

# A Schott From The Bleachers

## New Orleans Pelicans 1887 – 1959: Those Were Very Good Years

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by

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For the New Orleans Pelicans, it all began successfully on April 17, 1887 when the Pels entered organized baseball with a 5 – 2 Southern League victory over Mobile.

It ended September 7, 1959 when the team dropped a 7 – 5 decision, also to Mobile, before a meager double-header crowd of 229.

During the 72 years between the start and the finish, New Orleans enjoyed some of the most successful and suffered through some of the most troubled times in minor league history.

After beating Mobile in that first game ever, the Pels went on to win the Southern League championship in their first season. It would be the first of 13 pennants the club would claim in the highly regarded Class AA league.

The team would send countless players on to fame as major leaguers. It would draw some of the largest minor league crowds ever and would develop a loyal following as devoted as could be found.

Unfortunately, it would also fall on hard times, to be rescued time and again by civic leaders and public officials, finally to die on that September day in 1959. Not until this year [1977] would the Pelican uniform show up again in the Crescent City.

The current Pels who play their games in the air-conditioned comfort of the Louisiana Superdome would not recognize the five different parks their predecessors occupied over the years:

**Sportsmans Park** – Home of the pre-1900 Pelicans, it was here that the team also played its first seasons. It was located at what is now City Park Avenue and the Pontchatrain Expressway, across the street from the Greenwood Cemetery.

**Athletic Park** – The Pelicans played in this park in the early years of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century. It was on Tulane Avenue between South Carrollton and South Pierce Street.

**Pelican Park** – Located on South Carrollton Avenue between Banks Street and Palmyra, it was the home of the Pelicans from April 15, 1908 through the 1914 season.

**Heinemann Park** – The glory days of New Orleans baseball took place here at Tulane Avenue and South Carrollton Avenue. The 1915 season opened there and the last game there was played at the end of the 1957 season, after which it was torn down to make room for the Fontainebleau Motor Hotel.

**City Park Stadium** – The original Pelicans ended their existence after playing two seasons in this totally inadequate stadium.

While the Pels had many winning eras, the finest were the years from 1901 through 1956 when they won 10 Southern Association pennants, placed second 11 times and third 14 times. That era also would produce manager Larry Gilbert, who led the Pels from 1923 through 1934, winning five pennants. He also managed at Nashville and to this day is the most successful manager in minor league history.

Gilbert was also on of the Pels' top players of all time. He made his debut here on May 6, 1917 and during the next nine years he played 1,049 games in a Pelican uniform. He had a lifetime batting average of .309 and in 1917 win the league batting championship with a .349 average.

My vote for the most outstanding performance by a Pelican is the unassisted triple play pulled off by Cotton Knaupp at Heinemann Park in 1916.

Here's how it happened. With the bases full in the sixth for Chattanooga and Joe Harris at bat, Lookouts manager Kid Elberfeld ordered a hit-and-run play. Pop Boy Smith delivered the pitch and Harris sent a liner to the right of second base which Knaupp speared for one out. By this time the man on first base had rounded second. Cotton tagged him and then stepped on second, retiring the runner who had vacated the bag, and the unassisted triple play was completed.

There were many other highlights which would fill page after page. One came on September 2, 1923 when the Pels and Birmingham Barons were playing a doubleheader at Heinemann.

Joe Martina pitched the first game and beat the Barons, 4 – 1. He took the mound in the second game too and got tied up with Earl Whitehill in a pitcher's duel which went 12 innings without either team scoring. Since the field was not lighted at that time, the second game was called after 12 innings, by which time Martina had been on the mound for 21 innings.

Lights were finally at Heinemann in 1936 and a crowd of more than 11,000 attended the first night game against the Atlanta Crackers. Atlanta won, 11 – 5.

Martina was not the only Pelican to serve in an iron man role. On June 15, 1907, Moxie Manuel pitched and won a double header from Birmingham, shutting out the Barons in both games. Both games ended 1 – 0, with Manuel giving up two hits in the opener and six hits in the nightcap. Only one other time in baseball history is it recorded that a pitcher hurled back-to-back shutouts on the same day. On September 25, 1908, the Chicago Cubs' Ed Reulbach blanked the Brooklyn Dodgers, 5 – 0 and 3 – 0.

The largest crowd ever to see the Pelicans play turned out on Opening Day, April 19, 1938. The entire field at Heinemann Park was circled by fans that day as 26,262 fans crowded their way into the park to see the Pelicans defeat the Memphis Chicks, 7 – 2. That crowd remains a Southern Association record.

The crowds yelled loudly, the players went at it fiercely, and the beer flowed freely.

Those were good years, 1887 – 1959.

Here is the All-Time Pelicans' All-Star team selected by Arthur O. Schott, Louisiana's official baseball historian:

Position	Player	Years
1B	Red Blum	1914 – 1918
2B	Cotton Knaupp	1911 – 1923
3B	Chuck Deal	1926 – 1927
SS	Ray Gardner	1926 – 1930
LF	Eddie Rose	1931 – 1937
CF	Larry Gilbert	1917 – 1925
RF	Ollie Tucker	1922 – 1928
C	Chick Autry	1932 – 1936
P (RH)	Dixie Walker	1913 – 1923
P (RH)	Joe Martina	1921 – 1928
P (LH)	Ted Breitenstein	1904 – 1911
Manager	Larry Gilbert	1923 – 1934