

Baseball in Minnesota
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Long before DIRECTV, long before television, and even long before radio, baseball was already known as the Great American Pastime.

The game that became very popular during the American Civil War when it was played in army camps really took off in the northern states after Union soldiers returned home from the War.

By the turn of the 20th century, almost every area of the country was saturated with the game. Minnesota was no different.

It became common for businesses to have company teams. Churches started up leagues of teams. Students at schools were forming teams and challenging other schools. Town ball teams had been present since the Civil War, but there were more teams playing all over the State by the beginning of the 20th century. Making the local town team in those days was an automatic mark of civic prestige. In leagues like the Great Soo League, fans would go out on Sundays in mostly German towns like Holdingford or St. Joseph and root the farmers and merchants that represented the community on the ballfield.

Previous to the Twins first season in 1961, the Minneapolis Millers and the St. Paul Saints were staples of professional baseball dating back to the 1880s when overhand pitching first became a legal part of the game. Besides having great players over the years like Willie Mays, Ted Williams, Joe Hauser, and Roy Campanella, it was also the rivalry between the two cities that brought out huge crowds when they played against each other. Many seasons saw 22 games between the Millers and Saints with holiday doubleheaders played in the parks of both cities on July 4th and Labor Day.

Stillwater's only season in professional baseball saw both the team and the Northwestern League fold in 1884. Perhaps the best player on the team was a man who was the first black player to ever play in professional baseball – Bud Fowler. Decades before Jackie Robinson played for the Dodgers, Fowler played baseball with over 15 professional teams during his career. However, unlike some of his white Stillwater teammates he never got to play in the big leagues. He was a real talent as he could play a number of positions, was a good hitter, and was a threat to steal bases.

During this time in American history when the frontier was closing in the eyes of many, Native Americans were also starting to play baseball. Charles Albert Bender was a member of the Ojibwa tribe born in Crow Wing County who went on to play in the Major Leagues for the Philadelphia A's. Elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1953, he is considered one of the best World Series pitchers ever. In what is a record that may never be broken, the ace of the Athletics threw a complete game in each of the nine games he pitched in various World Series.

Baseball was important to some of the groups who immigrated to the United States in the late 19th century. The American game was picked up quickly by Scandinavians who not only played for town teams and at the local schools, but also at the college level.

The students at St. Olaf College in Northfield and at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa used to celebrate Norwegian Independence Day, the 17th of May, with parades, speeches, and food. One of the mainstays of the *syttende mai* (Soot-n-duh My) festivities at the two schools was the baseball game that was played between Luther and St. Olaf every season. Both schools have strong baseball traditions and used to play to large crowds before World War II.

Within the large following and support of the game of baseball, barnstorming was in its heyday as well. Before 1950, there were only 16 Major League teams, and none of those were located west of St. Louis or south of Washington D.C.

Fans around the country followed the Major Leagues in the newspapers or watched the out of town scoreboard in some cities before radio coverage started in the 1920s. For many followers of the game, the best chance to see some of the most talented players in the country was either when players were in the minor leagues or when Major League or Negro League players barnstormed around the country in the offseason. The teams used these trips to bring in additional revenue, build up interest, or sometimes to scout the local talent in the area.

Babe Ruth came to Minnesota many times during his Hall of Fame career. He stopped through Sleepy Eye in 1922 as part of a 19-stop tour of the western part of the country. There are also several photos in the collection from his trips through Minneapolis when he played at Nicollet Park. One of the games was in 1924 and the Yankee team autographed a ball. Another trip was a decade later as part of the 1934 U.S. team that would barnstorm in Japan. In that era, Ruth's visits to these towns were often one of the highlights of the community, almost like the President coming to your town.

There is much to discover about baseball in the Historical Society's Collection, from the early days to recent years. Visit [Collections Online](#) or the [Library catalog](#) to learn more about what we have about the Great American Pastime!