

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

The American National Bank and the Bremer Brothers

Volume 23
Number 1



Ramsey County History

Published by the
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

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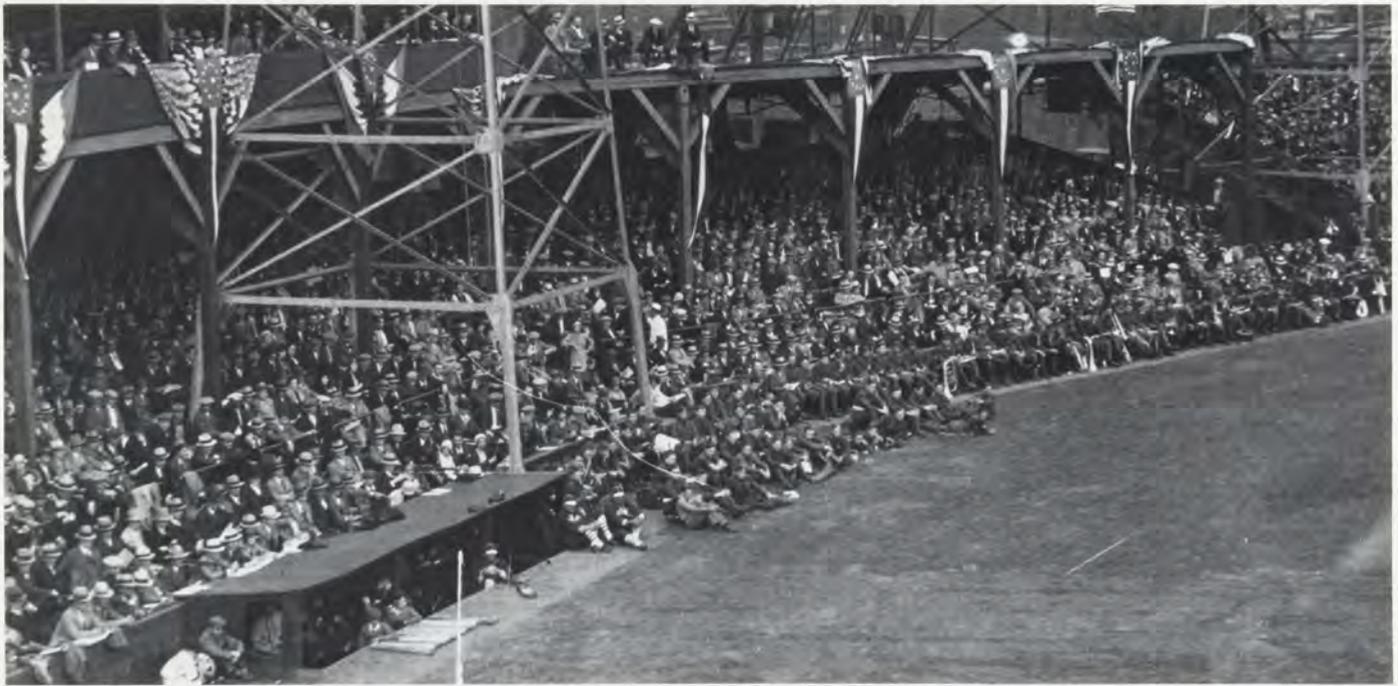
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ISBN 0-934294-55-0

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ON THE COVER: Benjamin Baer's office in the American National Bank was typical of banking in that period just after the turn-of-the-century. The Jacob Schmidt Brewing Company (small photograph) was linked with the bank through much of the bank's history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All photographs used in this issue of Ramsey County History are from the Audio-visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Lexington Ball Park, May, 1931. St. Paul Daily News photo.

Pay Days: The Millers and Saints

By Stew Thornley

“Even during the Depression, we could always count on a good crowd when the Saints and Millers played each other,” recalled Oscar Roettger, a pitcher and first baseman for St. Paul during the 1920s and 1930s. “Pay days — that’s what those games were.” Roettger was 84 years old in November, 1984, when he talked over his memories, which had remained sharp, of the battles between the Twin Cities.

The diamond rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul was in its golden years during Roettger’s playing days, but its roots were part of the post-Civil War baseball boom in America. Minnesota veterans returning home from Bull Run, Shiloh and Gettysburg began waging their own War Between the Cities, a battle fought with less lethal weapons — bats and balls — but

Stew Thornley is the author of On to Nicollet: The Glory and Fame of the Minneapolis Millers, which covers the history of professional baseball in Minneapolis from the 1880s to 1960. He has been a member of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) since 1979 and has served two terms as president of SABR’s local Halsey Hall Chapter. He is a public speaker and seminar leader and a member of Toastmasters International.

one that lacked a cease-fire for nearly a hundred years.

From the town teams of the 1860s and 1870s, the professional nines of the latter 1800s and finally the great Saints and Millers clubs of the 20th century, they fought — player vs. player, fan vs. fan, sometimes player vs. fan.

The newspapers even fired their artillery at enemy camps across the river. In the 1890s, when both cities were represented in the Western League, the *Minneapolis Tribune* leveled a charge of “dirty ball” against its neighbors to the east, owned and managed at that time by Charles Comiskey. “Manager Comiskey,” reported the *Tribune*, “will be served with a formal notice that the Minneapolis club will not play today’s game unless guaranteed that there will be no spiking of Minneapolis players, no interference on the part of the crowd, no throwing of rocks, no throwing of dust and dirt in the eyes of the Minneapolis players, and a few other tricks which the game yesterday was featured by.”

The Western League changed its name and transformed itself into a major circuit in 1901 as the American League — sans Minneapolis and St. Paul. But the following year the Saints and Millers became charter members of the American Association. And by the

time they hung up their spikes and shin guards for the final time, they had created a legacy for the incoming Twins to follow. Through their fifty-nine years in the league, the Millers compiled the best winning percentage of all Association teams; the Saints followed a close second. In addition, the two teams shared the Association record with nine pennants each.

The hottest race between the Saints and Millers was in 1915. Minneapolis' early-season hopes rode on a southpaw from Hackensack, New Jersey, Harry Harper. In May, the young phenom no-hit St. Paul, but two months later the Saints didn't even need their bats to pound Minneapolis, as Harper walked twenty men (in only eight innings), a marvel which remains an Association record. Harper was gone from the Minneapolis roster by the end of July, but the Millers hung on, edging out the Saints on the season's final weekend to cop the flag by a game-and-a-half.

But no matter what the standings (or the weather), the passions of the partisans were ignited by the twenty-two inter-city games each season, with the holiday doubleheaders providing the three peaks of the summer: a morning game at one park and a streetcar ride across the river for the afternoon-cap was the Twin Cities' primary entertainment on Decoration Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day.

Ab Wright of the Millers saved his biggest 1940 fireworks for the morning game on Independence Day. En route to winning the American Association Triple Crown, Abby belted four home runs and a triple against the Saints for nineteen total bases, a league record never equaled.

And the explosions heard on the Fourth of July in 1929 were from a Nicollet Park brawl between the rivals, described by one writer as the "most vicious affair witnessed at Nicollet" that "required fully a dozen policemen to quell the disturbance." Millers' reserve infielder Sammy Bohne came out of the coaching box to land some of the hardest punches, and the next day the headline over Halsey Hall's story in the *Minneapolis Journal* read "Sammy Bohne doesn't play, but gets more hits than those who do."

Hostilities even extended into the stands. In 1959 Minneapolis manager Gene Mauch scaled the railing at Midway Stadium to confront a fan whose remarks Mauch deemed "a bit too personal." Back in 1911 Millers' skipper Joe Cantillon had taken a bat with him to silence a heckler in the box seats at Lexington Park.

But despite the occasional bad blood, Oscar Roettger, the main recipient of Sammy Bohne's fists in that 1929 fracas, remembered that both teams were good friends off the field, often barnstorming across the state together after the season to "have some fun and get a little pheasant hunting done." Howie Schultz, a Saints first baseman in the 1940's, concurs and adds, "Fans

were more involved in the rivalry than the players were."

As for the players, a number of them wore the colors of both cities during their careers, among them Mauch, Angelo Giuliani, Bill McKechnie and Johnny Goryl, but the most notable man to work both sides of the river was Mike Kelley.

Kelley helped found the American Association in 1902 and managed the Saints to pennants in two of their first three years; he also played first base in an infield that included Hall-of-Famer Miller Huggins. Kelley moved to Minneapolis in 1906 for a managerial fling that was as stormy as it was brief, but later returned to skipper the Saints to three more league championships.

In 1924, Kelley made the move again. Lured by an offer to become part-owner of the club, he came back for another shot at managing the Millers. He eventually bought out the other owners and established a retooling factory for aging major-leaguers. Combining those with stars on their way up, Kelley built the powerful teams of the 1930s that included fence-crackers Wright, Joe Hauser, Buzz Arlett, Spencer Harris, Fabian Gaffke and Ted Williams and an ancient but shrewd pitching staff of Rosy Ryan, Jess Petty and Rube Benton. Kelley also became famous for his Dalmatians that roamed the bullpen during games and menaced opposing right fielders chasing fair balls into that area.

The last of the independent owners in the league, Kelley finally sold out to the New York Giants in 1946. By that time the Saints were a Brooklyn Dodger farm club, adding a local flavor to the Big Apple rivalry and giving Twin Citians the chance to watch Duke Snider and Roy Campanella play for the Saints and Willie Mays, Monte Irvin and Hoyt Wilhelm perform for the Millers.

The battlefields on which they skirmished — the Robert Street Grounds, Aurora Park, Lexington Park and Midway Stadium in St. Paul; Athletic Park, Minnehaha Park, Nicollet Park and the Met in Minneapolis and suburban Bloomington — produced their share of decorated veterans. Five members of Baseball's Hall of Fame once played for the Saints, while Minneapolis produced thirteen players (not including Carl Yastrzemski, who is not yet inducted) and one manager who are enshrined in Cooperstown.

What started as a Sunday-afternoon diversion in the 1860s, reflecting the larger struggle between two emerging cities to become the dominant city in the state, rapidly escalated and increased in intensity until it reached its Appomattox in 1961. On April 12 of that year, the Minnesota Twins played their first game, finally forming a union among area baseball fans. The baseball battle between East and West had ended. The Pay Days were history.

Guild of Catholic Women's garden party. See pages 13-16.



Otto Bremer. See pages 3-12.

Ramsey County History
published by
the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
St. Paul, Minn. 55102



Lexington Ball Park. See pages 21-22.



Fritz Woost's grocery. See pages 17-20.

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.



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