

Ragtime Baseball in New Orleans

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Ragtime was a new, syncopated music style born in the saloons and “sporting houses” of New Orleans’ Storyville district, an area named after city councilman Sidney Story, who in 1898 authored the legislation establishing the district. It was bounded by Iberville, Basin, St. Louis, and Robertson streets.

At the same time that ragtime was gaining popularity throughout the South, the parallel popularity of the city’s professional baseball club, the New Orleans Pelicans, was gaining momentum as well.

During the post-Civil War years the center of the baseball world in the South was New Orleans. The city boasted fifteen teams that had joined the National Association, the largest contingent from any southern city. Among these was an amateur team formed in 1865 known as the Pelicans. The city’s first professional team in 1887 as part of the Southern League, the Pelicans became a more stable enterprise in the reconstituted Southern Association that began play in 1901. The early Southern Association operated in a period in baseball known as the *Deadball Era*, so called primarily because of the type of ball used, but also because of the style of play at the time. It was a game which employed the



scientific method – today known as “small ball” – bunts, hit an run plays, and base stealing. Hitters would choke up on their heavy wooden bats and would try to punch or slash a hit over the infield.

Baseball entered the mainstream of the American cultural landscape in the early 20th century and the game’s popularity soared due to increased coverage in newspapers and periodicals. Reporters wrote of thrilling pennant races, the new World Series, and chronicled the tremendous growth of the major and minor leagues. Fans across the country had an insatiable thirst for information about their favorite teams and players, spawning a new generation of writers like Ring Lardner, Grantland Rice, Damon Runyon, and Hugh Fullerton.

The game itself was still evolving. The rules, the equipment, and the strategies were being refined and tested. For instance, in 1901 the first two fouls were considered strikes for the very first time. Only one umpire was used during a game and he was free to stand anywhere on the field he chose.

In New Orleans, fans could follow the Pelicans in the *Daily Picayune*, the *New Orleans Times*, or any of the other daily or weekly newspapers that thrived at this time. They also discussed the games and the players in the saloons along Basin Street where Jelly Roll Morton, Tony Jackson, Clarence Williams and King Oliver played ragtime for the patrons.

Baseball in New Orleans had evolved from amateur clubs that engaged in *match* play – where clubs challenged each other to a best-of-three or best-of-five game series with the defeated team treating the winners to a victory dinner – to professional teams that engaged in *league* play where the number of wins and losses were tallied during the course of the season.



In 1905, the New Orleans Pelicans were forced to play the majority of their games on the road as the last major outbreak of yellow fever quarantined New Orleans beginning in the early days of summer. The Pelicans called Meridian, Mississippi home starting on August 7th and made an energetic bid for the pennant behind the pitching of Ted Breitenstein (21 – 5), William Phillips (21 – 8), and Jimmy Dygert (18 – 4), while Ed Hahn (.304) and George Rohe (.281) led the team's hitters. The gutsy aggregation captured their first Southern Association championship, finishing ten games ahead of the Montgomery Senators.

The Pelicans returned to New Orleans and Athletic Park for the 1906 campaign. The ball park was located on Tulane Avenue between South Carrollton Avenue and South Pierce Street. The team ended the season in a disappointing fourth place, thirteen games behind the Birmingham Barons. The team improved to 68 – 66 (.507), good enough for third place in 1907 behind the Atlanta Crackers and the Memphis Egyptians.

In 1908 the Pelicans moved to a new ballpark known as Pelican Park, which was located on South Carrollton Avenue between Banks Street and Palmyra Street – roughly across from present-day Jesuit High School. From the outset of the 1908 season the Pelicans were in a heated pennant race with the Nashville Vols, the Memphis Turtles, and the Montgomery Senators. As summer began to fade, Montgomery fell off the pace and by the final week of the season Memphis was also eliminated, leaving New Orleans and Nashville to contend for the flag.

As fate, and the league schedule, would have it, the Pels and the Vols were slated to square off in the final series of the season. Even though they split the series Nashville had played two more games than New Orleans and their winning percentage was .573 versus .571 for New Orleans, putting the Birds in second

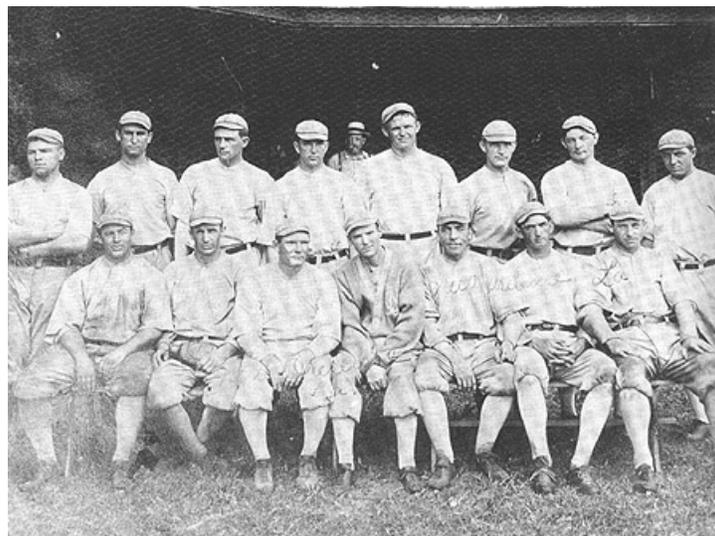


place by the slimmest of margins. In 1909 manager Charles Frank's boys fell into fourth place behind Atlanta, Nashville, and Montgomery.

Although New Orleans had a far richer baseball history than any of the other clubs in the Southern Association, they had captured only one pennant during the league's first ten years. The Pelicans had claimed their share of glory during the 19th century Southern League, winning titles in 1887, 1889, and 1896. Charles Frank was determined to turn things around and spent much of the fall and winter in 1909 at his remote camp on the Wolf River north of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi discussing players with scouts and friends.

Frank assembled a team of veterans led by pitchers Ted Breitenstein and George "Piggy" Paige, infielders George Rohe and Gene DeMontreville, and a last-minute addition in the outfield, Shoeless Joe Jackson.

From the first days of the 1910 season it was clear that New Orleans was the class of the league, taking first place in June and finishing 87 – 53 (.621), eight games ahead of Birmingham. Jackson led the Southern Association in runs (82), hits (165), and batting average (.354).



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Jackson was a big fan of the vaudeville circuit that thrived in New Orleans and it is entirely possible that he may have been a guest of popular saloonist Tom Anderson, the unofficial mayor of Storyville and a shareholder in the New Orleans Pelicans.

The Pelicans would repeat as pennant winners in 1911 behind the pitching of Otto Hess (23 – 8), but in 1912 they dropped into third place behind Birmingham and Mobile. They collapsed altogether in 1913, finishing in last place with a record of 45 – 85 (.346), more than thirty-two games behind the leader.

This led to a change – Charles Frank was replaced as manager by Johnny Dobbs from Montgomery. During Frank’s ten-year tenure with New Orleans his teams compiled a record of 735 - 607 (.547) and three Southern Association pennants.

Dobbs guided the Pelicans to a third place spot in 1914 with an 80 – 65 (.552) record with the contributions of pitcher James Bagby (20 – 9) and shortstop Walt Barbare (.296).

Despite their success on the playing field, the Pelicans were nearly bankrupt. During the fall of 1914, newly appointed Pelican president and general manager Alexander J. Heinemann initiated two decisions that would turn around the beleaguered franchise. He had already replaced Charles Frank as manager, hiring Johnny Dobbs. Next, he oversaw the construction of a brand new ballpark located several blocks away from Pelican Park on the site of the former White City Amusement Park. Using a mule team, Heinemann had the wooden grandstands hauled to, as they say in New Orleans, the downtown-river corner of South Carrollton and Tulane Avenue, future site of the Fontainebleau Hotel and presently a storage facility.



Aerial view of Heinemann Park

The new ballpark was completed at a cost of \$50,000 and was ready for opening day on April 13, 1915 against the defending champion Birmingham Barons. The Pelicans won 7 to 4 and maintained a heady pace throughout the season, finishing 91 – 63 (.591). They outlasted Birmingham down the stretch to finish four and one-half games ahead of the Barons. Fred

Thomas led the league in home runs (11) and stolen bases (53) while teammate Tim Hendryx led the league in runs (109) to help the Pelicans snag their fourth Southern Association pennant.

New Orleanians came out in droves to see the Pelicans in their new stadium, drawing 134,405 during the 1915 season. Expectations were high for the 1916 season, but the Pels faded in the last third of the season to finish nine games behind Nashville. The highlight of the season came on August 8th when Pelican second baseman Henry “Cotton” Knaupp pulled off the only unassisted triple play in the history of the Southern Association against the Chattanooga Lookouts.

1917 was another second place finish, this time seven games behind the Atlanta Crackers. In 1918, in a season abbreviated by World War I, the Pelicans were 49 – 21 (.700) and were seven and one-half games ahead of the Little Rock Travelers when the league shut down on June 28th. Nonetheless, the club won their fifth Southern Association crown. Dobbs’s gruff style of field management was successful and the Pelicans regained their financial and professional stability. He would remain as the Pelicans manager for nine years, through the



1922 season, during which time his teams won 728 games against 515 losses (.586), never finishing lower than third place.

Baseball was everywhere in New Orleans. Besides the Pelicans there were numerous semi-pro and amateur teams active throughout the city: firemen (Screw Guzzles and Red Hots), cycling clubs (Headers and Anti-Headers), and banker (the Whitneys, the Hibernias). There were ethnic teams: Irish (the Fenian Base Ball Club), German (Schneiders, Laners and Landwehrs) and Italian (Tiro al Bersaglio). There was even an indoor baseball league that had teams from the Young Men's Christian Association, the Young Men's Hebrew Association, the Phoenix Athletic Club, the Crescent Athletic Club, and the Young Men's Gymnastic Club among others. Numerous major league players spent their off-season in New Orleans playing in the winter league with the Parker-Blakes, the Schwartz Stars, the Fords, the Wormsers or any of a dozen other teams.

The game survived such diverse threats as the upstart Federal League (1913 – 1915), which convinced one-third of the players in the major leagues to jump ship for higher wages; the outbreak of World War I (1914 – 1918); and the global flu epidemic (1918 – 1920) that claimed the lives of 22 million Americans.

By 1918 jazz would replace ragtime as the most popular form of music in New Orleans and throughout the country. Despite the vigorous objection of New Orleans mayor Martin Berman, the Storyville district was closed down in 1917 by the federal government during World War I. Regarding prostitution, Behrman was quoted as saying, "...you can make it illegal, but you can't make it unpopular." The district continued in a more subdued state as an entertainment center through the 1920s, with various dance halls, cabarets and restaurants. Speakeasies, gambling joints and prostitution could still be found in the area despite repeated police raids. Almost all the buildings in the former Storyville



district were demolished in the 1930s to make way for the building of the Iberville Housing Projects.

Baseball would survive and continue to thrive in New Orleans. Even as ragtime gave way to jazz, the Deadball Era gave way to the lively ball, with another round of rule and equipment changes that accompany the evolution of the game. Baseball's ragtime years were a formative period in the continued development of the game of baseball. It was a period when the players and owners carried the National Pastime on their shoulders and preserved the game for the dramatic growth that lay ahead. We are drawn to this period of our history and the history of our National Pastime as a simpler, more familiar world – Americans worked on farms and dairies, manufactured a wide variety of goods, and watched baseball from stadiums named after the team's owner, not a corporate sponsor. Baseball was a business, but it was first and foremost a glorious game.