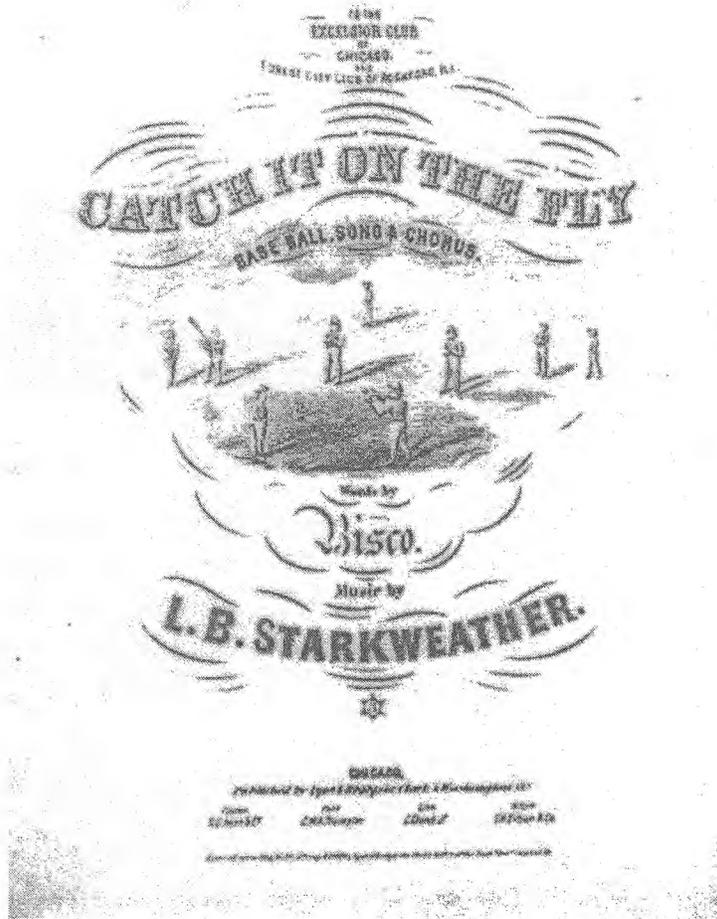

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 45 MARCH 2007 NUMBER 1

THE FOREST CITY BASE BALL CLUB- THE AMATEUR YEARS

By John Molyneaux



"Catch it on the Fly," sheet music dedicated "To the Excelsior Club of Chicago and the Forest City Club of Rockford, Ill.," 1867.

The rivalry between these clubs was the region's major baseball topic in 1867 and led to the discovery of Western baseball by the established Eastern clubs.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an article about the early years of the Forest City Base Ball Club by Dr. John Molyneaux. The Forest Cities were one of the finest base ball teams in the mid-west during the late 1860s. In 1871 they became a founding member of the National Association, the first professional baseball league.

Many of you know Dr. Molyneaux from his position as the Local History Librarian at the Rockford Public Library, a position he recently retired from after 20 years. Originally from New York State, he received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Virginia. Dr. Molyneaux taught at Rockford College before taking the position with the library. He is also a board member of the Rockford Historical Society.

Dr. Molyneaux is an expert in mid 19th century Rockford history and baseball is one of his favorite topics. He is currently working on a book about the Rockford Forest Cities. His previously published book, *African Americans in Early Rockford, 1834 - 1871* carefully documents a little known but important part of our local history.

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 885-1740.

Thomas Powers, Editor

DEDICATED TO PEGGY JENSEN

This issue of the Nuggets of History is dedicated to Peggy Jensen who recently passed away. Peggy was a long term member of the board of the Rockford Historical Society and was the Editor of the Nuggets of History from 1995 to 1999. Peggy was a well known writer and published many articles in various publications including *Rockford* magazine. In addition to her writing and editing talents, Peggy organized many of the summer trips for the Historical Society. We will miss you Peggy!

THE AMATEUR YEARS OF THE FOREST CITY BASE BALL CLUB 1865-1867

By John L. Molyneaux

The Forest City Base Ball Club (FC) was organized in June 1865, the first of at least eight formal clubs organized in Rockford in the two years following the Civil War. Within two months high local interest produced three more clubs, including the Sinnissippi Club, the other major local team. Because of avid enthusiasm, the Winnebago County Agricultural Society held a baseball tournament in conjunction with the county fair in September. Five clubs participated: Empire and Shaffer from Freeport; Excelsior and Atlantic from Chicago; and FC. The Rockford club was eliminated by a loss to the Atlantic and the tournament victory was awarded to the Empire after a disputed game with the Excelsior. After the Atlantic loss, FC closed its season with victories over Sinnissippi on September 23 and Shaffer in Freeport on October 20. In their first season of activity FC played five match games, winning three, and ended the season with three strong games (including the tournament loss to the Atlantic). Their first game had been a loss to the Empire, a more experienced club, organized in 1863. This game was played July 31 "on the old drill ground at the north end of Church Street," where Garrison school now stands, which was the location of the team's home field.

FC was an ambitious club. Their 1866 season began in April, with regular twice-weekly practice, while management scheduled as many match games as resources and availability of players would permit. These plans quickly strained the local talent pool. In 1865-1867 between 90 and 100 men played for the various organized teams, about one third of them (including the best players) for FC and its associated junior club, the Pioneer (organized in May 1866). Creating and maintaining a strong club required a steady flow of new talent. For one thing, every season a team would be a year older and, in the long run, increasing experience cannot counterbalance age. Also, in an amateur environment, many players participate just one or two years, then turn their attention to other interests, personal or business. For those few with the requisite talent and the inclination to give baseball top priority, a club needs to schedule matches with other strong clubs, presenting challenges to the player's competitive instincts and generating lively interest among local fans. The man who handled the problems of talent flow and competition was Hiram Waldo, elected president of the club in April 1866.

Hi Waldo was 39 years old, a bookseller and former school teacher and a former two-term County Superintendent of Education. He was an avid baseball enthusiast and player, now too old to play with younger men at the highest level. Genial and persuasive, he was an astute judge of playing talent, and he immediately brought a 15-year-old high school student named Albert Spaulding to the team. Albert was a good hitter and fielder, but Waldo saw pitching ability that could be developed with experience. It was not easy to get the boy for FC, however. Albert's widowed mother had moved her family from Byron to Rockford a few years earlier to get the lad into the Rockford schools. Despite his ability, despite the baseball craze in the city, Albert had not joined an organized team—he went to school and also held a job clerking in a grocery store. Waldo negotiated with Mrs. Spaulding, with the principal of the West Rockford High School, and with the employer to convince them Albert's life prospects would not be hurt if he were allowed the time needed for baseball practice and match games. There may have been a little subterfuge in the process—Albert was announced as president of the newly organized Pioneer club at the beginning of May, but before that club could play any match games, he was co-opted to the FC as their regular pitcher.

As good as he was, Spaulding was inexperienced, unsure of himself, jittery, and prone to occasional wildness. The FC catcher, George King, was sympathetic and calming and able to guide the young pitcher's development for several years. It was a nurturing relationship that Spaulding would recall with gratitude many years later.

Also in Waldo's plans was another tournament to be held under FC auspices at the County Fairgrounds, June 26-28, involving ten clubs from all over the Midwest. Competition would be for numerous prizes, for both teams and individuals, all donated by Rockford businesses. The tournament was announced May 12, just before the season opened. When tournament time arrived FC had defeated the Mystic (Belvidere), the Sinnissippi (Rockford) twice, and the Clipper (Rochelle).

An impressive array of clubs came to Rockford at the end of June: two from Chicago, two from Freeport, and one each from Bloomington, Dubuque, Milwaukee, Detroit, Rockford and Pecatonica (!). Pairings were determined by lot, and FC played Shaffer (Freeport) on June 27, winning 37-28. This was their seventh consecutive victory (going back to '65) for the club, but the streak ended on June 28 when Cream City (Milwaukee) beat them 14-13. FC led 13-11 at the start of the 8th inning but was shut out after that. The tournament ended with Excelsior (Chicago) coming first, Bloomington second and Cream City third. This

tournament revealed that FC needed more offensive power to support Spaulding's pitching, a weakness which Waldo addressed immediately.

In the early June game with Rochelle, against the Clipper club, one of their players attracted FC attention. Bob Addy, a tinsmith by trade, was offered a job with a hardware store if he would come to Rockford to play for FC. He accepted the proposal and by the end of July came to town to begin his duties. He was the first man to come to Rockford specifically to play baseball.

Bob Addy's early life is obscure. The most recent reference sources state he was born in Rochester, New York, in 1845, but a detailed search of various genealogical records shows he was in fact born in Canada in 1838, the son of Irish immigrants. The only other reliable early datum is that he played cricket when he was a youth. In any event, in 1866 he was in Rochelle, where a brother was a produce merchant, and both of them played for the Clippers. When he arrived in Rockford, then, he was 28 years old and an experienced veteran. Despite his age he had many years of baseball ahead of him: he played for FC longer than anyone except Al Barker, and his professional career extended into the late 1870s.

Albert Spaulding was very important in the future of FC, but Bob Addy became the defining player, the exemplar of the FC style of ball. Offensively, he was a line drive specialist, a contact hitter who rarely struck out. Most important for the club were his defensive skills, his base running ability, and his attitude. Almost unknown today, he was highly regarded by contemporary ballplayers. George Wright and Adrian Anson remembered him as a very aggressive, very intense player who routinely ranged all over the field. Al Spaulding remembered him as reliable and steady, a skilled bench jockey, and stated that he was the first player to use the slide in base running (whether Spaulding's claim is accurate is not known, but, true or not, it reflects on Addy's skills and innovative playing). In the next few years a good FC game was characterized by fine fielding, hard line drive hitting, and aggressive base running. Addy's style was not to win games, but to beat your opponent.

After the tournament FC resumed its match game campaign with two more victories over the Sinnissippi Club (in which Spaulding, for unknown reasons, did not play). But the season's highlight was a return game with Cream City, played in Milwaukee on August 21. This was the first long road trip for the club (they were gone two days and two nights). Waldo made a lineup move before this trip: Mart Wheeler, the star of the Sinnissippi club, was added to the roster. (Wheeler had actually played with FC in their first game, but switched to Sinnissippi as soon as that club was organized.) The game was played before a large crowd, Spaulding

was good, bats were hot, and FC won the game 24-10, with a 12 run 3rd inning. This was the first time FC had beaten a strong team from a larger city.

The last game of the season was played September 26, in Beloit, against a weak Badger club, FC winning 62-8. It was a predictable outcome and an insignificant game, but noteworthy because FC hit 3 home runs, 2 by Addy and 1 by King, the first multi home run game for the team or for any player. But for those familiar with 19th century baseball, this game has interest because for the first time Ross Barnes appeared in FC uniform. He played shortstop; Bob Addy played third base; and Al Spaulding pitched. The three key players of the next three seasons were together for the first time.

1866 had been an important season. FC had won 9 of 10 games and the foundations for future success were laid.

In 1867 several players left the team, the most important being Henry Warner, first baseman and leading hitter, and S. J. Sawyer, the '65 pitcher and '66 third baseman. Returning veterans were Bob Addy, George King, Al Barker, Harry Starr, and Albert Spaulding. Mart Wheeler, the former Sinnissippi star, became a regular. These regulars were supported by several experienced, occasional, players, and by two rookies from the Pioneer club, Roscoe (Ross) Barnes and Denton (Dent) Sawyer. It was a good club, but would be sharply tested as the level of competition was raised again.

In 1867 the Chicago Excelsiors were acknowledged as the strongest team in the region. The love-hate feelings of downstate Rockford toward the growing metropolis were stirred when the Excelsiors won the '66 tournament, then declined a challenge issued by FC. This season the Rockford team was determined to bring the big city club to bay. Perhaps the Excelsiors were afraid to play, fearful of being beaten? Or, worse, perhaps they regarded Rockford with contempt, as country bumpkins—Rockford eyes could see evidence of such an attitude in Chicago newspapers. After the FC annual meeting April 3 (when Waldo was reelected president) the Rockford *Register* remarked that "the self-styled 'champions of the west' [Excelsiors] have need to look out for their laurels if the Forest City boys go for them this season." Be careful what you wish for, the saying goes—this season FC involvement with the Excelsiors would bring startling and disruptive consequences.

The match games began May 3 with a 56-0 win over the Phoenix club in Belvidere. The game is noteworthy only because the Belvidere *Standard* commented that Spaulding "sends his balls so much after the corkscrew pattern that it requires some practice to hit them." Spaulding, now 16, was developing a

breaking pitch to complement his good fast ball. After this game there were victories over the Sinnissippi and Byron clubs, after which FC could boast of another seven game winning streak (going back into '66).

Finally, May 21, the Excelsiors accepted the FC challenge. Hi Waldo worked out a best of three series with them, home and home, with the third game, if needed, on neutral ground. The first game was slated for June 20, in Chicago. The Excelsiors also informed Waldo that the National club, of Washington, D. C., was planning a western tour in July. The Nationals were known as one of the strongest teams in the country, and this would be the first time an eastern club ventured across the mountains into the Midwest. For their Chicago stand, the Nationals wanted to play the Excelsiors and any two other clubs of the Excelsiors' choosing. The Excelsiors said they might consider the FC as one of these two clubs. This was an exciting prospect, but it did not change FC attitudes. The Chicago club was still the target this year, and since designation of teams to play the Nationals was in Excelsior hands, the only thing to do was beat them and see what would happen.

To strengthen the team against the formidable Excelsiors, FC again went outside Rockford and added Wallace Lightheart to the roster. Lightheart was a veteran infielder for the Empire and Shaffer clubs of Freeport, and thus reinforced the first game took place in Chicago before a large and boisterous crowd. The Rockford team lost by just three runs, 45-41. FC hit McNally, the Excelsior pitcher, hard, but young Spaulding was jittery, wild and ineffective. Even so, it was a close game. The return game was scheduled for July 4, the centerpiece of Rockford's Independence Day festivities. Before that game FC played the Phoenix of Belvidere again, in Rockford, July 1, winning 24-16.

On July 4 FC and Excelsior played on the Fairgrounds before a crowd estimated at 3 to 5 thousand. Once again FC added a new player from Freeport, veteran infielder Royal Buckman, dropping light hitting Dent Sawyer from the first nine. It was an excellent game, but once again FC lost by three runs, 28-25. Spaulding pitched well, FC hit well. The attack was led by Addy (5 hits, 5 runs, 2 RBI, steal of home), Buckman (5 RBI) and Barker (4 runs). It was a defensive loss: due to errors by King, Lightheart, Buckman, and Starr, the Excelsiors scored 15 runs in the 6th and 7th innings. The most astute move of the game was by the Excelsiors, who changed pitchers in the 5th inning. Starting pitcher McNally—who had allowed 41 FC runs in the first game—gave up 15 runs in the first 4 innings and was replaced. This was the first FC game where admission was charged and the two clubs divided a net of "upwards of \$400" between them.

FC lost both games but the club demonstrated they could play on the

highest level of available competition. They were formally invited to play the Nationals in Chicago on July 25, in the first of three matches the easterners would play there. The Excelsiors recognized FC was a strong club and hoped to gather useful information about the Nationals style of play against the Rockford club, a known quantity.

For the upcoming game FC made more lineup adjustments. Harry Starr was dropped. Starr was the fastest man on the team, and in his second year as a regular outfielder, but was a light hitter and prone to play too aggressively for his native abilities, leading to defensive and base running mishaps. He was replaced by George Stearns, a FC veteran who was less flamboyant and who had been a regular in '66. On the big day (July 20) FC came to Chicago trailed by hundreds of Rockford citizens, who were quickly lost in the crowd of thousands assembled to see the Nationals. The Washington team had played six games on their tour, in Columbus, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and St. Louis, winning them all by gigantic scores. Years later, Spaulding recalled he was petrified, and his teammates were frightened, tense, and excited "with the possible exception of Bob Addy." They hoped only to avoid shame and disgrace. But when the game began, everything but the moment disappeared and, finally, everything came together. FC took the lead in the 2nd inning and never gave it up, although it was not until the 7th that they realized they were going to win (enlightenment came with a Spaulding to Addy to Stearns double play, which ended a Nationals rally). Spaulding did not lose his composure, even after George Wright hit a home run. Barnes and Addy were steady and assured; the final score was FC 29-Nationals 23. Al Barker was so excited that he wore his baseball uniform while in Chicago the following two days, so everyone would know he was one of the FC. The victory was even sweeter when the Nationals beat the Excelsiors 49-4 and then the Atlantics 74-17 in their other Chicago games.

The game with the Nationals was the most important game FC ever played. It was reported across the country and brought attention to baseball in the Midwest. Eastern teams, eager for new, strong competition suddenly became interested in western teams, despite the time and expense involved, and it encouraged more frenzied baseball activity throughout the heartland. It opened the future for FC, who now would be sought by strong opponents. It also meant change for FC, as the inflow of talent would have to be increased and ways of raising more money would have to be found. But first there was celebration: on July 30 there was a banquet at the Holland House, followed on July 31 by a reception at Brown's Hall, which involved Rockford mayor Fowler and other

dignitaries. Hi Waldo, on behalf of the club, presented Albert Spaulding with a silver watch and chain, and Ross Barnes with a gold pen and case.

After the euphoria of victory came trauma. Al Spaulding had dropped out of high school the past winter and enrolled in Rockford Business College to study bookkeeping and commerce. In August, finished with his schooling, he was recruited by the Chicago Excelsiors. The boy (he turned 17 on September 2) was offered a bookkeeping job with a wholesale grocer at \$40 a week, and would play for the Excelsiors. Uncertain what to do, he talked with Hi Waldo who, speaking as a friend, said, "take the offer." So off went Albert to Chicago the second week in September. As it happened, his career in the big city fizzled. The grocer soon failed; another position (same arrangements) was found, and this business failed as well. It was late in the season, so there was little baseball activity. Homesick and discouraged, the teenager returned to Rockford in February 1868.

Spaulding's departure, assumed to be permanent, threw FC into disarray. Then, as now, pitcher is the most demanding and difficult position to fill. There were no appropriate candidates on other regional teams to attract. S. J. Sawyer, the '65 pitcher, was gone from Rockford, so attention focused on two young Rockford players, Dent Sawyer and Ernest Waxham. Waxham had pitched for the Pioneers, but had never played in the FC uniform. Sawyer had been a catcher for the Pioneers, but had played outfield for FC in '67. George King could not be dislodged at catcher, and Sawyer had been bumped from the first nine because his hitting was not judged strong enough. But he was a good player and, probably because of his experience, he was selected to replace Spaulding.

After the Nationals game there was necessarily a long pause in the FC schedule. Finally, in late September, a match was accepted with the Bloomington club. This game was to be in Freeport, sponsored by the Stephenson County Agricultural Society, for a cash prize of \$200. Bloomington had a strong club. In '66 they had finished second in the Rockford tournament, defeating the Atlantic (Chicago) and the Cream City (Milwaukee), but conceded first place to the Excelsior (Chicago) when the schedule required them to play immediately following their Cream City game. This would be a challenging effort for FC and their new pitcher.

The game took place September 26 before an unruly Freeport crowd estimated at 4000. At first Sawyer did well enough, "very much better than his friends supposed he would, he having never pitched in a match before," said the *Rockford Register*. The score was Bloomington 23-FC 21 after 5 innings. But it had been hard going—the inexperienced pitcher was hit pretty hard, and he could not

hold runners on base, allowing 14 stolen bases. Sawyer was "entirely used up" at this point. In the 6th inning he gave up 28 runs. For the last three innings Ernest Waxham—playing his first game for FC—pitched, Sawyer going to right field. The final score was Bloomington 67-FC 41. This horrendous loss was not Sawyer's fault. FC management erred in not relieving him after 5 innings (which was kindly pointed out by the Rockford newspaper). Although they had forced opposing pitchers out, FC had never switched pitchers in a game before and clearly had not understood when this was necessary. Furthermore, the team had not played a match game for over two months and was out of practice—Barker made 5 errors, Addy, Sawyer, and Buckman 2 each.

The last game of the season was October 4 against the Star club of Marengo, in Marengo. FC won this game 63-8, the Stars giving up after just 5 innings. No further account of this game has been located, but it is likely that Sawyer pitched again.

The victory over the Washington Nationals overshadowed everything else this season, obliterating the two close losses to the Excelsiors and the embarrassing game against Bloomington. FC finished with a won 6 lost 3 record and found that they would not lack unworthy opponents in 1868. And when Spaulding returned home after his unsuccessful sojourn in Chicago, the club was ready to take on all comers.

Significant Games, 1865-1867

The lineups are arranged in batting order

1865, July 31, at FC home field, North Church Street, Rockford. FC 21-Empire (Freeport) 55. Lineup: Barker, c; S. J. Sawyer, p; Warner, ss; King, 1b; Webster, 2b; Stearns, lf; Wheeler, cf; Brown, rf. NOTE: the first match game played by FC.

1865, September 18, at Fairgrounds, Rockford. FC 20-Atlantic (Chicago) 26. Lineup: King, 2b; Burns, lf; S. J. Sawyer, p; Lakin, ss; Barker, c; Hurd, cf; Warner, 1b; Dunn, ss; Webster, cf. NOTE: the first game FC played at the Fairgrounds, which became their home field in 1868. A game in the 1865 tournament.

1866, June 28, at Fairgrounds, Rockford. FC 13-Cream City (Milwaukee) 14. Lineup: Warner, 1b; Spaulding, p; King, c; Stearns, rf; Barker, lf; Webster, ss; S. J. Sawyer, 3b; Hitchcock, 2b; Starr, rf. NOTE: A game in the 1866 tournament.

1866, August 21, in Milwaukee. FC 24-Cream City (Milwaukee) 10. Lineup: Warner, 1b; Spaulding, p; Barker, 2b; Stearns, rf; King, c; S. J. Sawyer, 3b; Starr, cf; Addy, ss; Wheeler, lf. NOTE: first victory against a strong team and Spaulding's first impressive pitching outing.

1866, September 26, in Beloit. FC 62-Badgers (Beloit) 8. Lineup: King, c; S. J. Sawyer, lf; Barnes, ss; Addy, 3b; Hitchcock, 1b; Webster, rf; Barker, 2b; Spaulding, p; Starr, cf. NOTE: the first game for Ross Barnes and the first game Barnes, Addy, and Spaulding played together.

1867, June 20, in Chicago. FC 41-Excelsior (Chicago) 45. Lineup: King, c; Barnes, ss; Addy, 1b; Starr, cf; Lightheart, 3b; Wheeler, lf; Spaulding, p; Barker, 2b; D. Sawyer, rf. NOTE: the first of the Excelsior games, lost because Spaulding was ineffective. Played only 7 innings.

1867, July 4, at Fairgrounds in Rockford. FC 25-Excelsior (Chicago) 28. Lineup: Addy, 2b; Barnes, ss; King, c; Spaulding, p; Barker, cf; Lightheart, 3b; Wheeler, lf; Buckman, 1b; Starr, rf. NOTE: the second of the Excelsior games, lost because of defensive lapses.

1867, July 20, in Chicago. FC 29-National (Washington) 23. Lineup: Addy, 2b; King, c; Stearns, 1b; Spaulding, p; Barker, cf; Wheeler, rf; Buckman, 3b; Lightheart, 1b; Barnes, ss. NOTE: the first game FC played against a strong eastern team; the first time a western team had defeated an eastern team. This game was reported nationally and brought immediate recognition to FC.

1867, September 26, in Freeport. FC 41-Bloomington 67. Lineup: Addy, 2b; Barnes, ss; Wheeler, lf; King, c; Waxham, rf-p; Lightheart, 3b; D. Sawyer, p-rf; Buckman, 1b; Barker, cf. NOTE: FC searching to find pitcher to replace Spaulding. Game lost due to mismanagement (D. Sawyer should have been relieved after 5 innings) and defensive lapses caused by two month hiatus in match games.

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