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"WE CAN BEAT THE SPOTS OFF THE BEST CLUB THAT EVER LIVED"
THE FOREST CITY BASE BALL CLUB IN 1869

By John Molyneaux



Tom Foley, Ross Barnes, Al Barker. Foley, 3b, a long-time veteran of the defunct Chicago Excelsiors, was designated team captain. Barnes, ss, was, after Bob Addy, the defensive and offensive star of the team. Barker, of, in his fifth season as a regular, was a strong-armed defensive specialist.

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 Citys were one of the finest base ball teams in the mid-west during the late 1860s. This article continues the year-by-year history of the team. 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 Citys 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

"We can beat the spots off the best club that ever lived" The Forest City Base Ball Club in 1869

By John Molyneaux

On November 26, 1868, the Forest City Base Ball Club held its "First [and only] Annual Reunion and Ball." The gala event was held in downtown Rockford, at Brown's Hall. For a \$3 ticket one could hear the Forest City Band, dance, and fraternize with the ballplayers. It was a fundraiser "for the benefit of its treasury, as the boys are a little behind," but it was also the first step to convince the local money interests to support the team by buying into a proposed joint stock company. "Honorary members and guests" included E. H. Baker, Selden Church, Anson Miller, William Lathrop, R. P. Lane, Melancthon Starr, Freeman Graham, A. H. Spafford and other well known community leaders. (*Rockford Gazette*, November 12, 1868; *Rockford Register Gazette*, September 8, 1903)

In 1868 admission was charged to exhibitions, which allowed the season to expand from 10 to 17 games, but the income didn't cover expenses. Other than day trips, travel had been impossible and extended tours were necessary to get to appropriate competition. Attracting and keeping good players cost money as well. Raising more money would not be an easy task, however. Rockford had a growing industrial sector, true enough, but the city only had a population of about 10,000. The successful businessmen invested their profits in their businesses and behaved generally with a prudent, small-town way. It appeared the one avenue to persuading investment in the team would be an appeal to civic pride coupled with the advertising potential of a successful club. In the first half of 1869 efforts were made to create a company to back the club and, while no narrative has been found of the process, circumstantial evidence drawn from contemporary testimony allows us a glimpse of how it was done.

The first step was the Reunion and Ball of November 1868. The second step was installing club leadership clearly connected with the local money interests. In February 1869 George King was elected president, replacing Hiram Waldo, president for three years. Waldo had created the successful club: he was a small businessman (a bookseller) and had served eight years as County Commissioner of Education. King had impeccable playing credentials—he had played on the first nine for four years, served as team captain for two years—and he was teller of the Second National Bank, rapidly rising in financial circles. In the course of events King was selected to sell the joint stock idea to the business community and organize the company.

It was a long process; money was not easy to shake loose and the activities of the '69 season were affected. In February the club "contemplated an Eastern tour next summer.... They will probably pay their respects to the Athletics, Unions, Nationals, Olympics, Cincinnati, Buckeyes, Niagaras, Mutuals and other clubs." (*Winnebago County Chief*, February 20, 1869) In late May this had been revised to "The Forest City intends to go on an Eastern tour during the present season." When plans were finalized and announced it was "a short tour" of just six games in one week, reaching only as far east as Cincinnati and Cleveland—but at least there would be a tour.

The playing season was slow in starting, hindered by the necessary economic machinations. There was one game in May, then three games in June against inconsequential opponents. In July, however, the joint stock company was finally operational. A meeting on July 8 saw Thomas Butterworth elected president, George King now becoming treasurer. Butterworth was owner of the Rockford Gas Light and Coke Company and the first major investor in the club (possibly the only one at this time) and only now could Forest City [FC] begin extensive baseball activity.

The 1869 roster was composed of veterans and had much more depth than in '68. In February eleven players were announced: Al Spalding, 18; Bob Addy, 31; Ross Barnes, 19, Fred Cone, 21; George King, 25; Frank Trumbull, 19; Al Barker, 30; Val Osborne, 21; and Ernest Waxham, 21. Of these, the keys were Spalding, recognized now as the region's premier pitcher; Addy, 2b, the leading batsman and defensive template; Barnes, ss, Addy's protégé, fast becoming the star's equal; and Cone, 1b, a light hitter but defensive wizard.

Joining the returning veterans were two newcomers, veterans themselves: Scott Hastings, 21, and Lee Cheney, 22. Both had been playing for Bloomington; Hastings was a hard-hitting, versatile infielder; Cheney was a fleet outfielder. Hastings was provided with a job as a desk clerk at the Holland House. Cheney, a skilful billiard hustler, appears to have found employment at a billiard parlor. And finally—probably in May—Tom Foley, 22, came to Rockford. Foley had played four seasons for the Chicago Excelsiors. The Excelsiors had disbanded after the '68 season, and Foley, regarded as their top player, came to Rockford rather than play in Chicago for a lesser team. He was a bookbinder by training and rented rooms for his business in the Commercial Block on South Main Street. Despite this report he does not appear to have settled in Rockford. During the baseball season he, like Bob Addy, lived in Rockford, but when the playing season ended home was elsewhere—for Foley, Chicago. It is likely Foley enjoyed some monetary inducements to play in Rockford.



Bob Addy and Al Spalding. The 31 year old star at the peak of his game, and the 18 year old still developing pitcher

The long wait to get the club's operational basis established gave rise to various rumors that kept anxious fans nicely agitated for the season. It was known that King might not play and the rumor was he would be replaced by Al Barker. (It was generally believed around the city that Barker could pick up whatever slack there was in the team: he had been catcher, second baseman, and outfielder; when Spalding jumped the team in '67 he was rumored to be the new pitcher.) Another rumor was that Al Spalding would be the new team captain, despite being the youngest regular on the team. The scariest rumor was that Bob Addy was going to leave Rockford and move west, which caused more anguish than Spalding's actual defection had in '67. The *Winnebago County Chief* said Addy "is one of the best baseballists in the country.... He plays the second base second to none, and we are afraid his absence will materially weaken that important place." All were just rumors.

When the season opened in the middle of May FC had its most formidable roster ever, and one with some important changes. King, the catcher for three seasons, did give up playing; his place was taken by Addy, leaving Barnes teamed with Hastings in the middle

infield. And there were so many outfielders available they were regularly platooned. The usual lineup was: 1b, Cone; 2b, Hastings; ss, Barnes; 3b, Foley; c, Addy; of, Barker, Cheney, and Osborne, supported by Trumbull, Stires, Sawyer, and Waxham. (Stires and Sawyer, veterans from '68, were not on the February list but did in fact play in some games.) Hastings, Foley, and Spalding would play all the games; Addy, Barnes, and Cone would miss just one each. And Tom Foley was the team captain.



Val Osborne and Scott Hastings. Osborne, fast and hard-hitting, was probably the best outfielder in Forest City history. Hastings, a veteran of the Bloomington Base Ball Club, was an excellent hitter as well as a fine defensive infielder.

The first game was May 20 when FC beat Harvard in Harvard, 110-11. Then came games in Beloit with Beloit College on June 9 (win 37-9); Stillman Valley in Rockford on June 11 (win 103-6); and the Monmouth Clippers in Rockford on June 30 (win 76-1). Serious top level competition finally began in July when the newly organized Chicago Amateur Club came to Rockford for a game on July 5. Because the visiting team had two former Excelsior players, Rockford fans rather unjustly regarded the Amateurs as the Excelsiors in disguise and thus to be held in contempt.

In the 1860s professional baseball often carried in its wake some troublesome activities and fans, and troublesome Chicago fans were highly noticeable in tiny Rockford. The *Winnebago County Chief* reported that "The Sunday morning [July 4] train instead of the usual installment of Swedes...brought a platoon of bummers," men intent on wagering on the upcoming game. "They came to the Holland House drunk, and were so noisy and uproarious that...a policeman had to be called.... Yet they were of some profit to Rockford...since they carried away nearly all the bad whiskey, and left all the money they had with them, for what they did not spend in guzzling, they invested in base ball and billiard risks." To this the *Rockford Gazette* added, "In sporting matters large amounts were bet upon the results—odds being offered that the Forest City would win by a score of from two to four to one." As it happened, FC won by 8-1, which discomfited the Chicago sports. Besides losing on the ball game, that evening the Chicagoans "endeavored to win it back by heavily backing their champion 'billiardist' against Cheney, of Rockford, but they were also badly defeated at that."

The score of the game was 32-4, with FC scoring 22 runs in the last 3 innings. Barnes and Addy hit home runs, Lee Cheney scored 4 runs. The newspapers reported the Amateurs "could not stand before Spalding's pitching" and the FC "fielding was almost perfection." Gate receipts were "nearly \$400," suggesting paid attendance of about 1500. The next day, July 6, FC played another Chicago team, the Aetna Club, defeating them 25-4, paced by home runs from Foley and Barker. At this point FC had a 6-0 season record and a 12 game winning streak dating from 1868. And it was at this point that Thomas Butterworth was elected president, establishing the new joint stock company.

The day of Butterworth's election (Thursday July 8), the newspapers announced that FC would play the Olympics of Washington on Saturday July 10. "This is one of the best amateur clubs of the east. They have come a long way to try conclusions with Rockford." While the Olympics were indeed on a western tour, the team that came to town was the Cincinnati Base Ball Club, called the Red Stockings. The confusion is astonishing, but probably the result of haste, a spur-of-the-moment opportunity caused chiefly by the inability of FC to get business matters settled in a timely fashion. The Olympics were in Cincinnati, and perhaps they had been approached—but the Red Stockings showed up, a most satisfactory substitution.

The Red Stockings in 1869 were the world's only openly professional team. Paid by contract rather than from a share of gate receipts all save one of them were eastern veterans, not Midwesterners. They had just returned from a tour of the east where they had played all challengers. In '68 they had a 36-7 record and this season they were 26-0. The two teams were well matched—FC had been 13-4 in '68 and was 6-0 this season. The

disparity in games played is due to the volume of money backing the two teams. This would be the first time the Red Stockings played in Illinois.

July 10 was not a good game day. "The wind was on a rampage, blowing a perfect gale.... The Rockford boys...went to bat nervous and fearful, but scored 1 tally. The enemy then took up the willow and scored 13! because of wild throwing and high wind." The high wind affected things, but the main problem was Al Spalding got hammered: the wind had many more chances to help Cincinnati. At one point in the first inning, after 8 runs had been scored, the FC infield was clearly shell-shocked. There were two outs and on the play there should have been a third "but the infield of the Forest City seemed bewildered," and 5 more runs scored before the inning ended. Spalding gave up 10 hits in the first, including a lead-off homer to George Wright and three doubles. By game's end the FC pitcher had yielded 6 home runs. It took FC a long time to figure out Asa Brainard's offerings—in the last two innings they scored 10 runs—and when they did it was too late. Cincinnati won 34-13. The leading batsmen for FC were Addy (home run, 2 RBI) and Hastings (3 doubles, 3 RBI).

The gate receipts were estimated at \$600 to \$700, suggesting attendance of perhaps 2500. A common betting line was Cincinnati to win at 3-1 or better, which suggests FC did better than expected (*Rockford Gazette*, July 17, 1869) An important outcome of the Cincinnati visit was an arrangement for three more games between the clubs, and the Rockford team quickly prepared a short tour to visit Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago, leaving on July 23.

Before leaving on this tour FC played two games with the Garden City Club of Chicago, winning 31-10 on July 19 and 43-9 on July 20, both games in Rockford. With these victories, FC stood at 8-1 on the season and had now beaten all the strong Chicago clubs.

On Friday morning, July 23, an eleven man squad entrained for Cincinnati via Chicago and Indianapolis. The squad contained Foley (captain), Hastings, Cone, Addy, Spalding, Barnes, Trumbull, Cheney, Barker, and Waxham. Rockford businessman George S. Haskell went as business manager (his function was similar to that of Traveling Secretary in 20th century clubs), and there was an entourage of about twenty Rockford fans as well. William Smith, junior editor of the *Rockford Gazette*, was along to cover the tour. Fans and reporters had attended the team on occasion in the past (notably on the trip to play the Cream City Club of Milwaukee in 1866 and to Chicago to play the Nationals in 1867), but there had never before been the need of a formal business manager.

The second Red Stockings game (July 24) stands in FC annals right along with the Washington Nationals game in importance (FC had defeated the Nationals on July 25, 1867, almost exactly 2 years earlier). With one out in the 9th inning FC led 14-12, but the Red Stockings pushed across 3 runs and won 15-14. "They won it only by the skin of their

teeth," said the *Cincinnati Gazette*, "by the passed balls of their opponents, not by good play of their own. They have got precious little to crow over." Rockford editor William Smith reported "the winning tally would not have been made but for the jockeying of Brainard, who was running from second to third base, and managed to dodge between the [batted] ball and Barnes, which Barnes would surely have had otherwise." Smith also remarked that the Red Stockings "could not bat Spalding's pitching as they did at Rockford." Spalding gave up two home runs (but neither was to George Wright, the first game Wright batted against Spalding and had not homered). But it was the best game Spalding had yet pitched in his career, and against the strongest team in the world. Harry Wright pitched the first five innings, Brainard pitched the 6th and 7th. When FC began to hit Brainard, Wright returned and pitched the last two innings. The offensive star of the game (either side) was Bob Addy who had 4 runs scored and a home run despite being hit square in the face by a foul tip in the 6th inning (no masks, no gloves in use in 1869).



Al Spalding

The real story of the game was the FC defensive play. William Smith, knowing what his readers expected from the FC, carefully reported on what Rockfordians wanted to know: Addy "let but two go by him;" Barnes "gobbled any ball that he could possibly reach, and threw with wonderful accuracy;" Cone's "copious hands clamped on every ball thrown or batted near him;" Hastings "seemed out of sorts, and muffed several times;" Osborne "muffed his first ball this season;" Cheney "fielded finely as usual." The Rockford audience knew how FC tried to play and wanted to hear how it worked out.

The baseball fans in Cincinnati, however, had heretofore experienced a different kind of game. This was the first time FC had played outside of northern Illinois or southern Wisconsin. Cincinnati fans were accustomed to the heavy hitting and fast pitching of such teams as the Buckeyes and the Red Stockings. Al Spalding was a good pitcher, no argument, but they had seen good pitchers before. The FC style of playing was novel and different in spirit. It started before the game, when FC warmed up and "tossed the ball...in a kind of preliminary skirmish way that made the audience wonder if they had ever seen a professional nine do this sort of thing in much more dexterous fashion." But this preliminary showmanship did not stop when the game began, according to the *Cincinnati Gazette* sportswriter, who reported that Barnes "covered an amazingly large amount of ground," and Addy, Foley and Cone "were rousing good players.... More than this, they had a habit of supporting each other that was quite awkward for their opponents. If a ball passed one man...then in the rear of him was another fellow...ready to clutch it." Two days later, after FC defeated the Buckeye Club, a correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune* reported that "Base Ball authorities here [Cincinnati] say the fielding game of the Forest City was the best ever seen here." Baseball in the 1860s had yet to develop a formal fielding doctrine of aggressive play, anticipation, and mutual support, but this is how FC trained and played. When they left their home territory in July 1869 and came under the scrutiny of the larger baseball world this was immediately noted. The Cincinnati Red Stockings may have established the standard for hitting and offense, but the Forest City Club established the standard for fielding and defensive play.

The Buckeye Club had soundly defeated FC in '68, but this year they had lost most of their formidable roster to the Red Stockings and other teams. In the game between FC and the Buckeyes on July 26, said the *Chicago Tribune* correspondent, "the only interest to the spectators [was] the superb fielding of the Forest City Club." FC won 40-1. Scott Hastings turned in a good game, scoring 4 runs and hitting two home runs, but he was eclipsed by Ross Barnes. Barnes had developed into a good, hard hitter, but had thus far been most noted for his spectacular defense. In this game he put on an almost supernatural hitting display. "Barnes, besides making the most runs [8], led the score on the bases and also on strikes [hits], making sixteen. Barnes and Hastings both sent a ball over the fence in the left field." (*Chicago Tribune*). The tour continued from Cincinnati with victories over Mansfield, July 27 (83-14); Cleveland Forest City, July 28 (23-0, three innings, rained out); and Detroit, July 29 (32-10).

The last two games between FC and the Red Stockings were played in Chicago on July 31 and Rockford on August 2. In Chicago FC tried to outslug the Cincinnati and lost 52-32 before a crowd of about 3500 who experienced "general disappointment," according

to the *Chicago Republican*. In Rockford the Red Stockings crushed FC 28-7, before a large crowd. FC had lost 4 games to the Red Stockings in less than 4 weeks; the Cincinnati club had scored 130 runs to the FC's 66. What counted, however, was the close July 24 game and the successful tour. This is what fans remembered and it solidified FC's recognition as a major team.

Now came a three week layoff before a second short tour. This tour began August 25 and took FC to St. Louis, Springfield, Chicago, and back home. This was a triumphal tour which reflected the prestige accrued in July. Where once Chicago fans sneered, now the *Chicago Journal* reported the progress of "The State Invincibles—the Forest City Base Ball Club of Rockford." They defeated the Monmouth Clippers 46-2 on August 26 before a large crowd. On August 27 FC defeated the Occidentals of Quincy 43-7—the *Chicago Journal* noted "the Occidentals have been out of practice for two years, and only organized...a few days since expressly for this game, to give our citizens the privilege of witnessing the playing of the Forest Citys."

Moving on to St. Louis, FC defeated the Unions 44-11 on August 30, and then the Empires of the same city fell 70-6 on August 31. In Jacksonville on September 1 the Relics were defeated 66-3 and FC moved on to Springfield where the Liberty Club was crushed 101-13 on September 2. Years later, in 1896, George M. Blake remembered FC in Springfield: "Al Barker confidently informed [me] that the Forest Citys could beat the spots off the best club that lived. He threw the ball from one end of the ball park to the other, and did other feats to make the eyes of the youngsters stick out.... [I] never saw a man who inspired [me] as being so much bigger than old Grant as Al Barker." (*Rockford Register Gazette*, April 14, 1896) From the capital FC journeyed to Chicago, where they played the Chicago Amateur Club on September 3, winning 34-22. The last game of the season was October 6, in Morris, Illinois, against the Illinois Club at the Grundy County Fairgrounds. FC won, 41-10.

It had been a successful season, 20 wins and 4 losses. There were two road trips (only one third of the games were played at home). They had played the Cincinnati Red Stockings 4 times (only the Washington Olympics played them as frequently this year). This was the season that Bob Addy was joined by Al Spalding and Ross Barnes as the premier stars of the team. Despite the success and recognition, however, the FC had been unable to beat a strong eastern team since the victory over the Washington Nationals in July 1867, an anomaly which would have to be addressed in 1870. Most fans would agree with Al Barker that FC could "beat the spots off the best club that lived"—they just hadn't done it yet.

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