

A flash of brilliance: George Wilson and the Chippewa Falls Gotzians
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Chippewa Falls White Sox player/manager Andy Porter was starting to get worried. His team was coming off a season that earned them the title of the "undisputed champion of Wisconsin" by the St. Paul Appeal, but the club was entering the 1904 season without the services of their best player, Billy Williams. As one of the first full-time African-American players in the Chippewa Valley, Williams was a slick-fielding first baseman with a powerful bat. It would be a tall task to replace a man known to the fans and local press as "Gentleman Bill."

Porter, a Chippewa Falls native and former minor leaguer scoured the Midwest for a big name player to take Williams's place. In March he found a replacement that far exceeded his expectations. The player's name was George Wilson and he would lead Chippewa Falls to one of its greatest baseball seasons ever.

Over the previous decade, Wilson, a native of Palmyra, Michigan had made a name for himself on baseball diamonds all over the upper Midwest. Regarded as one of the best all-around players in the country, on the pitchers mound was where he gained notoriety. Throwing with a quirky, nearly underhand delivery, Wilson's fastball and assortment of breaking pitchers baffled batters to no end. His talents were coveted by a number of major league managers, including Connie Mack and John McGraw. The only thing holding Wilson back from playing at the professional level was a factor he had no control over- the color of his skin.

Wilson played one year of professional ball. In 1896, he went 29-4 for the Adrian Demons of the Michigan State League. Due to the separate-but-equal laws instituted by the 1896 Plessey vs. Ferguson "separate-but-equal" verdict, baseball owners were able to strengthen their "gentleman's agreement," barring any players of color from playing professionally. After that Wilson was relegated to playing for barnstorming and semi-pro teams in Michigan, Minnesota and then Wisconsin.

On May 1, in front of 1,200 spectators, described as by far the largest crowd to ever witness a game in Chippewa Falls, Wilson took the mound against rival Eau Claire. The White Sox jumped out to a 1-0 lead after one inning, but Wilson was wild, walking seven, leading to a 3-1 Eau Claire victory. Eau Claire, who was vying to be the next franchise in the Northern League, ended up being one of Chippewa Falls' toughest opponents during the 1904 season.

The White Sox won the rest of their games in May, including a 13-9 win in front of 2,200 at Eau Claire's new diamond at the Driving Park. Wilson picked up the win in the wild contest. Chippewa Falls' successful May caught the attention of management at the C. Gotzian Shoe Company who recently opened a factory in the city. An offer to sponsor the

team was made and accepted, making the Chippewa Falls White Sox the Chippewa Falls Gotzians.

Now adorned in uniforms with "Gotzian & Co." sprawled across the front, the team continued its run. Wilson was starting to show his prowess. He beat two of the top teams in St. Paul, the Gotzians 8-1 and West Publishing 10-0. In the latter contest, Wilson disposed of the team in an hour and ten minutes, throwing a perfect game and striking out 16.

Wilson and his teammates continued to struggle against Eau Claire, who beat Chippewa two more times in June. Following a 3-0 loss to Eau Claire on June 22, an emergency meeting of the team directors was called. Although the Gotzians were a respectable 10-4, investors and fans alike were unhappy with the team's performance, particularly against Eau Claire. It was decided that Andy Porter's "Captain" status would be given to Sam Foster, a close friend and former teammate of Wilson. Despite his demotion in leadership status on the field, Porter retained his duties as manager. He was dispatched to the Twin Cities to sign more talent, bringing back several new players. In addition to personnel changes, the Athletic Park's grandstands were going to be added onto in early July to accommodate the swelling crowds.

To this point in the season the Gotzians played the majority of their games at home, but in July they set out on an extended road trip to Minnesota -- something that had never been done before by a city team. With several new players and Wilson headlining, the Gotzians went 4-2 against an up-and-coming team from the small southwestern Minnesota town of Renville, known as the All-Stars. The Gotzians returned to Chippewa Falls with a new rivalry, a handful of victories, and a few gifts, including a badger.

The Gotzians finally handled Eau Claire, beating them twice in a four-day period, with Wilson tallying both victories, but the rivalry with Renville was taking precedence over the Chippewa Falls-Eau Claire dynamic. Following a series of games in early August, Chippewa Falls and Renville decided to play a game billed as the "Minnesota and Wisconsin Championship."

On Sunday August 16, a crowd of 2,200 congregated at Minneapolis' Lexington Park to see the two teams play. Wilson was in complete command, striking out 17 and allowing two hits. Foster and the team's catcher Dolan, a St. Paul native, each contributed home runs in the 10-2 romp.

The Gotzians finished the season with a 38-13 record, outscoring their opponents 278-157. Unfortunately, statistical newspaper accounts of the season were sparse. What can be surmised is that Wilson won at least 20 games and was the offensive leader from the clean-up slot.

Wilson signed a contract for the 1905 season in November of '04. Expectations were only heightened when the team was featured in Spalding's Minneapolis St. Paul Amateur Base Ball Year Book~1905. The season was a disaster from the start. Financial issues and poor

weather led Wilson to leave the team for the Renville All-Stars in July. The loss of a ball player of that caliber was felt throughout the Chippewa Valley. The Eau Claire Leader reported that, "A Chippewa Falls baseball team without Geo. Wilson the cerebral colored pitcher, to many would be something like Hamlet with Hamlet left out."

The Gotzians never recovered from Wilson's departure. The next year the Gotzian Shoe Company dropped their sponsorship when Chippewa Falls and Eau Claire entered a Andy Porter managed team (the Orphans) in the Wisconsin State League. Wilson went on to have success with the Sheboygan Chairmakers then the Manitowoc Elevators of the Lakeshore League.