Nebraska State League, Howe with Beatrice and Keefe with Grand Island. Ironically, in a game in late May between the two teams, both Howe and Keefe were accused of, “dilatatory playing” and “a severe talk was given them by their respective managers.”ⁱ Afterward they both jumped their clubs “without a moment’s notice”ⁱⁱ, were blacklisted from organized baseball, and returned to LeMars to finish out the year.

Howe’s blacklisting must have been overturned because early in 1893 he was signed by St. Joseph, Missouri of the Western Association and by mid-season Keefe, who had been playing in Cedar Rapids, joined him there as his catcher. Keefe returned to Iowa after the season but the Boston Beaneaters of the National League came through St. Joseph on a post-season exhibition tour and it was reported that they would sign Howe and take his back east with them, but for whatever reason, the tryout never materialized.

Howe stayed in the Western Association, splitting the 1894 season between St. Joseph, Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Sioux City, and played for both St. Joseph and Rockford, Illinois in 1895 before being suspended for insubordination in June. Meanwhile Keefe returned to Iowa to play on an amateur team in 1894 and joined Cedar Rapids of the independent Eastern Iowa League the next year. After the season his hometown newspaper bragged Keefe up calling him, “the greatest catcher that ever wore a uniform in the Western Association” and, “...the surest catcher ever sent out from the Hawkeye state.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Howe and Keefe played together at Decorah, Iowa in 1896 and continued their association when both played in the Red River Valley League in 1897, Keefe catching for the Moorhead (Minnesota) Barmaids and Howe pitching for the Fargo Divorces. Keefe was offered a tryout with Minneapolis of the Western League later in 1897 and the two player’s careers took divergent paths after that. Keefe continued to play with local teams over the next couple of years and in 1899 joined the club in Superior, Wisconsin. He returned to South Dakota in 1901 when he was a position as an accountant with the Fullerton Lumber company in Madison and joined the town’s baseball club. One early season report, reprinted in the Washburn, Wisconsin paper (he married a woman from Washburn the previous year) said of a game against Aberdeen, “Tim is one of the boys that can do the jollyng to a nicety and all through the game he kept the boys ready for quick

work. Keefe is a ballplayer from the ground up and he plays clean ball at that. The manager made a great find in Keefe and he will be found doing business all through the season. He showed splendid work with the stick and he is cleaver at running bases, taking strong chances and making the base.”^{iv}

However, things didn’t end well for Keefe in Madison. When he left the Madison club after the 1902 season, he was accused of stealing a prized hunting dog and having it shipped back to a friend at his off-season home in Decorah. Authorities in Mitchell filed extradition papers with the Governor of Iowa and even made a trip all the way out to Decorah to retrieve the dog. Keefe was arrested but soon released due to lack of evidence. It seems the dog ran away.

He was back in organized baseball the following year, splitting the 1902 season between Helena, Montana and Tacoma, Washington in the Pacific Northwest League. He returned to Superior, Wisconsin the following year as a player-manager and was one of the organizers of the new Northern League. That stint didn’t last long either as in May he was fined and suspended by the league for “rowdy conduct”^v and a few days afterward resigned his position and returned to Washburn.

In addition to the theft of the hunting dog, Keefe was involved in a number of other odd incidents. On his way back to Washburn after leaving Superior, he stopped off at a circus in Ashland, Wisconsin and after looking over the horses there, remarked that none of them appeared to be much of a bucking broncho. The circus manager, hearing Keefe’s remark, told him he could have any horse he could successfully ride. He took him up on the dare by selecting a horse, rigging up a rope for a bridle, and he hopped on and rode the animal home. When asked about it later, Tim said, “Oh, yes, he did buck a little on the start, but he soon tired and now he is as gentle as a lamb.”^{vi} Later that summer Keefe was arrested for larceny stemming from the fact that he was staked to a poker game by a third party and when the game never materialized, was accused of keeping the money. No information could be found as to how long he kept the horse, or how his legal issues turned out.

It’s not clear what happened to Harry Howe, partly due to the fact that there is some uncertainty about his identity. His record in Baseball-reference.com is under the name Henry H. Howe, but the newspapers in the cities he played in during this professional career, including the 1897 season in Fargo, always called him Harry. As early as 1889, the *Grand Forks Herald* mentioned a “Harry Howe” of the Grafton (North Dakota) baseball club and the *Herald* identified the “Harry Howe” who later pitched for Aberdeen that summer as, “...the old Grafton player.”^{vii} However, a few months later in 1889, the newspaper in Fayette, Iowa, which is in the far eastern side of the state, near the Illinois border, mentioned that the pitcher Harry Howe had spent the winter in the town “as is his custom”^{viii} and a couple of months later, in March, reported that he had left town to join the Milwaukee club^{ix} (Henry/Harry Howe’s Baseball-reference record indicates he was a member of the Milwaukee in 1890). They may have been the same man, but the

timing suggests that there may have been two pitchers named Harry Howe playing at the same time, one in Iowa and another in the Dakotas.

The Harry Howe who pitched in the Western Association from 1893 to 1895 was probably the same individual, but things become confusing again after that. When Harry Howe was pitching for St. Joseph in 1893, someone named Frank Howe was pitching for a club in Brainerd, Minnesota.^x Two years later, in February of 1895, he was offered a tryout with the Chicago Colts^{xi} (now the Cubs) of the National League, and the May 4, 1895 issue of the *Chicago Record* reported that "...Howe, a pick-up from Brainerd, Minn." pitched for the Colts in an exhibition games against the University of Chicago.

Meanwhile, a player identified as Harry Howe had begun the 1895 season as an outfielder, and sometime pitcher, with St. Joseph before being suspended for insubordination in early June. Around the same time, the Rockford club, also in the Western League, announced that a new pitcher named Howe was scheduled to join the team soon. The Rockford papers did not reveal his first name, but clearly identified him as the same man who had the trial in Chicago and hailed from Minnesota and that Cap Anson, the manager of the Colts still "had a string on him", meaning the Chicago sent him to Rockford to gain experience and still retained his contract rights. This Howe (Frank?) didn't last long either as he was released by management in early July citing wildness and a tendency to get easily rattled and the lack of "nerve". One of the Rockford papers said, "He is all right just as long as things are coming his way but as soon as a man or two get on bases, he doesn't know whether he is standing on his head or his feet."^{xii}

Both Harry Howes left their respective teams (St. Joseph and Rockford) in early June 1895 and one of them was soon back north; the *Grand Forks Herald* reporting on June 19 that Harry Howe was now pitching for Grafton, North Dakota and later that summer with Crookston and Brainerd, suggesting that this was the same Harry Howe who had the tryout with Chicago. Early in 1896, "Harry Howe, the Crookston pitcher"^{xiii} signed with Minneapolis but began the season with Crookston again before quitting the team in June and joining up with Moorhead. As further evidence, he was referred to as the "phenomenal pitcher from Brainerd."^{xiv} Why he was called Frank Howe a few years earlier was never explained, but this is the same Harry Howe who played with Fargo in the Red River Valley League in 1897 whose record is credited to Henry Howe.

As for the Iowa Harry Howe, who likely was the St. Joseph player, his movements are less clear. In September of 1895 it was reported that he would be playing in Decorah this week and planned to spend the winter on the west coast. In May 1896 the Fayette paper said that he had passed through town on his way to Aspen, Colorado,^{xv} and later that summer the same source said he was thought to be in Denver. The next year, 1897, at the same time another Harry Howe was pitching in Minnesota, an Iowa newspaper reported that Harry Howe "has been playing second base at Atchison, Kansas."^{xvi} This is the best evidence that there were two Harry Howes because the one in Minnesota was almost exclusively a pitcher while this one, likely the same man in St. Joseph in 1895, was primarily a fielder, who only pitched on occasion.

These reports did nothing to clear up the identity of the Harry Howes, but it did help explain the confusion. When one of the Harry Howes played in eastern Iowa later in 1896, an area newspaper, the *Fayette County Leader*, ran a brief item on March 5, 1896 saying, “A week or two since the papers said Harry Howe had signed with the Minneapolis ball team, but the *Decorah Republican* says it is not the Harry Howe known in these regions but a chap who had borrowed his name and attempted to steal his reputation.” There probably were two players going by the name Harry Howe playing basically simultaneously in different regions of the Midwest in the 1890s, but whether one or the other was actually Frank Howe, or Henry Howe, or a made-up alias, remains unknown.

ⁱ *Omaha World Herald*, May 29, 1892.

ⁱⁱ “Jumps His Contract”, *Nebraska (Lincoln) State Journal*, May 29, 1892

ⁱⁱⁱ *Estherville (Iowa) News*, August 30, 1894

^{iv} “Tim Keefe Making a Record”, *Washburn (Wisconsin) Times*, June 6, 1901.

^v “Tim Keefe in Trouble”, *Washburn (Wisconsin) Times*, May 28, 1903.

^{vi} “Tim Keefe Owns Forepaugh Circus Bucking Broncho”, *Duluth (Minnesota) News Tribune*, July 1, 1903

^{vii} “The Ball Game: The Champions of Dakota Defeat Grand Forks”, *Grand Forks Herald*, August 12, 1889.

^{viii} *Fayette (Iowa) County Leader*, January 3, 1890.

^{ix} *Fayette (Iowa) County Leader*, March 28, 1890.

^x *Little Falls (Minnesota) Transcript*, June 23, 1893.

^{xi} *Little Falls (Minnesota) Transcript*, February 22, 1895.

^{xii} *Rockford (Illinois) Star*, July 4, 1895

^{xiii} *Grand Forks (ND) Herald*, January 5, 1896.

^{xiv} *Grand Forks (ND) Herald*, July 29, 1896.

^{xv} *Fayette (Iowa) County Leader*, May 7, 1896.

^{xvi} *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, July 17, 1897.