

Of Rails and Red Stockings: The Extension of Baseball to the American West

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Jacques Barzun, noted scholar and critic, once remarked: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball." Emerging from the embryonic fetus of organized sport in America the game of baseball has beguiled the nation's citizenry into a long and passionate love affair of almost unrivaled dimension, and has gained a distinction of having generated more in the way of public attitude towards a national sport ethic than has any other singular sporting activity.

The most crucial technological development in the initial spread of baseball to the nooks and crannies of America was one of transportation impact, or, more definitively, the railroad. It can be argued that baseball development in many ways became an adopted foster child of the railroad, following the trestled pathways across the country like a child lured by the Pied Piper's flute.

As might be imagined the railroad was crucial relative to the first episodes involving the extension of baseball to the American West, particularly as the "twin ribbons of steel" related to the endeavours of the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings and their efforts to present the latest concepts of the game to more "primitive" baseball brethren. History reports that the 1869 Red Stockings played 70 games, winning 69 and tying one, that they travelled the length and breadth of America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, from the Great Lakes down the Mississippi River Valley as far south as Louisville; and, even more importantly, that they imbibed all with whom they came in contact, with an admiration and infatuation for baseball -an infatuation that here in more contemporary times continues to envelope the sporting interest of North Americans. What history has failed to report, however, are those events in 1869 which embraced the extension of baseball to Western America, an extension which through the years has had immeasurable impact on the history of the game. The record indicates that the Cincinnati Red Stockings of 1869 played five games in San Francisco in late September and early October, but otherwise, is silent in its portrayal of the Club's other western activities. The Red Stockings' crusade through the West in the late summer and early autumn of 1869, set against a backdrop featuring the activities of neophyte baseball clubs organized in the California cities of San Francisco and Sacramento and the pulsating, rambunctious Nevada mining communities known as Virginia City and Carson City is the story of yet another important episode in the early history of American baseball.