

## The North Dakota/South Dakota Base Ball Games of the 1880s

Originally part of the Louisiana Purchase, the United States Congress created the Dakota Territory in 1861. In addition to the current states of North and South Dakota, the territory also included much of Western Montana and Wyoming. Soon after white settlement, residents began to think of themselves as either North or South Dakotans, even though the separate states were not officially recognized until 1889. This division was further emphasized when the capitol of the Territory was moved from Yankton to Bismarck in 1883.

After the Civil War the U. S. Army built many military forts in the west, several of them on the Missouri River that bisected the Dakota Territory. Baseball was played by the soldiers at these forts since at least the early 1870s. The construction of railroads in the territory spurred settlement and towns sprang up along the rail lines. There is evidence of baseball being played in Fargo and Grand Forks, as well as Bismarck, in the mid 1870s. Within a short time baseball teams were organized in the southern part of the territory as well.

Mainly due to improved telegraph communication and rail transportation, teams for the northern and southern parts of the territory began playing each other in the early 1880s. Rivalries developed and soon teams hired outside professionals to improve their teams in order to beat their neighbors to the north (or south). After getting beaten by North Dakota teams in 1888, Aberdeen decided to field an all-professional team in 1889, and easily won all their games against North Dakota teams. From then on, amateur teams of local players were rare and most teams on both sides of the North Dakota–South Dakota border now had paid outsiders on their teams.

Grand Forks had the strongest team in the northern part of the territory in 1883. They, and a weaker club from Fargo, traveled as far as Minneapolis and St. Paul that summer for ball games. Also that summer, the team from Aberdeen, in present day South Dakota, "had gained quite a reputation ... by beating several clubs in that section." The Aberdeen club toured the Red River valley in late August and early September, playing the first known games between teams from what would later become North and South Dakota.

Fargo reportedly had been strengthened with "new men and steady practice", but Aberdeen, also known as the "Brown County Nine", defeated Fargo 9-7 on August 31 and 18-6 on September 1. Aberdeen then took the train to Valley City and thrashed that club 27-5 on Monday September 3. They returned to Fargo and beat that team again, although the score remains unknown. Aberdeen then traveled north and beat Grand Forks 6-4 on September 6, but Grand Forks won the final game 12-10. On their way home Aberdeen stopped in Fargo and lost their second game of their trip 20-10 to the St. Paul Red Caps. Coincidentally, the ball club from the Twin Cities was touring the Red River Valley at the same time as Aberdeen.

The *Grand Forks Plaindealer* reported that "considerable money had changed hands on the [second Grand Forks-Aberdeen] game, most of which was won by the home men" but also added "the Aberdeen boys are good fellows, from first to last." After the Aberdeen team returned home there were suggestions by some of the fans that accompanied the team on the tour that two players, namely pitcher Roberts and catcher Burdick, had sold out 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."

The Grand Forks – Aberdeen games featured two players who would go on to have long and successful careers in professional baseball. One of Grand Forks' star players was infielder Walter Wilmot. He later played for and managed the Minneapolis team and after that had a ten year career in major league baseball. In game box scores, the second baseman for the Aberdeen club was named Cantillon. This was Joe Cantillon, who would go on to have a 25-year career as a player, manager, and umpire in professional baseball. Interestingly, Joe's brother Mike also had later ties to the region as he would serve as president of the South Dakota League in the 1920s.

There is no record of any games between North and South Dakota baseball teams over the next few years. Teams from North Dakota played other local clubs until 1887 when Fargo and Grand Forks joined Wahpeton and

Fergus Falls, Minnesota to form the Red River Valley League. That summer a strong team from Watertown, in present day South Dakota, emerged. The self-proclaimed "Champions of South Dakota" made a swing through the Red River valley in mid-August so North Dakota teams took a break from league play for games against the club from the south.

The Watertown team, reputed to have won all but one of the 38 games they had played so far, arrived first in Wahpeton. On August 13, they lost to Wahpeton 14-12 in ten innings, but not without some controversy. One of the Watertown players "hired from other places" (suggesting that at least some of their players were outside professionals), J. F. Cantillon, insisted on having the umpire replaced during the game. This was the same Joe Cantillon who had played with Aberdeen four years earlier. He was described by 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.

Interestingly, Wahpeton's ball grounds were called Island Park, due to the fact they were located literally on an island in the middle of the Red River separating Wahpeton and Breckenridge, Minnesota. It was a multipurpose facility that was also used for trap shooting, croquet games, and a picnic grounds, and reportedly could accommodate 5,000 people. Ballplayers and spectators were transported via ferry boats until a walking bridge was later constructed.

After winning two games at Fergus Falls, Watertown 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 grand stand that Murphy's playing was about on parallel with that of a nine year old school boy, 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.

After the Red River Valley League season ended, Fargo, who won the league pennant, challenged Watertown to a post-season series to determine 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 20-14. The only account of the game comes from the *St. Paul Daily Globe* saying "... there was loose and careless playing" and "the weather was very windy and disagreeable."

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

While Watertown could rightfully claim to be champions of all Dakota, the Fargo nine returned home disappointed. The *Fargo 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 October of that year, representatives from the Red River Valley League met in Fargo and began planning for the next season. Fargo and Grand Forks expected the Fergus Falls and Wahpeton teams to drop out and suggested adding the towns of Duluth, Brainerd, and St. Cloud, Minnesota and renaming it the Northwestern League. An alternate plan was to form an eight team league by adding Winnipeg and five cities from southern Dakota Territory: Huron, Watertown, Mitchell, Aberdeen and Sioux Falls. J. Walker Smith of Fargo, league secretary, even went so far as to obtain a contract from the National Association of Professional Base Ball Clubs in New York, which would give the league protection under the "national agreement" and place them under the umbrella of Organized Baseball. However, the league never got off the ground, and teams continued to play independently.

In 1888, arguably the best base ball team in North Dakota was the club from Wahpeton. The team combined with Breckenridge Minnesota, the previous year as a member of the Red River Valley League, but had a poor season because they strictly adhered to league rules allowing for just two outside professional players, while Fargo and Grand Forks did not. The main reason for the club's success in 1888 was that one of the professionals they had hired, pitcher Tony Oestreicher, returned to town this season. In the first part of the season, the Wahpeton club easily beat area towns, including Fargo, and in July hosted the club from Aberdeen.

On Friday July 6 Wahpeton 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 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 Outcalt of Aberdeen blamed the loses on injuries to his best players while the *Aberdeen Daily News* stated "the absence of their mascot doubtless accounts for their ill luck abroad." When the team returned home they were met by the town band at the train depot who "discoursed a number of fine selections to revive the drooping spirits of the boys." Later that summer Aberdeen tried to arrange for the Fargo club to come to South Dakota, but could not commit to the guarantee of \$200 demanded by Fargo, so the games never took place.

In 1889 Aberdeen organized the first openly professional base ball team in the Dakota Territory; their team made up entirely of paid outside players. 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 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) and extended north to the McLean County coal fields.

In June Aberdeen hosted Fargo for four games and won all four (by scores of 17-6, 6-4, 21-10, and 12-7). 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. While in South Dakota the Fargo club also played a game against Redfield and beat Groton 8-3. Nonetheless, Fargo manager Bayard said his club "have made many friends and enjoyed their visit" and proclaimed the Aberdeen club the "strongest altogether in Dakota."

During this time manager A. E. Sunderhauf of Wahpeton was in Aberdeen and arranged for games between the two teams for the following week. However, before the games could take place, Wahpeton secretary Voorhees

telegraphed Baum to reschedule the games citing the absence of his pitcher. The *Aberdeen Daily News* suggested the reason for the cancellation was that Wahpeton was afraid to come after what had happened to the Fargo team. When the two teams did play in early July, the Aberdeen club pummeled Wahpeton by scores of 24-8 and 35-2. The *Aberdeen Daily News* described Wahpeton's effort as "the rankest display of chump playing ever seen on the Aberdeen grounds."

Next it was the Aberdeen club's turn to venture into North Dakota. Baum made ambitious arrangements for 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 first stop was in Bismarck and the *Bismarck Tribune* billed the three games as being for the championship of Dakota and as the "sporting event of the year." On August 8 Aberdeen beat the local Bismarck club 14-2 behind 17 strike outs by Harry Howe, the pitcher recently picked up from Fargo. The next day the Bismarck held a 5-4 lead after five innings but the shoulder of their star pitcher Huber had given out and Aberdeen scored nine runs off his replacement, Myron Hutchinson, and went on to win 18-8.

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. The Bismarck team congratulated themselves on a fine showing due to the fact theirs was an amateur club compared to the professionals from Aberdeen. 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." It should be noted that the Bismarck team went to Grand Forks in September and after beating that team three straight, claimed the championship of North Dakota.

Aberdeen next ventured to Grand Forks and won 7-3 on August 12, with Murnane holding the local team to three hits. The second game of a doubleheader was rained out. Aberdeen went down to Fargo and easily dispatched that team 16-3 and then returned to Grand Forks for one more game, a 7-0 win on August 14 with Harry Howe recording 12 strike outs in the shut out. 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."

When the club returned home to Aberdeen on the Northwestern Road on August 16, they were met at the train depot by the town band and "a large delegation of citizens on foot and in carriages." Team members were led on a parade through town and each carried a broom "indicative of a clean sweep." The *Aberdeen Daily News* remarked of the homecoming: "the streets were lined with the enthusiastic populace and the gratification over the boy's great success was universal." Before dispersing for the summer, the Aberdeen team made at least one additional trip into southern Minnesota.

Aberdeen's all-professional team of 1889 was clearly the best that had ever played in the Dakota Territory up to that point. After North and South Dakota gained statehood that fall, teams in both states would continue to hire a few outside players to improve their teams, but the expense of paying salaries to an entire team proved to be too costly for most towns. However, these first games in the 1880s, laid the groundwork for the Dakota League (which included teams from North and South Dakota) in the early 1920s and later the Northern League which also included teams from both states.