

The old ball game: Chiefs' 55 years a fraction of Winona's baseball legacy
by BRIAN P. HEILMAN

May 15, 1877, was no ordinary Tuesday in Winona.

That afternoon, lugging their customary cowhide gloves and sanded-ash bats, nine gentlemen from Minneapolis steamed into town to challenge the Winona Clippers in a game barely as old as the players themselves: baseball.

The nine sluggers from Minneapolis, some former Clippers themselves, brought a big-hitting reputation to the island town, but Winona fans turned out in droves to cheer on their hometown underdogs.

"It was a foregone conclusion that the Minneapolis nine would win," recorded an article in the Open Air Sport section of the Winona Republican Herald the next morning, "but the only question was whether the Winona boys would be permitted to get a run."

The big boys hammered the Clippers early and often, taking a nine run lead into the final inning. Nonetheless, the Winona boys kept their composure.

"Franklin's work behind the bat was satisfactory, and both he and Valentine kept very cool notwithstanding the goose eggs that rolled into the basket," the Republican Herald added in colorful fashion.

In the bottom of the last inning, with the town's hopes resting on their shoulders, the Clippers triumphantly cracked their goose-egg trend and slid two men safely across the plate.

And thus the game ended 9-2, with Winona as the exuberant losers whose late-game surges preserved their hometown pride.

Sure, they lost the game. But in this and many subsequent games, Winona's early ballplayers won the loyalty of their fan base and set in motion a great era of baseball glory in this humble river town.

Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, Winona had numerous professional and amateur baseball clubs of varying repute.

>From the goose egg-accumulating Clippers to the short-lived Winona Pirates and Winona Champions clubs from around the turn of the century, the earliest local baseball teams sparked local interest in the newborn game, even if their on-the-field exploits didn't match those of the bigger clubs from the metro.

Winona baseball first hit its stride around 1910 with the establishment of the Winona Ball Club, who donned nifty collared uniforms and battled their "Minnny League" foes at the old fairgrounds diamond.

The Ball Club prompted a veritable baseball boom in Winona, as numerous amateur teams sprouted around town. Schellhas Brewery started a club called the Winona Roses, named after salesman-turned-sluggger Rose Jozwiak.

The Roses played the likes of the Griesel Red Sox and the Peerless Chains, who were led by Julian Wera, perhaps Winona's most successful baseball talent of all time.

Although he never put up incredible individual statistics in the major leagues, Wera joined the likes of Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth on the legendary 1927 New York Yankees squad known by baseball historians both as "Murderer's Row" and as the greatest professional baseball team of all time.

Prior to his World Series championships alongside the Babe, "Winona Flash" Wera claimed a 1921 Winona city baseball championship with the Chains.

As Wera and other local talent left town and public attention moved to the thriving professional baseball clubs around the country, the Winona Roses were the only early Winona team to survive into the 1930s. Player/coach/organizer Jozwiak arranged exhibition games against touring teams like the Kansas City Monarchs and the House of David to keep his fledgling club alive.

Surprise victories against St. Paul and the Yankee All-Stars in 1926 kept the Roses proud, if not popular.

With the establishment of the Polish National Alliance (PNA) baseball club in 1935, the Roses finally had the crosstown rivals they needed to keep baseball spirit alive in Winona.

The East End PNA squad battled the West End Roses in a five game city championship series for a few summers, reviving local baseball interest and dividing Winona's baseball allegiance by a geographic and ethnic meridian.

When the PNA squad swept the Roses in the 1938 series, it cemented the PNA's place as the other dominant baseball club in Winona, and gave fuel to a rivalry that would fill the 1940s with diamond vitality.

Both teams joined the Bi-State League in 1939, matching up against Alma, Galesville, Whitehall, Lewiston and Eau Claire.

No Bi-State League games were as fiery as the clashes between the PNA and the Roses. In the eighth inning of one tense 1940 battle between the two Winona clubs, a PNA fan pounced onto the field and punched Roses catcher Max Molock in the jaw.

Post-punch, the PNA side tallied three clutch runs to win the game 9-6. Later that year, the PNA claimed the Bi-State League championship before falling to eventual state champs Shakopee in a semifinal matchup.

Despite Republican Herald reporter Gordon Holte's best efforts to unify the Winona baseball-loving masses, the town literally split in two over the clubs.

"That Winona can boast of two fine and evenly matched teams should be a source of mutual pride to all sports-minded persons in the city, rather than providing an illogical and ill-conceived basis for civic dissension," he wrote.

A letter in Holte's mailbox proved Winona's dedication to dissension and rivalry. "Next Wednesday night, for the love of Mike, ask your superior to have someone else cover this assignment," the letter-writer wrote. "You are impossible."

Eventually, as the PNA continued to assert their dominance on the local baseball scene, the Winona Roses and the Bi-State League folded.

The PNA side joined the Southern Minnesota League (aka "Southern Minny"), playing Mankato, Austin, Albert Lea, Waseca, Owatonna, Faribault and Rochester.

Because their opponents in the Southern Minny were resorting to hiring professional players to play alongside local talent, the PNA followed suit, using donated funds to lure regional stars.

In 1951, after a few years of Southern Minny mediocrity, the Winona Activity Group handed over the PNA ball club to the city of Winona. City officials renamed their acquisition the Winona Chiefs, in an effort to disassociate the club solely with the East End and make them more appealing to Winonans at large.

And thus, in 1951, the formative years of Winona's baseball life were complete. The 55-year story of the Winona Chiefs, who represent both the highest and lowest points in Winona's rollercoastering baseball ride, was about to begin.