

DARYL WEBB

“Keep Pro Baseball”

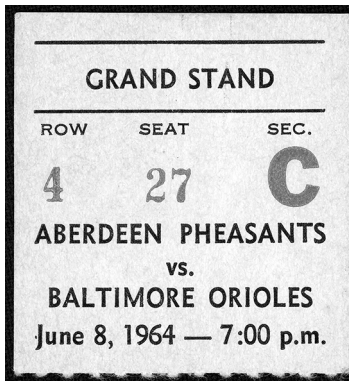
The Aberdeen Pheasants Baseball Team, 1946–1971

On 8 June 1964, Aberdeen Mayor J. Clifton (“Cliff”) Hurlbert and hundreds of excited baseball fans gathered at the Aberdeen Municipal Airport anticipating the arrival of the Baltimore Orioles. The major-league club was coming to town to play an exhibition game against the Aberdeen Pheasants, their minor-league affiliate. The Pheasants were having their best season since winning the 1947 Northern League championship, and the players were excited to show off their talents to the big-leaguers. “We’re gonna beat ’em and climb onto that big plane,” Pheasants players reportedly joked. “They can stay here and finish the Northern League schedule.”¹

The entire community was abuzz about the game that pitted the mighty Orioles of the American League against the hometown nine. That evening a sellout crowd of over five thousand fans from all over South Dakota poured into the ballpark to see the contest. Even the Saint Cloud (Minnesota) Rox, who were to play the Pheasants the next day, came out to watch. The pregame celebration recognized former Pheasants who played for the Orioles, and Mayor Hurlbert proclaimed “Baltimore Oriole Day” in the city. Fans then settled in for the highly anticipated matchup and witnessed an exciting battle that featured twelve hits, including a three-run homer by Aberdeen slugger Johnny Scruggs. The Orioles proved to be too much for the minor-league club, defeating the Pheasants 6 to 3. The *Aberdeen American-News* proclaimed that the Orioles’ visit marked “Aberdeen’s ‘biggest day’ in some 70 years of baseball fanaticism.”²

1. *Aberdeen American-News*, 7 June 1964.

2. *Ibid.*, 5, 9 June 1964.



This ticket stub comemmorates the only time a major-league baseball team has played in South Dakota.

The Orioles game certainly was the most notable day in seven decades of Aberdeen baseball history, but it was only one small chapter in the story of the Pheasants. Founded in the hope and optimism of the post-World War II era, the team thrived in the 1940s. The good times evaporated in the 1950s and 1960s, however, when competition from other forms of entertainment caused attendance (and the team's income) to plummet. Only creative management and help from the major leagues rescued the Pheasants and the entire Northern League from bankruptcy. However, the changes necessary to save the league in the short term reduced the quality of play on the field and drove many fans to other sources of entertainment. Eventually, declining attendance forced the entire Northern League to fold, thus ending twenty-six years of professional baseball in Aberdeen.³

Pheasants baseball began as part of a national resurgence in sports after World War II. During the late 1940s, baseball boomed all over the country and the minor leagues experienced a renaissance. The

3. Few Pheasants business records remain extant. The Northern League Collection at the Siouxland Heritage Museums in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, contains limited business records from the last years of the league. This article is based primarily on information appearing in the *Aberdeen American-News*. Sometimes the newspaper reported the club's profits and losses, while at other times it carried only late-season projections of the team's year-end financial status. In a few seasons, the *American-News* published no financial information about the Pheasants at all. Despite these missing pieces, enough information is available to tell the story of Pheasants baseball and paint a picture of the team's business affairs.

“minors” had developed over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as places where young players could hone their skills and gain experience as they tried to make it to the major leagues. Independently owned minor-league franchises contracted or affiliated with major-league teams that assigned players to the “farm team,” as minor-league clubs were frequently called. These farm teams were an ideal entertainment outlet after World War II. Following the Great Depression of the 1930s and the economic sacrifices of the war years, America experienced a period of broadening prosperity. At just over three thousand dollars a year, median family income in the United States was the highest in the world in 1947. The return of economic prosperity enabled many Americans to spend more of their money on leisure. To meet this new demand for entertainment, businessmen in large cities and small towns alike organized minor-league baseball teams. By 1949, 448 professional baseball clubs were playing in fifty-nine leagues. Paid attendance at minor-league games that year reached forty million, an all-time high.⁴

The Northern League was part of this minor-league baseball revival. First organized in 1933 with teams in Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and the Canadian province of Manitoba, the league had a Class C designation.⁵ Major-league clubs classified their minor-league affiliates based on the players’ skill level and experience. Class C was a middle-level designation, in which the athletes had some profession-

4. Lloyd Johnson and Miles Wolff, eds., *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, 3d ed. (Durham, N.C.: Baseball America, 2007), p. 40; Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball: A History of America’s Game*, 3d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), pp. 142–46; Joshua B. Freeman, *American Empire: The Rise of a Global Power, the Democratic Revolution at Home, 1945–2000* (New York: Viking Press, 2012), pp. xi–xii, 113–14; James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 63–65; James R. Walker and Robert V. Bellamy, Jr., *Center Field Shot: A History of Baseball on Television* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 206; Robert Obojski, *Bush League: A History of Minor League Baseball* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 24–25.

5. Several incarnations of the Northern League operated prior to 1933. The first iteration was formed in the Upper Midwest in 1902 and folded due to financial problems in 1905. Reestablished in 1913, the league failed again just three years later. Other attempts to revive the Northern League took place in 1908 and 1917, but neither foray lasted an entire season. Obojski, *Bush League*, p. 370.

al experience but were still developing their talent. While the Northern League endured the Great Depression in the 1930s, it suspended play in 1942 due to World War II. After the fighting ended, league officials desired to restart the circuit with eight clubs but found they were one team short. Aberdeen proved to be a good fit. With Northern League franchises already in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Grand Forks, North Dakota, an Aberdeen club would allow teams to break up long road trips by playing in the Hub City. With high school and amateur baseball thriving, the community had a strong baseball tradition. During the 1920s, Aberdeen had fielded a team in the short-lived Dakota League.⁶ Additionally, postwar Aberdeen experienced solid economic growth, highlighted by a construction boom and the establishment of a host of new businesses. The Hub City added four thousand new residents in the late 1940s, reaching a population of twenty-one thousand by 1950. The Aberdeen Civic Association estimated that the community anchored a regional market worth \$930 million that year.⁷

When the Northern League invited Aberdeen to join, community leaders embraced the idea. An editorial published in the *American-News* on 23 December 1945 argued that a professional team would enhance the city's prestige and spur economic development. Aberdeen Civic Association leaders spearheaded the campaign to bring minor-league baseball to the city. They conferred with Northern League officials, surveyed business and community leaders, and held a public meeting on 26 December to gauge local residents' support of the proposal. At the 26 December gathering, Civic Association president J. Edison ("Ed") Gorder argued that professional baseball would be a step for-

6. The Dakota League operated from 1921 to 1923 in both North Dakota and South Dakota. Huron, Madison, and Redfield were among the South Dakota towns that sponsored teams. Most clubs struggled financially and lasted only one season. Aberdeen, Mitchell, Sioux Falls, and Watertown were the only league members to field teams in all three seasons of the circuit's existence. Johnson and Wolff, eds., *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, pp. 25–26.

7. Neil J. Sullivan, *The Minors: The Struggle and the Triumph of Baseball's Poor Relation from 1876 to the Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 169, 237–43; Herman White, *An Informal History of the Northern League* (St. Paul, Minn.: Gryphon Press, 1982), pp. 4–10; *Aberdeen American-News*, 23 June 1976; *Brown County History* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Brown County Museum and Historical Society, 1980), pp. 168–69, 319–23.

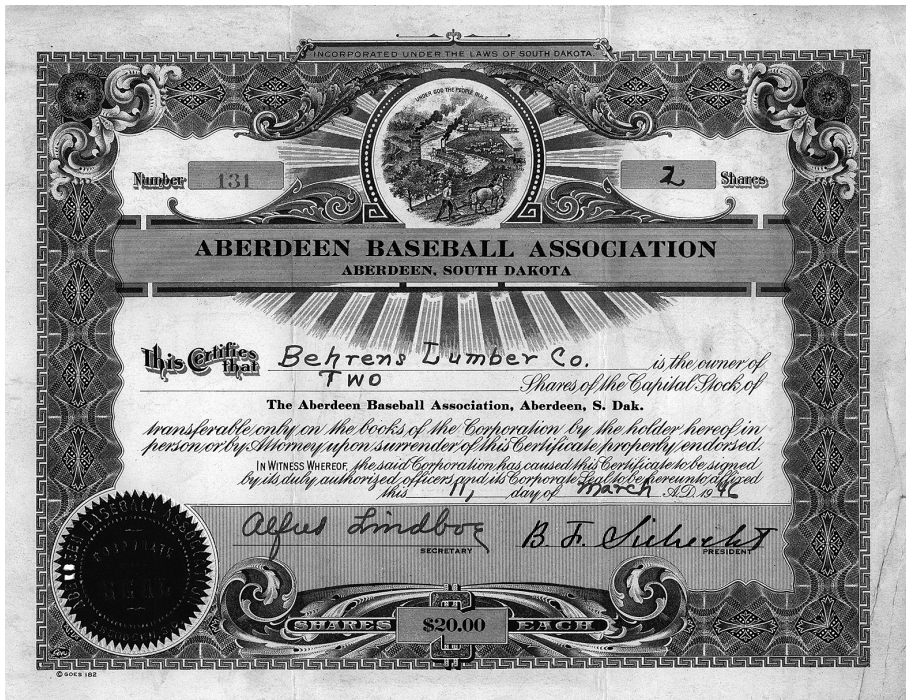
ward for the community. The response was generally enthusiastic and supportive. A few speakers, such as City League president Paul E. Miller, opposed bringing professional baseball to Aberdeen, fearing that it would reduce support for amateur baseball. Despite these concerns, the Civic Association decided to organize a new minor-league club and appointed a six-man committee to lead the effort. The group easily raised the two thousand dollars needed to pay the league deposit by 1 January, thus securing Aberdeen's place in the Northern League.⁸

Over the next five months, a flurry of activity took place as the organizing committee prepared for opening day of the 1946 season. A working agreement with the Saint Louis Browns of the American League was an important step forward. Aberdeen club officials made their first contact with Browns management in February 1946 and finalized the arrangement in time for the season opener in May. The terms of the agreement were typical for the 1940s, requiring the Browns to assign players to Aberdeen and provide a small amount of capital. However, most expenses and business operations were left to the local club. The arrangement continued on after the Browns relocated to Baltimore and changed their name to the Orioles in 1953.⁹

In a departure from the usual practice in professional sports, the organizing committee decided that the Aberdeen baseball club would be community-owned. Typically, owners of sports teams were wealthy individuals or groups of businesspeople. Beginning in February 1946, the Aberdeen team sold stock to any interested parties at twenty dollars per share, but no individual could own more than five hundred dollars' worth of stock. Since the franchise planned to raise twenty-five thousand dollars from the stock sale, this structure prevented any single person or organization from becoming the majority owner of the team. After the initial stock sale, shareholders selected a board of directors made up of prominent business and civic leaders who each ran one aspect of the team's day-to-day operations. During the first months of 1946, the directors secured permission to use Municipal Stadium, held

8. *Aberdeen American-News*, 21, 23, 26–27 Dec. 1945; interview of Larry V. Desautels, Aberdeen, S.Dak., by Marty Eriksen, 17 Nov. 1978, transcript, Pheasants Research Box, Aberdeen Pheasants Collection, Dacotah Prairie Museum, Aberdeen, S.Dak.

9. *Aberdeen American-News*, 3 Feb., 2 May 1946; interview of Desautels.



Minor-league baseball in Aberdeen was a community enterprise, with both individuals and local businesses holding stock in the team.

a contest to name the team, and organized a season ticket drive.¹⁰

Opening Day for the Aberdeen Pheasants was 19 May 1946. Over two thousand people turned out to watch the team lose to the Fargo-Moorhead Twins by a score of 6 to 2. Despite the loss of the club's inaugural game, the 1940s was the most successful era in franchise history. Total home attendance for the team's first season was just over fifty-seven thousand—a respectable showing considering that Municipal Stadium lacked lights for most of the 1946 campaign. Most home games started at 5:30 p.m. that year because of the lighting issue, which probably reduced fan turnout. With stadium lights permitting night games, attendance grew to an average of 87,420 fans each season be-

10. *Aberdeen American-News*, 3, 24 Feb., 2 May 1946; interview of Desautels; Les Keller, Pheasants Questionnaire, Mar. 1998, in author's collection.

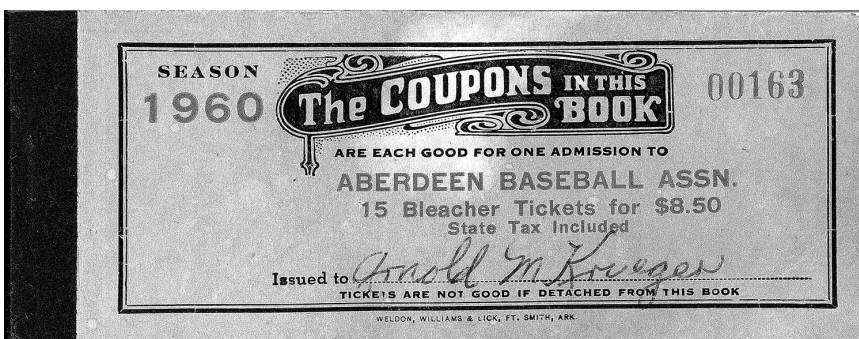
tween 1947 and 1949. Moreover, the Pheasants had a consistent winning record, and the franchise turned a profit during these years.¹¹

The initial success of professional baseball in Aberdeen was based on three factors. First, the Pheasants operated in a positive business environment. As the economy boomed, people had more discretionary income and leisure time than in the past. During the 1940s, the community had limited means to meet the new demand for entertainment. Although the city had four movie theaters, three parks, and a host of social and service clubs, many people were looking for new diversions. The Pheasants met this desire with sixty home games every summer, and each nine-inning contest was a unique experience. The club ensured that admission was affordable with tickets costing between sixty and ninety cents. While most spectators came from Aberdeen, the Pheasants also drew people from all over the region, with some fans traveling from as far as Mobridge and Sisseton.¹²

Low-cost entertainment was not the only magnet that attracted fans to the stadium. The Pheasants played a high-quality brand of baseball. During the 1940s, the club showcased great players and never posted a losing season record. Fans saw a host of future major-leaguers, includ-

11. *Aberdeen American-News*, 20 May, 5 Sept. 1946, 7 Oct. 1953; "Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946-1971," Pheasants Research Box, Aberdeen Pheasants Collection.

12. *Aberdeen American-News*, 25 Apr. 1947, 1, 4 July 1948, 23 July 1950; *Brown County History*, pp. 145, 218-19, 263-65.



The Pheasants kept admission prices affordable for the average baseball fan, as this ticket book demonstrates.

ing pitchers Bob Turley and Don Larsen. The latter went on to help the New York Yankees win the 1956 World Series by pitching a perfect game against the Brooklyn Dodgers, giving up no hits or walks. Larsen remains the only player to throw a perfect game in the World Series. Future major leaguers such as Turley and Larsen helped the Pheasants win games consistently. The 1947 Pheasants won the Northern League championship, while the 1949 club was in the pennant chase right up to the end of the season, finishing just one game behind the Bears of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The Pheasants finished in the middle of the Northern League pack in 1946 and in 1948 but won more games than they lost. In fact, the team achieved a winning record in each of its first seven seasons.¹³

Finally, fans flocked to the ballpark because professional baseball in Aberdeen was new and exciting. The atmosphere in the stadium was electric, and fans wanted to experience the thrill of professional sports. “I just had to be seen in that grandstand for the opening baseball

13. “Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946–1971”; “Aberdeen Pheasants Major League Alumni,” Pheasants Research Box, Aberdeen Pheasants Collection.



In this undated photograph, players round the bases at Municipal Stadium, which was located near the present Barnett Center at Northern State University.

game,” one fan proclaimed.¹⁴ Even opposing coaches commented on the crowds. “This must be some baseball town,” Fargo-Moorhead Twins manager Gordon Hinkle observed in 1948. “I have never seen a crowd like that in a town of that size.”¹⁵ Fans not only cheered for the Pheasants at games, but they also showed up to watch the team practice, talked about the Pheasants constantly, and wrote letters to the local newspaper praising the club. Local businesses ran newspaper advertisements welcoming the team to the city, while players and managers were frequent guests of the Quarterbacks Club, the Kiwanis, and other community groups.¹⁶ Players received so many free meals at club meetings that *Aberdeen American-News* sports editor Larry V. Desautels made a joking reference to the “knife and fork league” in a 1947 column.¹⁷

The intense fan enthusiasm of the 1940s evaporated in the 1950s, however, ushering in more than a decade of crisis for the Pheasants and the rest of minor-league baseball. Attendance at minor-league parks plummeted all around the nation. Total attendance at minor-league games reached forty million in 1949 but fell to twenty-eight million only two years later. By 1963, just ten million fans went through the turnstiles. This decrease in attendance caused gate revenues to crash, forcing thirty-eight professional baseball leagues and 328 teams out of business during the 1950s. Only eighteen leagues remained in operation in 1963. This trend hit the Northern League hard, as attendance dropped from about 647,000 in 1949 to just 207,000 in 1962. Six Northern League clubs went under during the 1950s and early 1960s. Two more franchises in the twin cities of Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin, consolidated into a single team in 1956. While the Aberdeen club stayed in business, its attendance dropped from 85,624 in 1949 to approximately 58,000 in 1953. In 1962, about thirty-nine thousand fans attended Pheasant home games.¹⁸

The crisis in minor-league baseball had several causes. First, the

14. *Aberdeen American-News*, 5 May 1948.

15. Ibid.

16. *Aberdeen American-News*, 31 Aug., 16 Sept. 1947, 29 Apr. 1949.

17. Ibid., 27 Aug. 1947.

18. Walker and Bellamy, *Center Field Shot*, p. 209; Elliot J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013),

minor leagues overexpanded in the 1940s. Many of the communities that created clubs in the late 1940s were too small to support a professional baseball team for the long term. Several Northern League clubs collapsed because they did not have an adequate fan base. Aberdeen, too, struggled with a limited fan base. The team's board of directors estimated that the Pheasants needed to draw seventy-five thousand spectators a year to make the club profitable, but the city simply did not have enough baseball fans to reach this goal. A core group of fans who loved the sport attended games regularly, but after 1949, the team never again drew seventy-five thousand people to the ballpark in a season. In the 1940s, the novelty of professional baseball helped drive attendance numbers well above the level needed to make the club financially viable. However, by the 1950s, the Pheasants had played for four years, reducing the thrill for casual spectators. A lower caliber of baseball at Municipal Stadium in the 1950s also dampened enthusiasm. While Hub City baseball fans did get to see future major leaguers such as outfielder/first baseman John ("Tito") Francona, pitcher Wes Stock, and first baseman Bob Hale, the team typically ended its season well out of first place. The Pheasants finished in the bottom tier of the league six times in the 1950s, including dead last in 1957 and 1958. This poor on-field performance kept many less enthusiastic fans away from Municipal Stadium.¹⁹

Increased competition from other entertainment sources also took its toll on minor-league baseball in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰ In Aberdeen,

p. 238; Kathryn Jay, *More than Just a Game: Sports in American Life since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 94; Bruce Chadwick, *Baseball's Hometown Teams: The Story of the Minor Leagues* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), pp. 117, 125; Jerry Poling, *A Summer Up North: Henry Aaron and the Legend of Eau Claire Baseball* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp. 88–90; *Aberdeen American-News*, 7 Oct. 1953; Johnson and Wolff, eds., *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, p. 40; Financial Statements of the Northern League, 31 Oct. 1963, Box 2, Northern League Papers, Siouxland Heritage Museums, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.

19. Walker and Bellamy, *Center Field Shot*, pp. 206–11; *Aberdeen American-News*, 21 June, 25 Aug., 15 Sept. 1953, 1 Sept. 1957, 12 June 1958; *Brown County History*, pp. 218, 220–22, 268–69; "Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946–1971"; "Aberdeen Pheasants Major League Alumni."

20. Some minor-league cities also had to compete with new big-league teams. During the 1950s and 1960s, the major leagues expanded into cities that already had

1957 NORTHERN LEAGUE BASEBALL SCHEDULE

DATES	AT WAUSAU	AT EAU CLAIRE	AT DULUTH SUPERIOR	AT ST. CLOUD	AT ABERDEEN	AT FARGO MOORHEAD	AT GRAND FORKS	AT WINNIPEG
APRIL 28-29-30			Eau Claire	Wausau	Winnipeg	Grand Forks		
MAY 1-2-3			Wausau	Eau Claire	Grand Forks	Winnipeg		
MAY 4-5-6	St. Cloud	Duluth					Aberdeen	Fargo
MAY 7-8-9	Duluth	St. Cloud					Fargo	Aberdeen
MAY 10-11-12	Grand Forks	Winnipeg	Aberdeen	Fargo				
MAY 13-14-15	Winnipeg	Grand Forks	Fargo	Aberdeen				
MAY 16			OPEN	DATE				
MAY 17-18-19					Duluth	St. Cloud	Wausau	Eau Claire
MAY 20-21-22					St. Cloud	Duluth	Eau Claire	Wausau
MAY 23-24-25	Aberdeen	Fargo	Winnipeg	Grand Forks				
MAY 26-27-28	Fargo	Aberdeen	Grand Forks	Winnipeg				
MAY 29-30-30	Eau Claire		St. Cloud			Aberdeen	Winnipeg	
MAY 31, JUNE 1-2		Wausau		Duluth	Fargo			Grand Forks
JUNE 3-4-5					Eau Claire	Wausau	Duluth	St. Cloud
JUNE 6-7-8					Wausau	Eau Claire	St. Cloud	Duluth
JUNE 9-10-11	Winnipeg	Grand Forks	Aberdeen	Fargo				
JUNE 12-13-14	Grand Forks	Winnipeg	Fargo	Aberdeen				
JUNE 15-16-17					Duluth	St. Cloud	Eau Claire	Wausau
JUNE 18-19-20					St. Cloud	Duluth	Wausau	Eau Claire
JUNE 21			OPEN	DATE				
JUNE 22-23-24	Fargo	Aberdeen	Grand Forks	Winnipeg				
JUNE 25-26-27	Aberdeen	Fargo	Winnipeg	Grand Forks				
JUNE 28-29-30	St. Cloud		Eau Claire		Winnipeg	Grand Forks		
JULY 1-2-3		Wausau	St. Cloud			Aberdeen		Grand Forks
JULY 4-4-5		Duluth		Wausau	Fargo		Winnipeg	
JULY 6-7-8	Duluth			Eau Claire	Grand Forks	Winnipeg		
JULY 9-10-11	Eau Claire			Duluth			Fargo	Aberdeen
JULY 12-13-14		St. Cloud	Wausau				Aberdeen	Fargo
JULY 15-16-17					Eau Claire	Wausau	Duluth	St. Cloud
JULY 18-19-20					Wausau	Eau Claire	St. Cloud	Duluth
JULY 21-22-23	Grand Forks	Winnipeg	Fargo	Aberdeen				
JULY 24-25-26	Winnipeg	Grand Forks	Aberdeen	Fargo				
JULY 27-28			ALL	STAR	GAME			
JULY 29-30-31					St. Cloud	Duluth	Wausau	Eau Claire
AUG. 1-2-3					Duluth	St. Cloud	Eau Claire	Wausau
AUG. 4-5-6	Eau Claire			Duluth	Fargo			Grand Forks
AUG. 7-8-9	Aberdeen	Fargo	Winnipeg	Grand Forks				
AUG. 10-11-12	Fargo	Aberdeen	Grand Forks	Winnipeg				
AUG. 13-14-15					Eau Claire	Wausau	St. Cloud	Duluth
AUG. 16-17-18					Wausau	Eau Claire	Duluth	St. Cloud
AUG. 19			OPEN	DATE				
AUG. 20-21-22			Eau Claire	Wausau	Grand Forks			Fargo
AUG. 23-24-25			Wausau	Eau Claire	Winnipeg		Fargo	
AUG. 26-27-28	St. Cloud	Duluth				Aberdeen	Winnipeg	
AUG. 29-30-31	Duluth	St. Cloud				Grand Forks		Aberdeen
SEPT. 1-2-2		Wausau	St. Cloud			Winnipeg	Aberdeen	

SPLIT SEASON — 1ST HALF ENDING AFTER JULY 5 GAME

JULY 27-28 — ALL STAR GAME

**PLAY-OFFS — 1ST HALF VS. 2ND HALF WINNERS
3 OUT OF 5 GAME PLAYOFFS**

HERMAN D. WHITE, President
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

BERNARD M. NEARY, Secretary
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

As this 1957 schedule shows, Aberdeen had the only professional baseball team in South Dakota, while the Northern League's northernmost franchise was in Winnipeg.

the Pheasants lost business to the Lee Park Golf Course, the Wylie Park Zoo, and the south side swimming pool, all of which opened during the period. By the 1960s, programming presented by the newly created community theater, arts council, and museum lured people away from the ballpark. Minor-league baseball teams also had to compete with television. Only 172,000 American families owned television sets in 1948, but the new medium reached 90 percent of the nation's households by 1960. The first commercial television station in South Dakota was KELO-TV in Sioux Falls, which began transmitting in 1953 and soon extended its broadcast range to Aberdeen. People could now choose to stay home to watch a televised major-league game or *I Love Lucy* rather than go to a minor-league park. Both Northern League and Pheasant officials reported that competition from television hurt attendance.²¹

Northern League officials looked for ways to help clubs deal with the new financial environment. In 1955, the league tightened both salary caps and restrictions on the size of team rosters. Two years later, the league created additional "Booster Nights," games in which the home team kept the entire gate revenue rather than paying a percentage to the opposing team. Additionally, the league experimented with split-season play and a new playoff structure for the 1957 season in the hope that these changes would generate more fan interest. In February

minor-league teams, such as Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles. Fans in these markets frequently chose to attend major-league rather than minor-league games. While the Boston Braves' move to Milwaukee in 1954 and the Washington Senators' transformation into the Minnesota Twins in 1961 did not affect Aberdeen's attendance directly, these developments did hurt the Northern League clubs in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Roland E. Parcel to Philip P. Piton, 8 Nov. 1968, Box 2, Northern League Papers; Poling, *Summer Up North*, pp. 89–90.

21. Ronald Briley, "American Sports, 1940–1949," in *Encyclopedia of Sports in America*, ed. Murry R. Nelson, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2008), 2:277; Walker and Bellamy, *Center Field Shot*, pp. 206–11; Jay, *More than Just a Game*, pp. 80–86, 94; Gorn and Goldstein, *Brief History of American Sports*, p. 238; Sullivan, *The Minors*, pp. 237–43; Rader, *Baseball*, pp. 190–94; Minutes of Northern League meeting, 2 Nov. 1968, Box 2, Northern League Papers; Poling, *Summer Up North*, pp. 88–91; Parcel to Piton, 8 Nov. 1968; *Brown County History*, pp. 158, 221–22, 268–69; Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), p. 337; *Aberdeen American-News*, 25 Apr. 1958.

1961, Warren LeTarte, a representative of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, attended a Northern League meeting to offer ideas on how individual teams could increase attendance. However, none of these measures stopped the decline in Northern League attendance.²²

As attendance plummeted, the Pheasants faced a crisis. The club turned small profits in only two seasons between 1950 and 1958. The team broke even in three other seasons and finished in the red in 1950, 1953, 1957, and 1958. A deeper examination of the franchise's balance sheet reveals the gravity of its financial problems. In 1953, the Pheasants finished twenty-five games out of first place and brought in only \$43,800 from ticket sales, ballpark advertising, concessions, and other revenue streams. However, the club spent \$54,839 in that season. The team's biggest expenses were players' salaries and spring training costs, over which the Pheasants had little or no control. The Browns (later, the Orioles) controlled player contracts and therefore set the Pheasants' payroll, which in 1953 amounted to twenty-two thousand dollars. The major-league club also billed Aberdeen thirty-five hundred dollars for spring training to prepare the players for the season. These two line items constituted over 46 percent of the team's expenditures for the 1953 campaign. Other major expenses for the Aberdeen franchise included nine thousand dollars for travel and five thousand dollars for stadium rental and lighting. Due to reduced attendance in the 1950s, the club's revenue streams no longer covered all of its costs.²³

In an effort to sustain the team in this challenging environment, the franchise's board of directors adopted new business strategies. The directors found ways to reduce expenses, including a reduction in the size of the team. The Pheasants carried only sixteen players on their active roster in 1957, three fewer than the limit set by the Northern League. Team officials also tried to increase revenue by bringing casual fans back to their games. The franchise ran a wide variety of promotions in order to lure people to the ballpark. The Pheasants honored area ama-

22. Minutes of Northern League meetings, 1955 (month and day unspecified), 18 Nov. 1955, 16–17 Nov. 1956, 17 Feb. 1961, Box 2, Northern League Papers.

23. *Aberdeen American-News*, 17 June, 12 Aug., 12 Sept. 1951, 3 Aug. 1952, 15 Sept., 7, 9 Oct. 1953, 7 Sept. 1954, 17 Aug. 1955, 20 Sept. 1956, 1 Sept. 1957, 9 Sept. 1958.

<p>HERMAN D. WHITE, PRESIDENT</p> <p>B. M. NEARY, SECRETARY & TREASURER</p>	<p>MEMBER OF NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL LEAGUES</p>	
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THE NORTHERN LEAGUE

EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN

CONTRACT WITH UMPIRE FOR USE OF AUTOMOBILE DURING THE
SEASON OF 1948.

This is memo of agreement between the Northern League and
the umpire signed below for the use of the umpire's car for
the transportation of himself and partner from city to city
within the league during the playing season of 1948.

The umpire agrees to furnish the car for the transportation
of himself and partner assigned to work with him from city
to city within the league, and to keep said car in good
running condition;

The umpire agrees to have his car insured in his name by
a policy that will satisfy the Wisconsin State Industrial
Commission as to liability for operation of the motor
vehicle within the State of Wisconsin and to keep said
insurance in effect during the playing season of 1948 in
the Northern League;

The Northern League agrees to pay the umpire for the use
of his car for the transportation of himself and his
assigned partner from city to city within the league
the sum of 6¢ per mile. Not included in this mileage are
those miles driven within the city or at the pleasure of
the umpire.

In witness of the above agreement the Northern League
President and the Umpire have signed such agreement this
.....day of.....,1948.

President Northern League

Umpire

This agreement between the Northern League and its umpires shows that the league office preferred to pay umpires mileage over making travel arrangements for them, perhaps as a cost-saving measure.

teur baseball teams, golfers, and service club members at special games and extended invitations to these groups to attend the festivities. The franchise also added extra entertainment, including anything from Little League all-star games and American Legion drum and bugle corps performances to nationally known entertainers such as baseball clown Jackie Price and baton twirling champion Pat Ryan. The team even hosted a wedding at home plate prior to a September 1953 game. Finally, team officials organized a fundraising network to bring in additional capital. The group, known as the Home Plate Club, was modeled on a similar organization that supported the Fargo-Moorhead franchise. The Pheasants' board of directors recruited wealthy supporters who agreed to donate money to the team when the club finished a season in the red. The Home Plate Club saved the team from financial ruin several times in the 1950s.²⁴

Despite these efforts, the Pheasants' financial woes continued throughout the 1950s. The money-losing 1957 season set off a community-wide debate over the franchise's future, as the directors' frustration boiled over. "We have about 500 faithful [fans] who really want the Pheasants to continue," team president Pete Bradbury announced to the *American-News* in August of that year, "but this is not enough to warrant the work, time and money that your directors and a few others have put into bringing the Northern League here."²⁵ After these comments went public, letters debating the club's future poured into the newspaper's offices. Some argued that it was time to disband the team. Leo J. Neifer of Aberdeen resented the intense effort to keep the team afloat. "We are attempting to help the few [investors in the Pheasants] instead of our own community's children," Niefer asserted angrily. He urged that the franchise be liquidated and the community's energies be redirected to local recreational programs.²⁶ Elton Howard of Groton observed that the Pheasants did not have enough support from either the Orioles or the community. "The directors of the association

24. Ibid., 30 June 1951, 20 June, 27 July 1952, 16, 21 Aug., 5 Sept., 18 Oct. 1953, 26 July 1955, 20 Sept. 1956, 11 Aug. 1957, 30 Aug. 1962.

25. Ibid., 15 Aug. 1957.

26. Ibid., 21 Aug. 1957.

had better quit beating their heads against the stone wall and call it quits at the end of this season,” he concluded.²⁷

Despite the team’s struggles, most people who wrote to the *American-News* about the club seemed to agree with the newspaper’s headline that urged the Pheasants’ directors to “Keep Pro Baseball.”²⁸ I. B. Christophersen of Aberdeen argued that “regardless of the record of the 1957 Pheasants, they have played a lot of good ball and have provided many pleasant evenings for fans.” A professional baseball team was a “mark of a city that is trying to be alive and in step,” he explained. Christophersen concluded his letter by exclaiming, “Let’s keep the Pheasants!!!”²⁹ Other baseball supporters agreed, with some offering solutions to the club’s financial woes. Aberdeen resident K. C. Perrizo suggested that the team run additional promotions and a more intense preseason ticket sales campaign. A. A. Zimmerman advised team officials to find another major-league parent club, arguing that the Orioles were not providing enough quality players for the Pheasants to compete in the Northern League and the resulting poor on-field performance was driving down gate receipts. Criticism of the Pheasant-Oriole pact intensified in 1958, with *American-News* sports editor Larry Desautels urging the franchise’s board of directors to sever ties with Baltimore. In August of that year, a group of prominent businesspeople held a public meeting to discuss whether the working agreement between Aberdeen and Baltimore should be terminated.³⁰

As community pressure to cut ties with the Orioles mounted, the big-league club offered the Pheasants financial incentives to maintain Aberdeen’s place in the Baltimore farm system. “The Pheasants had a strong management team and knew how to operate a club well,” former Orioles official Harry I. Dalton recalled over three decades later.³¹ Accordingly, the parent team offered to increase its annual contribu-

27. Ibid., 23 Aug. 1957.

28. Ibid., 22 Aug. 1957.

29. Ibid.

30. *Aberdeen American-News*, 18 Aug. 1957, 23 May, 7, 17 Aug. 1958.

31. Harry I. Dalton, Pheasants Questionnaire (ca. 1990), Folder 6, Box 3036A, Northern League Baseball Collection, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre.



Local artist Gordon Haug's cartoons featuring Philbert the Pheasant graced the front page of the *Aberdeen American-News* the morning after each game and usually commented on the team's performance.

tion to the minor-league club from four thousand to seven thousand dollars. The additional three thousand dollars would help clear up outstanding team debts. Orioles officials also convinced the Pheasants' board of directors that Baltimore's rebuilding plan, which emphasized improved scouting and player development, would lead to better teams in Aberdeen. The new agreement was too good to pass up.³² On 13 September 1958, the Pheasants announced that they had renewed their pact with Baltimore. "Although we have had two years of losing ball teams," new team president Byron J. McElligott explained, "we feel the risk involved in cutting away from the Orioles, and seeking another working agreement would be very great." He went on to proclaim that "financially we have the best working agreement in baseball."³³

The economic incentives in the 1958 working agreement between the Orioles and the Pheasants were part of the major leagues' effort to rescue the minors from financial ruin. As minor-league teams went under in the 1950s, the majors feared that their farm system would collapse, leaving no place to develop young talent. Accordingly, the major leagues implemented a plan to save the minors in the mid-1950s. New working agreements required the major-league clubs to pay players' salaries and cover spring training costs. The Orioles followed the trend, and post-1958 Aberdeen-Baltimore agreements contained these terms. With expenses reduced significantly, the Pheasants were better positioned financially than at any time since the 1940s. The cash infusion from the Orioles allowed Pheasants officials to announce on opening day 1959 that the franchise's finances were on a solid footing. The club had almost four thousand dollars in the bank when the 1959 season began and reported five thousand dollars in profit at its conclusion. Between 1959 and 1964, the franchise typically broke even or finished with a small profit, except for an astounding eighty-five-hundred-dollar profit for the 1964 campaign.³⁴

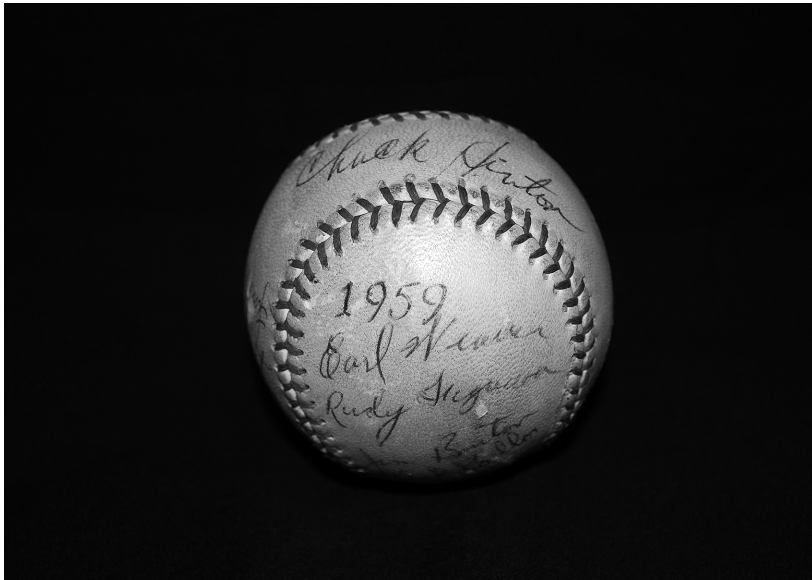
32. Warren Corbett, "The Oriole Way," in *Pitching, Defense, and Three-Run Homers: The 1970 Baltimore Orioles*, ed. Mark Armour and Malcolm Allen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and Society for American Baseball Research, 2012), pp. 1–2; *Aberdeen American-News*, 9 Sept. 1958.

33. *Aberdeen American-News*, 14 Sept. 1958.

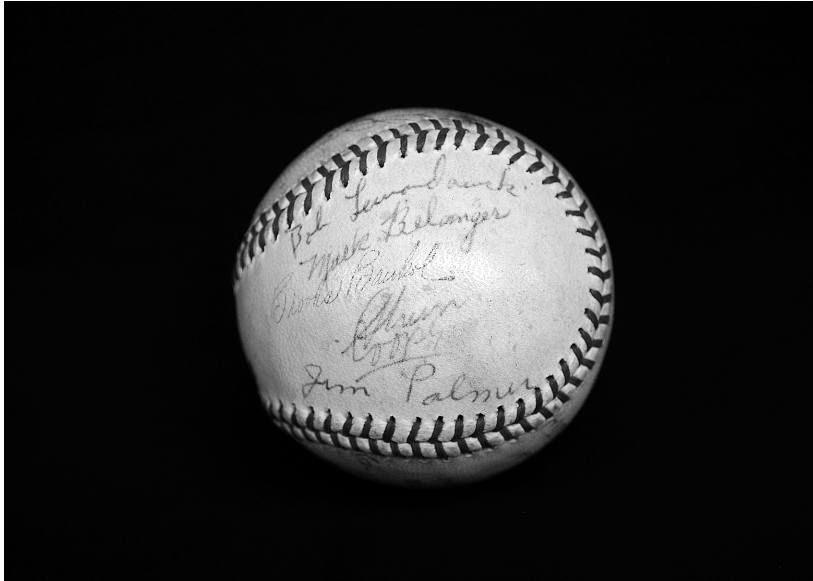
34. Obojski, *Busb League*, pp. 28–29; Sullivan, *The Minors*, pp. 254–55; Chadwick, *Base-*

The Pheasants not only achieved financial stability in the early 1960s but also played well on the field. During these years, the club finished with a winning record every season, participated in three pennant chases, and ran away with the 1964 Northern League title. Fans also saw many future big leaguers play for the Pheasants, including short-stop Mark Belanger, outfielder Lou Piniella, pitcher Eddie Watt, and future Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Palmer. In 1959, spectators enjoyed the antics of fiery manager Earl Weaver, who was frequently ejected from games for arguing with umpires. Weaver went on to lead the Orioles to four American League pennants (1969–1971, 1979) and one World Series title (1970). He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1996. Another future Oriole skipper, Cal Ripken, Sr., managed the Pheasants for three seasons, including the 1964 championship. Ripken

ball's Hometown Teams, pp. 133, 136; *Aberdeen American-News*, 19 Apr., 26 Aug. 1959, 10 Sept. 1961, 2 July 1962, 16 Aug. 1963, 8 Nov. 1964; Keller, Pheasants Questionnaire; interview with Dennis R. Maloney, Aberdeen, S.Dak., 10 July 2015.



Earl Weaver's signature is visible on this baseball autographed by the 1959 Pheasants. The fiery manager led the Orioles to a World Series title eleven years later.



Future Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Palmer and Gold Glove shortstop Mark Belanger were among the 1964 Pheasants who autographed this ball. The duo went on to win the World Series with Weaver and the Orioles in 1970.

brought his young family, including future Hall of Fame shortstop Cal, Jr., to Aberdeen during these summers.³⁵

Shortly after the elder Ripken led the 1964 team to the Northern League crown, the Pheasants and the entire league faced possible extinction. This time, the threat came from decisions made at the major-league level. Beginning in the mid-1960s, big-league clubs streamlined their farm systems by reducing the number of working agreements they maintained with minor-league affiliates. Major-league executives believed that fewer leagues and teams would improve player development and cost less. This trend placed the Northern League in jeopardy. Aberdeen retained its agreement with the Orioles after the 1964 season, but three of the six other Northern League franchises lost their affiliations with their parent clubs. These teams searched for oth-

35. "Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946–1971"; "Aberdeen Pheasants Major League Alumni."

er major league clubs to work with, but no interested partners could be found. By December 1964, it appeared that the Northern League would be forced to fold, a victim of the major leagues' cost-cutting. A Northern League delegation traveled to the major leagues' winter meetings in Houston, Texas, and desperately campaigned for player development agreements. The persistence of the Northern League representatives paid off as major-league officials finally gave in and agreed to support the endangered circuit.³⁶ "They haunted us for four days," one major-league official said of the Northern League delegates. "We decided that if they want baseball that much we'd better see that they get it."³⁷

In order to save their circuit, however, Northern League officials made a significant concession. The new Northern League would be a "rookie league," featuring players with no more than one year of professional experience and staging a short season lasting from mid-June to mid-August. Major-league clubs had created the rookie-league concept as part of their farm-system reorganization of the early 1960s. After the Northern League downgraded to rookie baseball, the Grand Forks, Bismarck-Mandan, and Winnipeg franchises all dropped out. Their departure left only Aberdeen, Duluth-Superior, and Saint Cloud in the new circuit with just six months to find replacement cities. Over the winter, Northern League officials worked with a group of Huron business leaders who organized a team and secured a major-league parent club. No other interested communities could be found, however, so the Northern League operated with only four teams in 1965.³⁸ Despite the major leagues' effort to cull the minors, the Northern League was still running. On opening day 1965, league president Roland E. Parcel proclaimed that "our fight for survival has been won."³⁹

The Pheasants' conversion to rookie-league baseball was a success

36. Obojski, *Bush League*, pp. 28–30; Sullivan, *The Minors*, pp. 254–55; Chadwick, *Baseball's Hometown Teams*, pp. 133, 136; Bob Golon, *No Minor Accomplishment: The Revival of New Jersey Professional Baseball* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rivergate Books, 2008), pp. 28–29; *Aberdeen American-News*, 8 Nov., 3 Dec. 1964.

37. *Aberdeen American-News*, 3 Dec. 1964.

38. *Ibid.*, 11 Jan., 5, 7, 10 Feb., 28 Apr. 1965.

39. *Ibid.*, 27 June 1965.

at first. The team played competitively in the first two seasons of the rookie-league format and turned a small profit. Average attendance per home game in 1965–1966 was even slightly higher than it had been for the period 1960–1964. Total yearly attendance declined, however, as the rookie-league campaign was some fifty games shorter than the former Class C season had been. The Northern League expanded to six teams in 1966, adding franchises in Sioux Falls and Bismarck.⁴⁰

Unfortunately for the Pheasants and their fans, the initial success of rookie-league baseball turned out to be short-lived. By 1967, spectators had noticed that the quality of play in the new Northern League was significantly lower than it had been under the former Class C arrangement. Rookie-league managers emphasized player development over winning games, thus giving their pitchers more opportunities to work out of jams with opposing runners on base. Inexperienced fielders made more errors than Class C players had in the past. These problems made the games less entertaining and less competitive than before. In seven seasons of rookie-league baseball, the Pheasants finished with a losing record five times, causing fans to complain about the low caliber of play. With other recreational opportunities readily available, many people opted to spend their time at the swimming pool or on the golf course rather than attend Pheasants games. Average attendance for a home game between 1967 and 1971 was about 503 people, or roughly 190 fewer than had attended a typical game from 1960 to 1964. On some nights during the last five years of Northern League play, the team drew fewer than two hundred fifty spectators.⁴¹

Despite the drop in attendance, the team remained financially stable. With the Orioles covering most of the club's expenses and with

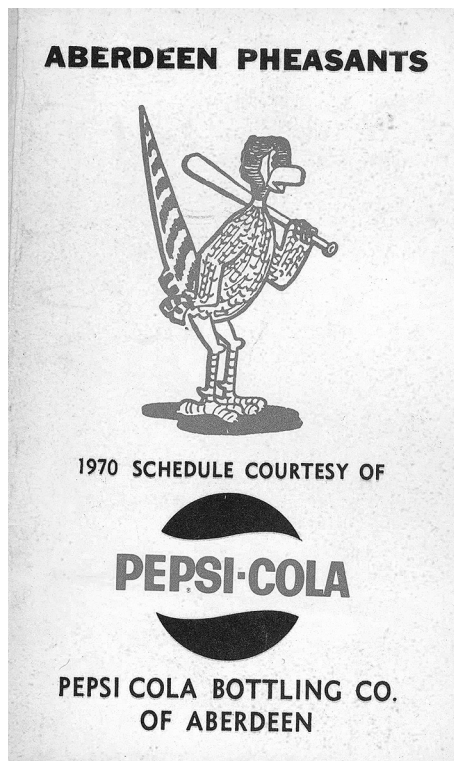
40. "Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946–1971"; Financial Statements, Aberdeen Baseball Association, Inc., 31 Oct. 1965, 30 Sept. 1966, Box 3, Northern League Papers; *Aberdeen American-News*, 2 Feb., 4 July 1965. Attendance comparisons in this paragraph and following are based upon data for the 1960 through 1971 seasons in Johnson and Wolff, eds., *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, pp. 508–55.

41. "Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946–1971"; Financial Statements, Aberdeen Baseball Association, Inc., 30 Sept. 1971, Box 3, Northern League Papers; Northern League Audit Reports, 1967, 1971, Box 2, *ibid.*; *Aberdeen American-News*, 11 Aug. 1967; Daily Report, Aberdeen Pheasants, 12 Aug. 1970, Box 3, Northern League Papers; interview with Maloney.

prudent management from its directors, the franchise was able to make ends meet. “We always finished in the black,” former Pheasants board member and president Dennis R. Maloney recalled about this era. “[There was] not a lot of money,” he explained, “but enough to keep [the] process going for the next season.”⁴²

Aberdeen was not the only place where support for Northern League baseball faded between 1965 and 1971. As attendance declined around the league, communities dropped out, making it necessary to recruit new members to take their place. Nine different cities fielded Northern League clubs over the period, but there were never more than six

42. Interview with Maloney.



Even as interest waned, businesses continued to support the Pheasants.



Fewer than five hundred spectators witnessed this August 1971 contest in which the Pheasants defeated the host Sioux Falls Packers.

active teams in any season. Only once did the circuit play two consecutive seasons with the same teams. The Northern League was back to four teams in 1971 after Huron and Duluth-Superior dropped out, leaving league officials discouraged. "If the fans don't want to be entertained by a baseball team, there isn't much reason for all the hard work the directors do to keep a ball team going," *Aberdeen American-News* sports editor Larry Desautels wrote near the end of the 1971 season.⁴³

With only Aberdeen and Saint Cloud committed to playing in 1972, Northern League officials desperately searched for new cities to join the circuit. They contacted baseball enthusiasts in Sioux City, Iowa, and the Minnesota cities of Rochester and Hibbing, among other places, but no community agreed to organize a team. Without enough teams, officials had little choice but to close down the Northern League.

43. *Aberdeen American-News*, 30 Aug. 1971.



Pheasants pitcher Henry Clayton has the visitors' dugout to himself before the game against Sioux Falls on 12 August 1971.

League president Arthur O. (“Art”) White made the announcement on 22 January 1972. White declared that he had exhausted every possible option in an effort to reorganize the circuit but simply could not find enough interested cities.⁴⁴ Pheasants president Dennis Maloney lamented the end of twenty-six years of professional baseball in the Hub City, saying, “It’s a sad day for those faithful Aberdeen baseball enthusiasts who have supported the club through some tough years.”⁴⁵

Despite some difficult years and constant financial struggles, the Pheasants were a success. The club was never meant to be a money-making enterprise; rather, it was a community asset for twenty-six years. The team provided its fans with many hours of entertainment, highlighted by several pennant chases, two league championships, and the 1964 exhibition game with the Orioles. These twenty-six seasons of professional baseball were a vitally important part of Aberdeen’s entertainment and sports landscape. The Pheasants’ success entailed more than just winning baseball games. The team also enhanced the sense of community in the city. The Pheasants brought Aberdeen-area baseball enthusiasts together for a common purpose. The community united behind the Pheasants by buying the club’s stock, donating money to save the team from financial ruin, and cheering the hometown nine on to victory. Pheasants games were an important center of community life in the summer. The ballpark was the place where the city’s service clubs received public recognition of their work, the community watched fireworks on the Fourth of July, and past baseball heroes were remembered at old timers’ nights.⁴⁶ These activities gave people a deeper connection to each other and to their city.

As a direct link to big-league baseball, the Pheasants were a major source of status for the city of Aberdeen. The Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce, city government, and other civic groups all highlighted professional baseball as a community asset. Chamber of Commerce

44. “Aberdeen Pheasants Team Standings, 1946–1971”; Johnson and Wolff, eds., *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, p. 40; *Aberdeen American-News*, 30 Aug., 9 Nov. 1971, 13, 22 Jan. 1972.

45. *Aberdeen American-News*, 22 Jan. 1972.

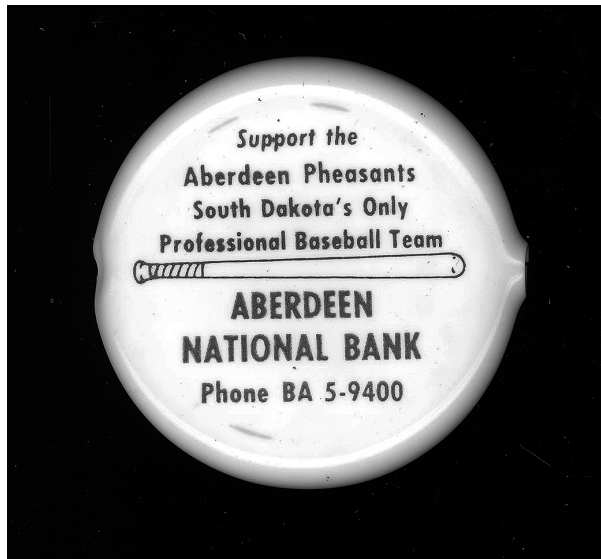
46. *Ibid.*, 24 Feb. 1946, 16, 18 Aug., 18 Oct. 1953, 30 June 1963.

promotional materials featured the team prominently during the mid-1960s and boasted that “professional baseball attracts huge crowds at home games.”⁴⁷ In the early 1960s when Aberdeen was the only South Dakota city in the Northern League, city officials bragged that Aberdeen had “South Dakota’s only professional baseball team.”⁴⁸ The Pheasants allowed Aberdeen residents to get to know future big-league ballplayers such as Don Larsen, “Tito” Francona, and Jim Palmer. The local newspaper maintained these relationships with stories that followed the careers of former Pheasants and highlighted their successes in the majors. “That was the fun part of it; watching these kids grow and play such great baseball in the American League,” Dennis Maloney recalled in 2015.⁴⁹

47. Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce, “Aberdeen, South Dakota” (ca. 1965), Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce Annual Reports, Box 25, General Archival Collection, Dacotah Prairie Museum.

48. City of Aberdeen, “Hub City of the Dakotas” (ca. 1960–1965), Box 8B, *ibid.*

49. Interview with Maloney.



This plastic coin purse is a reminder of the time when Aberdeen was home to the state’s only professional baseball club.



Manager Cal Ripken, Sr., stands at center in this portrait of the 1964 Northern League champion Pheasants.

Even after the club disbanded, the Pheasants continued to be important to the city. Over the succeeding four decades, people continued to tell stories about seeing big-league stars who played for the Pheasants. In 1998, Aberdeen's Dacotah Prairie Museum produced a popular exhibit on the team.⁵⁰ As recently as 2014, the *American News* still reported on former Pheasants and their children. One such story about Cal Ripken, Jr., referred to the Hall of Fame infielder as a "former Aberdeen resident," reminding readers that his father Cal, Sr., had managed the Pheasants for three seasons.⁵¹ An *American News* profile

50. *Aberdeen American News*, 11 June 1998.

51. *Ibid.*, 25 May 2014.

of Terry Francona identified the Cleveland Indians manager as an “Aberdeen native.” His father, Tito, played for the 1953 Pheasants and later married Roberta Jackson of Aberdeen. Terry Francona was born in the Hub City six years after his father played baseball there but spent most of his youth in Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, Francona told the newspaper that he waved to drivers of cars with South Dakota license plates when he was on the highway.⁵² More than forty years after the Pheasants played their last game, the team still connects Aberdeen to the majors and remains a source of community pride.

52. Ibid., 21 May 2014.

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On the covers: The popularity of baseball in South Dakota dates back to territorial days. For more than two decades in the mid-1900s, Pheasants baseball was a fixture of summertime entertainment and the local economy in Aberdeen. In this issue, Daryl Webb details the rise and fall of this professional Northern League team.

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