

Early 20th century minor league mogul had ties to Chippewa Falls
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William Lucas had no idea he was auditioning for the Chippewa Falls Base Ball Association when he arrived in Eau Claire on July 4, 1884. Playing third base for the St. Paul Red Caps, Lucas wowed the crowd of over 1,000 with daring baserunning and sparkling defense. Following the Red Caps 12-10, 11-inning defeat of the Eau Claire Crescents he was approached by the officers of the Chippewa Falls Base Ball Association. On the spot they offered him managerial reigns for the city's struggling ball club. Lucas accepted.

Born in Cleveland, William Henry Lucas learned the game of baseball playing for the city's independent clubs. He attended Concordia College in Fort Wayne, Ind., where he helped establish a ball team before making his way to St. Paul to try to make a living at playing baseball. He found a spot on the St. Paul Red Caps. Founded in 1877, the Red Caps were one of Minnesota's first professional teams, playing in the short-lived League Alliance.

Lucas's foray into managing was met with mixed results, including losing to Eau Claire in a best-of-five, bragging rights series. His own play was hampered by a broken thumb suffered while catching his first game with the Chippewas. He was able to attract players from the Twin Cities metro area to come play in Chippewa Falls, including Bud Fowler, who was playing for an abysmal Stillwater club in the Northwestern League. Fowler is regarded as the first African-American to play in professional baseball (either the major or minor leagues).

Lucas returned in 1885, but his Chippewa Falls squad played second fiddle to Eau Claire. Playing an audition season for the Northwestern League, the Eau Claire Crescents were on its way to winning a state championship with a 37-5 record. By mid-season the Chippewas lack of money and poor performance led Lucas to head north to Duluth, Minn. He was quickly regarded as one of the Duluth's best players, but in late August he suffered a gruesome broken leg while sliding into home against none other than the Eau Claire Crescents.

Like Eau Claire, Duluth was working on joining the Northwestern League and Lucas was just the person to help them reach their goal. In 1886, Duluth had a franchise in the Northwestern, the Duluth Jayhawks, managed by Lucas. In 1887, the Duluth Freezers, with Lucas at the helm, replaced the Jayhawks. Lucas's broken leg was slow to heal, keeping him out of the play in '86, but he recovered enough to play in a few games in 1887. His desire to play was starting to dwindle, but his interest in the promotion of teams and leagues was increasing.

From Duluth, Lucas went to Iowa where he ran two clubs in the Central Interstate League. In 1888 he ran Davenport, followed in 1889 by the Burlington Babies.

In 1890 Lucas was lured out west by the prospect of helping start a new professional league — the Pacific Northwestern League. As part of helping get the league off the ground he agreed to run the Tacoma franchise.

Lucas was back in Wisconsin in 1892, helping start the Wisconsin-Michigan League. He managed the Menomonie club to a first-half championship.

The following year, 1893, Lucas managed the Kansas City Cowboys of the Western Association. On his team was Chippewa Falls native Andy Porter. After his minor league days, Porter returned to the area and spent several decades known as Chippewa Falls' "Mr. Baseball".

Lucas, now known as W.H. Lucas, returned to the Chippewa Valley after the 1893 season working as a scaler for lumberman E.A. Martin of Cadott. Lucas was making such good money that he decided not to pursue any professional baseball ventures for the 1894 season. This decision benefited the Chippewa Falls Base Ball Association who called on him to help not only run the team but help with the construction of a new ball park. The plan was met with disaster. The ballpark, constructed in haste, still wasn't finished when the grandstands collapsed at the second game of a Memorial Day doubleheader. One person died and several were badly injured.

Before the summer of 1894 ended, Lucas was back in the minor leagues helping out with the Quincy (Ill.) Ravens of the Western Association. That only lasted a few weeks before he was back in Chippewa Falls.

Over the next four years Lucas continued to work for Martin. In December 1897 he married Martin's sister, Carrie, a widow with one daughter. He also happily ran the Chippewa Falls baseball club. With Eau Claire failing to get a franchise in the new Northwestern League, the two cities renewed their rivalry during those years.

After gaining enough capital, Lucas headed back out west. Over the next decade he was involved in running several leagues. In 1900 he organized the Montana State League. The following year he helped reorganize the Pacific Northwest League, which he was the president of from 1901 to 1903. During those three years he also helped form the National Association of Minor League Baseball Officials, serving as an honorary member of the board of directors. He then organized the Pacific National League (1904) and the Puget Sound League (1905). From 1906 to 1910 he was president of the Northwestern League.

Lucas, his wife Carrie and stepdaughter Roxy often returned to Wisconsin during the offseason to visit family. Local papers reported his progress through the minor leagues, proudly noting his ties to the area.

In 1907, the Chippewa Falls Daily Independent falsely reported his death. He was onboard the Columbia, a steamer that sank off Shelton Cove, Calif., after colliding with a steamship, the San Pedro. Of the 189 passengers and 60 crew members, only 70 survived. Lucas was one of them.

In 1911 Lucas headed to the Rocky Mountains, taking over as president of the Union Association. His health began to fail under the stress of running the league.

On September 15, 1912 Lucas died of an aortic aneurism at his home in Missoula, Mont. To the end he was working on baseball business, having just finished the league report in the hours leading up to his death. He had also recently been offered the opportunity to arrange an Australian barnstorming tour for the New York Giants.

There were many kind words spoken of Lucas in the days after his passing. One stands out that best exemplifies his effect of the baseball world. "Mr. Lucas was a courteous gentleman, a man of sterling integrity. A strict disciplinarian, one thoroughly devoted to the best interests of the national game which he strove to hold to the highest standards."

It is certain to say that he learned some of those staunch values in Chippewa Falls.