

Covering All the Bases: the historical sport of indoor baseball and how it swept the Valley

Volume One (Eau Claire, WI)

February 19, 2009

Over a century ago, an indoor winter sport was taking on a life of its own in the Chippewa Valley. It was played in front of large audiences at gymnasiums, auditoriums, armories, and opera houses. The games were heavily covered by local press, often followed by a dance with orchestral accompaniment, and attended by a large fan base including, as one paper put it, a “who’s who of society people.”

The game was a modified version of baseball, called “indoor baseball,” and colorfully known as: kitten ball, diamond ball, mush ball, and pumpkin ball. It was touted as an equivalent of the outdoor game and a means of exercise for males and females alike. For close to four decades, indoor baseball was played throughout the Chippewa Valley.

The indoor variety of baseball, or “base ball” as it was often referred to at the time, was invented on Thanksgiving Day, 1887 by George Hancock at the Farragut Boat Club in Chicago. While waiting for updates of the Harvard-Yale football game, the makeshift game of baseball was assembled. Hancock chalked out a baseball diamond, bound a boxing glove with its strings, and used a broom handle as a bat. The game ended with a score of 41-40. Shortly thereafter, Hancock would put together a set of rules and create a ball and bat that were conducive to indoor use. The sport spread throughout Chicago, and by 1889 indoor baseball leagues were being formed.

Quickly reaching other states, the game flourished in the Minneapolis area. Lieutenant Louis Rober of the Minneapolis Fire Department utilized the game to keep his department fit. When he took the game outdoors, modified the ball and bat, the game flourished, eventually morphing into modern day softball.

With its proximity to the two indoor baseball hotbeds, Chicago and Minneapolis, it is no surprise that the game caught on quickly in the Chippewa Valley. In the 1890s, games were being played at places such as the Eau Claire’s Griffin Rifles Armory, between teams like the Griffin Rifles and the West Side Athletics. The armory was located where the parking lot on the corner of First Avenue and Ann Street is, while the Griffin Rifles were Company E, the first National Guard Unit in Eau Claire. Additionally, it was reported that some 20 young ladies from the west side were playing indoor baseball and engaging in calisthenics.

At the turn of the century, adult male indoor baseball leagues were in existence from coast to coast, while girls were playing competitively at the high school level. In fact it had become so popular that in 1903, the Spalding Athletic Library began producing Spalding’s Official Indoor Base Ball Guide, a publication that ran for more than 20 years (the guides are available in their entirety on the Library of Congress website).

The guide discussed the history of the game and its rules. It gave specifications for equipment as well as advice on forming a league, including constitution, bylaws, and rules. In addition, a large segment discussed indoor baseball for women and “how to teach girls indoor base ball.” There was also an extensive catalog with all kinds of Spalding’s indoor baseball-related equipment and apparel.

Most of the suggested rules printed in Spalding’s guides mirrored the ones established by the founder George Hancock. Seven to nine players made up a team with only the pitcher and catcher having set areas assigned to them. The ball used was nearly twice the circumference and much softer than a baseball. Indoor baseball bats were significantly shorter and smaller in length and diameter and made only of the “wood possessing great strength.” A rubber tip was placed on the handle to prevent losing one’s grip. Bases were half filled with sand or another heavy substance to stay in place due to not being attached to the floor and being a mere 27 feet between them (regulation baseball bases were 90 feet apart). Other dimensional changes included 22 feet between the pitchers mound and home plate, compared to 60 feet, six inches outdoors. In fact the rules could accommodate a playing space as small as 40-by-50 feet.

Chippewa Falls could have used some guidance in their attempts to play the game. In February 1900, an eight o’clock start was planned for an indoor game at the Opera House. There seemed to be some difficulty adjusting to the indoor game, which left a few players and fans with bruises. The umpire also walked away with a bruise of his own when he was caught by a punch from a fight that broke out between players. The game was so poorly played, that when the dust settled no one knew what the score was. In fact, the Opera House had to hire carpenters to spend two days repairing windows, staging, lights, and walls for a New York City stock company who was arriving in a few days. Needless to say, indoor baseball was banned from the Opera House and there was no date given for the next game to be played in Chippewa.

Whatever problems existed before must have been solved by 1903 when an indoor baseball league was formed in Chippewa Falls. Known as the City League Indoor Baseball Club, it ran from November to March, with teams from local businesses (the Toggery), fraternal societies (Sans Souci and Aerial), military instillations (Company C), and the academic world (college). Games were once again allowed to be played at a now-prepared Opera House, and in front of enthusiastic audiences. There were also games between teams from Chippewa Falls and Eau Claire, with a large fan base traveling between the cities. The interurban rail, named the Chippewa Valley Electric Railway, made the 12 plus mile trip easy and comfortable, even during the winter months. Two heated cars with electricity ran between the two cities every hour, enabling not only the teams, but also their fans to make the trip.

Over the next few decades, indoor baseball continued to be played in the Chippewa Valley, but not to the grand extent of the early 1900s. In the 1910s the Eau Claire YMCA had an indoor league. The early 1920s saw the “Y” host a grade-school league held between the wards in town. The 1923 champion was the Third Ward, their prize being a

bronze miniature indoor baseball suspended from a black silk ribbon. The girls of the Normal school played games against the faculty at that time.

On a national level, interest in indoor baseball became less and less, and shortly thereafter basketball moved out of its peach basket phase, and soon took over as the most popular indoor winter sport. Those still interested in playing the game could get their fix with the outdoor version of indoor baseball, which was named “softball” in the mid-20s.

During the Depression the game remained wildly popular for the “US army of unemployed” as a Time article wrote. One last push was given to the game in late 1939, when Hall of Famer Tris Speaker attempted to start a professional league called the National Professional Indoor Baseball League (NPIBL). Made up of teams from major metropolitan areas, 102 games were scheduled, but the league folded before it started.