

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

CELEBRITY AND CONTROVERSY:
PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL IN EAU CLAIRE BEFORE 1900

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO DOCTOR ASHLEY WRIGHT
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| ABSTRACT | 4 |
| FIRST INNING: | |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Historiography | 6 |
| America's Game: Baseball History in the United States | 8 |
| SECOND INNING: | |
| Eau Claire's Game: Baseball Arrives in Eau Claire | 10 |
| THIRD INNING | |
| The Crescents and the Framework for Professional Baseball in Eau Claire | 15 |
| FOURTH INNING | |
| The Eau Claires and Professional Baseball | 17 |
| FIFTH INNING | |
| 1885 State Champions | 19 |
| SIXTH INNING | |
| Professional Baseball: The Root of all Evil in Eau Claire | 23 |
| SEVENTH INNING | |
| The Sunday Baseball Controversy | 27 |
| EIGHTH INNING | |
| The 1886 Season: The Beginning of the End | 31 |
| The Demise and Dissolution of the Eau Claires and Professional Baseball in Eau Claire, 1887-1900 | 33 |

NINTH INNING

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| Conclusion | 37 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 38 |

ABSTRACT

During the aftermath of the Civil War, a new form of popular entertainment made its way onto the fields of Eau Claire and into the hearts of its citizens. Baseball reached its pinnacle in popularity in the 1885 when the Eau Claires, the city's first professional team, took to the diamond. The team was avidly followed and supported by local fans and by the local press. Conversely, some members of the community viewed professional baseball as the root of all evil in Eau Claire and the animosity that surrounded the controversies that the sport carried eventually led to the demise and failure of the Eau Claires and professional baseball in the city.

FIRST INNING

Introduction

The *Eau Claire Free Press* ran an interesting article in August 1885. It reads, “The following conversation between two ladies was listened to on the grandstand the other day...

- Lady #1: ‘Wasn’t that a splendid hit? There, now, why didn’t he run?’
- Lady #2: ‘Why, my dear, that was a foul ball.’
- Lady #1: ‘Well, I’d run anyhow.’
- Lady #2: ‘But the Umpire wouldn’t let you.’
- Lady #1: ‘Of course not. The umpire is all the time yelling and running about and interfering with the game. If it wasn’t for him base ball would be real interesting.’¹

The article may have been intended to be a comedic addition to the weekly newspaper, but it was actually a fairly accurate reflection of the state of baseball and its culture in Eau Claire. The game was still in its infant years in the city and was far from being in the mainstream. There were avid fans of the game, represented by “Lady #2;” and there were those who had little or no knowledge or interest in the game, like “Lady #1.” There was also another a group, which materialized after the sport turned from amateur to professional, that abhorred the game and rued all the ills that came with it. By other accounts, however, professional baseball was a smash hit upon its arrival in Eau Claire during the post-Civil War era. The fact that the city ball field had a grandstand, and there was a newsman seated there reporting on the goings on at the park suggests there was considerable fandom surrounding the game. Professional baseball was met with tre-

¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 3 August 1885.

mendous support and popularity when it arrived in Eau Claire; however, the game brought with it controversial aspects that some Eau Claire residents took exception to.

Historiography

Harold Seymour, commonly known as the “Father of Baseball History,” wrote, “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.”² Seymour was a pioneer in the field of sports history and was the first to write a history book dedicated to baseball. There are thousands of literary works for fans of the game, but until Seymour’s *Baseball: The Early Years*, the first book in his three-piece anthology, there were no sources for serious scholars and students of the game and its rich history.

Today, according to baseball historian David Block, “baseball is famously known for the almost religious devotion of its fans, writers, and scholars.”³ Block adds that there are more feet on bookstore shelves dedicated to baseball than to any other sport. “The game has been studied, analyzed, dissected, poeticized, theorized, and obsessed upon.”⁴ The popularity of baseball as a literary genre stems from the intimacy that the sport shares with America’s culture and history. Jules Tygiel describes the game as being “peculiarly suited to the American temperament and disposition.”⁵ Tygiel continues,

Since its origins it has reflected broader changes in society and maintained a special place in American culture. Baseball has become embedded in the culture on several levels: as a popular pastime for boys and men; as a

² Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 1.

³ David Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005) xvi.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 8.

spectator sport; a centerpiece of national and local periodical reporting; a profession and form of entrepreneurial and commercialized leisure; and increasingly as a source of national pride.⁶

Nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman romanticized about baseball's close connection to American culture. He wrote,

Baseball is the hurrah game of the republic,
That's beautiful:
the hurrah game!
well –
it's our game.
That's the chief fact in connection with it.
America's Game:
has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere –
belongs as much to our institutions,
fits into them as significantly as our constitutions,
laws:
is just as important as the sum of our historic life.⁷

Benjamin Rader emphasizes the importance professional baseball has on the communities in which they play. Rader elaborates on the deeper emotional existence that is created in cities and towns that house professional teams. These teams help define the character of the community, and likewise, the communities help define the ball club. The game provides memories, nostalgia, and a respite from the daily stresses of life.⁸ Tygiel identifies two dominant themes in the historiography of baseball: the heavy focus on the business

⁶ Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History*, 14.

⁷ Benjamin Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), xv.

⁸ Benjamin Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), xvi.

side of the game; and the ethereal, rhapsodic celebration of baseball and its special essence.⁹ Both themes will become very clear in this thesis.

Block writes, “There are books about small-town teams and leagues so obscure that almost no one besides the author recalls them.”¹⁰ In the case of my thesis, that statement is very close to the truth. Eau Claire historians Jerry Poling and Jason Christopherson, and Harold Kronenberg have all written about baseball in Eau Claire, but none have gone so far in depth in researching the earliest years of baseball in the city. Poling’s book, *A Summer Up North: Henry Aaron and the Legend of Eau Claire Baseball* is mostly dedicated to Henry Aaron and the minor league Eau Claire Bears during the 1940s and 1950s. He does include some background information for baseball in Eau Claire, however. Christopherson offers a broad overview of baseball in the city, from the earliest years up to the present; and Kronenberg’s book, entitled *River City Sports*, is a documentation of all sports that have been played in Eau Claire. My research expounds on the work done by these three authors and is an in-depth analysis of baseball during its first half century in Eau Claire.

America’s Game: Baseball History in the United States

The origins of modern baseball can be dated back to the 1840s, when a New York club organized. The Knickerbocker club began play in 1842 and the founder of the club, Alexander Cartwright, published the rules of the “Knickerbocker,” or “New York Game” in 1845. For this accomplishment, Cartwright is commonly known by baseball historians

⁹ Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History*, xi.

¹⁰ Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It*, xvi.

as the “father of baseball.” In 1953, Congress officially credited Cartwright with the invention of the modern game and he has since been inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.¹¹

The game quickly spread from New York City throughout the United States. Burgeoning American infrastructure in the form of roads and railways hurried the game across the nation. In 1856, the *New York Mercury* coined the game the “National Pastime.”¹² Soldiers in Civil War camps turned to baseball as a diversion from the rigors of war and these men carried the game back to their home towns. Tygiel refers to the post-Civil War era as the “Age of Baseball.”¹³ Americans felt a need for national attributes even before the Civil War, but the “American Game” became a symbol of American Nationalism and reunification following the war. “The Civil War had defined the United States as a nation. In its aftermath, baseball truly reigned as the “National Game.”¹⁴

¹¹ Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*, 14-16.

¹² Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History*, 6.

¹³ Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History*, 13.

¹⁴ Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History*, 7; 14.

SECOND INNING

Eau Claire's Game: Baseball Arrives in Eau Claire

In 1867 the *Free Press* claimed, "This national game is becoming so important that Eau Claire needs a club to keep up with the times."¹⁵ The first state tournament was held in Wisconsin in that year and Eau Claire was not one of the nine cities represented.¹⁶ A month earlier, the *West Eau Claire Argus* reported in 1867 that many cities around Eau Claire were taking interest in the sport of "base ball."¹⁷ On September 26, the Clear Water Boys met at the public square and played the first game of organized baseball in Eau Claire. No score was recorded from that game, which was played between the Clear Water Boys and Nationals, a team from Chippewa Falls who had played their first game a week earlier.¹⁸ The first recorded baseball game in Eau Claire was reported the next year. The Eau Claire Lonestars defeated the West Eau Claire Crocodiles by a score of 35 to 24.¹⁹

By 1868, baseball's popularity in Eau Claire was on the rise. The Shawtown Chippewas organized as a third team in the city. The three teams played each other, as well as teams from Chippewa Falls, Menomonie, and Durand.²⁰ Intense rivalries were born on the baseball diamond. Opponents represented the different localities, vocations,

¹⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 5 September 1867

¹⁶ Jerry Poling, *A Summer Up North: Henry Aaron and the Legend of Eau Claire Baseball* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 66.

¹⁷ *West Eau Claire Argus* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 21 August 1867

¹⁸ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 26 September 1867

¹⁹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 30 April 1868

²⁰ *West Eau Claire Argus* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 26 August 1868

ethnicities, and social backgrounds of the region. The Crocodile club, for instance, was comprised of businessmen and professionals. A bitter rivalry was crafted with their cross-town foes, the Chippewas, who were lumbermen and mill workers.²¹ Crowds were loud and boisterous, mostly because of intense betting on the games. Umpires, who rarely had any training or knowledge of the game, were heckled without mercy, and fans often spilled onto the field. The local teams had loyal followings and the players gained the respect of the fans that they represented.²²

The intensity of the rivalry between the West Eau Claire and Shawtown clubs eventually came to a head in October. The Crocodiles issued a challenge to the Chippewas for a match to be played to determine the city champion. The Chippewas claimed that *Haney's Base Ball Reference Guide* for 1867 required a one-week notice for a championship match. The Chippewas also cited their "lack of ball." In turn, the Crocodiles retorted that *Haney's Base Ball Guide* for 1868 had no such rule requiring a one week notice. The animosity between the two teams stemmed from an earlier meeting between the two clubs. The Chippewas recounted how they had been treated unfairly in the most recent match between the two rivals. The *West Eau Claire Argus* documented that the Crocodiles had used a pitcher from Durand in their 97 to 78 victory over the Chippewas.²³ Although the game was far from a pitcher's duel, the Chippewas certainly took exception; although they did feed the Crocodiles supper following the game, as was customary for the losing team to do. After their victory, the Crocodiles boasted about cheating their cross-town rivals, but they had done so because the Chippewas previously used a former

²¹ Harold Kronenberg, *River City Sports: Seasons to Remember* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: 1996), 3.

²² Kronenberg, *River City Sports*, 2.

²³ *West Eau Claire Argus* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 26 August 1868.

“Crocodile” player in a game. The Chippewas asserted that they had the right to use the player in question because he had not yet paid his initiation fee to the Crocodiles and it had been more than thirty days since he had played for the Shawtown team. The disagreement was never settled and the intensity of the rivalry was amplified.

According to the *Argus*, the Crocodiles acknowledged a response to their challenge. The Crocodiles called for a one o’clock opening pitch, the following afternoon. This presented a serious problem for the Chippewas. On top of their earlier claim of not possessing a ball, the team’s players were spread out along a four mile stretch along the Chippewa River. The majority of the players who made up the Chippewas were mill workers, or “Slab Wrestlers,” as the Crocodiles called them. Those men worked long days at the mills, leaving little time for practice. It proved impossible for the Chippewas to put together a team of nine on such short notice, and the championship match wasn’t played. The “second nines” of the two clubs wound up carrying on the rivalry and played the game later in the month. The Chippewas won the game, but the Juvenile Crocs, the name adopted by the second generation of ball players from the west side, refused to feed the winning team supper, and did not forfeit the ball that the Shawtowners had rightfully earned. Both teams accused one another of dishonesty and unfairness and the two teams refused to entertain the option of a rematch.²⁴

Eau Claire witnessed a brief hiatus from baseball for the next two years. The *Free Press* reported in August of 1869 that the baseball clubs were not organized.²⁵ Byron Buffington, a local Eau Claire dignitary, wrote, “We have not got a club in town now,

²⁴ *West Eau Claire Argus* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 14 October 1868; Jason Christopherson, *Baseball in Eau Claire* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 7; Kronenberg, *River City Sports*, 3.

²⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 12 August 1869.

or anything else at present...awful dull.”²⁶ There is no reference to baseball in the press until 1871. The interval between the coverage of baseball can be attributed almost entirely to the arrival of the railroad in Eau Claire. Hopes of a railway going through Eau Claire materialized as early as 1856, when the Land Grant Railroad was established, going through Black River Falls, less than fifty miles away. The first locomotive, owned by the Western Wisconsin Railroad, rolled into town at 10:30 A.M. on August 1 and was met by a tremendous celebration. Many local historians call the event one the greatest to have ever taken place in the city.²⁷ Over 10,000 locals attended the first day festivities. Wisconsin Governor Lucius Fairchild was on hand for the three day celebration. Bands played, canons boomed, and the press ate it up.²⁸ There was very little reporting done on anything but the railroad, and it seems as though nothing else was relevant in the city, including baseball.

Baseball in Eau Claire witnessed a resurgence after 1871. The *Eau Claire Weekly Free Press* reported that the Lonestars had resumed playing, and later reported that a new club had formed on the west side. The *Dunn County News* carried an article that reported the West Eau Claire club had swept two games from the Menomonie Pioneers, in Menomonie, by scores of 43 to 37 and 87 to 23.²⁹ The Pioneer pitchers apparently did not have their best stuff for the second game, or perhaps there was some shaky defense behind them. Although the Chippewas and Crocodiles ceased to exist after their rivalry nearly

²⁶ Byron Buffington to Frank Clough, 1 August 1870, in the *W.W. Bartlett Papers*, Possession of Special Collections, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

²⁷ Lois Barland, *Sawdust City: A History of Eau Claire, Wisconsin from Earliest Times to 1910* (Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Worzalla Publishing, 1960) 76; Kronenberg, *River City Sports*, 3; Poling, *A Summer Up North: Henry Aaron and the Legend of Eau Claire Baseball*, 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Dunn County News* (Menomonie, Wisconsin), 9 September 1871.

ruined baseball in Eau Claire, the game was again being played in the city. The *Free Press* reported in 1873 that the game recommenced in University Square.³⁰ Two new teams – the Red Hots of Shawtown, and the Badger Boys of West Eau Claire – had organized by 1876.³¹ The *Free Press* ran a story introducing another Eau Claire team, the White Caps, included in an article detailing the rising popularity of the sport in the city.³² Baseball continued to gather tremendous esteem and reputation among its citizens and the press was pleased to feed the city's appetite for baseball information. The local teams were well documented in the Eau Claire papers, and the presses also began carrying news and scores from the professional leagues.

³⁰ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 15 May 1873.

³¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 3 July 1876.

³² *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 30 August, 1877.

THIRD INNING

The Crescents and the Framework for Professional Baseball In Eau Claire

Eau Claire baseball reached new heights in popularity and appeal in the 1880s. The Aesthetics and Crescents, both created in 1882, were the city's most talented and supported clubs to date.³³ The *Eau Claire News* reported five hundred people were in attendance to watch the Aesthetics defeat the Menomonie Blue Caps on July 22.³⁴ Bitter rivalries spurred teams to seek out the very best players in the area. By 1884, the only way to acquire the best players was to pay them, and thus, an era of professional baseball in Eau Claire was born. In that year, the Crescents acquired two players, a pitcher and a catcher. Following a 12 to 0 victory over the Saint Paul Red Caps, in which Eau Claire's professional pitcher recorded seventeen strikeouts, the *Daily Leader* declared the home club could "give any club in this section of the country a lively tussle."³⁵ That point was put to the test not long after the editor had made his claim. The railroad made it possible for teams to travel greater distances in order to seek out the best competition and showcase their own talents. Games were scheduled with teams outside Northwest Wisconsin, with cities such as Milwaukee, Chicago, Green Bay, Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Winona, and Stillwater.³⁶

Gambling at the ball park intensified, as indicated by an article in the *Weekly Free Press* that read, "The local ministers have been preaching against it but considerable bet-

³³ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 17 July 1882.

³⁴ *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 22 July 1882.

³⁵ Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 67.

³⁶ *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 15 June 1884.

ting is going on at games. It gives the locals and the sport a bad reputation.”³⁷ One Chippewa Falls man was said to have taken several hundred dollars from Eau Claire men at a game between the Crescents and the Chippewa team.³⁸ The fans were not the only people taking part in gambling at the ball park. The players themselves put money on the games, and challenges were issued detailing how much the games were to be played for. The *Chippewa Herald* reported, “The Chippewa base ball club defeated the ‘Crescents’ of Eau Claire, the game being for \$100.”³⁹ For the first time, the newspapers applied a critical tone directed at the home town team. It was clear that the games had more meaning than they once did and the editors of the newspapers reflected the mood of the fans. Following a loss to a Saint Paul team, the *Free Press* ran a story saying, “It is time the Crescents understood that if they expect support and interest they must have something to show spectators besides a string of errors. [The ball] was constantly lost in the pig sties and barns.”⁴⁰ Poor play by the local team did not last long and Eau Claire soon experienced a better brand of baseball.

³⁷ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 25 July 1882.

³⁸ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), 18 August 1884.

³⁹ *Chippewa Herald* (Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin) 29 August 1884.

⁴⁰ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 5 July 1884.

FOURTH INNING

The Eau Claires and Professional Baseball

By 1885, baseball evolved into a serious business venture in Eau Claire. The Eau Claire Baseball Association (ECBA) was incorporated at \$5,000 to run the baseball operations and control the baseball grounds.⁴¹ President W.F. Bailey, Vice President John S. Owen, Secretary C.M. Buffington, Treasurer E.B. Putnam, and Abe Devine were elected as directors for the ECBA.⁴² The newly founded organization worked quickly to obtain land to construct the city's state-of-the-art ball field. On May 9, the ECBA leased a tract of land from the city just south of the gas works. The *Weekly Free Press* reported that A.F. Wilbur, the chief architect and groundskeeper of the new ball field, declared that "When he is through with the job Eau Claire will have the finest base ball ground in the state."⁴³ Wilbur finished construction by June, a week behind schedule. The *Weekly Free Press* announced the induction of the field and described the grounds as an "enclosure containing several acres, surrounded by a ten foot board fence." To Wilbur's credit, the ground was "all nicely evened off and the diamond was rolled as smooth and as level as a billiard table."⁴⁴ The quality of the playing surface was not the only aspect of the park that could be marveled at. A stunning wooden grandstand was erected behind home plate that could comfortably seat hundreds of people. By all accounts, the new ball park was a modern spectacle that could rival any in the Midwest.

⁴¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 15 May 1885.

⁴² *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 26 June 1885; *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 14 July 1885.

⁴³ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 22 May 1885.

⁴⁴ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 2 June 1885.

The ECBA recruited the best players from all around the upper Midwest. The players were offered salaries of up to \$75 per month, which proved to be the right price when attracting some of the region's best players. According to an article in the *Free Press* bearing the headline "BASEBALL ARRIVALS," T. Nagle and T. Delaney of Milwaukee; J. Sheehan of Beloit; Cal Roberts of Rockford, Illinois; Jim Cantillon, and Joe Cantillon, C.J. McGinley, and L. Wilbur of Janesville; signed on to play for Eau Claire and reportedly were "already in the city and practicing everyday for the coming match."⁴⁵ Members of the Eau Claire Crescents, the city's most talented ball players, rounded out Eau Claire's new nine. In a showcase of creative genius, the city's first professional baseball team was coined the Eau Claires.

⁴⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 22 May 1885; *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 18 May 1885.

FIFTH INNING

1885 State Champions

Eau Claire papers reported that the Eau Claires were to be integrated into the Northwest Baseball League as an expansion team but they were not one of the original twelve teams in 1885. The Eau Claires played teams from the league but only for exhibition. According to Poling, the league was considered to be one of the four strongest in the nation – only the National League, American Association, and Eastern League could boast better quality baseball.⁴⁶ With such a reputation to uphold it would have been foolish for the league to include a team that had not yet played a game in any capacity, let alone at the professional level. In that regard, the 1885 season was a summer-long tryout for the young Eau Claire ball club. The Eau Claires filled in their schedule with games against teams that spanned the Northwest.

The Eau Claires exceeded the expectations of everyone on the field and proved that they could compete with any team that opposed them. Following opening day at the new ball park, which resulted in a nine to three victory for the home team over a Minneapolis club, the editor of *Free Press* wrote, “The result of the game bears out the statement by the managers that we have the best club in the city. The Minneapolis club is a strong one, but was no match for our ‘heavy hitters’ yesterday.”⁴⁷ The opinion that the Eau Claires were the best club in the city was a severe understatement. The Eau Claires proved to be incredibly talented and dominated nearly every opponent on the diamond. The victories mounted, the number of fans in attendance climbed, and the reputation of the team was bolstered. The players on the team reached celebrity status around the city.

⁴⁶ Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 67.

⁴⁷ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 4 June 1885.

They were invited to attend fancy dinners, lavish balls, and wildly entertaining nights at the Criterion Roller Skating Rink. The local papers raved about the team's success and fame that the players gathered. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fans crowded into the ball park to see the Eau Claires showcase their baseball prowess. The grandstand was jammed full during home games, spectators lined the fences surrounding the diamond, and others – who did not pay the 25 cent admission fee and were not counted toward the attendance figures – stood outside the park or watched from the streets in their carriages. Teams came from the Northwest League and other amateur teams traveled to Eau Claire to test their might against the adept Eau Claire nine. Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Milwaukee, Chicago, Green Bay, Hudson (Wisconsin), Berlin (Wisconsin), Cambria (Wisconsin), Chippewa Falls (Wisconsin), Menomonie (Wisconsin) and Winona (Minnesota) all sent the best teams they could field to test the Eau Claires.

The highlight of the 1885 season occurred on the Fourth of July. The *Free Press* wrote, "After considerable writing and trouble the Eau Claires have succeeded in securing the celebrated Gordon Club of Chicago for two games of base ball on July 4th." The Gordons were an all-black baseball club and the "best in the world" according to the *Free Press*. The Gordons were advertised, justifiably, as a difficult challenge for the home team, but the Eau Claires had proven that they were up to such a challenge. In 1885, the Gordons were in their tenth year of barnstorming the country and competing against the best the nation had to offer on the diamond. No team from Wisconsin had ever defeated them, and according the *Free Press*, an Eau Claire victory would "prove to be the greatest feather in their caps." The Eau Claires were unwaveringly up to the challenge, "having beaten every thing in the shape of white men in the Northwest." The ECBA spent

\$200 to bring the Gordons to Eau Claire, which spoke volumes for the reputation that the team carried. It was by and large a rarity for a team to be paid just to show up for a match. Simply paying for a team's travel expenses was rare enough and \$200 would have unquestionably covered the cost of travel from Chicago to Eau Claire. In lieu of the extra expense, the ECBA increased the price of admission to 35 cents for adults and 25 cents for children.⁴⁸

The scene at the ball park on Independence Day was quite a spectacle. The *Free Press* described the scene: "In the morning the park was crowded to such an extent that it was thought impossible to get another person inside the gate, at least 2000 people being present. In the after-noon the crowd was tremendous, the grand stand was filled to suffocation [sic] and every inch of ground outside of the line was taken. The officers had to be continually on their guard to keep the crowd from breaking over the railing and taking possession of the grounds." The largest crowd to ever attend a baseball game in Eau Claire was on hand and the newspaper headlines told the story of what nearly one-fourth of the city's population witnessed. The *Free Press* ran two articles, emblazoned with the headlines, "The Celebrated Gordons of Chicago Failed to Celebrate the Fourth As They Expected," and, "It was Rather a Sad Day for the Visitors—The Home Team Victorious Both Morning and After-noon." The hometown fans witnessed history on that Independence Day. Twenty years after the Civil War liberated blacks from slavery, the Gordons stepped off their train and were the first black baseball players to take their positions on an Eau Claire baseball diamond.⁴⁹ Emancipation made it possible for a team of black

⁴⁸ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 28 June 1885; *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 3 July 1885; *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 7 July 1885; *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 7 July 1885; Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 70.

men to roll into Eau Claire on a locomotive. It is possible that members in the audience fought in the Union Army and would have greeted the arrival of the Gordons with tremendous pride and honor.

The sweep of the doubleheader against the Gordons was monumental for the Eau Claires. The back-to-back victories legitimized the claims that they could play with the highest caliber teams, not only in the Northwest, but in the entire country. The wins prompted the *Free Press* to aver that the club was “fit to travel,” or in other words they were ready to commence their professional road tour. The article, headlined “Off on Tour” continues: “The Eau Claires have won undying fame during the last few weeks in this city, beating everything that came their way. They now go forth looking for fresh clubs to flatten and more worlds to conquer. They bear with them the best wishes of all.”⁵⁰ The next day, another headline was printed in the *Free Press*, reading “Eau Claires Abroad,” that announced that the team would take part in a series of games between teams in Milwaukee, Green Bay, Oshkosh, Cambria, and Berlin, in order to determine a state champion.⁵¹ Remarkably, the Eau Claires defied all the odds and their “tryout” season as an expansion team of the Northwest League ended in winning the state championship. Excluding games versus amateur clubs, the Eau Claires finished with an impressive record of 37 wins and five losses in 1885. Much to the delight of the local fans, only one of those losses came on their home field.⁵²

SIXTH INNING

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 16 July 1885

⁵¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 17 July 1885.

⁵² *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 22 August 1885; Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 69.

Professional Baseball: The Root of All Evil In Eau Claire

Professional baseball was a smash hit in 1885. While the newspaper coverage of the Eau Claires and the attendance figures compiled at home games clearly illustrate the appetite and fandom that the city had for their first professional baseball team, there were many who rued the Eau Claires and the sins that the team brought to the city. Countless Eau Claire residents viewed the game as the root of all evil in 1885.⁵³ The reasons for that sentiment were many and some were concrete, legitimate claims. The team was made up of professional players from throughout the Northwest and there was a tone of resentment that clouded over the city. Furthermore, the players played for money, considerable betting on their games took place, and the team played on Sundays, which was an outrage to local Protestants, and there were many in Eau Claire in 1885.

Baseball was not the biggest social ill in the city. The male-dominated lumber industry gave the city the moniker “Sawdust City.” Lumbermen were notorious for their dishonorable lifestyles and raucous behavior and Eau Claire catered to their every desire. The city was home to over ninety saloons, twenty houses of prostitution, and innumerable gambling rings.⁵⁴ Reports of drinking related crimes and disorderly conduct ran alongside baseball headlines and box scores in the local papers. It seems ridiculous for Eau Claire residents to have spoken out against the vices of baseball when other, more serious forms of unruly behavior were regular activities in the city.

A source of some resentment toward the Eau Claires stemmed from their occupation as ball players. The majority of the city’s population was made up of immigrant farmers, lumbermen, and mill workers. Those occupations required long hours of gruel-

⁵³ Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

ing labor for minimal financial gains. Contrast that notion with the nature of work done by the baseball player and the source of resentment becomes clearer. While axmen and sawyers labored in the forests and lumber mills, the Eau Claires swung their lumber in the batter's box. And while farmers worked their fields, the Eau Claires fielded ground-balls. Ball players practiced for a couple hours a day, whenever they wanted, and sometimes not at all. Players were paid to entertain and to fill the bleachers. The easiest way to do that was to showcase their talents on the diamond and rack up the victories. The Eau Claires proved to be proficient at the art of winning in 1885 and the fans wildly supported the home team. Winning, however, was not enough to win over the hearts and minds of all the people in Eau Claire.

Baseball brought with it the arrival of a new form of gambling in Eau Claire: sports betting. Wagers were taken on games at gambling houses across the city. Abe Devine, one of the directors of the ECBA ran his own gambling pool. The bookkeepers openly advertised in the local newspapers and the editors deemed it newsworthy to report on the gambling opportunities. One such article in the *Free Press* reads, "Pools on the game will be sold to-day at Abe Devine's sample rooms, and in the evening on the Wednesday game."⁵⁵ Supporters of the baseball club had clear motives in openly advertising gambling opportunities in the papers. Gamblers formed a new market that the ECBA could target. The heightened interest in the club from gamblers boosted attendance at the park and drove ticket sales. For the newsmen, it was all about selling papers and that required providing the news that the readers wanted.

The fans were not the only people who had a stake in the outcome of the games. Team players challenged opponents and wagered hefty sums on the outcomes of the

⁵⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, WI) 27 July 1885.

games. In an article glorified with the title “THEY PLAY FOR ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS,” the *Free Press* recorded an Eau Claire loss at the hands of the Cambria nine. The article claims that Cambria purchased three players, notably a pitcher and catcher battery, from a Milwaukee squad.⁵⁶ Later in the year, Abe Devine, on behalf of the Eau Claires, sent a challenge to teams in Berlin and Milwaukee, as well as any other club in the state, to play for “any sum not less than \$100 or exceeding \$500.”⁵⁷ Earlier in the year, the Eau Claires challenged the Berliners to a bout for \$200, but the challenge was declined.⁵⁸ No team answered the \$500 challenge, but the mere suggestion of playing a game for that amount of money enraged a number of baseball’s opponents in Eau Claire. The *Free Press* reported on June 19 that the “Quinceys of Illinois want to play the Eau Claires for the gate receipts.”⁵⁹ Oddly, the gate receipts were property of the ECBA, so the losing team would have matched the amount of the receipts out of their own pockets.

It became evident early in the season that the Eau Claires were far superior to any of the clubs that nearby localities could produce. Many of those teams would not make a straight-up wager against the Eau Claires so odds were made that heavily favored the opposition. Following an eleven to two victory over the Hudson crew, the *Free Press* reported, “The Hudsons got their two scores on errors. The heavy batters being a little nervous over the prospect of winning the \$25 that was promised them if they shut out the

⁵⁶ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 18 July 1885.

⁵⁷ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 2 September 1885.

⁵⁸ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 22 August 1885.

⁵⁹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 19 June 1885.

visitors.”⁶⁰ The Eau Claires did very well for themselves during the 1885 season, both in the win column and in their own wallets.

⁶⁰ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 28 June 1885.

SEVENTH INNING

The Sunday Baseball Controversy

The controversy that shrouded Sunday baseball games dates back to 1878. In that year, Eau Claire police officers intended to stop games which were scheduled for or were already taking place on Sundays.⁶¹ The debate came to a head in 1885. Eau Claire residents openly spoke out about the depraved nature of playing, and attending games, on Sundays. The editor of the *Eau Claire News* described the Sunday games as “not only a disgrace to our civilization, but unlawful.”⁶² One reader asked the *Free Press* to publish the city’s Sunday Laws, so that all of the paper’s readers would be aware of the illicitness that Sunday games carried. One particular Sunday game that was witnessed by a large crowd elicited a letter to the editor that argued that the game disturbed and annoyed people living near the grounds and was an offense to their religious sentiments. Pastors of the Protestant churches in the city orated about the sins of not reserving the Sabbath for rest and holy celebration.⁶³

Eau Claire was not the only city dealing with the Sunday baseball dispute. The *Free Press* ran an article taken from the *Milwaukee Journal* that mirrored the situation in Eau Claire. Members of the Milwaukee Reds were arrested on a Sunday afternoon after a Protestant reverend insisted the police take action at a ball park in Kenosha. The team members were taken to jail, where they were discharged the same afternoon in time to return to the field to finish the game before the sun went down.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 18 April 1878.

⁶² *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 20 June 1885.

⁶³ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 15, 17, 20, 21 June 1885.

The Eau Claires and the ECBA acknowledged the accusations that were made and attempted to appease the naysayers. In an article announcing an upcoming Sunday game, team manager Jas. Cantillon stated that everything would be “quiet and orderly.”⁶⁵ Apparently Cantillon’s plea was not heard, because a week later he issued a letter to the editor of the *Free Press*, entitled “WE WILL NOT PLAY ON SUNDAY,” that stated, “We are not going to play ball on Sunday, there are so many against it that we came to the conclusion we would not play any more Sunday games.”⁶⁶ The Eau Claires accomplished quite a track record for appeasing fans and their grievances in 1885. The team won the praises from the *Eau Claire News* after an editor addressed concerns that some fans in the grandstand disapproved of tobacco smoking in that area of the park. The editor petitioned to Cantillon, who prohibited smoking in the grandstand for the rest of the season.⁶⁷

Giving up their Sunday games was an incredible sacrifice for the Eau Claires and the ECBA. Sunday games were the most popular and by far the most attended. For as many citizens that protested against the Sunday games, the attendance figures did not show a slump in the demand for tickets on those days. For many of the residents of the city, Sunday was the only day of the week off of work, and thus, was the only chance for those people to attend a game.

The Eau Claires, the ECBA, and even the newspaper editors appealed to the fans and requested that the games that were to be played on other weekdays be well attended,

⁶⁴ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 2 July 1885.

⁶⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 13 June 1885.

⁶⁶ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 20 June 1885.

⁶⁷ *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 11 July, 1885.

as a sign of gratitude for the team's peaceful and unselfish gesture. The *Free Press* wrote,

The Eau Claires think it a little strange that after giving in on the Sunday business that the citizens should so quietly leave them alone on the week days. At the Chippewa-Eau Claire contest yesterday there was about enough citizens present to form a corporal's guard. Now if the Eau Claires had persisted in their Sunday playing they could at least count on a large turnout of working men.⁶⁸

As profits sagged, the ECBA made an even bolder request. The association asked that Eau Claire citizens help subsidize the team by paying to keep games from being played on future Sundays. The association's petition went mostly unanswered though, and the Sunday baseball issue would arise later in the season.⁶⁹

The Chicago Gordons, who matched up with the Eau Claires on the Fourth of July, scheduled a return trip later in the year. The game was to take place in Eau Claire on Sunday, September 23, but the Eau Claires moved the venue to Chippewa Falls to escape the wrath of public opinion in their hometown. Earlier in the week, the YMCA convinced the district attorney to issue a warrant for the arrest of anyone playing baseball on that afternoon. When the sheriff arrived at the field and read the warrant, the players and crowd dispersed. The Gordons boarded the next train out of Eau Claire and the game was never concluded.⁷⁰ The editor of the *Free Press* was critical of the law that the YMCA cited because it was rarely enforced and in his opinion should have been repealed.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 24 June 1885.

⁶⁹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 11, 29, 30 September 1885.

⁷⁰ *Chippewa Herald* (Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin) 2, 9 October 1885; *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 24, 25 September 1885; *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 23 September 1885; Poling, 69.

⁷¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 1 October 1885.

This flare up was the last for the year in 1885, but the Sunday baseball dilemma would be revisited in the future.

EIGHT INNING

The 1886 Season: The Beginning of the End

The Eau Claires officially joined the Northwest Baseball League in 1886. The league restructured to include teams from Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Des Moines, Duluth, Oshkosh, La Crosse, and Eau Claire. The NBL made two crucial amendments in 1886 that would come to doom the future of professional baseball in Eau Claire. The first was the drafting of a schedule that assigned Sunday games only being held by the teams in the larger cities: Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Saint Paul. The local climate in Eau Claire simply would not allow for games to be played in the city on Sundays.⁷² The financial implications of banning Sunday home games have been previously addressed. The second rule change eliminated the limit on players' salaries, which was \$76 per month the previous season. Team organizations and managers could pay their players any amount they wanted.⁷³ Although the salaries of Eau Claire players were not publicized, a Duluth paper claimed the Eau Claire club was paying a player \$350 per month.⁷⁴ That was an incredible amount of money for the time and only elevated the level of resentment some locals held for the ball players. Profits were already taking a big hit because of the Sunday baseball issue so increasing the team's payroll was not the best business plan for the ECBA. The team won the league championship the year before and the quality of the team's players that year was extraordinarily high. It would have been a difficult task to bring in more people to the ballpark and increase revenue from the previous season, and adding to the payroll doubtfully would have accomplished doing so.

⁷² *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 30 April 1886.

⁷³ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 26 June 1886.

⁷⁴ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 28 July 1886; Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 70.

The overspending by the ECBA indeed backfired. Profit margins dropped off from the 1885 season to 1886. More surprisingly, the Eau Claires underperformed on the diamond as well, finishing league play in second place.⁷⁵ Despite finishing in second place, the *Free Press* heavily criticized the team's play in 1886, and after the season reported that better players were being sought out and obtained to ensure there would be no "second rate exhibitions that were seen last year."⁷⁶

But the 1887 season was a disaster for the Eau Claires and the NWBL, much to the chagrin of the local fans and newspaper editors. Eau Claire, Oshkosh, La Crosse, and Duluth were all having catastrophic financial problems. By September, the *Free Press* was suggesting that the NWBL would probably cease to exist after the end of the season. The Des Moines, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Saint Paul clubs were already making plans to join leagues that were made up of teams from larger cities.⁷⁷ The Eau Claires finished the 1887 season with a record of 38 wins and 85 losses, 41 games out of first place. As was predicted, the NWBL folded when the season concluded. So too did the ECBA and the Eau Claires.⁷⁸ After only its third season in existence, professional baseball in Eau Claire was gone.

⁷⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 1 October 1886.

⁷⁶ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 11 October 1886; Christenson, *Baseball in Eau Claire*, 8.

⁷⁷ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 20 September 1887.

⁷⁸ Christenson, *Baseball in Eau Claire*, 8.

The Demise and Dissolution of the Eau Claires and Professional Baseball in Eau Claire, 1887-1900

Amateur baseball replaced the professional game as Eau Claire's baseball entertainment after the Eau Claires departed following the 1887 season. No amateur team generated as much fandom and enthusiasm as the Eau Claires, though. The *Weekly Leader* wrote in 1991, "We have all sorts of baseball clubs in this city but they have faded and disappointed."⁷⁹ Like the Eau Claires, the amateur teams faced contempt from the public that was centered on the Sunday baseball matter. The *Free Press* and the *Leader* reported in 1891 that local clergymen and representatives from the protestant churches were meeting to discuss several issues. The meetings favored more rigid enforcement of the Sunday laws, which included the cessation of Sunday baseball games, and preventative measures against liquor sales and consumption on Sundays. It should be noted that not all delegates were in agreement on all of the issues that were brought up in the meetings. The reverend of the Eau Claire Episcopal Church made it public that he did not oppose Sunday baseball.⁸⁰ A Unitarian pastor preached about "keeping Sunday and making others keep it." In his sermons, he argued that Sunday baseball was not intrinsically wrong and should be permitted if it was played in an isolated place where others would not be bothered and noise was subdued.⁸¹ In June, a month before the meetings, a petition was presented to the mayor protesting loud noise at the ball parks that was disturbing some citizens' Sabbath rest.⁸² That same week the *Eau Claire News* reported

⁷⁹ *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 13 April 1991.

⁸⁰ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 2 July 1991; *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 6 July 1885.

⁸¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 16, 23 July 1891.

that petitions against and in favor of Sunday games were numerous being signed.⁸³ On June 18, a counter petition was presented to the mayor that favored Sunday baseball. Some residents supported Sunday games because they served as a distraction to other social ills that the city had to offer. Many preferred baseball over drunkenness, which was an alternative enjoyed by many. Local saloon owners were among the proponents of Sunday baseball because they feared their establishments would be the subject of break-ins on those days if the men were not offered an alternative.⁸⁴

According to the *Free Press*, the Sunday debate was a statewide phenomenon in 1891. “A somewhat general uprising is going on over the state among Christian people against Sunday baseball playing,” wrote the *Free Press*.⁸⁵ In Eau Claire, the matter came to a stalemate. The mayor and municipal police did nothing to deter Sunday games, so long as order was maintained.⁸⁶ The dispute came to a head when members of an ad hoc committee went to the ball park to write down the names of those participating in the games on a Sunday in mid-July. The names were submitted to the Eau Claire County District Attorney and the committee called for warrants to be issued for their arrest. The District Attorney balked and refused to prosecute the players. He cited several reasons for doing so, including the matter being a municipal matter and not one considering the county courts, the cost of prosecuting the petty cases, and the opposition that would have

⁸² *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 11 June 1891.

⁸³ *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 15 July 1891.

⁸⁴ *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 18 June 1891.

⁸⁵ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 16 July 1891.

⁸⁶ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 23 July 1891.

been mounted by those who supported Sunday baseball.⁸⁷ The tensions eased when protestant leaders and the city officials reached an agreement to have brief church services held at the ball park before Sunday games. These services, labeled “pre-game blessings for the misguided,” were conducted by leaders of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, as well as members of the YMCA.⁸⁸ The *Eau Claire News* revisited the Sunday case later in the year, claiming local amateur teams were playing freely on Sundays and Sunday games were popular in the city. The only criticisms regarded the poor quality of play of the amateur clubs.⁸⁹

The quieting of the Sunday controversy sparked attempts to bring back professional ball to Eau Claire. In 1892, a disorganized group failed in their attempt to bring back the pro game to prominence in the city. The team did not have the backing of any organization, like the Eau Claire Baseball Association which supported and provided oversight for the Eau Claires. The team flopped and the manager skipped town in July, having owed several members of the team back salary.⁹⁰

Two years later another group made tried to establish a successful professional team in Eau Claire. A newly formed Northwest Baseball League was forming and appealed to Eau Claire to be a member. In April, 1894, W.D. Davis, the team’s manager, had engaged enough players to form a team.⁹¹ In May, however, Eau Claire mayor A.D.

⁸⁷ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 16, 23 July 1891; *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 20 July 1891.

⁸⁸ *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 27 April 1891, 26 August 1891; *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 6 August 1891; Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 69.

⁸⁹ *Eau Claire News* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 4 September 1891.

⁹⁰ *Eau Claire Sunday Morning Forum* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 10 July 1892.

⁹¹ *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 12 April 1894.

Cameron informed Davis that the team would not be permitted to play on Sundays. Davis and his associates thought better of the venture and the plans for the Eau Claire team were scrapped. With no city to replace Eau Claire the NWBL was forced to fold.⁹²

There would not be another attempt to bring professional baseball back to Eau Claire for the remainder of the nineteenth-century.

⁹² *Eau Claire Free Press* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) 3 May 1894; Poling, *A Summer Up North*, 69.

NINTH INNING

Conclusion

Baseball arrived in Eau Claire in the 1860s and promptly gathered much popularity in the city. Eau Claire citizens became avid fans of the game and their ravenous hunger for the game triggered the city to create the Eau Claire Baseball Association, which brought professional baseball to Eau Claire in 1885. The Eau Claires built an impressive reputation as one of the Midwest's top teams. The players turned into overnight celebrities and professional baseball became a central figure for the city, as represented by the thorough press coverage carried in the local newspapers.

The game, however, brought with it many controversial aspects that aggravated a portion of the local population. Despite all of the social ills that Eau Claire was already catering to, professional baseball attained a reputation for being the root of all evil in the city. Some members of the community resented the fact that men from outside the city were brought in to play baseball, and that they were paid so handsomely for playing a game. Others rued the gambling prospects that the games provided. Most important though, local Protestants were outraged that baseball games were taking place on Sundays and disrupting their Sabbath day rest. The controversy that surrounded Sunday baseball games contributed to the failure of the Eau Claires and professional baseball in Eau Claire. After only three years in the city, professional baseball had come and gone.

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