

Shanghied Maroon?

By Lefty Farnsworth

After starring at Chicago's North Division High in the seasons of 1903-04, Walter Steffen was one of the most highly recruited prep players in the Midwest. When Steffen enrolled at the University of Chicago in the Fall of 1905, most observers felt that Coach Amos A. Stagg had found a worthy successor to the great Walter Eckersall.

After Stagg's 1905 Maroons had defeated Iowa 42-0 the entire sporting community of Chicago was stunned by the news that Steffen had deserted Chicago and had accompanied Coach Phil King of Wisconsin and the Badgers' Captain Edward Vanderboom back to Madison. Wisconsin had been one of the more vigorous pursuers of "the phenomenal young football player and track athlete" while he was still a prep, so it seemed only natural that Coach King would look up Steffen while in town to see the Chicago-Iowa game. After spending the day together Steffen departed at 4PM on Sunday with the Badger coach.

The sudden developments surprised not only Stagg but the football star's parents. But Mr Steffen declared that his son had not been satisfied with Chicago and that he preferred Wisconsin. In the best tradition of mothers, Mrs Steffen was quoted as saying that "I know Walter would not go to Wisconsin without my consent."

A couple days later Stagg's freshman hero "returned penitently" to Chicago. Steffen returned to the campus at 3AM, and was attending classes and freshman football practice the next day as though nothing had happened. In the words of the Chicago Tribune: "Steffen's return was as quiet as his departure" and that "Coach Stagg's cup was overflowing."

Steffen was quoted as stating: "I made the trip to Wisconsin entirely against my will. For a month I endeavored in every way to avoid going to Madison as a guest but the pressure became so strong that I could not resist. I told them before I went that I could not enter Wisconsin under any circumstances, and an hour after my arrival I told them that I would not remain. They told me that if I once saw Madison I would never return to Chicago. I was ashamed to make the trip ... I like Chicago ... and I intend to stick here until I get my degree."

The following day Wisconsin reacted to the reports that "improper influences" were used on Steffen. Captain Vanderboom said that "I brought no influence whatever to bear on Steffen. He saw me on the field and came up and introduced himself. He explained that the situation at Chicago was unsatisfactory and distasteful to him. He said there was continual strife in the athletic department between the graduates of Hyde Park and North Division High schools. At present Eckersall, a Hyde Park man, has matters his own way and all others have hard picking. Therefore I suggested that he come up to Madison and look over the ground. Whatever was done was done on Mr Steffen's own initiative."

So ended a minor "incident" that was soon lost in the dust of time and the pages of the Chicago newspapers. But just imagine how the football history of the Western Conference might have been altered in the 1907-1908 seasons if Walter Steffen had played his Hall of Fame career for Wisconsin instead of Coach Amos Alonzo Stagg's Maroons of the University of Chicago.