

Keokuk in Big League Baseball

To the present generation of baseball fans in Keokuk, the story of the participation of a local club in big league baseball is only a legend; but six or seven decades ago it was possible for old-timers to say, quite smugly no doubt, "that, of course, was when Keokuk was in the National League". Strictly speaking it was not the National League to which the Keokuk Westerns belonged; it was the National Association of Professional Baseball Players, organized in 1871. The National League took its place later. It is, incidentally, a coincidence that baseball rivalry began the year Iowa was admitted as a State, the first game between rival New York teams having been played on June 19, 1846.

Except for old newspaper clippings and a few faded letters, there is little recorded history of the glamorous days when players from the "Gate City" of Iowa rubbed elbows with professionals from the eastern cities as well as those from Chicago and St. Louis. Philadelphia had three teams in the Association — the Athletics, the Centennials, and the Philadelphias (now the Phillies). The Centennials dropped out along the way. St.

Louis entered the Red Stockings, probably forerunners of the Cardinals, and the Brown Stockings, later known to baseball fans as the St. Louis Browns.

Just how a small town like Keokuk landed in a big league berth naturally arouses speculation. The early seventies saw considerable eastern capital flowing into Keokuk and the city enjoyed one of its boom periods. This brought outside interests into the sports picture, especially in baseball, horse racing, and rowing. D. L. Hughes, a prominent Keokuk sportsman of those days, in a letter written in 1921, recalled that Keokuk had a fast, independent baseball team in 1874, also called the Westerns, which booked games with bigger clubs, among them the Mutuals of New York.

Henry Chadwick, in a history of the game included in an old baseball guide, wrote that players controlled the early leagues or associations. It would be the natural thing for the Keokuk players to wish to continue this big-time competition and in this they must have received the support of the fans. At any rate, an application to join the National Association was made late in 1874 or early in 1875, and the bid was accepted. William Trimble was named manager of the Keokuk team. John N. Irwin (who was appointed Governor of Arizona Territory in 1890 and went

to Portugal in 1899 as minister from this country) was named president of the local club.

A notice in the *Keokuk Gate City* of March 11, 1875, stated that the Westerns would meet to organize for the season on March 20th. At this meeting, Joe Simmons was elected captain and uniforms were selected. These were to be similar to those worn in the previous year, white with blue stockings and trimmings. On the bosom of the shirt and on the cuff of each sleeve was a letter K, "making the appropriate trio of K's". The news report added that "hats would be worn instead of caps". These, no doubt, were the soft-crowned, small-brimmed type.

The admission price for all home games was set at fifty cents, "children and vehicles, 25 cents". The ball diamond, work on which already was well started, was located across from the present Rand Park, and was called Perry Park.

In the issue of the morning of May 2, 1875, the *Gate City* announced that the "baseball season of 1875 will be formally inaugurated here tomorrow by the White Stockings of Chicago and the Keokuks." The time of arrival of the White Stockings was even considered of sufficient interest to be announced as 10:20 o'clock in the morning of the day for the game. They were reported to be accompanied by "citizens of Chicago in such

numbers that it is decided to hold the evening train until after the game".

Rain, however, spoiled this opening game which was then set for May 5th. At that time the White Stockings defeated the Westerns by the lop-sided score of 15 to 1 before a crowd of 1,000 fans. The *Gate City* explained the defeat by observing that "the Westerns by loose fielding lost their first tilt in the professional arena". The box score of that contest may be of interest since both clubs presented quite an array of talent.

Keokuk		R	1B	PO	A	Chicago		R	1B	PO	A
Hallihan	ss	1	2	1	2	Higham	c	2	1	7	0
Quinn	cf	0	0	2	0	Hastings	cf	0	1	0	1
Simmons	1b	0	2	10	0	Warren	3b	3	2	4	4
Jones	lf	0	0	1	0	Devlin	rf	3	2	0	0
Riley	rf	0	1	1	0	Hines	lf	1	2	3	0
Goldey	3b	0	1	2	3	Keerl	2b	1	0	0	1
Miller	2b	0	0	1	4	Peters	ss	2	2	1	3
Barnie	c	0	0	7	2	Glen	1b	1	1	11	0
Golden	p	0	0	1	2	Zetlein	p	2	2	1	1
Totals		1	6	26	13			15	13	27	10

Runs earned, Keokuk 0, Chicago 1

Total base hits, Keokuk 6, Chicago 13

Passed balls, Barnie 8, Higham 3

Time, 3 hours

Umpire, F. Bordman, Chicago

Scorer, G. Stahl

In the above box score, as the newspaper carried it, there is no explanation for the 26 "put outs" for Keokuk instead of the usual 27. Perhaps the scorer failed to record one or a batter was retired arbitrarily. The small number of runs earned indicates that the local club made a great many errors. While there are no copies of scoring rules for this period, it is probable that earned runs were much the same as now — those untainted by any misplays. The large number of passed balls for each catcher was due to the fact that catchers stood far back of the plate and took the balls on the first hop. The scorer's practice of abbreviating names is found in the Keokuk half of the box score. "Goldey" is remembered by old fans as "Goldsmith".

"Our public should not judge the Keokuks, however, by the result of yesterday's game", the reporter suggested in announcing that the second game of the Chicago series would be played on the afternoon of May 6th. "With experience in the professional arena," he predicted, "they will gain confidence, and that's about all they need to enable them to play a good game." Belying this prophecy, the Keokuk team again bowed to the White Stockings by a score of 7 to 1. The alibi this time was that the umpire, who was from Chicago, made an erroneous decision.

On the afternoon of May 7th, "Victory Perched Upon the Banner of Keokuk", according to headlines in the *Gate City*. This was the first appearance in Perry Park of the Red Stockings of St. Louis, and the Westerns were the victors, 15 to 2. Waxing almost lyrical in his praise of the team, the reporter for the *Gate City* wrote: "our boys are nearly all stalwart, muscular and some of them rather fleshy, while the Reds are small. The Keokuks played a magnificent game, one far in advance of any previous effort and give their friends encouragement that they will take high rank in the professional arena".

The second game of the Westerns with the St. Louis Red Stockings resulted in a victory for the St. Louis team by the score of 6 to 1, and the newspaper reports of this game began to reflect a critical attitude on the part of the fans toward the "stalwarts" of the previous day. In those days, even as now, fans wanted a winning team, and a hero today might easily turn out to be a bum tomorrow.

Rain washed out the game scheduled for May 12th against the St. Louis Brown Stockings, and the Westerns resumed their losing ways on the thirteenth when the Brown Stockings walloped them 16 to 6. The Keokuks were credited with having "redeemed themselves" on May four-

teenth when they held the score with the Brown Stockings down to 4 to 2. Once again this loss was blamed on poor umpiring, and the *Gate City* reporter commented that against the Browns, "lions of the west, our boys gave their best game so far".

The Keokuk team took to the road after this game and invaded the home grounds of the Chicago White Stockings, losing the first tilt, 7 to 6, in ten innings. A telegram to the *Gate City* declared that the "Keokuk boys displayed unexpected ability" even in defeat. The message did not enlarge on this ability, so perhaps it was a case of wishful thinking.

The White Stockings then administered a second defeat to the Keokuk players, who according to the telegraphic report of the game to the *Gate City*, "did their best work at bat being able to knock Zetlein (White Stocking pitcher) all over the inclosure, but their fielding was miserable. The Whites found it difficult to get to Golden's pitching only four hits being made". The score of 6 to 2 against Keokuk dropped the team to tenth place in the league standing.

From Chicago the Westerns moved to St. Louis, where their defeat at the hands of the Red Stockings, by a score of 7 to 1, was captioned in the *Gate City* "The Same Old Story". In the

comment on the game, the editor expressed the opinion that the team "either lacks nerve or confidence". Another defeat by a score of 3 to 2, and the loss of an extra-association game to the Louisville, Ky., Eagles brought the caustic comment from the *Gate City* "boys for heaven's sake come home and practise awhile".

The game with the Louisville club illustrated one of the evils referred to by Chadwick who said that control of the Association by the players produced contract breaking, failure to meet engagements, and pool gambling. It was evident that the players counted on making something on the side when they barn-stormed into the Louisville club's territory. After the Louisville game the Westerns played an obscure club and won the game, which brought the comment in the *Gate City*, "Hooray, the Keokuks got away with another little amateur club".

Club officials took occasion to inform the fans that the team was being reorganized for the next game at home which was scheduled for June 10th with the Boston club. Not over 1,000 attended this game which Boston won 6 to 4. Bad as the club may have looked on the basis of its losing scores, two old time newspapermen who witnessed this game have left interesting accounts which would indicate that the Westerns were not

wholly outclassed by the team from the Hub. J. M. Davidson, writing in the *Carthage (Ill.) Republican* in 1921, recalled that he "went over to Keokuk in an equipage, the motor power of which was the famous Easterday mule team to see the Boston club which is in the height of its renown".

"To our surprise," wrote Mr. Davidson, "Boston had to be content with the big end of a 6 to 4 score. . . . The Bostons played steadily. Mr. Spalding was the greatest pitcher I ever saw considering that he used the old straight arm pitch without curves or drops. No fancy motion, quiet and deliberate and yet he could change the speed of the ball so effectively he had the batters helpless."

While Keokuk played "nervously", according to Mr. Davidson, "it appeared that they were on their tiptoes to make as good showing as possible". As an illustration of this on-their-toes attitude, he described a put-out at first base, where a ball had been thrown to cut off a runner who had slashed the ball to the infield. "The baseman muffed the ball, but quick as a flash he dropped to the ground, his foot on the base. He reached out and succeeded in touching the ball with one finger as the runner reached the base. The umpire ruled the runner out and the baseman got a hearty round of applause."

C. P. Whitney of Keosauqua, who also saw the game, has left in a letter some memoirs of the occasion in which he calls Spalding a curve ball pitcher and asserted that he wore something on his fingers to curve the ball. "And that is what beat the Keokuks for they were unable to hit the ball until the end of the game", was his explanation. According to Mr. Whitney, the Western pitcher, Mike Golden, was a speed artist "who threw a terrific straight ball and beat up all the catchers" with this delivery. One catcher named Clinker, who was a harness maker by trade, and who lived near Milton, Iowa, "tied his fingers together and had the sand to stay on the job", Mr. Whitney wrote. "In those days the catcher stood behind the plate without mask or glove or any kind of protection, and all the rest played barehanded with the same hard ball as is used now."

The end of the professional road loomed large for the Westerns when the *Gate City* for June 12th carried the headline, "Boston Skips Off", meaning that the visitors from the east left Keokuk, determined not to play the second game of the current series. Manager William Trimble of the Keokuk team filed a protest with Harry Wright, president of the Association, claiming a forfeiture of the game, but without effect.

The Westerns played only one more game,

that with the Mutuals of New York. The game, on the Keokuk diamond, was halted in the fifth inning on account of rain, with the score 1 to 0 in favor of the New York team. "It was the finest game witnessed here", wrote the reporter for the *Gate City*.

On June 17th, the *Gate City* announced that the Keokuk team had been disbanded, after a meeting of the board of directors had been "convinced that the organization could not be permanently maintained for the reason that the population is not sufficient to furnish audiences necessary to induce professional nines to come and play full series of games."

The directors also claimed that "both Boston and the Mutuals (of New York) profess to have lost money by their trips here and we are satisfied that they did". This might be taken to indicate that the receipts at the gate were not sufficient to pay traveling expenses, and division of funds which the Association no doubt had approved. Morale in baseball circles was at a low ebb in 1875 and most of the clubs were faced with bankruptcy.

Seven of the thirteen teams in the Association finished the season of 1875 in what Chadwick designated as the first division, and six, including the defunct Westerns, in the second division. If

there had been a pennant it appears that Boston would have taken it. The final standing was as follows:

First Division

	Won	Lost	Pct.
Boston	71	8	.809
Philadelphia (Athletics)	55	28	.756
Hartford	54	28	.639
St. Louis (Brown Stockings)	49	39	.574
Philadelphia	37	31	.544
Chicago (White Stockings)	30	37	.448
New York (Mutuals)	29	38	.426

Second Division

St. Louis (Red Stockings)	4	14	.222
Washington	4	22	.156
New Haven	7	39	.152
Philadelphia (Centennials)	2	13	.133
Keokuk (Westerns)	1	12	.077
Brooklyn (Atlantics)	2	42	.065

Judging from the alacrity with which the remaining clubs in the Association snatched up the various Keokuk players who were turned loose when the club disbanded, the poor showing of the Westerns was not altogether the fault of the individual players. Miller went to the Chicago White Stockings, Carbine to the St. Louis Red

Stockings, and Hallihan and Barnie to the New York Mutuals. Three clubs bid for Simmons and two offered berths to Riley. Jones joined the Louisville, Ky., Olympics, not included in the Association. Golden and Quinn decided to drop baseball as a profession.

Through all of Keokuk's baseball history — amateur, semi-professional, and professional — runs the theme of the months spent in fast company of the National Association clubs. Like the glow in the sky that survives the sunset, the glamor of those weeks still highlights the picture of local baseball, and will be cherished, however legendary it now seems, as long as baseball remains the national pastime.

FREDERIC C. SMITH