

Baseball Mania Strikes Iowa

by John Liepa

By spring's arrival in Iowa in 1867, a new phenomenon had taken hold. More than 200 teams had been organized to play baseball in the state. Iowa's largest cities and smallest towns—it made no difference—were all enthused about America's fastest growing sport. Communities as tiny as Bangor—with fewer than a hundred houses and only 600 residents—had their teams. Towns not much larger, such as Knoxville with 1,100 citizens, probably had more than one. Distinctive or colorful names were chosen to give each club its own identity: the Proud Mahaskas in Oskaloosa, the Hesperians in Monticello, and in Indianola, the Gorilla Club. Grundy Center had the Wadiloups and Fort Dodge, the Wahkonsas.

The *Keokuk Daily Gate City*, in August 1867, dramatized the baseball "contagion" as only a 19th-century newspaper could: "Men and women and little ones are becoming spellbound. . . . It is fastening itself upon almost every community in the land. . . . High and low, rich and poor—the kid gloved exquisite and the honest laborer, all bow before its onward march. . . . Such is the influence of the Base Ball mania of these times."

For a game that has long been a part of American culture, a myth about its origins still persists. The myth, simply put, is that Abner Doubleday invented the game in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839. Because of that myth, the Baseball Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown, and every year, as new members are inducted, major leaguers play a baseball game on Doubleday Field in Cooperstown. Abner Doubleday was a cadet at West Point Military Academy in 1839 and may have had some rudimentary knowledge of baseball. But baseball was not invented. Rather it evolved out of numerous bat-and-ball games (rounders, town ball, tip-cat, and others) brought to colonial America from England and other parts of Europe. Early on, the game was played under various sets of rules; there were the Massachusetts rules, the Philadelphia rules, the New York City rules, and so on. They varied on basic aspects, such as the shape of the field, the number of players, and the length of the game. In New England, a base runner would be out if he was hit by a thrown ball.

The individual most responsible for formalizing

baseball into what approximates today's game was Alexander Cartwright of the Knickerbocker baseball club in New York City. In September 1845 he helped draft the first written rules. Many are still used today: a diamond-shaped infield with three bases and home plate; foul lines; and nine-man teams, with each player covering a specific position. Batting was rotated, and three outs retired a side.

Where commerce led, culture and sports followed. By the 1850s baseball had reached the busy river town of Davenport, Iowa. The *Daily Gazette* of May 29, 1858, stated that "two 'Town Ball' clubs have been formed from the original one, and they are now proceeding to a regular organization. They will have a big list of members, a lot of their own for playing purposes, and a good time generally. They have their rules and regulations printed, and everything will be done on system."

In these early years, baseball clubs and teams were strictly amateur, playing largely for social enjoyment. Ball players left their workplaces at day's end (or earlier) to meet at the local diamond and play an invigorating game. Unlike card playing and horse racing, baseball was considered clean and honest, an innocent and respectable sport that even women could watch without offense. As the Mt. Pleasant newspaper noted, the local Hawk-Eye baseball club members were "the very best young men of our city" and "profane language is strictly prohibited, and is never heard during their games."

Individual teams often represented a particular social class or occupation: tradesmen, or store clerks, or college students, for example. The officers of Davenport's "Pastime base-ball club No. 2" comprised two leading citizens—George L. Davenport, the president of a gas company and the son of a town founder; and Joseph A. LeClaire, businessman and nephew of another town founder—as well as a lawyer, editor, jeweler, merchant, tailor, and "House, Sign and Steamboat painter." In mid-June, the Davenport's *Daily Gazette* reported that "the Cricket and Base Ball clubs take exercise now with a good deal of regularity. The players are improving, and will soon be ready to challenge somebody."

Those who did not exercise "with a good deal of regularity" were later reminded by the city's *Morning*

News that "we Americans are a scraggy, consumptive, liver complaining set—a drug devouring, whiskey-drinking people, who believe in long doctor's bills, and in 'living like lightning and dying like lightning.' . . . All our energies seem devoted to the lessening of physical labor; and American ingenuity and American industry seem destined to effect the most wonderful revolution the world has ever yet beheld, and that is, the almost total abolition of manual work. We forget that we have bodies to be cared for, muscles to be developed, and lungs to be preserved and exercised. . . .

Americans . . . never learn

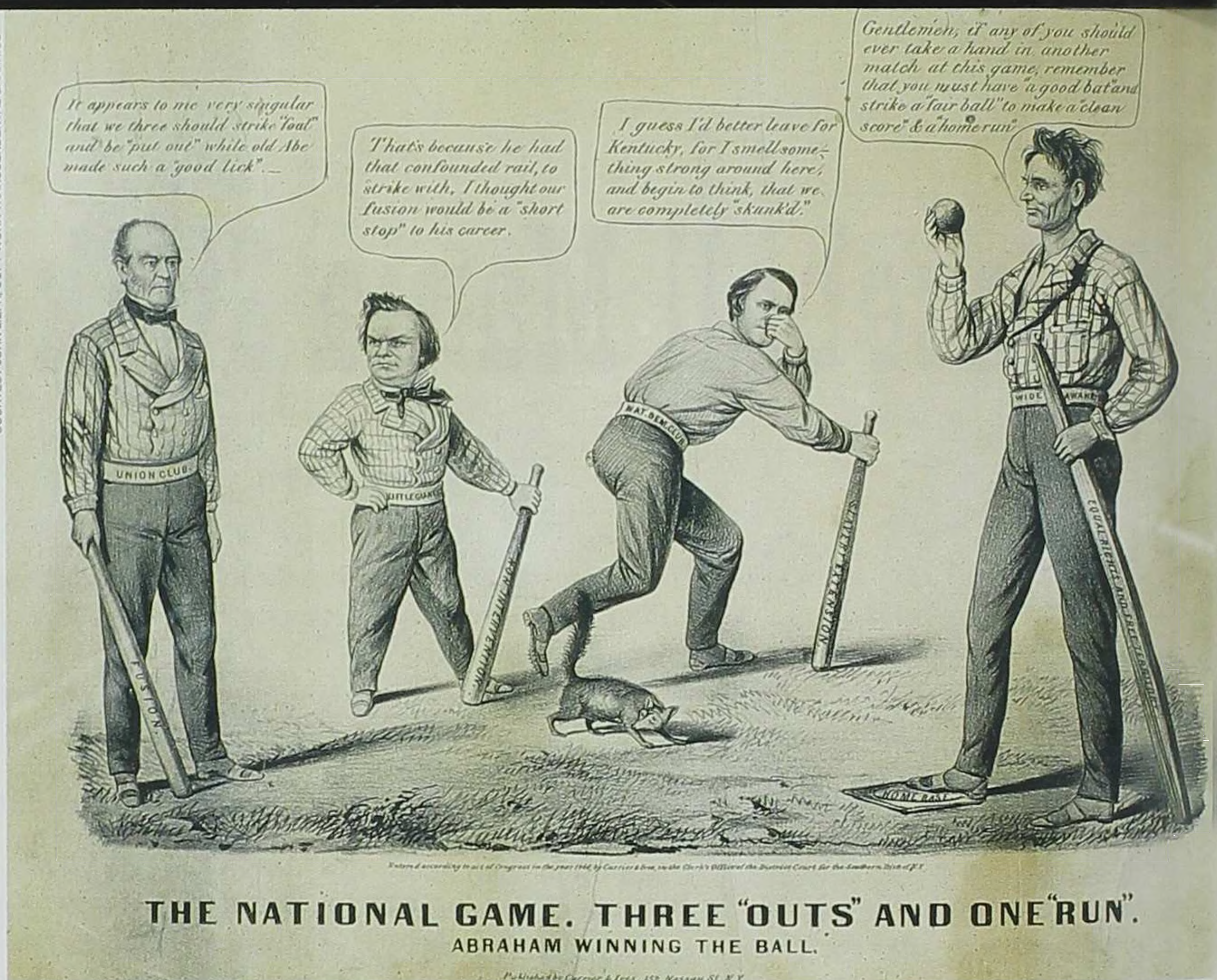
to take exercise—notwithstanding the many examples set them by their foreign brethren—and base ball clubs, and cricket clubs, and boat clubs, dwindle away after the first or second meeting. . . . There must be soundness of body, ere there will be soundness of heart and mind. The 'moral muscle' can only be developed by the assiduous care of the physical."

"What has become of the old Cricket Club?" the same *Gazette* wondered the next April, while noting that "an impromptu gathering of base ball players took place on the bluff . . . and a few games played with hearty zeal. A meeting of the members of the old Base Ball Club is desired this evening at Jewel's paint shop on Third Street."

Not everyone was zealous about the game. In March 1859, the *Washington (Iowa) Press* reprimanded: "Boys! Boys!! Playing ball is nice sport—it is helpful and invigorating—and we like to see you enjoying yourselves in that way. But there is a place as well as a time for everything.—Now the County Judge and other citizens have gone to a good deal of trouble and expense to plant trees in the court yard and sow it in grass seed, so that it may look pleasant and nice and be an ornament to the town. But don't you see the trees will all be killed, and the grass can't grow at all, if it is made a playground for all the boys in town? Certainly you do, though perhaps you didn't think of it before, and now we are sure you will find some other place to play ball—out in the street or on the common somewhere. Of course you will."

A lady in Keokuk shared her frustration with *Gate*

COURTESY, JOHN LIEPA, COPY WORK, TRANSCENDENTAL GRAPHICS



Already in 1860, when this political cartoon appeared, baseball was called the "National Game."

City readers in March 1859: "Almost every evening a large number of boys engage in 'ball playing' near our house. I can endure the screaming and yelling . . . but the players become thirsty, and we have been sodding and planting our trees. A portion of the boys jump the fence, and of course, that ruins the grass and damages the trees. The others come in at the gate, and when they go out, leave it open, thereby giving a general invitation to all the cows around to 'walk in.'"

"Think of a pump being rattled every minute, and water wasted; for every boy pumps a bucketful when he fills the dipper. I cannot endure this annoyance any longer. Boys, I dislike to refuse you a 'cup of cold water,' but I find it very annoying to have about fifty tumbling in and out of the yard every afternoon. You will please change the usual programme, and oblige."

Baseball's increasing popularity in the 1850s was interrupted by the Civil War. Very few accounts have been found of any baseball activity in Iowa during the war. One appeared in the *Dubuque Daily Times* in August 1863, reminding the Dubuque City Base Ball Club to meet behind "Judge Wilson's residence, promptly at half past three, this afternoon." Four days later, another item announced "a match game between the nines selected from the Hawkeye Base Ball Club" at the old race track.

Civil War camps, even prison camps, were where

the most baseball was played during the war. Soldiers whiled away tedious hours practicing the game. When they returned to their hometowns, they brought the game with them. War had taught them camaraderie, discipline, order, and management—traits essential to putting together a successful baseball organization.

The 1860s game shared similarities with fast-pitch softball today: the pitcher tossed the ball with an underhand motion. Although the game resembled modern-day baseball in some aspects, there were substantial differences. The batter could call for a high ball or a low one. The pitcher's job was not to strike out the batter, but to get the batter out on the bases and to deal with him there before he could score.

Gloves and catcher's masks were not used until 1870 and were considered "unmanly." Broken fingers were both an inevitable consequence and a badge of honor. Every old-time catcher was proud of his hands, often thickened and crippled in every joint. Iowa's first professional player, Calvin McVey, played several positions including catcher from 1869 to 1885. Years later a baseball historian described his hands as "big ham fists with discolored lumps and knobs, odd-angled joints, and mangled fingers." As early as 1867 a dialogue titled "A Scarred Hero" in a Des Moines newspaper joked about the "mania" for playing baseball despite its risks:

What is the matter with your finger?
 Struck with a ball and drove up; but it's a noble game.
 Precisely; and your thumb is useless, is it not?
 Yes; struck with a ball and broken.
 That finger joint?
 A ball struck it. No better game to improve a man's physical condition—strengthens his sinews.
 You walk lame. That foot, isn't it?
 No; it's the—the—the—well, a bat flew out of a player's hand and hit my knee pan. He had the innings.
 One of your front teeth is gone?
 Knocked out by a ball—only an accident.
 Your right hand and your nose have been peeled—how's that?
 Slipped down at a second base—only a mere scratch.
 And you like this sort of fun?
 Like it? Glory in it! Perfectly splendid!—Healthiest game in the world, sir! Take a hand?

In early town-building, a church and a schoolhouse had been essential; so too was baseball to a community in the second half of the century. Matches represented much more than winning or losing. They were about showing off one's community and players and exhibiting civic pride. A successful ball club put a town on the map.

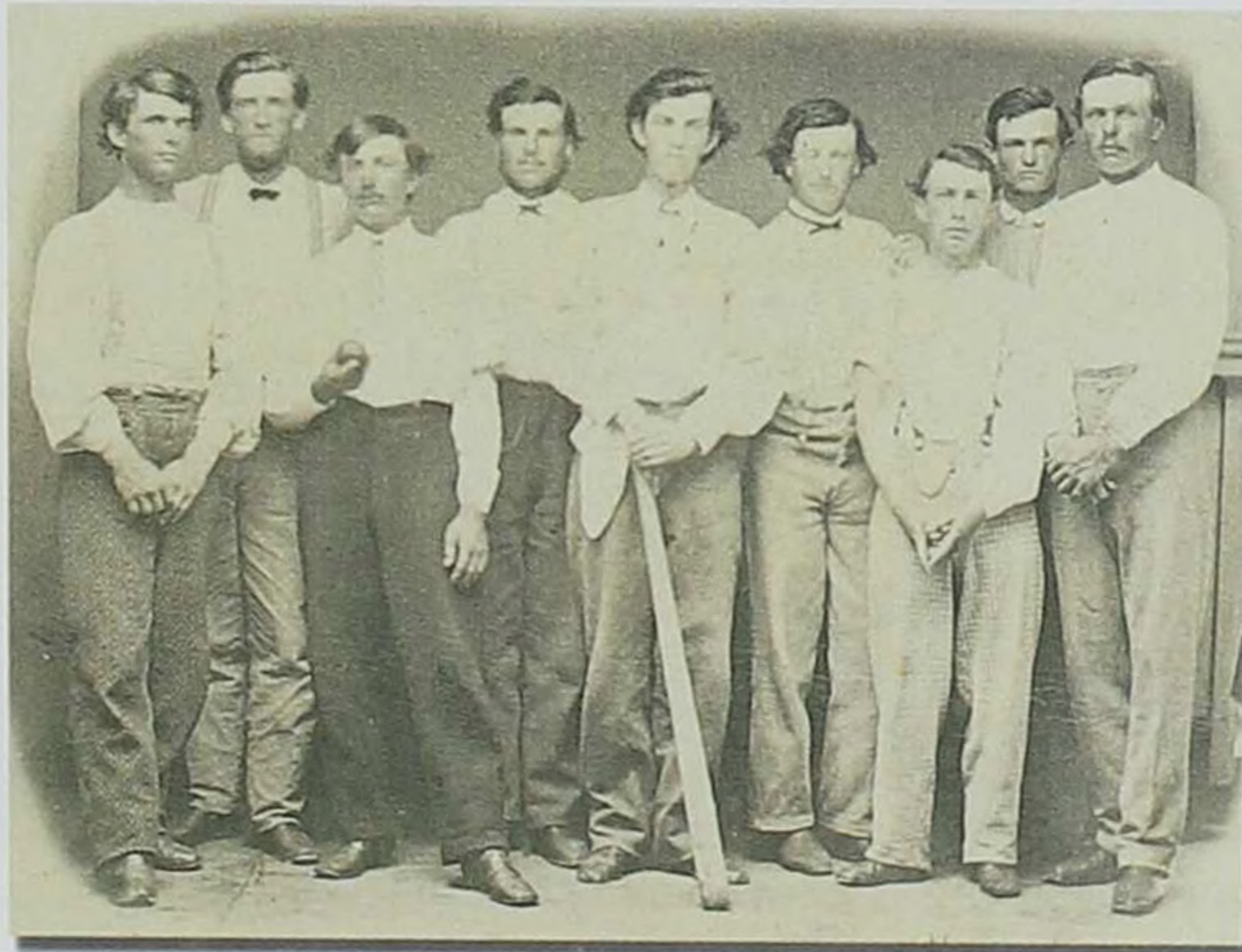
Two of Iowa's best teams were Fort Dodge's Waukonsa Base Ball Club and Marshalltown's Marshall Base Ball Club. In early August 1866, Louis D. Button, the president of the Fort Dodge club (and school principal), put forth a challenge: "In order to create an interest in the great American Game of Base Ball in Northwestern Iowa, and for the mutual benefit of all concerned, the 'first nine' of the Waukonsa B. B. Club hereby challenge the 'first nine' of the Marshalltown Club, to play a single game. . . . The game to be played in accordance with the regulations prescribed by the Base Ball

Convention held in New York City December 13th, 1865." The challenge was accepted, and the game was heralded as "a grand match." The date and place were set: September 12 at Boone, 30 miles southeast of Fort Dodge and 50 miles west of Marshalltown. Fort Dodge's *Iowa North West* sent a reporter to cover the game. His

COURTESY JOHN LIEPA

Perhaps Iowa's earliest "baseball card" is this 1866 cabinet card of Washington's baseball club and its "first nine" best players. Below: Unidentified team from a carte de visite photo.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)





COURTESY JOHN LIEPA. COPY WORK TRANSCENDENTAL GRAPHICS

The Marshalltown club in 1867 poses, a year after the team's "grand match" with the Fort Dodge Wahkonsa club.

story did not appear for two weeks (the editor explained that "Our Special Reporter was a little behind time"), but what he lacked in timeliness he made up in color. His coverage was as much about camaraderie, civic pride, and celebration as about the actual game: "The first nine of the Wahkonsa Club, their scorer and your special reporter, left Fort Dodge on Tuesday morning, the 11th, in one of the North Western Stage Company's splendid new coaches, drawn by one of the finest four-horse teams in the State, under the management of the accomplished horseman, 'Steve.' As the day was wet and disagreeable . . . the boys managed to drive dull care away with songs, stories, anecdotes, sells [hoaxes], and yarns, reminding us more of a gay wedding excursion, than a matched nine who were to contend for the championship of North Western Iowa . . . and as I looked upon these athletic nine, taken from our best business men, I felt like challenging the State to produce a better selection, both as to moral worth, business qualifications, and muscular development.

" . . . [We arrived] in Boonsboro about dark; singing as we passed through to Boone, every thing known to vocalists, from 'Old Hundred' to 'Babble, babble little brook.' The inhabitants stared at us; children looked amazed; dogs barked. . . .

" . . . We learned that the Marshall Club had not as yet put in an appearance, as promised. . . . After stow-

ing away our clubs, and plowing and irrigating our faces, we partook of a sumptuous supper prepared for us, and found the landlord had discommoded himself and guests to make us comfortable during our stay. We were met and welcomed by the citizens of Boone. . . . The night was put in with song and merriment. . . .

"Wednesday morning opened up a beautiful day, and we arose from our easy couches, rested, buoyant, and confident. . . . The grounds were then selected, and our boys performed the hard work of laying them out and preparing them, and arranging every thing in order, with bases, posts, &c."

Eight of the nine from Fort Dodge were bachelors, and, according to the reporter, their hearts went "pit-a-pat" at the sight of the "beautiful hundred ladies" who now arrived on the excursion train with the Marshalltown team, the brass band, and other spirited fans.

"The game was the most exciting scene I ever witnessed. Bets were freely made . . . and in one instance ten to one was bet on our boys by a citizen of Boonsboro." The correspondent described each inning and a few "laughable" incidents. One of the Marshall players accidentally slipped out of his shoe and left it at first base, "creating much fun for the crowd. And then their Captain . . . turned a somersault, in mockery of a fall our 'blacksmith' got in making a desperate run for the ball. . . . The smith returned to his base with a defiant, confident air, and the game went on."

The match was a well-contested, narrow victory for the Fort Dodge Wahkonsa Club, by a score of 29-24. As the team's player/blacksmith said, "We scooped them."

Baseball had arrived in a glorious fashion in Iowa. ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

Almost all of the information for this article was gleaned from Iowa community newspapers, 1850-1870. In Des Moines, John Zeller's many years of poring over 19th-century newspapers saved the author hundreds of research hours; Merle Davis of Iowa City also researched baseball in many newspapers. The author's wife, Dianne, and son Torey provided assistance, encouragement, and support in numerous ways.

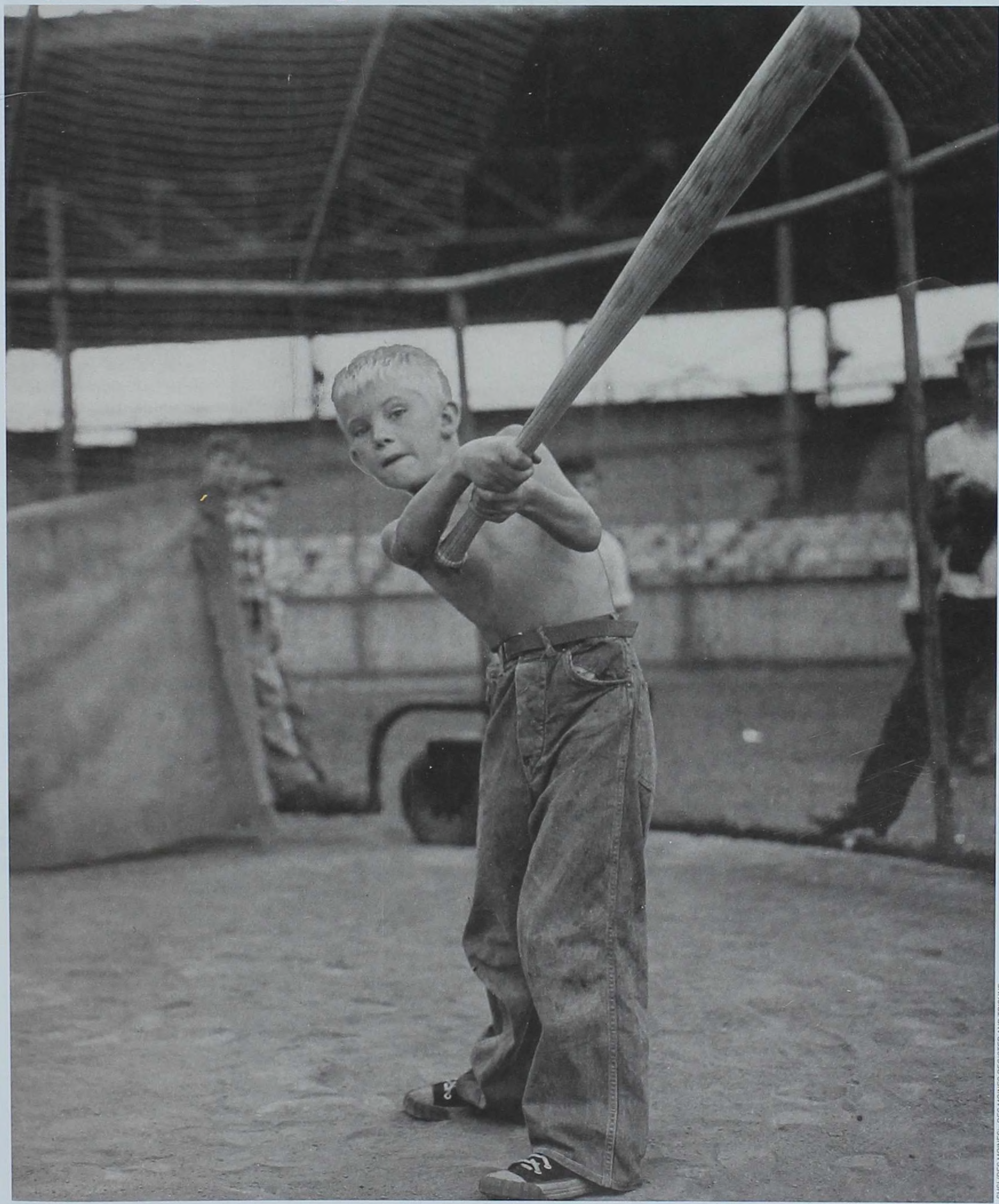
Base Ball on the Brain (to be sung to the minstrel tune "Ham Fat"; printed in the *Daily State Register*, September 27, 1867)

At length the war cry's hushed and still,
And peaceful are the signs,
The cannon's roar affrights us not—
"All quiet on the lines"
No more the fearful charge we brave—
For raids we look in vain,
But still excitement we must have,
And we've base ball on the brain!

... And there's the little urchin, too,
With importance he is great,
As he holds his "bat" invitingly,
Just knee-high o'er the "plate."
The "pitcher sends a whirling 'ball';"
For a "skyer" he is fain,
But "foul" the "Umpire" loudly calls,
With base ball on the brain!

... The girls, too, aping lordly man,
Have taken up the chase,
And with Bloomer pants and gaiters high,
They fly from "base" to "base!"
In faith, I think the truth to tell,
There's none of us quite sane,
But that we all have Poplar Lawn!
And base ball on the brain!

A passion for the game . . .



SHS (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

With a large stadium as backdrop, ten-year-old Charley Pike chokes up on the bat and eyes the outfield (1949).