
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 37 JUNE 1999 NUMBER 2

ROCKFORD'S MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

1865 - 1923

Official Score Card,



Western Association.



ROCKFORD BASE BALL CLUB.

SEASON OF 1895....

West End Park.

C. W. MALONEY, BOSTON, MASS.,

PUBLISHER OF

SCORE CARDS FOR BASE BALL, RACE TRACK AND BICYCLE MEETINGS.

1895 WESTERN ASSOCIATION OFFICIAL SCORE CARD

REPRODUCED COURTESY OF MIDWAY VILLAGE & MUSEUM CENTER

FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents accounts of Rockford's early baseball history. We welcome contributing author Thomas Powers, a 35-year Rockford resident. Tom is an accountant with the City of Rockford Water Division.

As a resident of Rockford's Edgewater Neighborhood, Tom has written several articles, relating to the neighborhood's history, for the Edgewater Neighborhood Association Newsletter. When he learned of the existence of Riverside Park in the Edgewater area, he first thought of writing about it for the newsletter. John Molyneaux, Local History Librarian at the Rockford Public Library, suggested that Tom submit such an article to *Nuggets of History*.

Tom's research uncovered baseball history prior to Riverside Park. The scope of his intended piece grew to cover the period before and after use of Riverside Park.

Tom is past president of the Edgewater Neighborhood Association and has held various other offices. He's a Rockford Historical Society board member and a member of the Macktown Restoration Foundation.

Peggy Jensen

Peggy Jensen, Editor

SPRING BUS TOUR. SATURDAY, JUNE 19.

Destination, Janesville, Wisconsin.

- We will not only have guided tours of Rotary Gardens and the Lincoln-Tallman Restoration, but our bus will take us through the Courthouse Hill Historic District with a step-on guide. Lunch will be on your own at the Cracker Barrel.
- Board a Peoria/Rockford bus at 8:45 a.m. at Highcrest Center, near Gray's IGA. Return to Rockford about 5 p.m.
- Send a \$25 check by June 12 to Rockford Historical Society, c/o Russell Carlson, 6799 Guilford Road, Rockford IL 61107.
- Additional information: Margaret Lofgren, 815/633-8624 or Peggy Jensen, 815/877-4632.

RECRUIT NEW MEMBERS!

- Please respond to Elaine Carlson's membership challenge by recruiting new members. Individuals may join for \$10; families for \$15. Make checks payable to Rockford Historical Society. Mail to Membership Chairman, Rockford Historical Society, 6799 Guilford Road, 61107.

PLAY BALL! ROCKFORD'S MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

by
Thomas Powers

FOREST CITY BASE BALL CLUB

The Rockford Forest City Base Ball Club (1865-1870) played as one of the top amateur teams in the country. In 1871 they became a charter member of the National Association, the first professional league and the forerunner of the National League, founded five years later. Several members of the Rockford team ranked among the best players.

In 1871, when **Harry Wright** of Boston (the team with the deepest pockets) wanted to put together a championship team, he came to Rockford to recruit. He signed four Forest City players. They formed the nucleus of his team. Boston won the league championship four consecutive years. That record would not be broken until the New York Yankees won five in a row nearly 80 years later.

Outstanding Forest City players who moved up to National Association and National League teams include the following:

· **Albert Spalding.** Recognized as the best contemporary pitcher. Later, the manager and owner of the Chicago N.L. team and the founder of Spalding Sporting Goods Company. Member of the Hall of Fame.

· **Roscoe "Ross" Barnes.** During his prime, the most dominating all-around player. For five years with Boston in the National Association, he led the league in every category at least once. When the N.L. was founded in 1876, he moved to Chicago. He led that league in

batting average (.429), runs, hits, doubles, triples, walks, slugging percentages, and fielding averages.

· **Adrian "Cap" Anson.**

Considered the best player of the 19th century. Anson played 27 years in the major leagues, starting in 1871 in Rockford. He was not only the first to reach 3000 career hits, but also one of the first to be elected to the Hall of Fame.

· **Jim "Deacon" White.** Catcher

for Al Spalding in Rockford and later in Boston and Chicago. He played 20 years in the majors: N.A., five; N.L., 15. He achieved a lifetime batting average over .300.

· **Fred Cone.** An outstanding

Rockford player recruited in 1871 by Wright to play for Boston. He retired after one season.

· **Scott Hastings.** With

Rockford, 1871; later with five N.A. and N.L. teams, principally as catcher.

The Rockford Forest City team disbanded after the 1871 season. Most of the other N.A. teams were located on or near the east coast. Travel expenses created a drawback for Rockford, population 12,000.

But the team's demise, did not signal the end of organized baseball in Rockford. Baseball's popularity supported a variety of amateur, semi-pro and professional teams playing here in various leagues. Future major league stars played for Rockford or rival teams.

FAIRGROUNDS PARK

The Forest Citys and other local teams played home games in the 1860s and 70s at centrally-located Fairgrounds Park. Fans could walk or take a short carriage ride to games. The "stadium" consisted of diamond and outfield surrounded by a wooden fence with advertisement signs. A grandstand accommodated a few hundred people. Other fans would stand or sit on the grass. Usual admission: 25 cents. Attendance figures for 1870 are not available.

In the early and mid 1870s, amateur and semi-pro teams flourished in the Rockford area during a time when the National Association was the country's only professional league. (In 1876, the National League replaced the N.A. as the only pro league.)

During 1877-78, Rockford's semi-pro team played against rivals in Elgin, Chicago, Janesville, Milwaukee, Davenport and elsewhere. Notable among the Elgin players, a pitcher named **Charles Comiskey** would later become an American League founder and owner of the Chicago White Sox.

NORTH-WESTERN LEAGUE

In 1879, Rockford became a charter member of the North-Western League, one of the country's first minor leagues. Dubuque, Davenport and Omaha also belonged. A bumpy start caused the league to fold halfway through the season. But it reorganized the following year, without Rockford, and evolved into the Western League, predecessor of the American League at the turn of the century.

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HUGH NICOL

During the 1878 and 1879 seasons, a local boy named **Hugh Nicol** began his career playing on

Rockford teams. Subsequently, he played ten years in the major leagues with Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati. Not only was he one of the best infielders, but he also was a first-rate batter, hitting over .300 most years. One of his greatest skills, however, was in base stealing. He's credited with being the first to slide head first into the base. He set records for steals in the 1880s and excited the fans. Reportedly, attendance in other cities rose when Nicol's team came to play. After retiring from playing in 1891, Nicol returned to Rockford. He managed minor league teams here.

NON-LEAGUE PLAY

During the early and mid-1880s, Rockford teams did not play in organized leagues. But most small to mid-size Midwest towns had a team of local talent playing for the fun of the game. Better players sometimes moved from town to town, selling their services in an informal manner.

Paying players or offering a job to play on the team created semi-pro status. Such teams had two sources of revenue: advertisements painted on wooden outfield fences and admission fees. The money raised paid for uniforms, balls, and train travel to other towns. At this time, amateur and semi-pro teams outnumbered organized minor leagues. Many future major league players started their careers in Rockford, Beloit, Janesville, Elgin and Dubuque playing against teams from Chicago, Elgin, Bloomington and others.

A NEW BASEBALL PARK

Baseball games moved from Fairgrounds Park to a new location at Old Camp Grounds Park in 1887. The term "Old Camp Grounds" referred loosely to an area near where Camp Fuller had existed during the Civil War. Built in the block surrounded by North Main,

John, Church and Napoleon streets, the park did not occupy former camp grounds. The **Rockford Reds** semi-pro team played there in 1887.

Then, in 1888, the Reds joined the Central Inter-State League, consisting of eight teams in Illinois, Iowa and Indiana. They played home games at Old Camp Grounds Park. Like previous others, the league would disband before the end of their first season. But this one would be the fore-runner of the 1890 Illinois-Iowa (I-I) and Illinois-Iowa-Indiana (I-I-I) leagues.

ROCKFORD BASE BALL CLUB

Rockford did not have a franchise in the I-I League until 1891. Then a group of local businessmen formed the Rockford Base Ball Club. They sold shares of stock to meet the \$600 deposit for the league plus a monthly \$50 fee to pay for league expenses.

In addition, they had to hire a manager and to pay a team of professional players. The league set a salary cap of \$750 per month for each team. This had to provide salaries for 11 or 12 players and a manager.

Other expenses involved railroad travel to away games. To supplement the sale of stocks, the club received money from advertisers and gate receipts. General admission remained at 25 cents.

SUNDAY GAME CONTROVERSY

Sunday baseball created a hot issue. The I-I League had been founded on the principle that they would not allow games to be played on Sundays. This soon became a contentious issue.

Some ministers and others considered playing baseball on Sunday as breaking the Sabbath. Sermons denounced the practice. Laws were passed against it. On the

other hand, Sunday was often the only day a working man could go to see a game. Owners and managers knew that Sunday game attendance would be higher than any other day. Their own religious beliefs, as well as local ordinances and pressure from religious groups, often prevented games on Sundays.

Sunday game scheduling created dissension among teams. Some, declaring they would go broke without Sunday games, defied the league "police" and played anyway. Eventually, all teams played on Sundays.

JOHN MCGRAW

After the Rockford Base Ball Club had hired **Hugh Nicol** to manage the team, he attempted to find good players and to sign them to contracts. On March 26, 1891, he signed a young shortstop, **John McGraw**. When he did not report on time, Nicol sent a telegram ordering McGraw to report. McGraw, however, had also signed contracts with Davenport, Fort Wayne and Cedar Rapids.

Each team threatened to sue if he did not honor their contract. Cedar Rapids gained McGraw's services; the other three teams dropped their lawsuits. At the end of the 1891 season McGraw left Cedar Rapids on good terms and joined the National League Baltimore Orioles.

Following a successful career with the Orioles, he became the New York Giants manager in 1901. His 37-year managerial stint with the Giants ranks second only to **Connie Mack**. McGraw is in the Hall of Fame.



WEST END PARK

The West End Street Railway Company, founded in 1890, was the city's first electric trolley company. At this time, electric

power generating companies started providing power for electric trolley cars. Previously, horses had pulled the cars. As backers of the **Rockford Hustlers**, the West End Company agreed to build a ball park for the team if they could build it on a trolley line. They reasoned they could make money from trolley passengers going to games.

The idea was not unique to Rockford. Trolley and street railway companies throughout the Midwest were building ball parks and other venues to attract customers.

Late completion of the rail line to the new park near W. State and Johnston streets delayed the 1891 home opener until May 27. The grandstand held 1000 people. The playing field had unusual dimensions. The left field fence was 280 feet from home plate; the right field fence, 220 feet. A ball hit over the right field fence counted as a two-base hit. In June, however, both fences were moved 75 feet farther.

The **Rockford Hustlers** finished third out of six teams completing the 1891 season. Rockford's record of 54-46 placed them 11 games back of Quincy, the pennant winner, and three games back of Joliet. Other teams included Ottawa, Ottumwa and Cedar Rapids.

PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Rockford's (first name?) **Dale** won the batting title with a .345 average; first-baseman **Bill Gleasman** finished third at .330. The Philadelphia Phillies (National League) drafted the Hustler's star pitcher **William Kling**. Rockford's **James McKee** was named league president.

1892 SEASON

Tough times characterized the 1882 season. Two teams dropped out

before the season began; others dropped out, moved, or were replaced. The league decided to split the season in half: the winner of the first half would play the winner of the second half for the pennant. Rockford finished in second place during both halves. At season's end, only two teams remained: Rockford and Rock Island. In a 12 game playoff, Rockford won five of six games at home and lost five of six games in Rock Island. Disputes arose. Was this a valid playoff? or an exhibition series? Rock Island received the pennant; the league folded.

LANDER'S COLTS

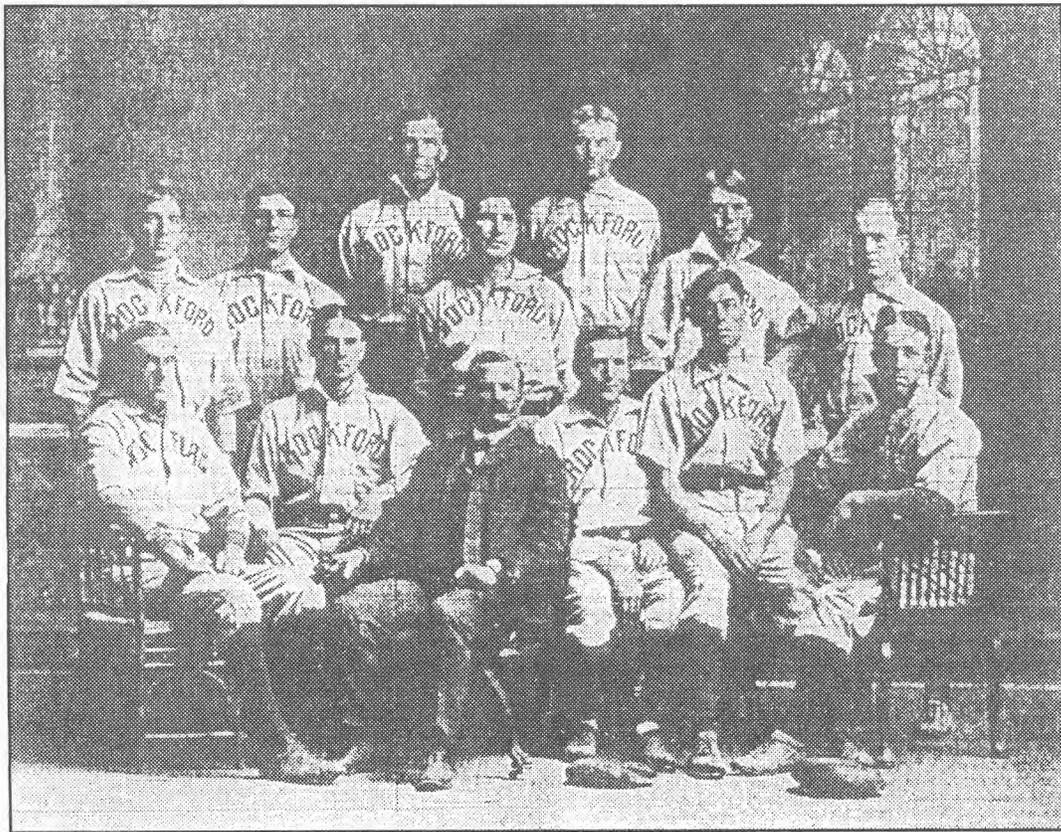
The next two years, Rockford fielded a semi-pro team not associated with any league, managed by **Frank Lander**. He had managed other semi-pro teams in Rockford in 1886 and 1887. This team, sometimes known as Lander's Colts, played other amateur and semi-pro teams from Chicago, Madison and other nearby cities.

WESTERN ASSOCIATION

Rockford was granted a franchise in 1895 in the Western Association. Other teams in this league included Peoria, Quincy, Jacksonville, Des Moines, Denver, Lincoln (Nebraska), and St. Joseph (Missouri). Rockford City Railway Company was one of the team backers. They had purchased assets of the West End Street Railway Company, builders of West End Park, 1891. The men who had formed the company had also built Harlem Park.

Now they wanted to attract more business for their electric trolley cars by building a new ball park. In the spring of 1895, Riverside Park was built in the block bounded by Cumberland, Fulton, Oxford and Van Wie, a few blocks northwest of the amusement park. An extension of the trolley line was built. The team played an inaugural exhibition game April 14, 1895.

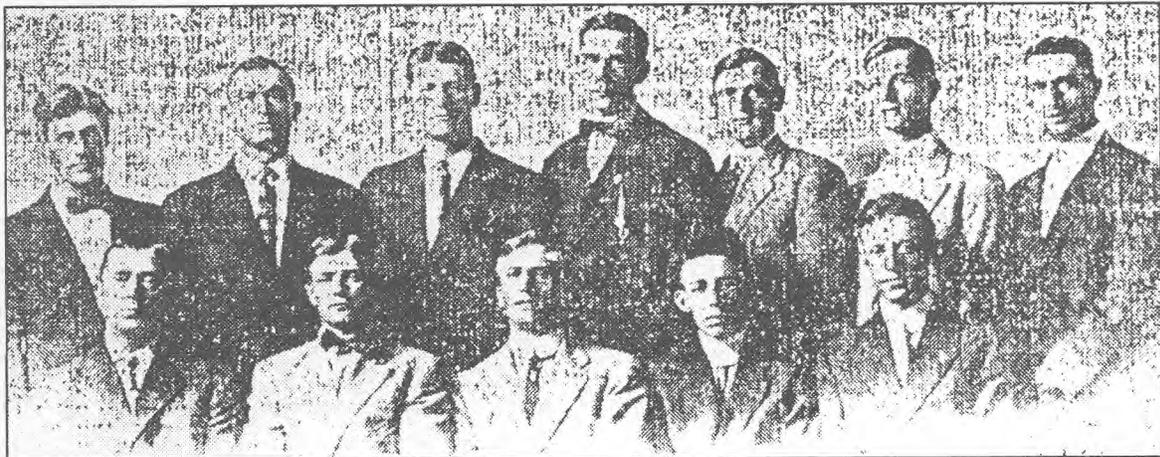
Champions I=I=I League, Season 1902



Standing, left to right: Bufka, r.f. Lippert, c.f., Builow, 1b.
 Beedles, p. Owens, p. Kruger, l.f. Thiery, c.
 Seated, left to right: Killian, p. Morrissey, s.s. Mgr Hugh Nicol
 Capt. Henry Hines, 2b. Stark, c. Pattison, 3b.

*Photo courtesy The Rockford Morning Star, Sept. 14, 1902.
 Photo by McPherson Bros., Rockford.*

Rockford Base Ball Club 1911 W-I League Pennant Winners



Standing, left to right: Curtis, c.f. Reisinger c. G. J. Bubser,
 President. Marshall, p. Kench, p. Martin, s.s. Eberly 1b
 Seated, left to right: Betts, r.f. Cahill, l.f. Slapnicka, p
 Smith 2b Richards, 3b, Captain and Manager
 Cy Reidy, not shown, He refused to be the 13th man in the photo.

Photo courtesy Rockford Republic, Sept. 11, 1911.

JOHN KLING

Prior to the 1895 season, the Rockford team played a St. Paul team managed by **Charles Comiskey**. The Rockford team won, 15-11. (Five years later, Comiskey moved his team to Chicago to become part of the American League.) One of the Rockford players in 1895, catcher and outfielder **John Kling**, moved on to other teams. In 1900 he began his major league career with the Chicago Cubs. Over the next 10 years he was one of the premier catchers in the National League. He led the league in fielding percentage four times. He played in four World Series with the Cubs including the 1908 team--the last time the Cubs won a World Series.

ROCKY RELATIONSHIPS

The Rockford team did not have a good relationship with the Western Association. In 1896 they were denied a franchise. They rejoined in 1897 and finished third out of eight teams. In 1898 they were again denied a franchise. The local paper vilified the Western Association.

When team backers approached the Western League for a franchise, they were told that if they had applied 30 days earlier, they could have had the franchise awarded to Omaha. The Western League was the strongest minor league.

In 1899, Rockford joined the Western Association for the last time. The association and the team disbanded on June 20 that year.

In 1900, the Western League changed its name to American League, but remained at minor-league status. Not until 1901 did they compete against the National League at major-league level.

HARRY WRIGHT

Harry Wright, considered the father of professional baseball,

served as player-manager of the first professional team--the 1869 undefeated Cincinnati Red Stockings. Then when the National Association was organized in 1871 as the first professional league, Wright went to Boston to be captain and manager of the Red Stockings.

His search for the best players led him to Rockford for contract signing. (See page 1.) Wright's Boston team won the pennant four times and almost won the fifth year. When the National League was formed in 1876, Harry continued his managing career with teams in Boston, Providence and Philadelphia over the next 18 years.

His death on October 3, 1895, inspired league owners to declare a "Harry Wright Day" in each N.L. city. Proceeds would set up a memorial fund. His fame and popularity led minor league teams to honor him as well.

On April 13, 1896, Rockford celebrated "Harry Wright Day" with an old-timers game at Riverside Park. Former members of the Forest City team, now successful businessmen in other cities, flocked home for the game. Marching bands and local dignitaries joined the players in a grand parade. Local newspapers devoted several pages to the event; Chicago reporters attended the game also.

I-I-I LEAGUE

Rockford received a franchise in 1901 in the newly-formed Illinois-Iowa-Indiana League. Once again, **Hugh Nicol** managed the team. Other teams included Bloomington, Decatur and Rock Island; Evansville and Terre Haute, Indiana; plus Cedar Rapids and Davenport, Iowa.

During the first year, Rockford finished in fourth place. In 55 home games, paid attendance averaged 391, lowest in the league.

But in 1902, Rockford won the championship with a 74-50 record. They received a silver cup. The *Rockford Morning Star* published a team picture. The team's star pitcher **Ed Killian** played for Rockford in 1902 and 1903 until traded to the Cleveland A.L. team. Traded next to the Detroit Tigers, he played with them for seven years. He had two 20-game win seasons, including 1908 when he led the league with eight shutouts.

1903-04 SEASONS

Rockford slipped to sixth place in 1903 and continued the downward slide in 1904. The team, now known as the Red Sox, was in last place. On July 22, 1904, **Nicol** resigned (or was fired) as Rockford Red Sox manager. Almost immediately the Rock Island team hired him as manager. "**Hunky**" **Hines**, the Rockford team captain and second baseman, replaced Nicol as manager. Hines had previously managed the Rockford Western Association team in 1899. The change in managers didn't help. The team finished in the cellar with a 48-76 record.

Before the 1904 season opener in April, traveling-evangelist **Billy Sunday** played in an exhibition game here. Prior to his ministry vocation, he had had an eight-year career in the major leagues playing for National League teams in Chicago and Pittsburgh. During the exhibition game before 500 fans, he hit three doubles and a single, scored five runs, and stole a base.

At the end of the 1904 season, the team disbanded. Professional baseball would not be represented here for three years.

ACTIVITY AT RIVERSIDE PARK

While Rockford did not always have a professional team, Riverside Park did not sit empty. In 1900, a cricket club leased the grounds. The City League, composed of factory and social club teams,

played Saturday and Sunday games. Admission: 15 cents. Rockford Central High School also played games at Riverside Park. During the 1904-07 interim, the Rockford Elks amateur team played a regular schedule against Dixon, Aurora, Beloit, Elgin and Davenport teams.

WISCONSIN-ILLINOIS LEAGUE

Rockford received a 1908 franchise in the year-old Wisconsin-Illinois League. Other teams: Freeport, LaCrosse, Wausau, Madison, Green Bay, Oshkosh and Fond du Lac.

Known as the **Rockford Reds**, our local team had a bad start in 1908. Near the bottom of standing most of the season, they finished in last place. Despite their poor showing, they attracted an average of 490 fans per game, second in the league. A grandstand ticket cost 25 cents. The team improved in 1909; by 1910 they raced Appleton for the pennant. They didn't win that year, but in 1911, they won with a record 74-46 led by their star pitcher **Orvid Slapnicka**.

CASEY STENGEL

In 1911, the Aurora Blues of the W-I League, signed a young center fielder named **Casey Stengel**. Enroute to winning the league's batting championship, he played several times in Rockford. Signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1912 began his 14-year major league career as a player, followed by a second career managing the New York Yankees during their glory years. He is in the Hall of Fame.

ROCKFORD ROX

The team's nickname changed in 1912 from "Reds" to "Rox." The team slipped to sixth place with a 62-72 record. Oshkosh won the pennant, but was accused of cheating. They had signed several players with Class A experience, a practice prohibited in league bylaws. (The

W-I League was Class C.)

Prior to the 1913 season, Rox owner **George Bubser** decided to build a new ball park on the east side. He chose a site on 15th Avenue near Seminary Street. While the new park was being built, players held preseason practice at Riverside Park, the home of local professional baseball since 1895.

In a contest to name the new park, Kishwaukee Park won. **Mayor Bennet** dedicated the park, April 30, 1913. That day, a full-page ad appeared in the *Rockford Register Gazette*. It not only announced the first game but also contained cartoons and small ads for nearby saloons, billiard halls, the trolley company and other businesses seeking to attract fans. Kishwaukee Park would be used by minor league teams until 1923.

1914 for the **Rockford Rox** was not a good year. The team finished in seventh place with a 48-71 record. Total attendance, however, reached 27,000, an average of 460 per game--far ahead of other league cities. At the end of the season, the W-I League disbanded.

AMATEUR/SEMI-PRO LEAGUES

Meanwhile, Riverside Park continued as a venue for amateur and semi-pro play. Local newspapers mention **Rockford Grays, Colored Giants** and **Colts**. In addition, a trolley league and a factory league existed. During World War I, a Camp Grant team competed with other teams in nearby cities. Some games were played at Riverside; others at Kishwaukee.

ROX REJOIN I-I-I LEAGUE

After an 11-year hiatus, the Rox in 1915 rejoined the I-I-I League. They replaced the Springfield franchise and joined Peoria, Quincy, Bloomington, Decatur, Moline, Davenport and Dubuque. That year the league operated two half

seasons with a playoff between winners of the half seasons. The Rox finished in second place the first half; slipped to fourth in the second. In 1916, with a record of 66-67, they again finished fourth.

Minor leagues across the nation began to fail in 1917. (Forty-two leagues had existed in 1914.) But when the United States entered World War I, young men entered the service. This factor, plus introduction of other forms of entertainment, lessened baseball's popularity. The I-I-I League ceased to operate July 8, 1917, but reorganized in 1919. During 1918, due to the war and a world-wide flu epidemic only one of 42 leagues finished the season.

When the league resumed operations in 1919, only six teams belonged. The Rox continued to play in Kishwaukee Park. They finished in fourth place with a 62-61 record. The following year, with a team roster of eight, the Rox 70-70 record placed them third. In 1921, they finished second with a 72-64 record. Despite, better team performance, attendance dropped 10 percent to a 685 paid average.

In spite of a 1922 74-65 record, the team dropped to fifth place. A successful year followed. The team placed second at 76-63. Team owners, however, were not making enough money to maintain a team. It folded at the end of the 1923 season.

Owners donated Kishwaukee Park land to the Rockford School District. It later became the site of Beyer Stadium.

Rockford would not have another professional baseball team for 25 years.

Author's note: In 1948, the Cincinnati Reds fielded a Class C farm team here. Still later, Rockford would be home to minor league teams such as the Expos, Cubs, and currently the Reds.

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Several readers have responded to a request in the previous issue to add information about Rockford schools.

Norma Ang, former Brown School student, contributed the following:

Brown School--located on the northwest corner of Eighth Street and Sixteenth Avenue. Lydia Gregory was the principal. A two-story tan brick building, it was built in 1892 at a cost of \$29,310.27. Torn down in 1938. It was named for William Brown, a prominent Rockford attorney active in city affairs.

Mary Lou Yankaitis added facts and opinions:

Lincoln was originally an elementary school on Park Avenue near the Woman's Club. When Lincoln Jr. High School was built on Charles Street, the new school took the name of Lincoln and the Park Street school was renamed Franklin.

Basically, elementary schools were named for local educators. I worked for James E. Blue for many years and always wished a school could be named for him--he was an educator. Of course, "Blue School" does not have much appeal.

Today's Haskell School is built on the site of a Haskell School at the same location. I believe the original stone-brick 2-3 story school burned.

"Charley" Beyer was also head of the Athletic Department at West High.

Mary Lou Yankaitis: graduate of Franklin, Roosevelt and West High schools; executive Secretary for REA; WHEA (West High Education Association) editor; member, District #205 Rockford School Board; Secretary for Dr. Mary Wollner and the Gifted Program. Avid collector of old postcards featuring Rockford Schools.

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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