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Cap Anson of Marshalltown: Baseball's First Superstar

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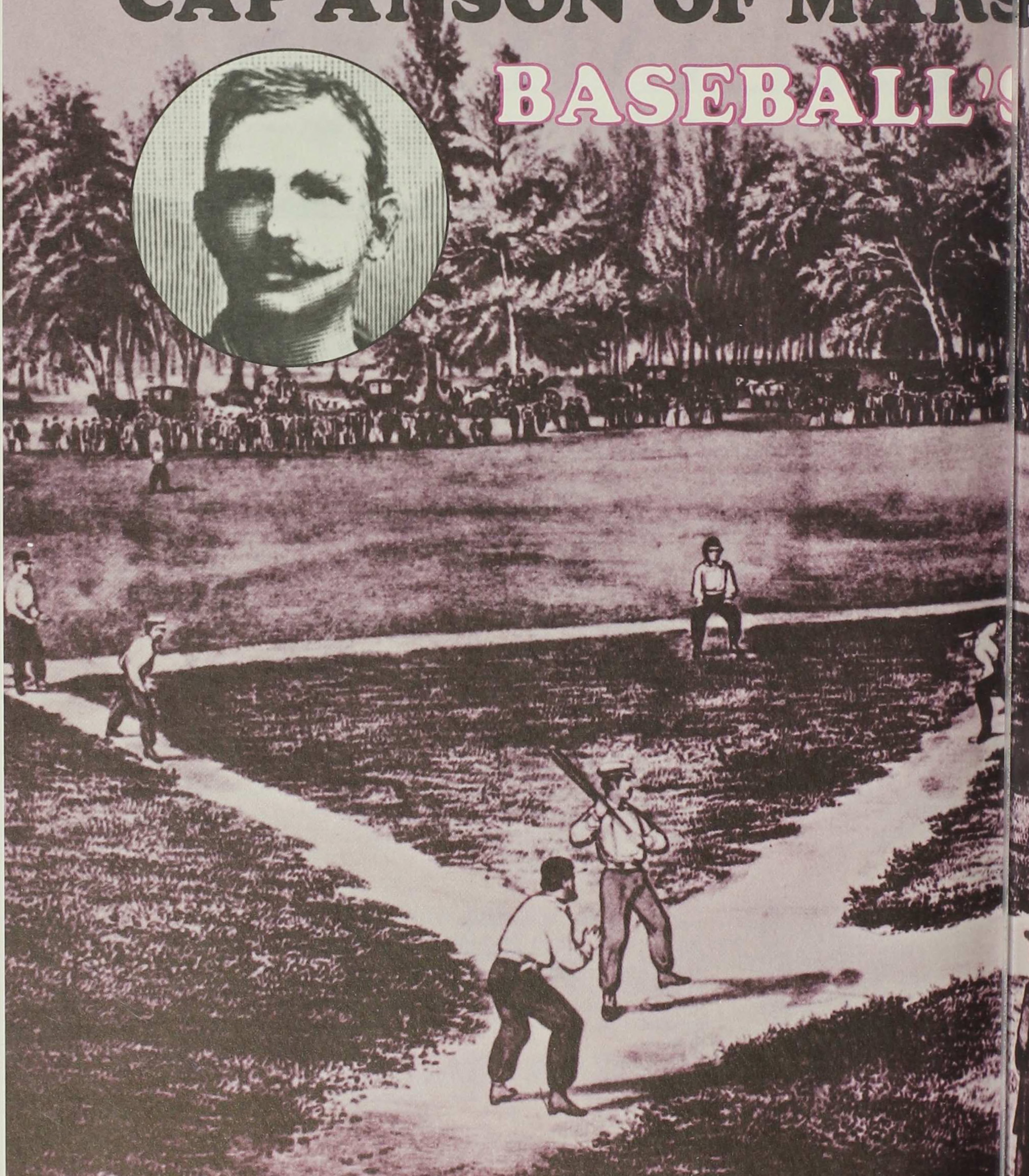
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CAP ANSON OF MARSH

BASEBALL'S

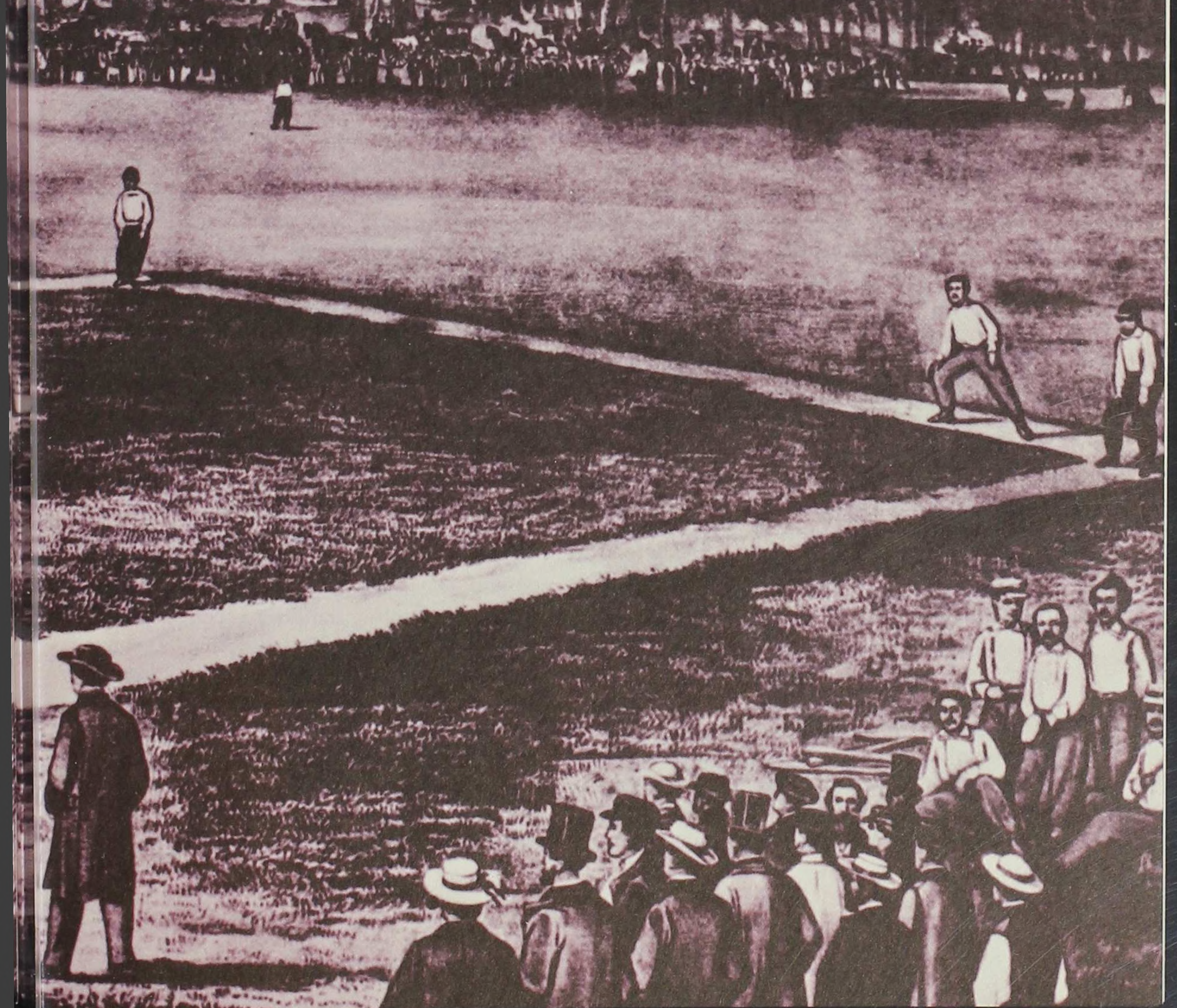


Lithograph by Currier and Ives (Culver Pictures)

SHALLTOWN

FIRST SUPERSTAR

by David L. Porter



*Lo! from the tribunes on the bleachers
comes a shout,
Beseeching bold Ansonius to line 'em out;
And as Apollo's flying chariot cleaves the sky,
So stanch Ansonius lifts the brightened
ball on high.*

Nicknamed "Cap," "Unk," "Pop," and even "Pappy," Adrian Anson of Marshalltown was baseball's first superstar performer. The "bold Ansonius" of sportswriter Eugene Field's verse earned fame on baseball diamonds and in clubhouses at a time when the game became America's national pastime. Indeed, for better or worse, Anson and a few of his contemporaries gave professional baseball much of its modern character.

Born in 1852, young Anson learned the fundamentals of the game from his father, an amateur third baseman who organized the first Marshalltown Baseball Club. After a brief stint at the University of Iowa, he transferred to Notre Dame University in 1869; there he excelled as a second baseman. Anson was a poor student, however, and soon quit school. Returning to Marshalltown in 1870, Anson continued to play baseball for his father's club, which also included Adrian's brother Sturgis. Marshalltown in 1870 attracted considerable publicity by playing an excellent team from Rockford, Illinois in an exhibition game. The Rockford club was one of the nation's premier teams, having an outstanding pitcher in Albert Spalding, and often scored over 100 runs a game. Marshalltown astonished the visitors from Illinois by losing only 18-3, as Adrian played well both at bat and in the field. "They put up a rattling game, especially the two (Anson) sons," Spalding commented, "and they were the hardest fighters I ever saw in my life."

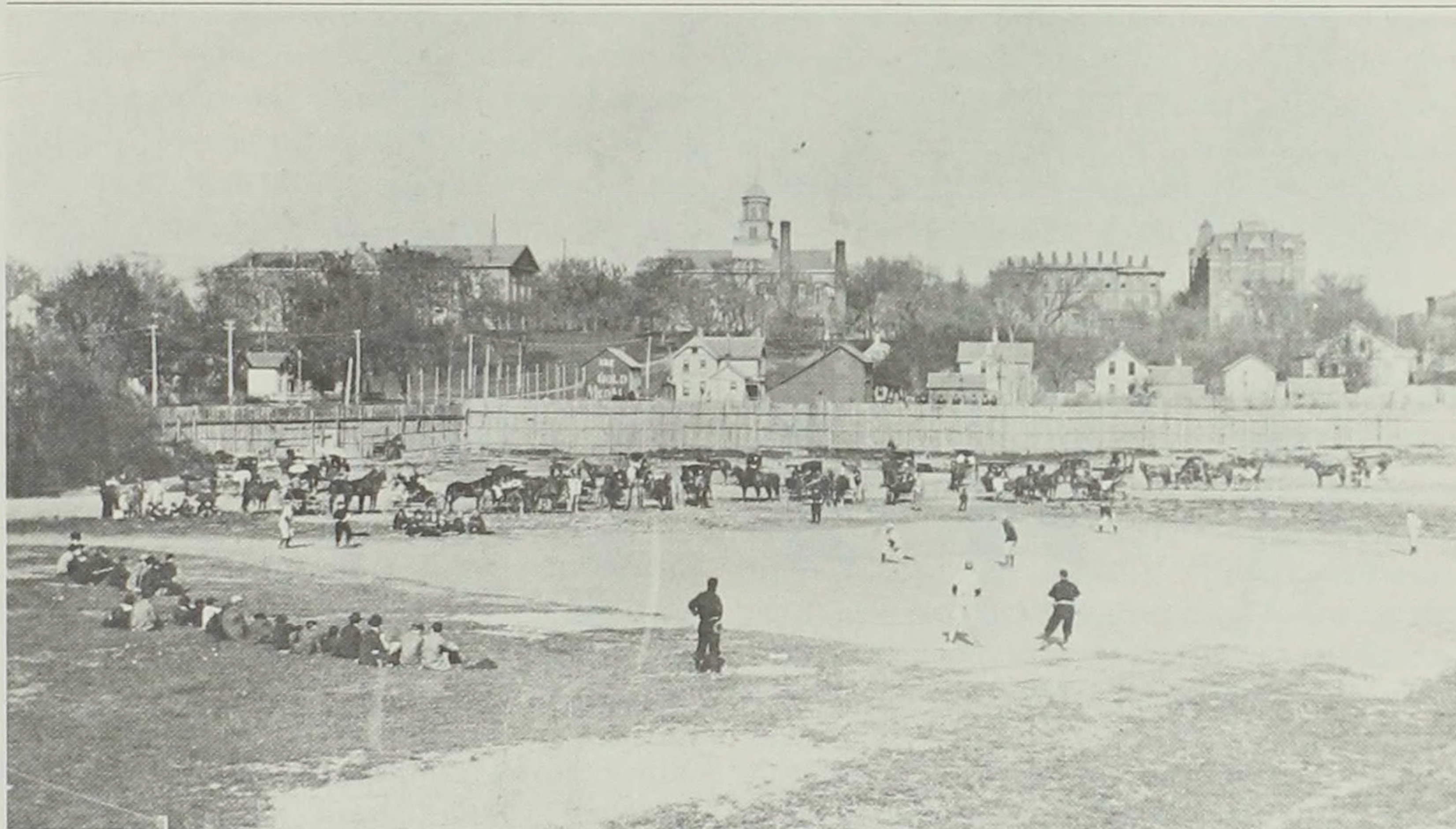
Launching his professional baseball career while still a teenager, in 1871 Anson signed a contract for \$66.66 per month with a newly-

founded Rockford, Illinois team. "It was a fairly good salary for a ball player," Anson recalled in his memoirs, "and especially for one who was only eighteen years old and a green lad at that." Anson played third base and led Rockford in batting, but the club finished in last place in the National Association and disbanded at the end of the 1871 season.

From Rockford, Anson travelled east in 1872 to play for the Philadelphia Athletics of the same National Association. Here he received a more lucrative contract of \$1,250 annually, which was boosted to \$1,800 after he performed well for the club. Although primarily a third baseman, Anson played all infield and outfield positions and frequently even caught.

In Philadelphia Anson became embroiled in baseball's first contract dispute. When the National League was formed in 1876, Chicago entered a club named the White Stockings. The previous year, club president William A. Hulbert had secretly signed six players from the rival National Association, including Anson of Philadelphia. He had agreed to play for the White Stockings for \$2,000—\$200 more than he was receiving from the Athletics. Hulbert hoped to keep the signings secret because the players legally were still under contract to their National Association clubs, but the *Chicago Tribune* published the story in late summer 1876.

Before the 1876 season began, however, Anson sought a release from his new contract with the White Stockings, for the Athletics had offered to increase his salary from \$1,800 to \$2,500. It was a raise that he simply could not refuse. Explaining that his fiancée Virginia did not want to leave Philadelphia, Anson requested but was denied a release from the Chicago contract. Anson journeyed to Chicago twice to persuade Hulbert and team friend Albert Spalding—another of the six ballplayers jumping to the Chicago club—to release him from the agreement. On his second trip Anson even offered to pay the Chicago club \$1,000 in



The baseball diamond at the University of Iowa, where Cap Anson played as a college student in the late 1860s (SHSI)

return for his release. The offer astonished both Hulbert and Spalding, but they still declined to release Anson. "A man who will give a thousand dollars rather than break his word," Hulbert commented, "must be a good man to have."

Still determined to secure his release, Anson watched the White Stockings in their first practice dressed in a Prince Albert coat, striped trousers, and fashionable hat. Anson grew impatient after watching for a few minutes and asked hurler Spalding to throw him a few pitches. Spalding refused to honor the request until Anson took off his coat and hat.

Cap Anson not only participated in the remainder of practice that day, but stayed with the White Stockings for the next twenty-two years. In his rookie season with Chicago, Anson continued as a third baseman and helped the White Stockings win the National League pennant. The 1876 club still ranks as one of the best in baseball history, winning 52 of 66 games or

nearly 79 percent of its contests. Pitcher Spalding won 47 of those games while Anson compiled an impressive .343 batting average with 59 runs batted in.

Over his entire career, Anson had a remarkable .333 batting average. In 27 seasons he had 3,041 hits, a figure surpassed by only eleven players. He holds a major league record for hitting at least .300 in 25 of 27 seasons, including his final season at age 46. The first player to make 3,000 hits, he won the National League batting title twice and finished second four times. Anson was also a power hitter, pounding 96 home runs and driving in over 1,700 runs in a dead ball era. Larger physically than most of his contemporaries, the six-foot, 227-pound Anson menaced opponents with a 44-ounce bat to the end of his long career.

With his good eye and his strength, Anson became one of the great hitters in the game's history. He proved himself competent in other playing categories as well. Although a slow



Nineteenth-century baseball attire, from the scrapbooks of John S. Entler (SHSI)

runner and only an average first baseman, he nevertheless enjoyed great moments in the field. He led National League first basemen in fielding six times and was the first player to make two unassisted double plays in the same game.

For all of his contributions to the game, unfortunately Anson also established an unwritten rule banning black players from organized baseball. His rigid belief in the segregation of black and white players and his enormous popularity discouraged other owners from recruiting blacks. While managing the White Stockings in 1884, Anson threatened to remove his team from the field during a game against a Toledo team that included a black player, Moses Fleetwood Walker. The Toledo management insisted that Walker play even if it meant a forfeit by the White Stockings for refusing to play. Anson retreated quickly and dropped his protest. Several years later, however, Anson again threatened to take his squad off the field, this time against a Newark minor league club unless its black pitcher, George Stovey, left the field. Later Anson persuaded the New York Giants to cancel plans to promote

Stovey to the major leagues, and—according to baseball historian David Quentin Voigt—used “all the venom . . . of a Tillman or a Vardaman” to achieve his end. (Benjamin F. Tillman of South Carolina and James K. Vardaman of Mississippi were rabid segregationists in the United States Senate in the late nineteenth century).

As manager, Anson was a strict, gruff, outspoken taskmaster; he disciplined players for drinking violations, required top physical conditioning, and even made legendary night bed-checks. He insisted that his players wear suits, abstain from liquor and tobacco, and stay at reputable hotels. Although well-respected, he was regarded as a domineering manager by many players. A serious-minded team leader, Anson also stressed honesty and dignity among his players. After his team lost one very erratically played game, a suspicious spectator telegraphed Anson inquiring whether the contest was “on the level.” “I would not disgrace my players by showing them your telegram,” Anson tartly replied, “nor degrade myself by answering your question.”

Anson managed and captained the Chicago White Stockings from 1879 to 1897, and is considered the premier manager of the late nine-

teenth century. His apprenticeship for the post took place between 1876 and 1878, when he served as the team's captain and player-coach. Ranking in tenth place among baseball managers, Anson won nearly 1,300 games and compiled a .575 lifetime won-lost percentage. In the years 1879-1886 Anson directed the White Stockings to five National League pennants; the club won consecutive championships from 1880 to 1882 and won again in 1885 and 1886. During the next five seasons, the White Stockings finished in second place three times and in third place twice.

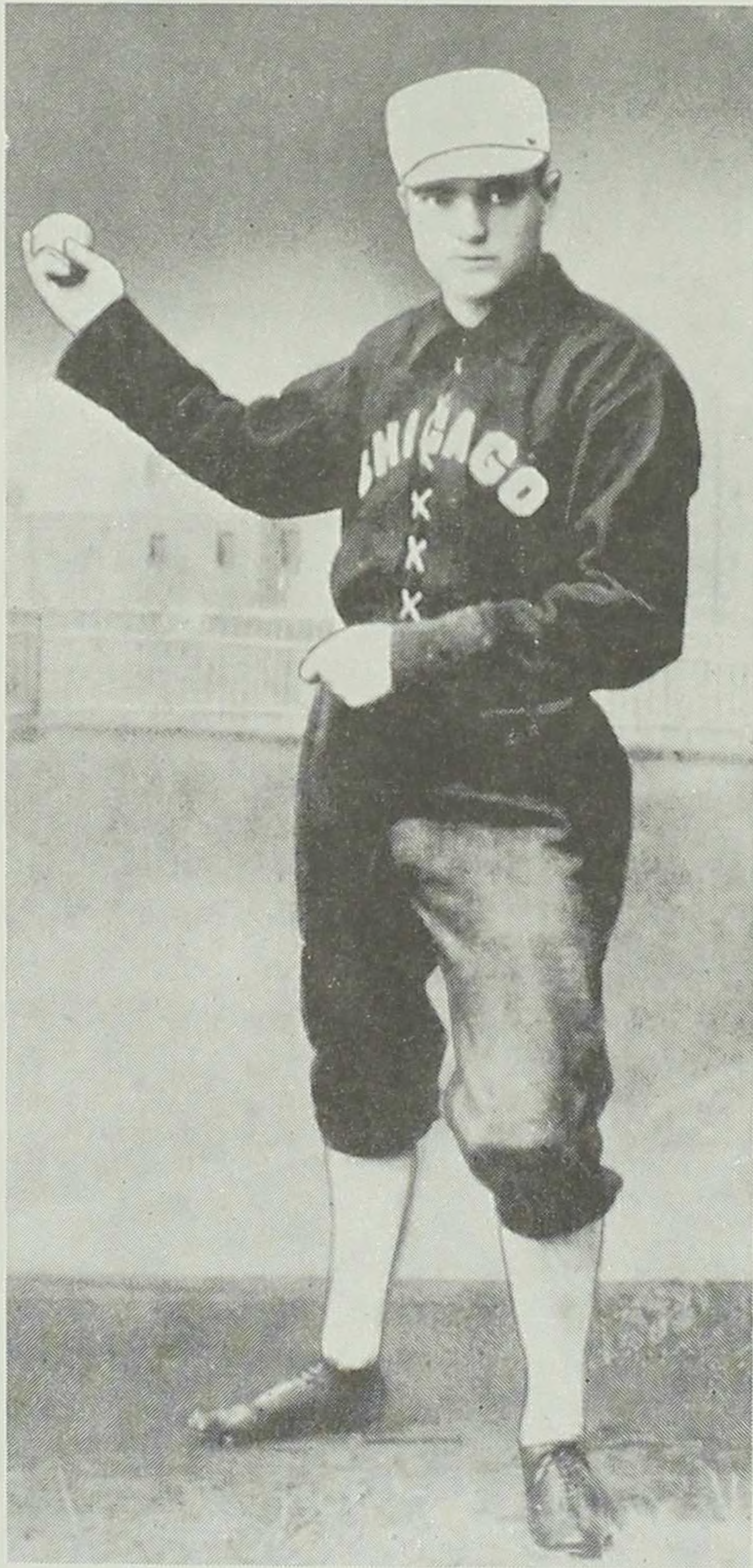
Stressing aggressive team play under Anson's leadership, the White Stockings compiled other impressive records as well. In 1880 they set a yet-unsurpassed record of winning 67 games, or nearly 80 percent of their contests. In September 1883, the team sent 23 players to the plate in one inning against Detroit, scoring 18 runs on 18 hits. The next year Anson's club hit 140 home runs, the highest team total until Babe Ruth's legendary 1927 New York Yan-

kees. Considered an exceptional judge of baseball talent, Anson developed many important players, including pitchers Larry Corcoran, John Clarkson, Jim McCormick, and Clark Griffith, as well as outfielders Mike "King" Kelly, Ed Williamson, William Lange, and fellow Iowan Billy Sunday.

Anson made several innovations in the game during his career. In 1886 the White Stockings manager required his players to train for three weeks in the South before beginning the regular season. Soon other major league clubs were employing spring training sessions. Anson also introduced the daring "hit and run" strategy—having the batter try to advance the runner an extra base without concern for his own average. Besides encouraging base stealing, he developed the baseline coaching box and invented both offensive and defensive signals. Anson's idea of rotating pitchers encouraged opposing teams to try the strategy, especially when Anson's club won five pennants in seven years.



The champion Chicago White Stockings of the 1870s (SHSI)



Renowned evangelist Billy Sunday—born in Ames, Iowa in 1862—enjoyed a successful career in the big leagues before he turned to preaching in 1891. Signed by Cap Anson in 1883 to play with Chicago's White Stockings, outfielder Sunday also played on National League teams in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Many fans considered Sunday the fastest man in baseball, though others complained that Sunday's weak hitting would have kept him out of the majors had it not been for the influence of fellow Iowan Cap Anson. (SHSI)

Throughout his years as a player, Anson served as a goodwill ambassador for baseball abroad. In 1874 Anson's Philadelphia Athletics made a thirty-day tour of England, playing fourteen exhibition games against the championship Boston club. Although not familiar with cricket, the American players had such batting skills that they defeated the premier Marylebone All-English Eleven and other British teams. Fourteen years later, the Chicago White Stockings and ten National League All-Stars made a six-month tour playing numerous baseball exhibitions around the world. Accompanied by their wives, the players visited Hawaii, Australia, Ceylon, Egypt, Italy, France, and England, and received a cordial welcome everywhere. "[They] created interest in the game," tour organizer Spalding said, "in countries where it had never been seen before."

In the 1890s Anson began to experience an increasing number of problems as a player-manager. During the late 1880s, the White Stockings sold stars Mike Kelly and John Clarkson to Boston. The formation of the rival Player's League in 1890 further depleted Anson's once-stellar team, which was renamed the Chicago Colts. The hapless Colts did not finish above fourth place for the rest of the decade. Chicago sportswriters chided "Old Man Anson" for their failings on the field and boldly hinted that he should retire as a player. In a game on September 4, 1891, the 39-year-old Anson retaliated by wearing broad, long whiskers covering the letters on the front of his uniform and made three hits. He insisted on being awarded first base in the second inning after one pitch hit his whiskers, but the umpire adamantly refused to oblige. "And even if it had hit them," umpire Tom Lynch replied, "they aren't really yours and you couldn't take first base just because somebody else's whiskers got hit." The *Chicago Tribune* remarked that "the grand old man of baseball was hurling defiance

into the teeth of age by aping its appearance." Although Chicago sportswriters and spectators became increasingly disenchanted with the team's declining performance over the years, manager Anson continued playing first base until 1897, when he quit at age 46 after 28 years as a player.

(The whiskers incident was not the only humorous escapade involving the usually very serious Anson. In a home game against Louisville during the 1890s, a Louisville player hit a sharp ground ball to Chicago shortstop Bill Dahlen. Dahlen threw the ball wildly over first baseman Anson's head. After hitting the base of the stands, the ball bounced toward right field. Anson chased the ball into right field until a sway-backed horse owned by a Chicago groundskeeper escaped from a fenced area behind the clubhouse and galloped toward the first baseman. Anson promptly gave up on retrieving the ball and ran for safety, while the runner circled the bases and scored the winning run. No ground rule existed limiting the number of bases that a runner could take when a fielder was being chased by a horse.)

Quarreling with umpires was another Anson trait and he often used "brawling, bullying tactics" against game officials, according to the *New York Times*. Anson had "a voice in his impassioned moments like a hundred Bulls of Bashan," and—as sportswriter Ira L. Smith noted—the spectators "love to see him face up to the umpires" and "go wild when he clashes with the officiators. Whenever there is the slightest cause for a difference of opinion, he leaves his place at bat, on the coach's line, or at first base and roars into a presentation of his argument." National League President Nicholas E. Young, who fined Anson \$110 for misconduct in 1886, said "he has walked a hundred miles up and down the first base path in mild deprecation of the umpire's decisions."

Anson also frequently engaged in spirited conflicts with team officials. He strongly disliked James A. Hart, a businessman named by

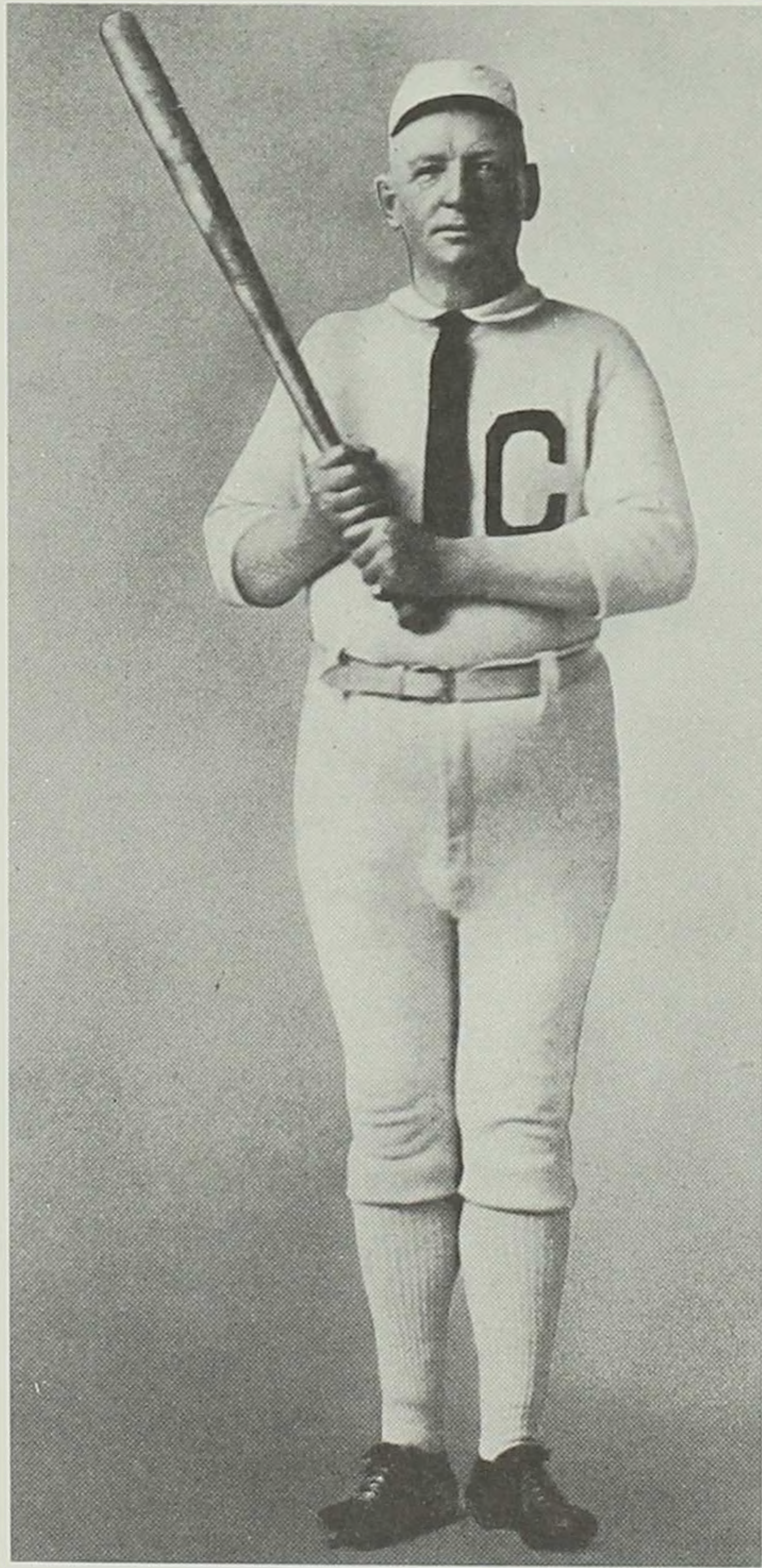
owner Albert Spalding as White Stockings club president in 1891. Previously Spalding had given Anson a free hand in field operations. After all, the manager was in the fourth year of a ten-year contract and owned 130 shares of stock in the club. Anson aspired to become club president and now insisted that the younger Hart not infringe upon his managerial authority. In an attempt to placate Anson, Spalding assured Anson that Hart would be only a figurehead and that Anson would be retained as manager. In truth, Spalding intended to let Hart operate the club, and increasingly during the 1890s Hart compromised Anson's control over daily operations. To Anson's dismay, Hart repeatedly blocked player deals and did not back his manager in disciplining players. And to make matters worse, Anson's once powerful club continued to founder in the standings. Writers and fans were growing more and more impatient.

In February 1898, Hart fired Anson. Anson's ten-year contract had expired a month earlier, and Hart had concluded that Anson was no longer useful to the club. He needed only Spalding's consent to remove the veteran manager. Spalding hoped to retain Anson, but Hart already had committed the club to name Tommy Burns as replacement and threatened to quit unless Anson was released. Spalding considered Hart a very able businessman, and thus reluctantly consented to the dismissal of Anson and named Burns as manager. In a fitting gesture, the Chicago Colts were renamed "the Orphans" to symbolize the departure of their nineteen-year manager.

Spalding meanwhile offered Anson an opportunity to establish and preside over a baseball college for training young players, but the veteran manager rejected the offer. Spalding also arranged with the Chicago Athletic Club a testimonial dinner designed to raise a pension worth thousands of dollars for Anson. On the day prior to the event, however, Anson learned of the dinner and ordered Spalding to cancel

the testimonial. "This I refused to accept," Anson stated, "for the reason that I was not a pauper, the public owed me nothing, and I believed that I was still capable of making my own living."

That same year, Anson made a fruitless at-



Cap Anson late in his career, when he managed and played first base for the Chicago Colts. Local sportswriters teased "Old Man Anson," but even in his forties the slugger from Marshalltown batted better than .300 almost every season. (Bettmann Archive)

tempt to become the controlling stockholder of the Chicago team. On February 15, Spalding agreed to sell Anson 1,000 shares of stock at \$150 per share and set a sixty-day deadline for the transaction. Anson worked diligently to raise the amount by the April 15 deadline, but failed to acquire the needed funds for the purchase. In his memoirs Anson charged "there was never any intention on the part of A.G. Spalding and his *confrères* to let me get possession of the club." Anson claimed that he had trusted Spalding too much and thereafter did not continue cordial relations with his once-close friend.

Ousted from his Chicago club, with little chance of assuming front-office responsibilities, Anson did not remain in baseball much longer. The New York Giants selected Anson as field manager with the guarantee that he would have full control of the team, but Anson resigned after three weeks charging that owner Andrew Freedman had interfered too much in daily operations. Later he attempted to revive the American Association, an older baseball league, but was unable to convince his former colleagues in the Orphans front office that the city of Chicago could support two rival franchises.

Anson remained active in sports nonetheless, operating both a billiard hall and a bowling alley in Chicago. Himself an outstanding bowler and billiards player, the former major leaguer captained a team in the 1904 American Bowling Congress Championships. When his businesses faltered—because of strikes by workers and because business associates often took advantage of him—Anson turned to politics and enjoyed brief success in public life. Elected City Clerk of Chicago in 1905, Anson gleefully told reporters, "I'm just as pleased as if I'd won another pennant." After serving two years, however, Anson met defeat in a bid for re-election.

His hard times continued. In January 1909

Anson was summoned to appear in municipal court for owing \$111 to a Chicago wrecking company. Admitting that he was "busted," Anson told the judge he was "getting on as best he could, and wasn't going to worry because that never got anybody anything." The judge, who had watched Anson play baseball years earlier, dismissed the citation. Leaving the courtroom, Anson remarked, "There is still another inning," and received a round of applause from spectators. Despite this temporary reprieve, Anson eventually saw his Chicago home foreclosed.

Anson managed a semi-professional baseball team that toured the Midwest in 1909 and 1910, but this endeavor likewise was unprofitable. In an attempt to restore his assets, Anson starred in a much-criticized play entitled "The Runaway Colt." He also appeared in a slapstick vaudeville act, during which he wore green whiskers and sang a chorus, "We're Ten Chubelin Tipperary Turks." National League President John K. Tener attempted to establish a pension fund for Anson, but the former Chicago manager rejected the plan as another charity move. More insulting perhaps, in 1920 baseball club owners chose Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis over Anson for the newly created position of Commissioner of Baseball.

Two years later, while managing Chicago's Dixmoor Golf Club, Anson was stricken with a glandular ailment and had to be rushed to the hospital. Surgical efforts to relieve his painful condition proved unsuccessful and on April 18, 1922 the legendary slugger was dead.

News of Anson's death spread quickly throughout Chicago and then across the nation. Players and fans looked back on his career with both awe and affection, all of them aware of his immense impact on the sport. Albert Spalding lauded him as "one of the greatest ballplayers that ever lived. . . . a man who was as good as his bond," while pitcher Cy Young claimed "they never made any greater

or better players." Sportswriter Grantland Rice praised Anson as "The Grand Old Man of Baseball" and lamented that "there is none in sight who will ever quite take his place." A year after his death, Anson's friends erected a monument in his honor at Chicago's Oakwood Cemetery, where he is buried.

The ultimate tribute came in 1939 when Anson was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. According to his plaque in Cooperstown, the young man from Marshalltown had become "the greatest hitter and greatest National League player-manager of the nineteenth century." Anson's innovative leadership and aggressive style put him in the select company of the game's great pioneers—including Connie Mack and John McGraw—men who helped transform a sandlot sport into the national pastime. □

Note on Sources

The author is indebted to Archie Motley, Curator of Manuscripts at the Chicago Historical Society, and Terri Wendt of the Marshalltown Public Library for providing pertinent materials on Anson. The principal sources for this article are: Adrian C. Anson, *A Ball Player's Career* (Chicago: Era Publishing Company, 1900); the *Chicago Tribune*; the *New York Times*; Albert G. Spalding, *America's National Game* (New York: American Sports Publishing Company, 1911); Arthur Bartlett, *Baseball and Mr. Spalding, the History and Romance of Baseball* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Company, 1951); and "Baseball's Grand Old Man," *Literary Digest*, LXXIII (May 6, 1922), 62-65.

The Chicago Historical Society houses the helpful Chicago National League Baseball Club Records, 1873-1890. For Anson's statistical impact, the *Baseball Encyclopedia*, Rev. Ed. (New York: The Macmillan Publishing Company, 1974) and *Spalding's Official Baseball Guide*, 1876-1898 are indispensable. Useful articles include: Roger H. Van Bolt, "Cap Anson's First Contract," *Annals of Iowa*, XXXI (April, 1953), 617-625; George S. May, "Major League Baseball Players from Iowa," *The Palimpsest*, XXXVI (April, 1955), 133-165; and Edwin Platt Turner, "Adrian Constantine Anson," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 22 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928-1944), pp. 311-312. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) and David Quentin Voigt, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966) describe the development of baseball in the late nineteenth century.