
A Dress Rehearsal for Night Baseball

by David W. Zang

In the inexorable rush to be number one, Cincinnati has been no shrinking violet in the baseball world. In 1869, the Red Stockings proved to be the first club able to gauge the future of their sport by fielding a team of salaried professionals. And the Reds confirmed their pioneering mettle (as well as a good instinct for profit) when, on May 23, 1935, General Manager Larry MacPhail became the "father of night baseball" by sending his Reds into the glare of 616 floodlights in a 2-1 victory over the Phillies.¹ Actually, MacPhail was only redeeming credit for a Cincinnati experiment begun twenty-six years earlier! Seldom does a near-miss precede the actual event by twenty-six years. If Apollo Eleven had not quite made it in 1969, it is unthinkable that a successful moon landing would have been delayed until 1995. But in 1909, an inventor was prepared to make a different Red executive the father of night ball under conditions similar to those of the 1935 event. Only good sense and a pair of Elk Lodges intervened to change the course of history.

As early as the 1890's, experiments in night baseball had taken place in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; Ft. Wayne, Indiana; and Houston, Texas.² These ventures were in the nature of one night stunts, however, and were sometimes combined with efforts at indoor baseball. The 1909 proposal of inventor George F. Cahill was to bring real night baseball to the major leagues, and Cincinnati owner August Herrmann agreed to give Cahill his chance at technological stardom. Cahill, who also designed an early model pitching machine, bore the title "Inventor" proudly, as could be expected in an age boasting Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and the Wright brothers. A battery of fourteen powerful arc lights mounted on five steel towers was to be Cahill's ticket to success,³ but the circumstances of June, 1909 led him, instead, to obscurity.

The original agreement between Herrmann and Cahill called for a June 17 night time encounter between the Reds and the Phillies. Early in June, however, Herrmann got cold feet and withdrew the Reds from the contest for fear of injuries.⁴ By season's end, the Reds' fielding statistics proved this fear to be groundless as the club apparently stumbled about in the field even in daylight.⁵ Nevertheless, the decision was prudent at the time and Herrmann replaced the pros with two teams representing local Elk lodges, a

well-calculated act of patronage by President Herrmann who decided to use the entire proceeds of the game to boom his own candidacy for grand exalted ruler of all Elkdom at the upcoming national convention.⁶

As June 17 approached, the Elks of Cincinnati Lodge #5 and the Newport (Kentucky) Lodge #273 were decidedly ready for their brush with immortality. They played a practice game on June 16 and, that night, the Newport Lodge either in unrestrained anticipation of the big event or just in demonstration of how little Elks have changed since the turn of the century, had a laugh on Albert B. Root, member-in-good-standing. Root, married the day before, boarded a train for a honeymoon trip to Springfield, Ohio. Upon arrival, he was arrested with a fake warrant by the local chief of police. Not until the Springfield Elks arrived to demand his release did Root discover that it was all a joke of the boys at home.⁷

At home, League Park was ready. After testing the lights several times in the days prior to the game Cahill pronounced them fit for play. Willie Locke of Pittsburgh and Charlie Fredericks, secretary of the White Sox, traveled to Cincinnati to witness the spectacle, and President McIntyre of the Chicago Semiprofessional League was on hand to order Cahill lights for all of the parks in his league should he be suitably impressed.⁸ Alas, just as in 1935, rain struck and washed out the first attempt at play and the game was rescheduled for the following evening.⁹

During the afternoon of Friday, June 18, the Reds beat the Phils, 4-1. The two teams committed a total of three errors.¹⁰ Afterwards, attention turned again to the highly publicized clash of Elks. The main entrance to the park opened shortly before game time. All other gates were closed to avoid accidents in the bleachers, the one area not covered by Cahill's lights.¹¹

Though Theodore Roosevelt would not press a key in Washington to switch on the lights as F.D.R. would do twenty-six years later, and Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis was not on hand to throw out the first pitch, the occasion was not without its festivity. Vice Mayor Galvin of Cincinnati and Mayor Krieger of Newport agreed to umpire the game.¹² Members of the local lodge handled concessions, liquids, and the famous Laughery club broiled bratwurst; and Drum Major Burkhardt tendered the First Regiment band in a pre-game concert.¹³ Attending throughout were the Reds and the Phillies who were as anxious as the 4,000 paying spectators to pass judgment on the quality of the baseball to come.

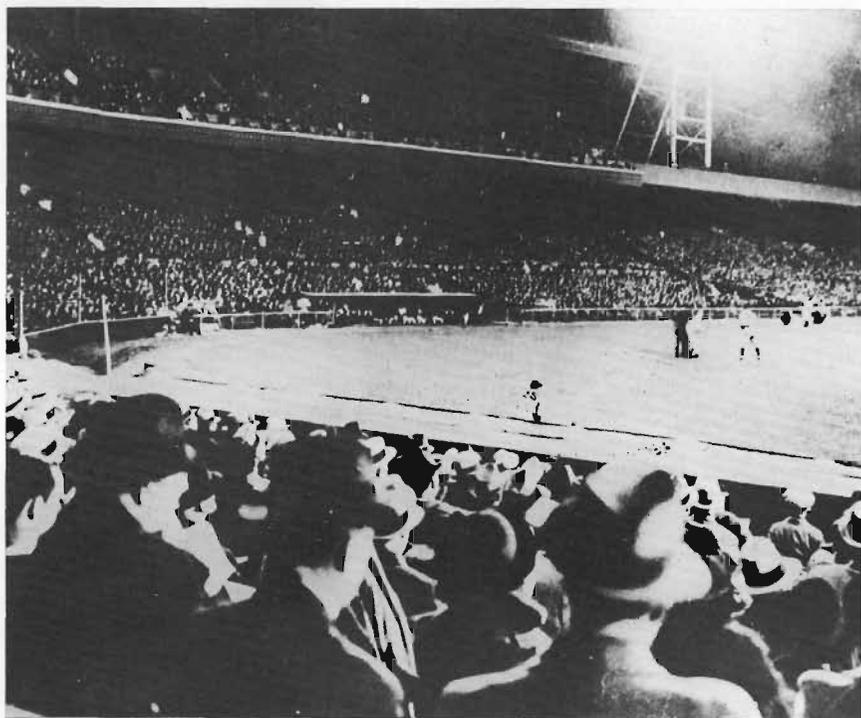
Local papers touted the Elk nines as "crack" teams. To be sure, the Cincinnati lodge started former Red catcher, Emil Haberer, as well as a right-fielder listed only as Dr. Podesta, a professional but not of the diamond.¹⁴ Either the players or the lights failed to fulfill their promise. Though the fans were enthused with the experiment, and the Elks enjoyed their moment of glory, good baseball was lost somewhere in the darkness.

Cincinnati defeated Newport 8 to 5, but the two teams combined for eigh-

Although August Hermann, owner of the Cincinnati Reds, originally invited Cahill "to stage a game" at Redland Field, he changed his mind because of fear of injuries and replaced the pros with two amateur teams.



Twenty-five years later in 1935, Larry McPhail, at the urging of Powel Crosley, introduced night baseball to Cincinnati fans and the professional baseball world.



teen errors, including three by each shortstop. Newport pitcher Joe Youtsey struck out sixteen in the losing effort and winning hurler Verkamp fanned ten of his own. Some outfielders lost balls in the shadows and some lost balls in the blinding lights. Haberer was the hero getting three basehits including a three run homer that was lost in the shadows near the bleachers. Dr. Podesta was an undistinguished 0 for 1 though he played a flawless fielding game in right field.¹⁵

Cahill, Herrmann, and most journalists proclaimed night baseball to be a great success. The Reds and Phillies were unconvinced, wishing to see improvement in the lights before risking their own safety. There is every reason to believe that those improvements would have been quickly forthcoming were the baseball world really ready for lights. But the time was not yet right as evidenced by the account of the *Sporting News*, whose correspondent wrote that, ¹⁶

... the rays of the good old sun were missing; the grass didn't take on the right hue, and you couldn't see the inside workings of the minds of the spectators, and these are the things that add so much to the attractiveness of the game as played under natural conditions.

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(1) *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 23, 1935, p. 9; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 25, 1935, p. 8.

(2) Allison Danzig, *The History of Baseball* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1959), pp. 111-113.

(3) *Washington Post*, June 19, 1909, p. 8.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *Sporting News*, December 30, 1909, p. 5.

(6) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 17, 1909, p. 6.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 7.

(8) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 18, 1909, p. 6; *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 17, 1909, p. 6.

(9) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 18, 1909, p. 6.

(10) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 19, 1909, p. 6.

(11) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 17, 1909, p. 6.

(12) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 6, 1909, p. 12.

(13) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 17, 1909, p. 6.

(14) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 18, 1909, p. 6.

(15) *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, June 19, 1909, p. 6.

(16) *Sporting News*, June 24, 1909, p. 5.