

# ‘Teamworkers:’ Industrial League Baseball, Worker Culture, and Labor Relations, 1910-1930

Jeffrey E. Smith

The St. Louis Mercantile Library

By 1920, most commentators called baseball the “national pastime.” Spectatorship was at an all-time high, and there were more baseball fans in America than ever. Professional baseball generated some of them. But just ten cities hosted fourteen major league teams, with minor league squads playing in 156 more communities. On the other hand, fans watched industrial league teams in hundreds of towns and cities nationally. Therefore, these teams were central to building baseball spectatorship too. That same year, 1920, the four largest railroads alone sponsored more than 150 teams. Each of them played in local city leagues against similar company teams. These games were immensely popular among workers. Five hundred workers at a game in the west was typical attendance; industrial cities in the northeast regularly doubled and even quadrupled that. All those workers watching those ball games had a significant impact on the rise of baseball’s popularity.

Companies sponsored these so-called “varsity teams” to accomplish specific management aims that had little to do with the national pastime. Rather, management used baseball teams as part of an effort to reduce absenteeism, cut turnover, eliminate or weaken union forces, and reinforce behavior and values among the work force. “Welfare work” sought to accomplish such goals in labor relations through a myriad of programs such as safer working conditions, lunchrooms, employee magazines, and health insurance. Varsity baseball and its spectator orientation was part of this system.

This paper investigates industrial league baseball from three perspectives. First, I will look at the place of these teams in worker culture. Spectators were the primary audience for this aspect of welfarism. For managers, participation meant attending games and rooting for the company colors. Consequently, these weekly games were very much a part of the lives and leisure of workers. Second, I will examine industrial league baseball as a mode of labor relations. I will discuss management's motives and labor's response—in short, did workers receive the message the company was sending? Some did; in 1912, the Santa Fe Magazine (the employee magazine published by the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway) reported that the company's team in Stockton, California, was calling itself the Teamworkers, "after the Santa Fe watchword." Third, I will draw a relationship between industrial league games and the rising popularity of baseball. Welfarism played a significant role creating and nurturing baseball fans in cities outside Organized Baseball, whether management realized it or not.

## Hank Gowdy, Baseball's Doughboy Hero

John D. Stevens

University of Michigan

Hank Gowdy was at the peak of his career in 1917 when he volunteered as an infantryman and fought in France. To quote the punch line of Grantland Rice's ode. "Lank Hank had been the first to go." In 1914 he had been the hero of the World Series for the "Miracle Braves." He batted .545 in that Series.

Stars & Stripes idolized him. Upon his return, Gowdy drew cheers, even from fans of opposing teams.

By the time he hung up his glove in 1930, he had caught 1050 games, all for the Braves and Giants. His lifetime average was .270. He then managed and coached for another 20 years. The army named a stadium in his honor at Fort Benning. With the coming of World War II, he reentered the army and as a special services officer managed some army all-star teams.