

The Cincinnati Red Stockings and Cal McVey

Iowa's First Professional Baseball Player

by John Liepa

He is powerfully built," the *Cincinnati Daily Times* noted, with "broad shoulders and barrel chest . . . handsome though shy, and is a favorite of the ladies. He is very conscientious and a hard worker . . . a good fielder, but his strength is with the ash in his hands . . . he is a long . . . good thrower . . . and he doesn't drink."

The baseball player the newspaper described was Cal McVey, the first Iowa-born professional baseball player. His versatility—he played every position on the field—made him a highly sought-after team member. And he played on baseball's first professional team, which also completed the longest winning streak in the history of the game.

Calvin Alexander McVey was born August 30, 1850, in Montrose, six miles upstream from Keokuk. His family had arrived in Iowa shortly after statehood in 1846. His father farmed and tried his hand at carpentry, but after a few years of disappointment and economic difficulty, the family moved to Indianapolis, where Calvin's father became a respectable piano maker.

"Mac"—the nickname Calvin acquired in his teens—was introduced to baseball in Indianapolis, where it was flourishing. While pursuing his college degree, he quickly established himself as a key player on the University of Indianapolis team, and his priorities changed from academics to what would become the love of his life, baseball. He devoted the next two years



A rare image of Iowan Calvin McVey, 1874 (?).

to two Indianapolis amateur clubs, the Actives and the Westerns. In 1867, the Westerns played a highly publicized game against the top-ranked Washington (D.C.) Nationals. The Nationals won, 106–21. (High scores were common in early games, for several reasons. Pitchers delivered the kind of pitch a batter requested; outfielders wore no gloves; the fields were uneven; and games were longer than today.) Even though his team lost, McVey had gotten a solid hit in his first time at bat, but later in the game he injured his hand while trying to grab a hard-hit line drive. Nevertheless, his aggressive performance laid the foundation for his reputation as a competitive player. According to baseball's A. G. Spalding, "It was in this game that McVey, afterward to win enduring fame on the diamond, played at second base for the Westerns, and made his bow to the public as a future great one."

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati, a young businessman named Aaron Champion was adding his own name to baseball history. In 1868, Champion was president of the four-year-old Cincinnati Base Ball Club, originally an amateur club. For the next season, Champion asked the club's manager and pitcher, Harry Wright, to assemble a strong professional team, capable of competing with eastern clubs. Champion intended to pay salaries to the entire team.

The world of amateur baseball clubs strongly ar-

gued against paying players because, it was feared, that the sport would fall victim to corruption. In truth, paying players under the table was already happening in many clubs; so was betting. What distinguished Aaron Champion's bold plan was that rather than covertly paying players, he would pay salaries openly.

As Wright assembled players from other teams—only one was from Cincinnati—he learned about Calvin McVey and his fine performance with the Indianapolis Westerns. Most of Wright's new players had reputations as skilled players, but 18-year-old McVey was a huge risk. He had little baseball experience. Nobody knew what position he was best suited to play, so he was stuck in right field. And he was the youngest Red Stocking; his father had to sign the contract because Cal was still a minor. But McVey was also the team's strongest and most nimble player. He had fought as a bare-knuckles pugilist and was known to be a daredevil acrobat. The *Boston Times* once joked that McVey had "acquired considerable proficiency in his early days turning Catherine wheels and hand springs over the [Keokuk] rapids of the Mississippi. [He would] turn a flip-flap every time his club won." It also became known that McVey had a temper. Whenever a call was disputed, he was one of the first to leap into the fray, even if it meant disagreeing with his own teammates.

The first all-professional team was looked on as a novelty. As the 1869 season neared, very few East Coast prognosticators gave the Red Stockings much of a chance against well-established teams from New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, many of which had played since 1846. But the *New York Clipper* warned: "Contestants for the championship . . . will have to keep one eye turned toward Porkopolis" (Cincinnati's nickname, due to its stockyards).

As manager, Wright knew that part of making a national statement was to look like professionals. He had hired seamstress Bertha Betram to create stylish new uniforms. She chose a fabric called cricket flannel for the white jerseys. They were soft-collared and flared at the neck, with an eye-catching, bright red, Gothic letter C stitched on the front bib. She fashioned white knickers with a clasp below the knee (the players could run faster in knickers than in longer, restricting pants, and other teams soon copied the style). The stark white uniforms were accentuated by red stockings—the source of the team's new name. Baseball writer Henry Chadwick described the Red Stockings' garb as a "comfortably cool, tasteful uniform."

With the opening game upon them, the team looked

good. The fans were anxious. An exotically dressed zouave band was ready to add excitement. On April 17, 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings took to the newly renovated Union Grounds for their first game as the first all-professional club in baseball history. In April and May they played midwestern amateur teams that were considerably weaker, and the cumulative score after five games, 248 to 36, reflected this lopsided talent. After these first six weeks of training, the well-practiced Red Stockings were ready for the real challenge.

Their eastern tour would include 23 games from May 31 to July 1 against teams in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and West Virginia. The real test would be four particular teams—the New York Atlantics and Philadelphia's Athletics, Olympics, and Keystones. As the Red Stockings left Cincinnati by train on the morning of May 31, few fans knew that the team left with two hung-over players who had violated club rules, an injured catcher, short tempers, and very little money (at the last minute, \$300 was borrowed from a club member's wife's savings).

In 21 games in 30 days, the Red Stockings defeated the best teams in America. They trounced the Springfield (Massachusetts) Mutuals, 80–5; thrashed the Wheeling (West Virginia) Baltics, 44–0, in just three innings; and won a victory over the Troy (New York) Haymakers, 37–3. Their only real defensive struggle was a narrow 4–2 win over the New York City Mutuals. The *Cincinnati Daily Times* hailed it as the "greatest game on record" with "the largest assemblage of spectators ever seen on a ball field in this country. . . . The New Yorkers are beginning to take this 'country' club seriously."

As the team's successes mounted, camaraderie developed. Their long train trips between cities and shorter carriage rides to ball parks were occasionally interrupted by spirited outbursts of singing (to the tune of the Confederate song "Bonnie Blue Flag"):

We are a band of baseball players
From "Cincinnati City;"
We come to toss the ball around,
And sing to you our ditty.
And if you listen to our song
We are about to sing,
We'll tell you all about baseball
And make the welkin ring.

Hurrah! Hurrah!
For the noble game, hurrah!
"Red Stockings" all will toss the ball,
And shout our loud hurrah.

Our Captain is a goodly man,

And Harry is his name;
 Whate'er he does, 'tis always "Wright,"
 So says the voice of fame.
 And as the Pitcher of our nine,
 We think he can't be beat;
 In many a fight, old Harry Wright
 Has saved us from defeat. . . .

According to most accounts, the leaders of these impromptu songs were Andy Leonard, Charlie Sweasy, and Calvin McVey—the Iowa-born son of a piano maker.

One of the highlights of the eastern tour was the game on June 25 against the Nationals in Washington, D.C. According to the *Cincinnati Daily Times*, heads of government bureaus offered their clerks brief leaves of absence to attend the game. Numerous dignitaries and 8,000 spectators watched as the Red Stockings routed the Nationals, 24–8. The next day, escorted by the vanquished team and riding in a large coach drawn by six gaily decorated horses, the Red Stockings arrived at the White House. The president greeted them: "I believe you warmed the Washington boys somewhat yesterday." For 18-year-old McVey, born in tiny Montrose, Iowa, meeting Civil War hero and American president Ulysses S. Grant must have been an awe-inspiring and unforgettable experience.

As the Red Stockings continued on undefeated, their national celebrity grew. Easterners lamented losing su-

periority to this young upstart team, but as baseball writer Henry Chadwick acknowledged in the *New York Clipper*, "Westward the base ball empire wends its way."

On July 1, an exuberant parade welcomed the triumphant Red Stockings back to Cincinnati. At an exhibition game they were presented a grand trophy of sorts—a 27-foot wooden bat weighing 1,600 pounds. The lumber company president who made the presentation said that the Cincinnati nine had a reputation as heavy hitters, and now they had the bat to match. They won the exhibition game, 53–11, and then enjoyed a fine banquet. Aaron Champion proclaimed that he would rather be president of the Cincinnati Base Ball Club than the president of the United States.

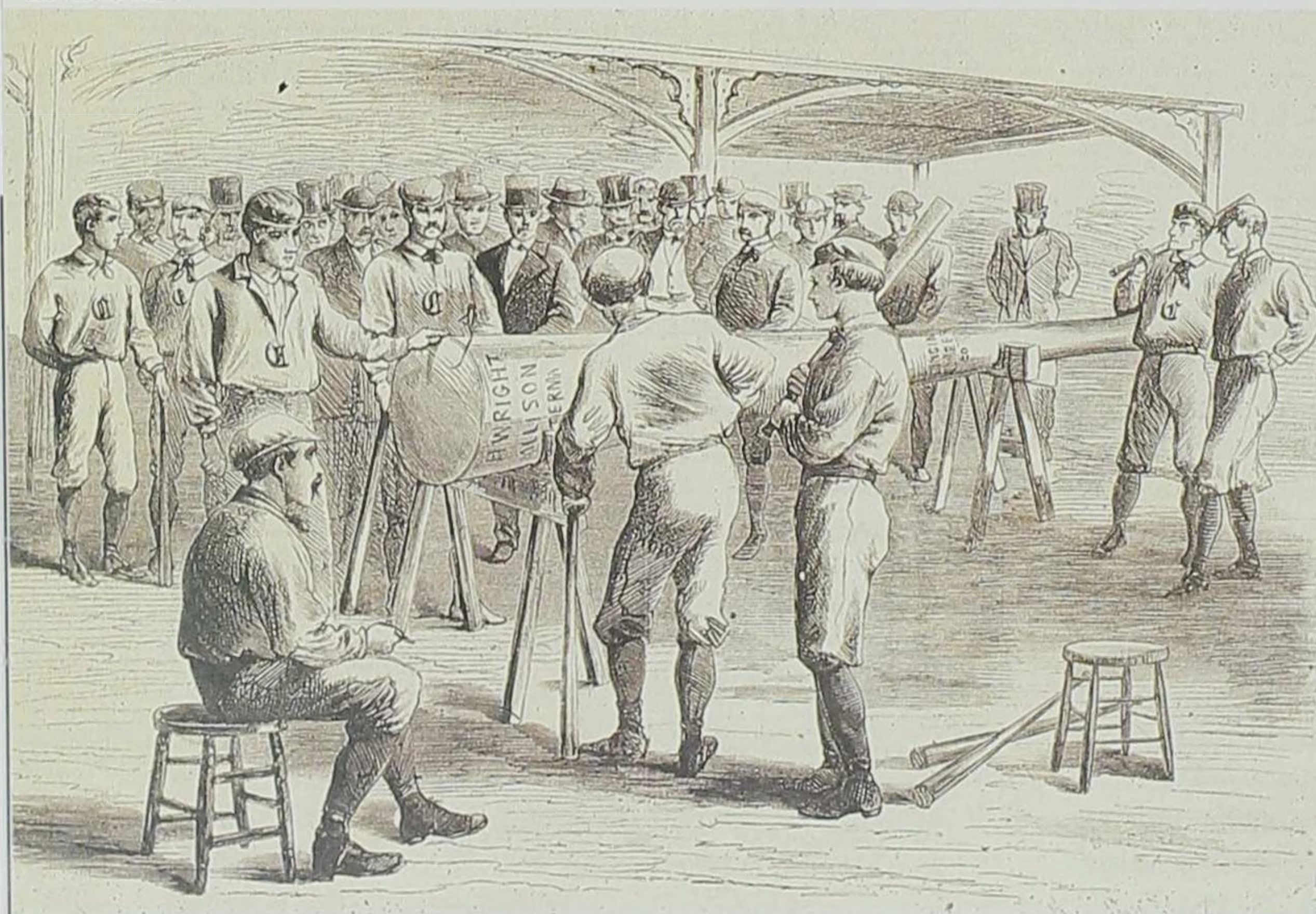
Throughout July and August, the Red Stockings dominated all opponents. On August 27, they again played the Troy Haymakers in what would be the only blemish on an undefeated season. The game ended in a 17–17 tie, but after the Haymakers left the field in protest of some of the umpire's decisions, the umpire declared the Red Stockings the winners.

Having beaten every club in the Northeast and the Midwest, it was not surprising that the team was now invited to play the best clubs in the San Francisco area. They immediately accepted. A West Coast team represented a significant investment. Only a team of the Red Stockings' stature could attract enough spectators to provide a return on the investment for both the host

clubs and the Red Stockings. According to historians Greg Rhodes and John Erardi, "Clearly their experiment in fielding an all-professional nine had been vindicated. No other baseball team in America could have been invited to California except the Red Stockings. No other club had the record, the reputation, nor the drawing power to be considered for such a journey. Nor would such a tour even have been contemplated before the Red Stockings' amazing season of 1869 revived the country's flagging interest in the game." Watching amateur games was no longer exciting; the public wanted more.

The team left Cincinnati on September 14, stopping in St. Louis to crush the Unions, 70–9, and the Empires, 31–9. Perhaps amidst the revelry, as the team briefly passed through Council Bluffs, McVey

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A giant bat is presented to the Red Stockings on their triumphant return home.

thought about his birthplace and early home in Montrose, on the eastern border of Iowa.

"The boys boarded a stage coach for the final leg into Omaha," Rhodes and Erardi write. "Gould, and Taylor sat on the very top with the baggage, George Wright and McVey took seats next to the driver, and the rest of the party climbed inside, wedged in with other passengers. What a sight! The champion ball club in America bouncing over the rough trail aboard a crowded stage coach, swaying this way and that, leaning out windows, perched on top of the stage and the driver's platform."

After a promise to play Omaha on the return trip, the Red Stockings headed west. They were the first baseball team to travel on the new transcontinental railroad, completed that May. A warm, enthusiastic reception awaited them in San Francisco. They responded with a complete demolition of three San Francisco teams, by a cumulative score of 289–22. It seemed that the highlights of the western excursion had been the Red Stockings' first sightings of buffalo, prairie dogs, and Sioux Indians, not the mediocre San Francisco competition.

On the return trip, the Red Stockings kept their promise and played Omaha, destroying them by 64 points, while U.S. Vice President Schuyler Colfax watched. A dog fight during the game distracted so many bored fans and gamblers that the Red Stockings officials threatened to leave the field if order wasn't restored.

In early November, the team defeated their most respected and feared rivals, the New York Mutuals, 17–8, thus completing a perfect season by a professional baseball team, with a record of 57 wins and 0 losses (Some historians count exhibition games as well as officially sanctioned games, for a record of 65 wins.) The team had proved that an all-professional team could succeed both financially and on the field. The meticulous team captain Harry Wright compiled the final statistics for the 1869 season. He tallied 2,396 runs and 222 miles ran between bases. The team's highest score in a single game was 103; the lowest, 4. They had scored 40 runs in a single inning and only struck out 8 times. They had traveled 11,977 miles, playing before 200,000 spectators.

Over the winter, numerous teams tried to recruit Red Stockings players, but wisely, Aaron Champion already had had them sign contracts in the fall. Wright made sure his players stayed fit. "I have the players here now in far better form than they were this time a year ago," he wrote to his friend Harry Chadwick. "They are all members of the gymnasium here and exercise daily; and if I can only induce them to keep it up, I think, when we go East this season, we will be able to play a game or games of ball that will keep up our reputation."

After a rain-delayed start, the 1870 season opened on April 18 with an easily won exhibition game, 34–5. Then, like a juggernaut, the Red Stockings destroyed all opponents across six states. Was there no team left that could give the Red Stockings a serious challenge?

The answer came on June 14, a warm, sunny day in New York, where the very talented Brooklyn Atlantics were led by their very talented catcher Bob Ferguson, nicknamed "Death to Flying Things." Between 12,000 and 15,000 spectators filled the stands. After the regulation nine innings, the teams were tied, 5–5. If accepted by both teams, the tie would end the game. If either insisted on continuing, the game would have to be completed. The Red Stockings insisted. Ironically, their two-year, 81-game winning streak ended.

Aaron Champion telegraphed Cincinnati: "ATLANTICS 8, CINCINNATI 7. THE FINEST GAME EVER PLAYED. OUR BOYS DID NOBLY, BUT FORTUNE WAS AGAINST US. ELEVEN INNINGS PLAYED. THOUGH BEATEN, NOT DISGRACED."

Their aura of invincibility evaporated. Other teams now rose to the challenge, and by season's end on November 5, the Red Stockings had suffered 5 more losses and 1 tie. But what an amazing run it had been: an undefeated 1869 season followed by a series of 24 victories in 1870. Their two-year record was an unbelievable 124 wins, 6 losses, and 1 tie.

Somewhat spoiled by success, Cincinnati fans laid blame for the losses on captain and center fielder Harry Wright and his brother, shortstop George Wright. Complaints about the players' salary structure, and charges of mismanagement and greed surfaced. Problems off the field, including drinking and other flagrant violations of club rules, led to speculation that the club would be reorganized in 1871. The local press didn't help the situation either, suggesting that some of the players had become lackadaisical, and grouching about the increase in ticket prices from 25 to 50 cents (though Champion needed the extra revenue to match or exceed salaries offered to his players by other teams). The last straw was when both club president Champion and club secretary John Joyce resigned.

It was later revealed that two factions had emerged on the team regarding drinking and discipline. Harry and George Wright, Charlie Gould, and possibly Calvin McVey favored teetotaling; Asa Brainard, Charlie Sweasy, Fred Waterman, Doug Allison, and Andy Leonard were on the other side.

The Cincinnati team's stockholders voted to return to amateur status. Meanwhile, other baseball clubs were making substantial offers to some of the Cincinnati players. Harry Wright became captain and secretary of a



McVey (back row, far left) and the formidable Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1875.

Boston team with the same name, the Red Stockings. His brother George, Gould, and McVey, joined him.

What was the legacy of the Cincinnati Red Stockings and their two amazing years? The team revolutionized baseball. Their success helped bring about the March 1871 formation of the first professional league—the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players. According to Rhodes and Erardi, “The 1869 team revived interest in the sport and promoted it to a level never imagined before. The Red Stockings also proved, contrary to popular opinion of the time, that the professional team concept could succeed. . . . They demonstrated that the public cared much more about excellent play and honest effort than it did about the professional or amateur status of the players. . . . To Aaron Champion and Harry Wright go the credit for casting the mold for the professional sports team . . . they established that the all-salaried club, the scouting and training of junior-level players, regular training procedures, systematically conducted practices, and carefully devised strategies and teamwork could produce results far superior to any system that had been tried.”

The career of Iowa’s native son Cal McVey continued to blossom. On the Boston team in 1871, he batted an exceptional .421, and Boston finished in second place (and first in 1872). In 1873, he played almost every position for the Lord Baltimores and became at age 22 baseball’s youngest manager. The club finished third, 23–14, and McVey batted an outstanding .380. His baseball odyssey took him back to Boston for two more years

of success. In 1874, he led the league in hits, total bases, RBIs, and runs, and he finished second in batting average at .359. The 1875 season was almost a carbon copy—Boston again finished first and McVey again led the league in many categories.

It is ironic, then, that when he and the Boston Red Stockings came to Iowa to play the Keokuk Westerns on June 10, 1875, the local press overlooked their native son. Keokuk’s *Daily Gate City*, a paper that followed baseball closely, covered the game at length, inning by inning. But there was no fanfare, acknowledgment, or even mention of Cal McVey. Granted, he had a lack-

luster performance that afternoon, going hitless in two at-bats with five put-outs and one assist, but the versatile professional McVey was at the peak of his career. Did no one in Keokuk know that this amazing 24-year-old player was born only six miles away?

The next year McVey jumped to the Chicago White Stockings and again delivered a first-place finish. But after a disappointing fifth place in 1877, he decided to return to where it had all begun—a two-year stint with the now renamed Cincinnati Reds. McVey led the team to a respectable second-place finish, but then the team dropped to fifth in 1879.

After eleven years of professional baseball, at age 29, Calvin McVey left major league ball and headed to California. The West had fascinated him when the Red Stockings traveled there in 1869, and there he settled for the rest of his life. He organized, managed, and played for the Bay City Athletics and the San Francisco Pioneers. In 1885 he retired from the sport. Throughout his 17-year career, he seemed to have brought the Midas touch to teams he played for and managed. He was a winner and he produced winners.

Unfortunately, the Midas touch didn’t carry over to his life after baseball. In 1906, his wife was seriously injured and his home destroyed by the great San Francisco earthquake. He lived in a small shack and depended on charities for food and clothing. Seven years later, a 30-foot fall in a Nevada mine where he was working crippled him. Limited to part-time jobs, he worked as a night watchman for a lumber company for ten years.

Former Red Stocking teammate Doug Allison petitioned the National League for medical and financial assistance for McVey, but only minimal and strictly personal aid was given. The rest of his life was one of struggle and severe economic hardship.

His one final moment of glory was the 50th anniversary of baseball's first professional team. He was invited to return to Cincinnati as an honored guest on the eve of the Reds taking on the Chicago White Sox in the infamous 1919 World Series. Sixty-nine-year-old McVey, George Wright, and Oak Taylor proudly rode in a parade as part of the celebration. They were the only surviving team members of the 1869 Red Stockings.

Calvin Alexander McVey died on August 20, 1926, in San Francisco. In 1968, he was inducted into Iowa's

Sports Hall of Fame. One of the great baseball biographers, Frederick Ivor-Campbell, said it well: "Cal McVey began his professional career at age 18 with the famous Cincinnati Red Stockings of 1869, and quickly became one of the brightest lights in the game's first decade of openly professional play." ❖

Author John Liepa is a 20-year member of the Society for American Baseball Research, has collected baseball cards and memorabilia for more than 50 years, and does presentations dressed as 1869 Cincinnati Red Stocking Calvin McVey.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources for this article include Arthur Bartlett, *Baseball and Mr. Spalding* (NY: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951); Darryl Brock, *If I Never Get Back* (NY: Penguin Putnam, 1998); Jerry E. Clark, *Anson to Zuber: Iowa Boys in the Major Leagues* (Omaha: Making History, 1992); Christopher Devine, *Harry Wright: The Father of Professional Base Ball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003); Harry Ellard, *Baseball in Cincinnati* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); Stephen D. Guschov, *The Red Stockings of Cincinnati: Baseball's First All-Professional Team* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); Greg Rhodes and John Erardi, *The First Boys of Summer* (Cincinnati: Road West Publishing Co., 1994); William J. Ryczek, *Blackguards and Red Stockings* (Wallingford, CT: Colebrook Press, 1999); William J. Ryczek, *When Johnny Came Sliding Home: The Post-Civil War Baseball Boom, 1865-1870* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); and A. G. Spalding, *Baseball: America's National Game* (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1911).

A passion for the game . . .

SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Duplicate agreement between Davenport
Base Ball Association and W. C. McAlister:
Witnesseth, that said McAlister in consideration
of Twenty (20) Dollars per month, agreed to
be paid by the Association, agrees to play
and practice Base Ball in the Nent of
the Association in such positions as
may be assigned him, and subject
to all rules and regulations of the
Association for five months from May
15th 1878, to October 15th 1878. This contract
may be terminated by either party upon
giving three days notice.
Dated at Davenport Iowa, March 5th 1878.
H. B. Fulton Manager
Wm McAlister

This rare, handwritten baseball contract was signed by William Cleaves McAlister in 1878. McAlister was a 20-year-old clerk in a Davenport pharmacy when he signed the contract to play on a Davenport team. His baseball salary was \$20 per month—at a time when a farm laborer earned a dollar a day.