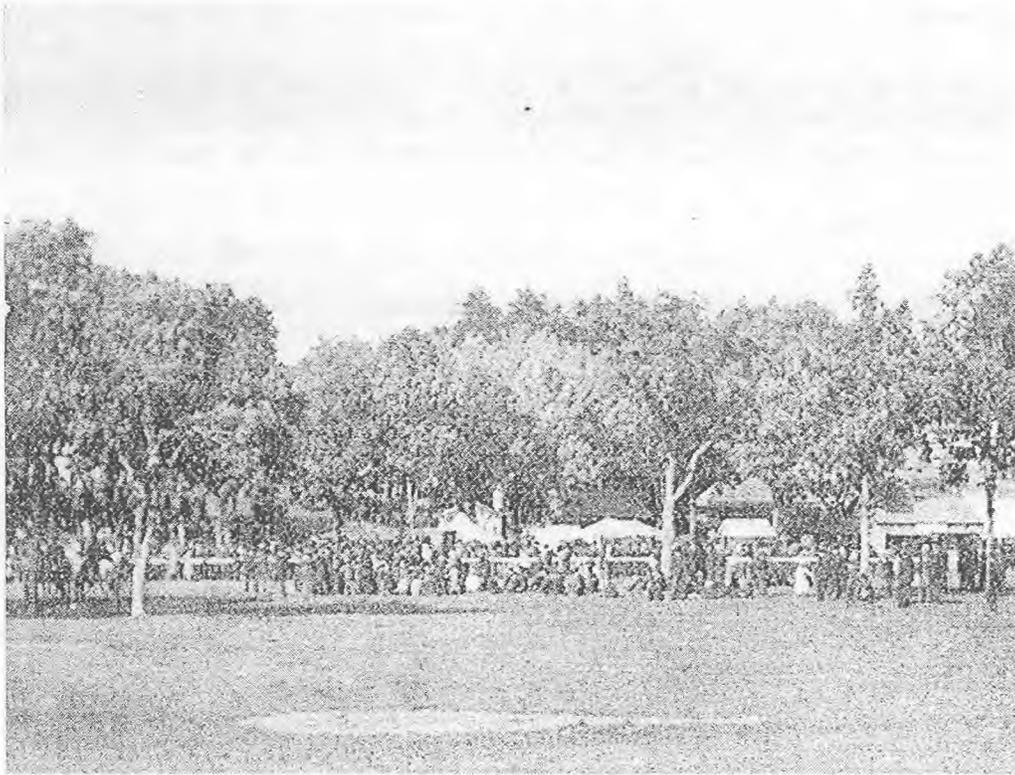

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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NO LONGER AMATEURS: THE FOREST CITY BASE BALL CLUB IN 1868

By John Molyneaux



The ball diamond at the Fairgrounds in 1879, looking from 3b across toward 1b, little changed from the time FC played there 1865-1871. There is no pitcher's mound (not used until 1883) and the pitcher's box was just 45 feet from home plate. The trees along the right field line could make things difficult defensively.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents another 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 has written several articles about the Rockford Forest Cities and their rivals. 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 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS

The Rockford Historical Society has awarded scholarships to a deserving history student at each of the four Rockford High Schools. The award recipients are:

Anju Goyal - Auburn
Ognjen Malinovic - East
Matthew Miner - Guilford
Ryan Halpin - Jefferson

Each student received a \$100 scholarship and a year's subscription to the *Nuggets of History*. Congratulations to all!

No Longer Amateurs: The Forest City Base Ball Club in 1868

By John Molyneaux

Rockford's baseball team announced its 1868 plans early in the year: "The Forest City...intend to spare no pains to eclipse their former triumphs. The former pitcher of the club having returned, it is intended to organize a nine that cannot be beaten. It is also intended to give the crack clubs of the east a chance to try their skill and muscle...by making an extended tour during the season." This manifesto appeared in the *Rockford Gazette* on February 27, projecting the ambition and energy of the past into the upcoming season.

In 1866 Hi Waldo, a local bookseller with an eye for baseball talent, was elected president of FC [Forest City] and began shaping a team selected by talent and hard work. He acquired four new players and integrated them into the young gentleman's team of 1865. Bob Addy, of the Rochelle Clippers, was brought to Rockford as the professional star of the team. Mart Wheeler, the leading player of the local rival team, the Sinnissippi Base Ball Club, was added to the roster. Albert Spalding and Roscoe Barnes, teenagers with no organized baseball experience, were secured. Waldo imbued his players with the energy and confidence—almost cockiness—that lay behind the manifesto. It was later recalled that "day after day and evening after evening he spent with them practicing...always cheerful, always optimistic, always certain that the grand things were about to be accomplished—and they usually were." (*Rockford Morning Star*, April 27, 1912)

In 1867 FC began to play strong clubs: they lost two close games to the Chicago Excelsiors, the region's leading team, but then caused a national sensation by beating a strong eastern team, the Washington Nationals, the first Midwestern team to accomplish this. This success brought immediate retribution, however. The young pitcher, Albert Spalding, was stolen by the Chicago Excelsiors, lured from Rockford by jobs and money. Then the powerful Bloomington club inflicted a humiliating defeat. But the victory over Washington trumped these events. Early in '68 young Spalding had returned home, his career in Chicago having fallen apart before it ever began and FC was ready to resume the quest of "grand things."

"Sparing no pains" to build an unbeatable club meant FC had to begin generating revenue through baseball. At the March 6 annual meeting Hi Waldo was reelected president, but now administration of the team began to be influenced by businessmen, not players, and a sort of proto-"front office", separate from the players, began to emerge. Alfonso Nicholds was elected secretary: he was an insurance agent. Harry Starr was vice president:

he was a dry goods merchant who would shortly become proprietor of the city's leading hotel, the Holland House. James H. Manny was a director: he was an industrialist involved in reaper manufacturing. H. W. Price was official scorer: he was a boot and shoe manufacturer. George W. King was a director: he was teller at the Second National Bank. All were baseball enthusiasts: King was a member of the first nine, and captain of the team; Starr had been a starting player for two years; Nicholds had played on the second team. Bob Addy, the team's star player, was a director and the only officer whose primary occupation was playing baseball, supported in the off season by his work in the hardware store.



Bob Addy came to FC in 1866. The star of the team, his base running and defensive skills shaped both the FC style of playing and the abilities of his protege, Ross Barnes.

Next, a decision was made to finance the team through gate receipts. Hitherto no admission was charged to games; save in exceptional circumstances, but now a charge of 25 cents per head was established. Anyone could purchase a year's membership in the club for \$1, which would allow free admission to all home games. An arrangement was made with the Winnebago County Agricultural Society to use the Fairgrounds as the team's home field. At the Fairgrounds existing facilities allowed admissions to be controlled, easy construction of seating, and refreshment concessions. The original FC home field on North Church Street, where Garrison School would later be built, had been in use for three seasons and it was now abandoned. Gate receipts appeared to have good potential for significant revenue: in 1867 estimated attendance at four important games totaled 20,000. An expanded schedule and matches with even stronger clubs would certainly draw thousands more.



Hi Waldo, president of FC 1866-1868, put together the team and led it into the national limelight.

Money would be needed, but just how much was not clear. The County Agricultural Society doubtless was paid for use of its grounds. Travel expenses would be high, especially if the team took an eastern tour. But gate receipts were shared by the playing teams, so only a portion of this revenue would accrue to FC. And in the move away from amateur status, players would now be compensated. Most strong teams by now adopted the "co-op system," by which a certain portion of the gate would be distributed among the players. It was officially pretended that this was not playing for pay, though only the most willfully naïve could believe this. It is likely (though no overt statement has been found) that with the adoption of admission charges FC became a "co-op" team. Another widespread professional practice, but one which did not involve a charge on team finances, was finding employment for ballplayers. FC had done this as early as 1866, when Bob Addy was given a job in a hardware store. In 1868 other arrangements are known: Albert Spalding (who had bolted the team once already) was employed in the insurance office of Alphonso Nicholds, the club secretary. Ernest Waxham, the club's chief substitute, was employed in club president Hi Waldo's bookstore. It is likely such an arrangement was made for Ross Barnes, Spalding's close friend and another teenager, who was employed as a clerk in the county courthouse. There may have been others as well.

Seven front-line players from 1867 returned as starters on the '68 team: George King, Bob Addy, Al Spalding, Ross Barnes, Al Barker, Mart Wheeler, and Ernest Waxham. To these veterans were added three new faces: Garrett "Gat" Stires, Ballard "Val" Osborne, and Fred Cone. Stires and Osborne had been the stars of the Byron Base Ball Club, which had claimed the 1867 Ogle County championship; they were good hitters and, most

"if their game...with the Athletics...is as good,...their victory over the Nationals [last year] may find a companion." While FC was clearly a good team, a great deal was being claimed on the basis of one victory over the Excelsiors.

The Philadelphia Athletics were willing to play the Forest City, true enough, but they refused to incur the travel charges to and from Rockford. They were in Chicago on a tour and the Rockford club could come there, like they did for the Washington Nationals in '67. So on June 18 FC traveled into Chicago and played the Athletics before a large crowd. It was, as they say, a learning experience. The Athletics, led by Dick McBride and Al Reach, were much stronger than the Nationals and had a very good day on the diamond. They scored 20 in the 6th, 34 in the 9th, and the final score was 94-13, the worst defeat in Forest City history. The lineup problems for FC got worse, though no one claimed this had a bearing on the game's outcome. Wheeler was still unable to play and Waxham started for him in left. For some unspecified reason Barker was unavailable and was replaced by Henry Warner in right. Warner had been a regular in '65 and '66, had been, in fact, the team captain and leading hitter. His baseball activity had been curtailed when he opened a drug store. He was a sentimental favorite locally, but he had never been an outstanding fielder and now suffered from lack of practice and activity as well. Finding help on the diamond beyond one substitute was clearly going to be a problem.

The loss to the Athletics was so surreal it does not seem to have done serious psychic damage to the team—in fact, no one seems to have remembered it after about a week. Besides, it happened in Chicago, then as now a questionable place for many Rockfordians. More important was the next game with the Brooklyn Atlantics on June 24. This was the first time a strong eastern team came to Rockford. The Atlantics featured stars like Dickey Pearce, Bob Ferguson, and George Zettlein, well known to baseball fans, and they drew a crowd estimated to be 2500 or 3000 to the Fairgrounds.

In this game Gat Stires became an instant local hero. He came to bat in the 6th inning with the bases loaded and "sent the ball high up and over the line of carriages and people in the right field.... He was tremendously cheered for some time...." It was "the most handsome thing we have seen in base ball," said the *Rockford Gazette*. The *Winnebago County Chief* simply said Stires "came close to knocking the ball out of Winnebago County." Alas, FC was unable to hold on, despite leading 24-17 after 7 innings. Spalding faltered badly in the 8th, the Atlantics scored 12, and FC managed to lose 31-29. This was the first time FC had ever lost two games in a row, but it could easily have been a win and everyone was satisfied. The FC focus on defensive play is noted in newspaper coverage. The *Chief* reported FC out fielded the Atlantics: "less muffing, more flies taken." "Addy was decidedly himself, and

importantly, excellent fielders. Cone had played for the Sinnissippi Club and for its junior club, the Unions. He hit well enough, but was a marvel defensively. The season thus started with this roster: 1b, Cone; 2b, Addy; ss, Barnes; 3b, Stires; c, King; lf, Wheeler; cf, Osborne; rf, Barker; p, Spalding; sub, Waxham. All were selected with fielding as the first criterion, then hitting. The most accomplished defensive players were Addy, King, Barnes, Barker, and Cone. Addy, King, Barnes, and possibly Stires, were known to hit with some power, but overall the team hitting was moderate. Spalding was a good batsman, but only 17 years old and still rather tentative as a pitcher, though clearly as good as the region's best. He was a question mark in '68, but a question mark any team would be happy to have. The planned schedule would call for nearly twice as many games as last year, and those against significantly stronger clubs, but as long as the lineup remained intact...well, of course, lineup problems began as soon as the season got under way.

Practice began as usual in April. The first match games were with Byron on May 21 (in Rockford) and Harvard [IL] (in Harvard) on June 4, both easy victories. The season's first series of games against strong clubs was announced May 28: Chicago Excelsiors, Philadelphia Athletics, Brooklyn Atlantics, and Madison Capital Citys.

The Chicago Excelsiors came to Rockford June 12. Several thousand spectators were on hand and themselves participated in the first excitement when, just as the umpire started the game, "a row of seats which had been erected for the accommodation of spectators gave way...slightly injuring several persons." The worst injury (dislocated wrist) was quickly attended to and play began about 20 minutes late. FC dominated play: Barnes was "ubiquitous" in the field; King hit a three-run homer; Addy had three hits and 2 RBI. The Rockford team won 20-18. The *Chicago Times* (June 14) particularly noted the FC pitcher: "he has wonderfully improved in accuracy and precision and to-day he is without doubt the best pitcher in the west.... The Excelsiors made a great mistake when they allowed Spalding to return to Rockford." Finally, the Excelsiors had been beaten—but there was a cost: in the 4th inning Wheeler was "disabled" and replaced by Waxham. The injury was not specified, but it was serious and the club's lineup problems began.

The win over the Excelsiors generated overconfidence, certainly in FC supporters and likely in the team itself. (The Rockford press, especially the *Winnebago County Chief*, tended to demonize the Excelsiors and Chicago when reporting baseball matters, so opinions could be a bit unbalanced.) Thinking of the Brooklyn Atlantic game scheduled for June 24 the *Chief* observed "The Atlantic is the crack club of the East.... It is to the East, what the Forest City is to the West." The *Rockford Gazette* looked forward to the upcoming game with the Philadelphia Athletics on June 18 and, quoting the *Chicago Times* with approval, stated that

took almost every ball that came within his neighborhood, and what he did not take Barnes did." Osborne was also cited for exceptional defense. But lineup troubles continued. It was clear by now Wheeler would be out of action a long time, and Stires was moved from 3b into left field in this game. Wallace Lightheart was placed at 3b. Lightheart was a hard hitter with past experience with Freeport teams and FC. He was a poor fielder, however, and it is likely he was used as a stopgap in this particular game. Once again Barker was unavailable, and Dent Sawyer took his place in right field. Sawyer was a fixture with the FC second nine and generally regarded as Waxham's principal rival as chief substitute.

On July 4 the club went to Chicago for a second match with the Excelsiors. Before a crowd of 2500, FC again beat the Chicagoans, this time 36-27, paced by the hitting of Addy, King, Barnes, and Spalding. In Rockford this victory generated some small delirium. The train carrying the team arrived home at 2 AM on the 5th, to be met by a crowd of 500, a fireworks display, and the city band. After these festivities, there was a parade through the streets to Hi Waldo's house, "to whom a serenade was given and the crowds dispersed with cheers for the 'Forest City'." The Chicago newspapers were not impressed by the game. According to the *Chicago Republican* the Excelsiors had lost the game through complacency and lack of practice, it was "simply another drubbing...by a backwoods ball club...." The *Winnebago County Chief* wasn't impressed, either: "it don't amount to much. When our boys meet foremen worthy of their steel—such as the Nationals of Washington...or the Atlantics of Brooklyn—then we are ready to throw up our hats.... Future contests of anything like equal merit will have to be with first class eastern clubs." The game with the Athletics was already consigned to oblivion. The lineup problems continued. Barker was back in the outfield, but Waxham had to fill in at third.

Now came a set of home and home games with the Capital City club of Madison, Wisconsin. The first game took place July 9 in Rockford, during a fierce heat wave which kept attendance down. FC won handily, 28-9, with Osborne doing the heavy hitting. Some excitement occurred in the 2nd inning when "a part of the seats came down with a crash; no one was injured." The quest for a permanent third baseman entered a new phase: Sam Swasey, a young player from the Belvidere Phoenix club, would be tried in the hot corner for several games. The return game took place on July 16 in Madison, another FC win, 43-12, with Addy, Barnes, Barker, and Spalding leading the hitters. Osborne was unavailable and his place was taken by Dent Sawyer, while Swasey continued at third. After an overnight in Madison the team stopped in Janesville on July 17, where the local team was crushed 88-6.

On July 23 the Buckeye Club of Cincinnati came to Rockford. Cincinnati, a Midwestern city, was home to two powerful clubs, the Buckeyes (currently the top club) and the Cincinnati Base Ball Club, known as the Red Stockings, now in their second year of operation. Despite the geography, both Cincinnati clubs were built around contractually paid eastern professionals. The Buckeyes were, in fact, an eastern team, and among their stars were such players as Andy Leonard, John McMullin, and William "Cherokee" Fisher, a very tough right handed pitcher. For a while it was a close game, with FC holding a 7-6 lead after 6 innings, but Fisher and the Buckeyes were too much for Spalding and they won 19-11. This was the weakest offensive outing for FC in '68 (they had scored 13 against the Athletics). The need for more batting punch in the FC lineup was made clearer than ever. And lineup problems continued: Swasey was still at third but was not fielding well, and in this game Cone was injured, replaced at 1b by Waxham.

On August 11 FC played the Morrisania [NY] Unions, the 1867 amateur baseball champions. Led by pitcher Charlie Pabor and shortstop George Wright (who had played for the Washington Nationals in '67) the Unions had won 11 games in a row when their Midwest tour brought them to Rockford. There were 2500 at the Fairgrounds, allegedly the largest crowd of the tour. As fate would have it, the lineup troubles of the FC escalated. Cone, still injured and unavailable, was replaced by Warner at first. Swasey continued at third, despite his fielding. And now Gat Stires was seriously ill (details not known) and unable to play. His place in the outfield was taken by Frank Trumbull. Trumbull was a veteran of the Sinnissippi club, which had just gone out of existence, and was known to be a good fielder, if only a moderate hitter. Swasey and Warner were unable to handle their positions. In the 5th inning Captain George King switched their positions, but to little avail. Addy and Barnes did some powerful offensive work, but it wasn't enough—Barnes had 3 hits (including a home run), 3 RBI, 3 stolen bases (including a steal of home); Addy had 3 hits (including a double), 4 runs scored and 3 stolen bases. The final score was Union 23, FC 17. "The absence of Cone...made a marked difference" commented the *Rockford Gazette*. This was the last FC game for both Swasey and Warner.

For those interested in obscure baseball facts the FC-Union game has some interest. Al Spalding played against George Wright in July 1867, when FC won its celebrated victory over the Washington Nationals—shortstop Wright hit a home run off pitcher Spalding. Now, in August 1868, in the 23-17 loss to the Unions, pitcher Spalding gave up another home run to shortstop Wright. In 1871-75 Spalding and Wright played together on the Boston Red Stockings and today they are together again in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

FC traveled to Dubuque August 21, where they won a 75-5 victory, then experienced disappointment when the Union Club of St. Louis failed to appear for a match on August 25. A forfeit win was recorded and the season record now stood at 9 won 4 lost.

The rest of the season was spent squaring off against two old Illinois rivals, each of whom had beaten FC in the past. First was the Chicago Athletics, who had beaten the Rockford team in 1865. The Athletics had played the Washington Nationals in '67, one of the three teams to play the touring easterners in Chicago (FC and the Excelsiors being the others). On September 4 FC met the Athletics in Chicago, winning 31-14. Finally, after complicating matters all season, the lineup problem was close to resolution. Osborne was moved from the outfield to third base and Frank Trumbull, a reliable player in the desired FC mode, continued in the outfield. Stires, unfortunately, was still sick, but Mart Wheeler was available to play, though this was to be his last game for Forest City. The return game was in Rockford on September 22 and was another FC victory, this time 29-14 in 7 innings, Barnes hitting a homer. Stires was still out, Waxham played in his stead.

On September 24 FC met the Bloomington Club at the Fairgrounds. This club had finished 2nd in the '66 Rockford tournament, behind the Excelsiors, and had beaten FC badly in '67 by a score of 67-41, in Freeport. This was a hard game, but a win for FC, 20-14. Stires was able to play, for the first time in two months, and this was the only game since the first Excelsior game in June that all the designated first nine took the field, although Trumbull had replaced Wheeler. The return game was played in Bloomington October 29, the last game of the season. FC won this one 20-12, the game being called after 6 innings on account of darkness. Addy and Barnes supplied the offense; Stires was again unable to play and Waxham started in the outfield.

A footnote to the season: on October 15 a game was played at the Fairgrounds for the benefit of Gat Stires, "who has just recovered from a severe sickness." Season tickets were not good for admission to this game and "all (players included) are expected to pay 25 cents admission." The squads were picked by Al Spalding and Ross Barnes from members of the club, and Barnes's team won, 37-25. "Attendance was not as large as it should have been."

It had been a successful season for FC. They compiled a record of 13 wins and 4 losses. They had defeated the other major Illinois clubs, the Excelsiors, Athletics, and Bloomington. When victories over Madison, Wisconsin, and Dubuque, Iowa, teams are added to this, they had plausible reason to call themselves "Champions of the Northwest." They proved they could play with the strong eastern teams—true, the Athletics and the Buckeyes beat them soundly, no excuses allowed here, but the loss to the Brooklyn

Atlantics was due to Al Spalding faltering in one inning, probably through inexperience; and the loss to the Morrisania Unions came because the carefully balanced fielding game had come apart due to injuries.

Certain problems had been revealed, however. One was that, while the Rockford area had produced exceptional talent, top notch players were not plentiful and by September 1868 all of them now played for the Forest City. Frank Trumbull was, in fact, the last good local player available. Not only that, by 1868 all the other local baseball teams were extinct, the last to go being the Sinnissippi club. Three FC regulars had gotten their experience through the Sinnissippi: Mart Wheeler, Fred Cone, and Frank Trumbull. Further proof of the depletion of local talent was that two of the '68 regulars, Gat Stires and Val Osborne, were from Byron, not Rockford. In the future player replacements due to injury or illness, age, or career changes would have to come from a larger geographical area than heretofore if FC was to remain competitive at the highest level.

Affecting all concerns was the problem of financing. Gate admissions did not generate enough money to maintain a first class club. Despite the optimistic projections available, gate receipts fell short of what was required for the plans announced in February and no tours, eastern or otherwise, were undertaken. One factor apparently not considered was that charging an admission fee when games had been free would mean fewer attendees. But to attract and retain top players, not only did compensation have to be provided, top competition had to be sought, and that meant traveling, around the Midwest and to the east coast. Money had to be found somewhere, and that meant attracting investors. Presently the only way to invest in the team was to buy an annual membership for \$1, and the *Winnebago County Chief* reported in July that about 150 memberships had been sold, a minute proportion of what was needed. If the club were to continue a significant reorganization would be required for the following year.

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