

The Independent Carolina League, 1936-38: Baseball Outlaws

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The independent Carolina League, the professional offspring of semi-pro textile baseball, was born of the Depression-era collapse of organized professional baseball leagues, fed by inter-community rivalries and nurtured by a spirit of independent community enterprise. It became a threat to organized baseball when its leaders realized they could attract high-quality players by offering salaries that were competitive far beyond the size of the league towns, and by promising players career stability (instead of the journeyman life of the organized minor leagues), community hero status and off-season jobs in an era of severe economic uncertainty. Declared an outlaw league by organized baseball, the league nevertheless survived and flourished for three years, partly because of strong community support that defied "organization" from outside and partly because the executives of the close-knit league had the flexibility to make rules to fit any situation that came up, stoking rivalries while also helping to keep rival teams from foundering financially. Several of the league's strengths, however, became fatal weaknesses when organized baseball began to recover from the Depression and high-quality prospects again began to see their best opportunities in organized baseball instead of the outlaw league.

Before the independent Carolina League was even a month into its first season in 1936, the boss of organized baseball knew he had a problem.

The upstart independent league quickly had become a threat to the organized leagues. Its teams were pirating away talented ballplayers with the lure of higher wages, more enthusiastic fans, community hero status and an off-season career. If the talent drain continued, it might jeopardize the complete control that the organized baseball monopoly had held over players for decades.

Declaring the Carolina League "outlaw" and blacklisting its players, the czar of minor league baseball -- Judge William G. Bramham of Durham, N.C. -- began a campaign to destroy the league.

Over the next three years, the campaign waged by the National

Association of Professional Baseball gradually backed the outlaw league into a corner but, by itself, could not kill it. The Carolina League -- born during the devastation that the Great Depression brought onto organized baseball -- would thrive for three tumultuous seasons, fueled by the tight-knit community spirit of Southern textile towns. Fans enjoyed the exciting and often unruly play on the field as much as they relished the cunning back-room tactics that team executives used to get the upper hand on their opponents and on organized baseball. But in their insistence on turning their league into a battleground of wits where they could wage their rivalries, the Carolina League's leaders outwitted themselves. Ultimately the league would die because the same qualities that made it so competitive in its heyday became fatal liabilities when its day passed.

On May 18, 1936, however, civic and business leaders throughout the Piedmont region of North Carolina believed they were embarking on a grand enterprise as the Carolina League's first season opened, flush with ambitious community pride, spurred by rivalries among neighboring towns and encouraged by their success in more modest baseball ventures. During the next three years, this upstart league would challenge the foundations of the all-powerful monopoly of organized professional baseball and its standard player contract, which legally bound a player to a team as long as he played ball. Initially alarmed, Carolina League fans and officials alike would learn to view the NAPB's blacklists with sardonic derision, and they would wear the "outlaw" label with a defiant swagger.

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The South's economy, already faltering in the 1920s while the rest of

the country prospered, was knocked flat by the Great Depression. Small North Carolina industrial towns often survived on the strength of one mill, the paternal control of its owners and the stubbornness of working people raised to fend for themselves.

For many in the working class, life in the textile towns consisted of uncertain work in the mills and the open neighborliness of insular mill villages. Line workers lucky enough to have jobs labored long hours in the mills at meager wages. Those who stayed home saved empty flour sacks and pieced the colorful fabric together to make school dresses for their daughters. On the long summer evenings throughout those years, almost the only entertainment was at the ballpark. And that's where almost everyone went.

Teams of local textile workers, sponsored by the mills where they worked, drew hundreds of fans to dirt ballfields for their two or three games per week. Rivalries between neighboring mill towns developed and flourished, exciting fans and taking their minds off their economic hardships. Games became community social events: not just entertainment for the masses but a place for prominent men and women to socialize. Players became local celebrities. The schoolboy who could boast that a player was living at his house, eating at his parents' table, or working beside his father in the mill had something impressive to brag about. Mill bosses, unencumbered by the strictures of modern personnel practices, could hire whomever they wanted; often they gave year-round jobs to capable ballplayers just to keep them in the fold. Some of those players had only to show up on Fridays for their paychecks -- an easy supplement to their baseball salaries known as "the mill envelope" -- and everyone looked the other way, or at least dared not complain. Other players used the opportunity to make careers for themselves

outside baseball that would last a lifetime.

The Carolinas already had earned a reputation for producing quality homegrown ballplayers. The powerful heads of sprawling baseball organizations -- such as Branch Rickey of the St. Louis Cardinals and Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics -- drew players from the dozens of cow-pasture teams that dotted North Carolina, making it the unofficial capital of minor league baseball. Soon, besides its homegrown talent, the Piedmont -- the rolling plateau between the state's coastal plain and the Blue Ridge -- was attracting players from elsewhere, and Mack and Rickey, among others, cultivated it. (Between 1930 and 1939, at least two dozen players either arrived in the Carolina League from, or left it to join, major league rosters. Probably there were more, but their tendency to play under assumed names to avoid being blacklisted makes documentation impossible.)

By the winter of 1935-36, organized baseball was courting the teams of the textile leagues. Local leaders knew they had a winner, and they wanted to make the most of it. So they were determined to keep their enterprise independent. It built community spirit -- from which the mills could only benefit -- and it was a convenient outlet for workers to let off steam, which they did at the ballpark with relish and abandon. Baseball was the all-popular national pastime at the height of its golden age. So what if a few of the local baseball stars had to be lured to stay with jobs that required no work during the season? It only made things more exciting when an executive could put one over on his competitor by spirited some talented ringer away from a major league organization and bringing him into town to play under an assumed name. It only elevated his sense of shrewdness -- and his community's pride -- when he was able to extort more players from that same major league organization in exchange for returning the rising star he

had swiped.

Perhaps nearer to the heart of these executives' determination, however, was that textile baseball and the textile industry had an important common enemy. Organization from the outside was the only perceived threat to the local bosses' complete control of their industry and of the people who did the work. In many workers eyes it had become, after the disastrous General Strike of 1934, an equal threat to their way of life.

Charles A. Cannon had built his father's Cannon Mills Co. in Kannapolis, N.C., into an international manufacturing giant and himself had become one of the most potent political forces in the South. Though they weren't as powerful regionally, the authority of such mill owners as Francis and Albert Garrou in Valdese, N.C., was unchallenged locally. For these paternalistic magnates it was worth almost any expense to keep the disruptive influence of Northern labor organizers away from their isolated, dominated and loyal workers. Whether applied to labor or to baseball, "organized" was a dirty word to them, as well as to many workers, who had seen their livelihoods threatened in the General Strike and mill workers' lives at stake in the deadly Loray Mill strike in Gastonia, N.C., in 1929. To them, organized labor and organized baseball represented similar ways in which people from the North -- where much of baseball's power structure resided -- or simply from outside the community were attempting to wrest Southern affairs from local control and disrupt the local way of life. Organized baseball controlled all the players in the minor leagues; players had to accept being assigned wherever and whenever they were directed, at the salary offered, and local teams had to accept these comings and goings and make the best of them.

The roots of outlaw baseball

A September 1927 game that is still locally famous demonstrated to area baseball enthusiasts just what was possible, given enough money and effort. Kannapolis, an unincorporated town that was literally the property of Charles A. Cannon, was home to some of the state's largest textile mills and a relatively huge millworker community. Concord, the 135-year-old Cabarrus County seat only seven miles to the south, was where Cannon and his mill bosses lived, as well as their lawyers and doctors. The two semi-pro teams had played each other 19 times during the season. Concord led the series 10-9, and in September the two agreed to meet for a potential two-game series that would determine "the semi-pro championship of North Carolina."

The semi-pro textile teams of Piedmont towns in the '20s had made it normal practice to bring in a professional minor league pitcher to pitch an important game. Paying these ringers -- or "outlaws," as they already had come to be known -- was expensive, and to bring in more than one at a time was almost unheard-of. But a class of player arose throughout the South: the outlaw, playing outside his legally binding contract with some organization in the National Association of Professional Baseball.

Like most organized professional minor leagues, the Class B Piedmont League and South Atlantic Leagues had ended their seasons Sept. 1, so all their players were available -- for the right price. Eager to get the upper hand over Kannapolis, Concord manager Manley Llewellyn went scouting for additional talent. Llewellyn -- who had been an outstanding pitcher at the University of North Carolina and had pitched for the New York Yankees in 1922 -- had starred for the Greenville Spinners in the South Atlantic ("Sally") League in 1926, and Greenville had just won the 1927 Sally League championship. Llewellyn asked his old manager, Frank Walker, to lend him

some players. Meanwhile, manager Rube Wilson was digging up ringers for Kannapolis. Of course, hiring these players for the pivotal matchup cost money.

Jake Wade, nationally known sportswriter for *The Charlotte Observer*, wrote of the matchup in his column "Sports Whirl":

"Concord and Kannapolis had set the sky the limit for the final games. So rapidly did the managers of the two clubs change players that we doubt seriously if they knew all the players they were giving tremendous salaries. The clubs quit semi-professional ball and began to scout the South Atlantic, Virginia and Piedmont leagues. They succeeded in getting the men, but the prices came high. Two more weeks of such procedure and we daresay that most of the fans in both places would have had to mortgage house and lot to pay salaries to the ball players."

The game for which they were preparing would represent the first known wholesale use of "outlaw" professional ballplayers by the semi-pro teams of the Piedmont region.

On Wednesday, Sept. 7, Concord Mayor C. H. Barrier issued a proclamation calling for all businesses and stores in Concord to close so that all citizens could attend the afternoon game the next day. Ten automobile dealerships and garages immediately agreed to close early.¹

On game day, crowd estimates ranged from more than 3,000 inside the ballpark to more than 7,000 counting the fans in the trees and on the banks and hills around the ballpark, according to *The Tribune*. It was a huge crowd by semi-pro standards. Marvin Watts, who later played in front of 6,000 fans in Kannapolis in the 1937 outlaw Carolina League, said it was the biggest

¹White Auto Co., White Brothers Tire Co., Bollinger Service Station, Syles Motor Co., Corl Motor Co., Reid Motor Co., S & S Motor Co., Auto Supply and Repair Co., Concord Motor Co. and Standard Buick Co.

crowd he ever saw in Cabarrus County. A young teenager at the time, he watched the event from the branches of a tree overlooking the fence.

Blanche Stewart, who sold tickets at the park for her father, said the crowd arrived early. By 90 minutes before game time, the house was packed in the steamy late-summer heat, fans spilling out of the stands to crowd right onto the playing field along both foul lines and all the way around the outfield. An hour before game time, all concession stands had sold out of food.

Many of the fans wore their Sunday best to the game, which had become an important social event in Concord. But some were ready for more than baseball. Some filled empty pop bottles with sand for use as weapons. Reports were rampant that the more rabid fans had brought knives and guns.

The first on-field argument came before the game started. The teams couldn't agree on several rules, including what would happen if a fair ball went into the crowd in the outfield with men on base, or whether the crowd in foul territory were required to move to allow a fielder to reach a fly ball. Meanwhile, clouds were gathering overhead.

Kannapolis scored two runs in the top of the first inning. In the bottom of the first, Concord batted, and on a single runners came home from second and third. According to news reports of the day, the plate umpire first allowed both Concord runs to count, but then decided a ground rule had been violated and ordered the second runner back to third base.

On that provocation, enraged fans poured out of the stands and charged from their places around the field toward home plate in a wild melee.

At the same moment, the heavens emptied in violent summer storm, flooding Concord's Webb Field with several inches of water in minutes, and the mob forgot its madness, turned and started running for the gates. Harry

Martin, retired Concord restaurateur and businessman, said, "I was ankle-deep in water before I could get out of the ball park." Lillian Stewart was standing on a hill outside the ballpark with friends. She said, "We were nearly drowned before we could move."

Curiously, however, almost nowhere else in town had it rained a drop.

Fred Chapman of Kannapolis, a teenager at the time who later would play in the Carolina League and in the majors, said all the reports of fans with weapons were true, and he later learned the umpires, at least, were ready. When Chapman was playing in the International League in 1935, an umpire learned Chapman was from Kannapolis and said, "You remember that game in '27 that they thought there was gonna be such a riot and we got washed out? I was prepared. I had a .45 in my pocket."²

The championship series was called off the next day. Those who were at the game called the thunderstorm "the work of the Lord." But the game was the beginning of the basic idea that ultimately gave birth to the outlaw Carolina League: hiring a whole roster right off teams in organized professional baseball. And it fed the fierce rivalry that proved to be both the lifeblood of the league and its fatal weakness.

Learning the outlaw game

Soon mill teams began using job and pay inducements to lure top players onto their permanent rosters. As this practice began to pay off with victories and big gates, it came to be expected. Gradually, local civic and textile mill leaders gained experience in putting good baseball teams together. Throughout the early 1930s they became practiced at finding

²1991 interview with Fred Chapman.

baseball players and luring them away permanently by offering year-round jobs in the mills.

The Carolina League might never have been possible without the Depression, which had devastated organized baseball as it had the rest of the nation's economy. Boasting 26 leagues nationwide in 1929, organized baseball had only 14 by 1933. Of the 19 leagues that opened play in 1932, at the depth of the Depression, only 13 had lasted through the season.³ Half the players who had been in baseball's talent pipeline before the crash of '29 no longer had jobs; there were many more talented players than roster spots. Professional leagues that were able to continue operating offered lower and lower salaries. And as always, once the baseball season was over, the players faced the added difficulty of returning home and finding off-season work -- a gamble made all too uncertain by the 25 percent unemployment rates of the era.

So it's not surprising that textile teams were increasingly able to attract professional baseball players from all over the country. Many were former major league players. Many others were on their way up and came from Class AA or A1 professional baseball, at that time only one step below the major leagues (until 1946, when baseball's first AAA leagues added another rung to the system). Some came to these Class D-sized towns -- several of which were little more than a crossroads with a textile mill -- for the money, seeking year-round economic security. Others came because organized baseball had cast them out, suspending them for fighting, drinking or other misbehavior. With the money they were prepared to offer as a full-time league, these towns attracted experienced journeyman baseball players in

³*The Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, Baseball America Inc., 1993, pp. 173-183.

their late 20s or early 30s who had learned every trick in baseball, both legal and illegal.

The area also incubated its own players. It drew college students and other youngsters who knew they could improve their fortunes in organized baseball if they developed their skills by playing against the seasoned veterans in the textile leagues before casting their lots with particular major league organizations. And it was fertile ground for local players who aspired to bigger venues or who, after moderate success in organized baseball, had dropped out and returned home to Piedmont towns to build new careers and become the heroes of textile mill teams.

Joining the veterans and the college players were the same local and area baseball stars who had first made textile baseball competitive. Some of them had organized professional experience but, though still on their teams' reserve lists, had no baseball jobs as organizations scaled back during the Depression. They had returned home for three meals a day and what work they could pick up in the local textile mills; the mills would take advantage of their talent to build winning teams that would bring the whole mill village together to cheer for the hometown boys.

The stigma of 'organization'

In 1934, textile workers had yet to realize the \$12 per week wages that had been promised under the new Textile Code, and North Carolina had just enacted a 3 percent sales tax. Then the United Textile Workers moved a small but militant force of Northern unionized workers into this uneasy situation. The so-called "Flying Squadrons" -- so named because they zoomed throughout the Southern textile area in Model T Fords, determined to organize their Southern textile brothers and sisters -- finally organized the General

Textile Strike of 1934.

The mill owners first responded with "heart-to-heart talks" and communications with their workers. "If we turn against our employers, can we blame them if they withdraw support from our churches, schools, baseball teams and all the things that have meant so much to us?" the manager of Stonecutter Mills in Spindale, N.C., told his employees. "Let us count the cost before we go too far." Later the owners resorted to firing employees who joined the union.⁴ For most workers, the strike only made bad times much worse. As the strike lengthened, people were hungry, and organized labor had no money to help the strikers get through even three weeks without a mill check. Violence erupted when non-union employees fought with their unionized neighbors. The textile owners likened the strike to Reconstruction days, when Northern carpetbaggers exploited Southern enterprises. N.C. Governor J. C. Blucher Ehringhaus responded to the mill owners' call and sent the National Guard to keep the peace in the small towns and villages all over the Piedmont.⁵

Southern textile towns reacted with ill will toward both government and organized labor. Twenty-two days after it began, President Roosevelt asked that the strike be ended on Sept. 21, 1934.⁶ Those who participated in the strike had learned to share the mill owners' profound suspicion of organized labor, government and, in fact, anyone but their own neighbors.

"Mill hands learned from their history, and in 1934, the lesson for many was a deep distrust of government and trade unions alike...."⁷ That

⁴*Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987, pp. 305-306, 325, 328-29.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 333-36, 354.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 354.

sentiment stirred up the un-Reconstructed spirit of many Southerners, and it soon generalized to resentment of all outside interference. In later years, it would bolster the determination of the Carolina League's leaders and fans to remain independent of what they all knew as "organized baseball."

Money, maneuvers and metamorphosis

In the league's rambunctious 1935 season, Piedmont textile baseball would reach its pinnacle, even as it was changing into something new. Organized baseball would come courting, and would be scorned. By remaining independent and making its own rules, textile ball would open the door to its more ambitious and free-wheeling offspring: outlaw professional baseball.

In 1935, the league made a key transition: What had been merely a well-known ad-hoc practice in textile ball -- hiring professional ballplayers to fatten rosters -- became a sanctioned league activity. As a result, players came from all over the country. "Dissatisfied professionals" came and went throughout the season as local baseball leaders perfected and expanded their expertise in procuring players.

It didn't take long for the flow of "class men" on and off team rosters to catch up with the Concord Weavers, who apparently were being opportunistic with the rules. On May 17, league officials determined Concord had eight "class men" on its roster instead of four. The team had won five games using the illegal players. In any other league, Concord would have forfeited all five games almost automatically. But the violation was sent to the league's board of directors for disciplinary action. The board's ruling was a preview of the kind of compromising and rule bending that would be both essential and destructive to the Carolina League of 1936-38.

Rube Wilson, manager of the China Grove Chinamen, had made the charge

that Concord had too many class men. Wilson himself was a former professional player and had managed the 1927 Kannapolis Towelers team, bringing in ringers for the Kannapolis team in that ill-fated championship game in Concord. He had spotted Concord's extra players, including those who were playing under assumed names to escape detection. To Concord fans, this was a thief accusing them of robbery. Concord officials claimed they didn't know they had violated the roster rules.

But Concord got off easily, because league directors from other teams voted in their own self-interest: The four teams that hadn't played in those games voted that Concord would forfeit only two of the five games, citing no clear distinction. Fans soon figured out why those four clubs voted the way they did: It meant two more of their opponents would have an additional game in the loss column, even though those losses had come against a team that clearly had used illegal players.

The incident helped set a standard that would earn the "outlaw" label for the league and its successor, the 1936-38 Carolina League. For the next four years, the league would create rules or bend existing ones to suit the situation. Only one common interest persisted through all the changes: Each team, while grabbing for any possible advantage, also knew that for its ultimate self-interest, it must avoid action that would drive another team over the financial edge and threaten to break up the league that made these maneuvers possible.

Often, however, rules meant to bring order or give permanency to the league had the opposite of their intended effect. Trying to cut down on player fights and attacks on umpires, for example, league officials ruled that any player ejected from a game for any reason would be fined \$5 and suspended until the team could show the fine had been deducted from the

player's pay.

Players soon realized they could profit from fighting: Fans began passing the hat to collect donations to pay the fines when players were ejected. The practice would become commonplace during the next four years, and a new pay category entered the vocabulary of the Carolina League players: "argument bonus money."

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Free spending on players caused financial problems for almost all the teams. Nearly every town sold booster tickets -- tickets that cost double or more the normal rate -- and several had conducted subscription campaigns to help cover costs. But the spending was paying off in quality baseball. By midseason, Concord had six players hitting over .300, and five of them had been acquired since the season started.

The quality play was drawing attention to the players. On July 2 it was reported that Kannapolis outfielder Rusty McCall, a Concord native, had signed a contract with the Albany Senators, Washington's International League farm club, and was to report to training camp next spring. Freddie Chapman of Landis already had reported to Albany.

Money problems did not prevent the Concord Weavers from completing one of the most famous and notorious deals of the 1935 season about the same time. Carl Doyle, a strong 6-1, 190-pound wild-fireballing righthander from Tennessee, was 23 and under contract with the Washington Senators' Albany club in the Class AA International League. But he was not playing for Albany. Instead he was pitching for a semi-pro team in the coal mining country around Verda, Ky. Possibly he had left Albany because of the low wages paid to minor league players at the time, or perhaps Albany had cut him

from the roster because of his pitching wildness, which plagued him throughout his career. Whatever the case, the reserve clause in his contract still bound him to Albany. Concord manager Art Hord knew about Doyle and had been trying to get him to come to Concord.

About the same time, Connie Mack, the legendary owner-manager of the Philadelphia Athletics, was looking for a strong right arm. He learned the Senators organization wasn't using Doyle and purchased his contract. Mack sent Doyle a round-trip train ticket and a little traveling money and asked Doyle to report to Philadelphia.⁸

But Hord had other plans. Hearing that Mack had called Doyle up, Hord learned that Doyle's train to Philadelphia would be going through Bristol, a town that straddles the Tennessee-Virginia line. It is not clear whether he had arranged with Doyle to meet him there; but Concord team president Aubrey Hoover drove with his son, Gene, and fellow mill executive Billy Flowe to Bristol, where they found Doyle on the train.

Doyle had no idea whether Mack, when he saw him work out, would activate him as a member of the Athletics, assign him again to some minor league club or return him to Kentucky. Hoover, on the other hand, had hard cash, a place in the Weavers' starting rotation and the promise of a year-round job if he wanted one.

Whether Hoover and Flowe duped or persuaded Doyle off the train that night in Bristol is uncertain. Concord fans of the day said the Weavers "kidnapped" Doyle for ransom; and in fact, before Connie Mack finally got Doyle to Philadelphia, he would have to send three players to Concord in exchange for a player he already owned.

⁸October 1991 interviews with D. Ray McEachern, Cora Hoover McEachern and Anne Hoover Tolleson.

In the second game of the traditional July 4 doubleheader, Concord and Kannapolis saw a matchup of two future major-league pitchers when Doyle faced Buck Ross, who also would be with the Athletics before the season ended, and won 2-1. During his 28-day career with the Concord Weavers, however, Doyle lost more games than he won. His record was 2-3, and he started five games and relieved in two more. But Doyle also had tough competition. Two of his three losses came against Buck Ross and Herman Fink, both of whom would become his teammates with the Philadelphia Athletics only a few weeks later that season.

Soon Connie Mack sent scout Ira Thomas to fetch Doyle to Philadelphia. Thomas told Hoover that Mack had been worried about Doyle when he didn't report. But Hoover didn't want to lose his sensational pitcher just two weeks before Aug. 1, the cutoff date for signing players who would be eligible for the league playoffs. Over the next two weeks Hoover and manager Art Hord negotiated with Doyle and Thomas and with Mack over the telephone, insisting that Mack wait until the end of the Weavers' season before taking Doyle to Philadelphia. "Philadelphia offered the Weavers a good deal of money . . . if Mr. Hoover would release Doyle and send him to Philadelphia...." said D. Ray McEachern, Hoover's son-in-law, but Hoover refused. So the Athletics promised a pitcher in return. Hoover agreed to let Carl Doyle go, and Mack sent several players, even replacing them when the first wave turned out not to be good enough for Hoover.⁹

Just a few days later, in August, Carl Doyle beat the New York Yankees 9-4 in his second game with the Athletics. He would spend part of the 1935 and 1936 seasons with the Athletics and 1939 with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

⁹1991 interview with D. Ray McEachern.

The fans of Concord were ecstatic with the idea that the famous Connie Mack was trying to help the Weavers beat their deadline for signing players. One can only surmise why Connie Mack was willing to try and help. Perhaps the biggest reason was that the Philadelphia organization owned the rights to dozens of unemployed professional ballplayers and could afford to be generous in the interest of maintaining good relationships with this strong independent league, where Mack's scouts had found a good source of young talent. Besides Buck Ross and Cabarrus County native Herman Fink, during the 1935 season Mack also signed Landis Cardinals' left-hander Fred Archer, who would play for Philadelphia in 1936 and 1937. A July 29 article in *The Tribune* called the Athletics "the Weavers' training camp in Philadelphia."

By August, two of the eight teams had dropped out of the league due to financial difficulties caused by free spending. The Landis Cardinals won the championship; of the team's 49 league victories, Herman Fink and Fred Archer together won 30. Fink, 24, reported to the Philadelphia Athletics after the Carolina League playoffs and pitched in the majors through 1937. Archer, 26, would report to the same Connie Mack team at the end of the 1936 season and pitch in the majors for two years. Kannapolis' Lee "Buck" Ross would pitch 10 major league seasons with the Athletics and White Sox.

Independent baseball goes full-time

After a highly successful 1935 semi-pro season, local textile leagues throughout the Piedmont region were more popular than ever, and the play on the field had risen to levels comparable with full-time professional leagues. Moving textile baseball up into a more rarefied level -- a full-time, regional, multi-city, independent baseball league -- looked workable. Piedmont textile executives had a chance to show how much more successful and

enjoyable an independent league, with independent owners and independent players, could be than an organization beholden to some outside power that could whisk players off the local team as quickly as it bestowed them. Baseball was their workers' favorite entertainment, and there could hardly be any better vehicle to reassure those workers that their own benevolent employers and local community leaders were the people who knew and would see to what was best for their communities. It also would establish that those leaders -- and, by extension, those Southern communities -- could compete successfully against the best in any enterprise they chose.

Thus, on May 18, 1936, Jake Wade, award-winning sports editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, wrote:

"Today is opening day, you know. It's a new baseball picture for Charlotte and this section. Not organized professional baseball ... but something which may prove just as entertaining and diverting. Certainly, it's a noble experiment, and most engaging.

"Charlotte is in the Carolina League. The league abides by the rules and general plan of organized professional baseball. The ball they hit is standard and bears the league president's signature. The carefully chosen umpires are uniformed, draw regular salaries, work under strict supervision. The only difference is the players are not strictly chattels as in organized professional baseball. They can leave on a moment's notice and go to an organized professional league, but they cannot jump from one club to another in this circuit."

A "noble experiment" indeed. Charlotte and seven small textile towns - - Concord, Kannapolis and Salisbury from the old Carolina Textile League, plus Hickory, Shelby, Forest City and Valdese from the former Western Carolina Textile League -- began a baseball odyssey that, in the effort to

secure the best baseball players their money could buy, would bring national attention to the area. Players in organized professional baseball now had an alternative with full-time pay. They no longer had to move where and when their team owners directed them and play at the salary offered. The Carolina League accepted them, if they were good enough, and in many cases offered an economic package that included not only higher baseball salaries but also year-round local employment and a life with permanent security off the field. It was a boon to the players and fans, who turned up at Carolina League games in numbers that put nearby minor-league organizations in larger cities to shame.

Behind it all were the men who put together the teams, formed the Carolina League and resolutely kept it independent.

All were prominent businessmen and civic leaders: textile mill owners, textile executives and middle managers, lawyers, doctors, preachers, small businessmen, educators, furniture manufacturers, high school and college coaches.

For most, their baseball management experience consisted of putting together mill teams that played three to four games per week in the local area. They were not paid for their baseball duties and responsibilities; all were volunteers. In fact, nearly everyone involved with any Carolina League team 1936-38 lost some personal money, not to mention time away from work. Nearly every town in the league had to conduct one or more subscription campaigns each season to raise money to pay the players. (At just 25 cents a seat, at least an hour's pay to a mill worker, gate receipts were hardly enough to compete with organized baseball.) Former players and managers Ulmont Baker, Tracy Hitchner, Pat Crowell and Mac Arnett agreed: No one made

a penny in the Carolina League except the ballplayers.¹⁰

Why would businessmen, accustomed to making bottom-line, profit-making operations pay, attempt such a "noble and engaging" experiment? And how could it succeed as well as it did?

The answer lies in civic pride, love of the game, rivalry with nearby towns and, above all, desire to offer Depression-suffering employees and fellow citizens a diversion that would make their lives a little more enjoyable and bolster the public spirit. It's likely, too, that a chance to prove the capability of independent Southern leaders to conduct business with the best -- to play hardball with the big hitters -- prodded the important financial backers of Piedmont teams. The league had the roguish appeal of a rebel underdog, and that, too, lay partly behind its ability to raise money and stay afloat.

Splitting with the small towns

As leaders prepared to launch the initial season of the full-time professional Carolina League in 1936, they adopted a subtle rule change that would effectively double the number of professionally experienced players allowed on each team's roster. The rule change ensured that the baseball would be better and that it would cost more. Technically, the league stayed with 1935's maximum of four "class men" per team, but it changed the way "class man" was defined. In 1935, a "class man" was any player with three or more years of professional baseball experience. But in 1936 a player would be considered a class man only if he had played organized professional baseball during the *previous* season. That meant the players who had been on

¹⁰1991 interviews.

each Carolina Textile League roster as class men in 1935 were no longer class men, and each team could now bring in four more players who had played in an organized professional league in 1935. That was at least eight expensive, high-quality players per team, all of whom would have been considered class men the year before.

By the end of February, Landis, Cooleemee and Mooresville all had dropped out of the league, because those smaller towns couldn't afford to pay the players' sometimes exorbitant salaries over a full-time schedule of six games per week. At that critical moment, Herb Pennock, head of the Boston Red Sox farm system, inadvertently gave the independent league all the boost it needed.

The Charlotte Hornets of the Class B Piedmont League had been a Red Sox farm club in 1935. Because of disappointing attendance, Pennock proposed that Charlotte add Sunday games to its schedule for 1936.

This suggestion received a decidedly cold shoulder in the Piedmont, in the heart of the Bible Belt, where people just didn't believe in playing baseball for pay, or engaging in any other commercial enterprise, on Sundays -- in fact, city laws against Sunday commerce weren't repealed in some places until the 1960s and even later. Perhaps miscalculating the strength of public feeling about the issue, or possibly looking for a reason to get out of the affiliation, Pennock threatened to move the Red Sox franchise out of Charlotte if Sunday games weren't allowed. The city council told Pennock to go ahead and leave.

Barron Hinson, a Charlotte cotton broker with family ties to Concord, had been watching the goings-on with the Carolina Textile League. As soon as the six-day schedule was adopted and the Red Sox withdrew from Charlotte, Hinson jumped at the chance to put a team in the independent league.

For the league, it was a coup of head-spinning proportions. Charlotte -- the area's biggest city, 10 times the size of the biggest textile league towns, and home of the area's largest daily newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer* -- was committing to play in this upstart league, outside the control of organized baseball, rather than seek another affiliation in organized ball. Charlotte's presence promised both a boon to attendance and a huge automatic boost to league publicity, not to mention the added credibility of just having a town that size as a member of the league.

The league is launched: Benign collusion

The Carolina League was born March 4, 1936 as a full-time, professional independent league, sprung from the remains of the Western Carolina League and Carolina Textile League. Nine clubs joined forces at a meeting in Newton, N.C.: Concord, Salisbury and Kannapolis of the Carolina Textile League; Hickory, Shelby, Valdese, Conover and Forest City/Rutherford County of the Western Carolina League; and Piedmont League dropout Charlotte. Conover soon dropped out, leaving a strong eight-team league that stretched from the Piedmont to the foothills of the Blue Ridge.

The formation of the league set off a scramble for players -- the first of many.

Concord fans were pleased when manager Bobby Hipps announced that Broadus Culler, an all-star shortstop in 1935, had agreed to play with the Weavers. That gave Concord three of the 1935 league's four all-star infielders: Hipps at first, Art Hord at second and, at shortstop, Culler, who would be playing in the majors before autumn.

Hipps also announced he had signed outfielder Rusty McCall, who had played with Kannapolis in 1935. McCall had signed a contract with Albany of

the International League in 1936 but had taken voluntary retirement rather than be shipped to a lower level.

Kannapolis fans were outraged. They could not understand how their most promising young outfielder could end up in Concord, without being released and without drawing any objection from Towelers management. The league's teams had agreed to honor all 1935 player contracts; if that were so, how could Concord sign McCall? The controversy continued for days, but Kannapolis officials lodged no protest.

Finally, league president Gene Lawing found a way to clear the air. The agreement, he declared, applied only to players under contract to the teams in the former Western Carolina League. Those teams had been afraid that Concord, Kannapolis, Salisbury and Charlotte -- well known to be free spenders -- would raid their teams with offers of more money, and they would not join the league without having their rosters protected.

The episode conveniently added fuel to the already hot rivalry between Concord and Kannapolis. But it demonstrates the sort of benign collusion that was common among the various teams in the league: Rules were made, if not to be broken, then at least to be adjusted to the situation at hand. What was important here was to avoid a bidding war over players that would drive one or more teams out of business, while not denying players the benefit of a move up in salary.

Owners of major league baseball were to face a similar situation in the 1980s, after several celebrated court cases in the 1970s struck down the reserve clause. As salaries offered to dozens of new free-agent players escalated, owners found their profits shrinking. In the 1980s it came to light that owners had secretly agreed not to offer high salaries to several key free agents in order to forestall a bidding war. They were convicted of

collusion and millions in damages were awarded to the players involved.

But whereas the major league owners' collusion was motivated by their desire to limit player salaries so as to cut costs and increase profits, the volunteer Carolina League directors colluded in an effort to hold their fledgling independent league together for what they saw as the benefit of the community -- better to allow a little give-and-take than to see the league collapse or be turned over to outside control. And if a little public controversy added heat to the fans' rivalries, it was so much the better for the gate receipts.

The hammer comes down

Barely a month into the Carolina League's first season, organized baseball had seen enough to know that this league was putting its monopolistic way of doing business on notice. The NAPB took action.

On June 16, 1936, a report appeared in *The Concord Tribune* that baseball players were openly jumping contracts with organized professional teams to play in the Carolina League -- and that organized baseball, whose czar was based in nearby Durham, N.C., was keeping track of them. The article was couched as a warning from Judge Bramham, president of the National Association of Professional Baseball :

"Presence of players on the ineligible list of organized baseball on the rosters of clubs in the Carolina League, an independent organization, has brought forth a warning from President W. G. Bramham calling attention of all players and clubs in the National Association to conditions which exist in this outlaw league.

"Judge Bramham said, 'The Carolina League, composed of Concord, Kannapolis, Salisbury, Shelby, Hickory, Forest City, Charlotte and Valdese,

is harboring and playing players under contract or reserved with organized ball. All such players are placed on the ineligible list, and all players and clubs in organized ball are notified that the playing with or against ineligible, or with or against clubs playing or harboring ineligible players, will bring about the ineligibility of any and all players who fail to observe this warning.' "

Bramham had declared the entire league an outlaw league. Given the power of the reserve clause, built into organized baseball's standard contracts, to bind a player to a single team for his entire career, Bramham could have enforced his threat. It wasn't until 1973 that the first major league players finally succeeded in getting the reserve clause overthrown in court, forever changing baseball by giving players control over their own careers. But the Carolina League was setting a precedent for such challenges nearly 40 years earlier. The "outlaw" behavior of the Carolina League offered an unstructured preview of the changes that player free agency has brought to professional baseball since the 1970s.

On Dec. 7, 1936 -- after the Carolina League had completed its first season successfully -- a news dispatch from the NAPB's annual winter meetings in Montreal indicated that the league was the subject of much discussion, both formal and informal. The dispatch that appeared in *The Concord Tribune* quoted a minor league executive describing the Carolina League as a "haven for dissatisfied professional ball players."

A league of outlaws

An outlaw league was bound to become a league of outlaws, drawing a parade of colorful characters.

By June 20, 1936, "Struttin' Bud" Shaney was the league's hottest

player, and its most engaging story. He had won nine straight games for Charlotte and was drawing sellout crowds but still had never pitched on the road -- only at home. The question on everybody's mind was whether he was cheating.

Shaney didn't mind a bit that opponents thought he was cheating; it gave him a psychological edge. Charles M. "Struttin' Bud" Shaney was one of the most colorful figures in the history of baseball in North Carolina. Crafty, experienced professional players were the trademark of outlaw baseball, and none fit that description better than Shaney.¹¹

Shaney grew up in southern California and played baseball practically year-round, except during high school football season. Football, in fact, was responsible for his nickname: He broke his leg on the football field, but it was never set properly. From then on he walked with a hitch that looked like a cocksure swagger; later his teammates began to call him "Struttin' Bud." As the years went by, his on-field demeanor grew into the nickname. He played professional baseball (including outlaw baseball) from 1920, when he got out of the Army and joined a team in Vernon, Calif., until 1942. Later he umpired for five years. Toward the end of his work life he worked as the groundskeeper at McCormick Field, home of the then-Class A Asheville Tourists.

In an article in *The Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times* published March 22, 1970, sports editor Bob Terrell quoted Shaney about the accusation that he was cheating: " '[1936 Concord Weavers manager] Bobby Hipps used to take baseballs that I'd pitched and saw them in two and shake 'em over a newspaper to see if any phonograph needles or anything else came out.... But I never

¹¹Interview with Mrs. Charles M. Shaney, July 18, 1991, Horseshoe, N.C.

used anything like that. I didn't need to. I could make the ball do things, and that was enough. If I'd use emery paper, they could've seen the scars on the ball, but I was never thrown out of a game in my life for doctoring a baseball.' "

Tracy Hitchner, who jumped a contract with the Albany Senators to pitch for the 1936 Hickory Rebels in the outlaw league, had an answer for that claim. "Maybe he was never thrown out of a game for doctoring a ball," Hitchner said, "but there were plenty of baseballs thrown out of the games when he was pitching."¹²

Shaney told Terrell he learned to shine the ball from the Chicago White Sox's Eddie Cicotte and the spitball from Jeff Tesreau of the Giants. "With my speed and strength," Shaney told Terrell, "those were all the pitches I needed besides the curve, and I could always throw the curve."

By 1925 Shaney had worked his way up to Milwaukee in the Class AA American Association, just one step below the majors. But at spring training in Florida that year, he contracted malaria and jaundice. Already a wiry 185-pound six-footer, he lost 45 pounds. He was sent to Asheville in the South Atlantic League. Shaney won more than 100 games for Asheville 1925-29. But 1925 would prove to have been Shaney's best shot at the majors. "I know I could've won in the majors, but I never got a chance," he told Terrell.¹³

By July 7, 1936, Shaney had won his 13th Carolina League game in a row -- always pitching at home, never on the road. Regardless of what, if anything, Bud Shaney or some cohort in the Charlotte dugout was doing to the ball, he had the greatest asset a pitcher needed to win: pinpoint control. In those 13 games he had walked only 15 men while striking out 101. Still,

¹²Interview with Tracy Hitchner, June 1991.

¹³*The Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times*, March 22, 1970.

at least one living witness once saw what appeared to be concrete evidence of Shaney's trickery. Former Forest City batboy Jim Hemphill said pitcher Pete Fowler told he to get a couple of balls when Shaney pitched at Charlotte. When they cut the balls open, phonograph needles fell out.¹⁴

Shaney won his 17th straight without a defeat on July 17, once again in Charlotte. Finally the streak ended in an 11-inning game against Kannapolis July 21, and after the game Charlotte manager Frank "What-A-Man" Packard was fired and Shaney was named to replace him. Even after his streak ended -- still perhaps the most remarkable winning streak by a Charlotte professional athlete -- Bud Shaney still did not pitch outside Charlotte.

Shaney pitched his Charlotte Hornets to a 4-0 victory over Kannapolis Aug. 22, putting the Hornets alone in second place, where they finished. The bigger news, however, was that it was the first Sunday game in Charlotte, played under the protection of an injunction issued by Superior Court. Owner Hinson had concluded that keeping his team solvent might make it worthwhile after all to flout an area taboo for an extra day's revenue each week. The hometown owner had succeeded where the Northern-based Red Sox organization had failed.

* * *

In July, Charlotte made a move that permanently engraved the league's outlaw reputation. The Hornets signed a man who had truly earned the outlaw label, who the year before had briefly become a national folk hero: Edwin Clinton "Alabama" Pitts.

In 1930, Pitts had been convicted of robbery and imprisoned at "Sing-Sing," the New York State Penitentiary on a sentence of eight to 16 years.¹⁵

¹⁴Interview with Jim Hemphill and Hugh Verner, July 1992.

¹⁵Joseph M. Overfield, "Product of Sing Sing Won Public's Support," The

In 1935 he became unquestionably the best-known minor league player in the nation when Judge Bramham barred him from organized baseball. He was a national *cause célèbre*, his banner carried by the foremost editorialists in the nation. In June 1935 readers were enthralled with his story; daily coverage appeared in *The New York Times*, among many other papers.

"Sing Sing" Warden Lewis E. Lawes, an early advocate of using prison to rehabilitate prisoners rather than just to punish them,¹⁶ used Pitts's case to promote his ideas.¹⁷ When Pitts was up for parole in 1935, Johnny Evers, general manager of the Albany Senators of the International League, signed him to a contract for \$200 a month, with Lawes's approval, to begin upon his release. But league president Charles Knapp nullified the contract, and Bramham supported him.¹⁸ *The New York Times* reported on the case in detail.¹⁹

In the spring of 1935, Hollywood had released a movie adaptation of "Les Miserables," featuring powerful performances by two of film's early greats, Frederic March and Charles Laughton. Pitts's predicament resonated in the public conscience with hero Jean Valjean's tragic story. Sportswriters and editorialists all over the nation took up the theme as appeals made their way to Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, and the story was front-page news for weeks, in Charlotte as well as most other places.

Finally, Landis bowed to public opinion and reversed Bramham's decision. Released to Albany, Alabama Pitts heard about the Carolina League from teammate Fred Chapman. Hampered by injuries, Pitts performed poorly,

Baseball Research Journal, 14th Annual Edition, Society of American Baseball Research, 1985, pp. 19-22.

¹⁶Id.

¹⁷*The New York Times Magazine*, June 23, 1935.

¹⁸Joseph M. Overfield, "Product of Sing Sing Won Public's Support," *The Baseball Research Journal*, 14th Annual Edition, Society of American Baseball Research, 1985, pp. 19-22.

¹⁹*The New York Times*, June 6, 1935.

and disheartened by the way the Evers and others exploited him for publicity, he left organized baseball the next summer. He resurfaced in Charlotte a few weeks later as a member of the Hornets in the Carolina League's inaugural season. He was a hit with Hornets fans, and he made an immediate impact on the team. In the outlaw Carolina League, Pitts, like so many other players, would find a home that suited him both during the season and between seasons. He played for Gastonia and Valdese. He would marry a local woman, father one child, coach at Valdese High School and take a job as a knitter in the local hosiery mill. Not three years after he finished the Carolina League's final season with Valdese, he was stabbed to death in a saloon fight at age 30.

It was perhaps inevitable, though certainly ironic, that only a year after Bramham tried to keep Pitts out of organized baseball, Pitts ended up strengthening the very outlaw league that Bramham had been trying to destroy, on a team based only 130 miles from Bramham's office. Because of his nationwide notoriety, Pitts's presence drew unprecedented attention to the Carolina League from across the country and gave stature to the fledgling league.

Organized baseball comes courting

Before and throughout its three-year run, the Carolina League had frequent opportunities to join organized baseball above the level for which its towns ordinarily would qualify by population. The offers were a recognition of the high-quality baseball that was being played in the league, in that the NAPB knew it would have to offer a very competitive product in order to tempt these teams into its fold.

In the winter of 1936-37, for example, some league officials and fans were convinced organized ball was the league's best future. They saw an

opportunity to use the league's new notoriety as a springboard to an orderly, permanent, mid-level minor league organization. It would assure the area of high-quality baseball without the constant maneuverings, financial problems and on-field antics they had endured throughout 1936. The key question, of course, was just how high a classification they could get and, thus, how talented the players would be.

For others, especially in Kannapolis, organization was exactly what they didn't want. "Organized" was still a dirty word among workers in Piedmont mill towns, connoting all the suffering and turmoil that had accompanied organized labor's efforts in the Depression's early years. Outlaw baseball had arisen as an alternative, a challenge to the outside control of organized ball, not as a trapdoor into its hierarchical bowels.

Along the way, the push-pull relationship between Kannapolis and Concord kept the two towns and their teams focused on each other, perhaps so much so that they didn't see the opportunity organized baseball was offering. They wanted so badly to play each other that they couldn't bear to be in separate leagues, yet they continually clawed over each other for supremacy. Thus when organized baseball offered a Class C berth, they missed what might have been the best chance they ever had to establish high-quality organized baseball permanently for the area, while thumbing their noses at the supposedly all-powerful monopoly of organized ball.

Then in November, the new North Carolina State League formed at Class D. Landis, Lexington and Mooresville severed their connections with the Carolina League and joined Salisbury, Newton and High Point in applying to the NAPB for franchises in the new league. And in March, Charlotte owner Barron Hinson announced he had turned over his lease on Robbie's Field in Charlotte to the Washington Senators, and that organization would field a

team in the Piedmont League.

Nevertheless, 1937 turned out to be the Carolina League's smoothest and most successful season. Concord, with 70,000 attendance in 1937, and Kannapolis, with 90,000, had far outdistanced the 25,000 drawn by the Class B team in Charlotte, a town 10 times as big.

1938: The fabric wears thin

The Carolina League's wild ride had been exhilarating. But by 1938, things were different, and not so advantageous for the outlaw league.

For one thing, organized baseball had recovered. It now had more leagues operating than it had had before the Depression began. So there were plenty of jobs in organized ball for the players the outlaw league had been recruiting, and that meant the opportunity and upward mobility that only the national network of organized baseball could offer. Players were less willing to risk being named on Bramham's blacklist. That created a disparity among players: The bright young college stars that had made the league seem vigorous and attractive now were packing their bags for Class D and Class C towns. The veterans who were left -- remember, many had come in the first place after being suspended from organized ball for misbehavior -- had begun to recognize the power they had over owners and had held out for more and more money; their subsequent misbehavior on and off the field took them down several notches in the eyes of fans, and for a league whose games had once been the social event of the day, the shine began to wear off.

For all those reasons, money problems grew and grew. Disenchanted fans meant smaller gates. Player arrogance meant higher and higher salaries, either to keep demanding players in the fold or to lure other players when the disgruntled ones left. And the league had always been a revolving door:

by the end of the season one year, Kannapolis had had 100 different players come and go from its 15-man roster.

All this made the league's continual problems with rules seem less like growing pains and more like a chronic instability.

It was emblematic of these problems when, on June 6, Concord fans' favorite player, young shortstop Broadus Culler, deserted them. The implications of the blow were more ominous than anyone recognized at the time. Culler was Concord's golden boy. A former star baseball and basketball player at High Point College, he was young, good-looking and educated, and his flashy play stood out among the older players. The whole town was indignant when they learned he was leaving. Culler left for Reidsville in the Class D Bi-State League, where he would earn no more than \$75 per month, less than half what he was making in Concord on baseball alone. In 1936, Culler had negotiated on his own terms with the Philadelphia Athletics to avoid being trapped by the reserve clause. He had played the late season with Philadelphia; then when the A's couldn't offer him the Class AA or better placement in 1937 that his contract demanded, they had been forced to release him, and he had returned to Concord. He had settled in Concord and been handed an attractive job for the off-season; since then he had been admired and looked up to by ever boy and girl in town.

Now suddenly he had abandoned the league for a job in Class D, the basement of organized baseball, at less than half pay, whereas only two years before, he had successfully refused to play lower than Class AA in organized baseball. In doing so he knowingly consigned himself to the uncertain life of the low minor leagues, in the hope he could reach the majors someday. It was a bad sign that such a key player no longer was willing to bank his future on the independent league that had held such promise a year or two

before. As the Boston Braves' regular shortstop in 1945 and '46, Culler hit .262 and .255, respectively. He hit .248 in 77 games in 1947 and was the Braves' leadoff man against the Brooklyn Dodgers in Jackie Robinson's historic first major league game.

From the day Culler left Concord, one rupture after another weakened the league, now composed of six teams. Since disgruntled players might leave any time, team officials were reluctant to discipline them.

Financial problems continued to dog the league teams. In June, rumors abounded that the Gastonia Spinners would fold. Then a group of fans, backed by the Gastonia Chamber of Commerce, took over the club from Frank Packard and Jimmie Campbell, setting off a raging debate. There was a great deal more to this ownership change than met the eye, but it wouldn't come to the surface for a month. When it did, the long arm of organized baseball would be clearly visible.

It came as a severe blow when, on July 19, the new Gastonia ownership group surrendered the team's franchise. Worse news for the outlaws, on that same day, the story broke that the St. Louis Cardinals organization would move its Class D Shelby franchise to Gastonia immediately to play out the rest of its N.C. State League season. It appeared that organized baseball finally had found a way to supplant an operating Carolina League franchise.

Did organized baseball -- perhaps in the person of N.C. State League president Gene Lawing, a former outlaw league president -- notice the decline of an outlaw franchise and leap upon the opportunity to take over outlaw territory? There can be little doubt. Did the Gastonia Spinners Inc. collude with organized baseball to root outlaw baseball out of Gastonia? It's clearly possible, and knowledgeable sources of the era seem convinced that it did. But was pressure from organized baseball responsible for making

the Spinners vulnerable in order to bring about its demise? Probably only indirectly, in that the Gastonia Athletic Club, like every other Carolina League club, went deep into debt acquiring players in competition with organized ball. Without that, organized baseball might never have gained a toehold in Gastonia.

When Valdese also withdrew from the league, also citing money problems, the players from the two folded teams, by all rights, should have become free agents; but as usual, the league had a meeting to wheel and deal and determine who would get whom. Thus the last month of the league was run the same way as its earliest days: swapping chances for the upper hand and mutual survival.

Just as at the beginning, the main goals at the end were to get the best players available and press any advantage for the team, but to stop short of any action that would sink the league. Now those quests pushed the league, down to just four teams, into a chaotic round of bickering and bargaining that would not end until the season staggered to the finish.

When it came time for the 1938 playoffs, Lenoir had gambled away a player; the Finishers had chosen to keep six pitchers instead of five, and only one catcher. But now that catcher, Joe Palm, was injured, out for the rest of the season. The Finishers argued they should be allowed to sign a replacement for him, and they wanted former Concord Weaver Chink Outen, now playing at Hollywood in the Pacific Coast League. Lenoir had offered Outen enough money to get him to risk the blacklist by joining the Finishers. Concord stood in the way, claiming Lenoir had to live with the players it had chosen for the playoffs. Lenoir manager Bobby Hipps, playing chicken with his former employers in Concord, threatened to withdraw the Finishers from the league if they didn't get a replacement catcher. If the Finishers

withdrew, there would be no playoffs and no playoff revenues.

Kannapolis, too, was going to lose a key player: Eric Tipton was due for football practice at Duke University Sept. 1, and the Towelers would be looking for a way to replace him. Meanwhile, Hickory's ace pitcher, Tracy Hitchner, was out sick, and Concord also needed another pitcher. Everybody had something to lose.

The league directors met to try to figure out these maneuvers. They decided to keep the roster limit at 15, but each club was granted permission to add another player if they didn't already have 15 on the roster. Each team also could make one roster substitution even if it already had 15 men active. Inevitably, the vote would become a tangled issue in the season's chaotic finish.

Then on Aug. 28, after those roster moves had been committed, Concord lost its catcher, meant this time Concord would have to go begging to the league directors. Earlier in the month, when all clubs had been allowed to add an extra player, Concord had chosen a pitcher. Now Concord quickly changed its mind about which position was most critical to fill. But that would take the consent of the other teams.

The league met again on the last day of August to hash out the matter. Kannapolis and Lenoir -- beneficiary of Concord's earlier compromise -- consented, but Hickory extracted a top player as a precondition: Concord could have its catcher if the Weavers would lend Hickory one of its top starting pitchers for the rest of the season, returning him next season.

Then during the 1938 championship series against Kannapolis, the Hickory Rebels signed pitcher Byron Speece, but the league directors agreed he was ineligible for the playoffs. Even so, Kannapolis gave Hickory permission to have Speece pitch the opening game, because Hickory officials

had advertised that he would pitch, and many fans would be disappointed if he did not play. The incentive for Kannapolis's leniency, of course, was revenue: More fans would show up in Hickory if Speece pitched, and that would swell the Towelers' share of the gate. It was stipulated, however, that Speece would not be allowed to pitch again.

Then, with the Rebels down three games to one, Hickory announced that it would pitch Speece again in the fifth game. Kannapolis officials, of course, protested. League president Wade Ison immediately notified Hickory the game would be forfeited if Speece played. After receiving Ison's message, the Hickory team failed to show up for the fifth game. So the championship series ended on a forfeited game, Kannapolis winning.

In the ensuing winter, the Concord-Kannapolis rivalry proved ultimately to be the only thing keeping the Carolina League together. Down to four teams, after months of waffling, the league couldn't find any other towns interested in joining its enterprise. In January 1939, Manley Llewellyn, the same person who had recruited the first outlaw team for Concord in 1927, proposed a plan that would create two new leagues in organized baseball, take care of everyone's concerns and disband the Carolina League. The league directors adopted the plan, and the outlaw league was no more.

* * *

Players scatter ... back to organized baseball

When the Carolina League finally disbanded, some of its players went back to playing for mill teams in the various towns where they had settled down. Others went straight into organized baseball, in spite of Judge Bramham's blacklist and in spite of the NAPB's rules, which held that any player who jumped a contract with organized baseball or played with or

against such a player would be suspended for at least one year.

Box scores from games throughout the country in 1939 showed the names of dozens of former "outlaws," indicating that organized ball winked at its own rule where it was convenient.

Among the most prominent of the outlaw players that organized baseball welcomed was Eric Tipton. Tipton had just finished his junior year at Duke University when he joined the Kannapolis Towelers for their 1938 season. A star outfielder, he led the Carolina League in hitting with a .375 batting average. Returning to Duke for his senior year in 1938-39, he led the Blue Devils football team to an undefeated, untied, unscored-on season and a trip to the 1939 Rose Bowl as a triple-threat, All-America fullback.

In the spring of 1939 Tipton was named All-America in baseball, then joined Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics after leaving school. He played in the majors for the next seven seasons, ending his career with the Cincinnati Reds in 1945. He hit .270 over his major league career.

Richard Broadus "Dick" Culler, who had played outlaw baseball 1935-38, was a graduate and sports hall of fame inductee at High Point College. An all-star basketball player in college, he had been an all-star shortstop in the Carolina League for four years, including the 1935 Carolina Textile League. In 1936 he had played in nine games for the Philadelphia Athletics after completing the Carolina League season with Concord. He returned to Concord in 1937 and '38, but in June 1938 he jumped his contract with Concord to join Reidsville (N.C.) of the Class D Bi-State League. Later he played seven years of major league baseball 1943-49.

It seems that organized baseball's blacklist had served out its usefulness as a tool to intimidate players who might have considered jumping to the outlaw Carolina League. Now that the league was dead, and along with

it the threat to organized baseball's monopolistic control of its players, organized baseball for the most part simply ignored the blacklist in favor of recruiting good ballplayers, regardless of where they had played before.

A number of other players of the 1938 Carolina League played in the N.C. State League in 1939: Gerry Fitzgerald, of, Concord; Ulmont Baker, 2b, Concord; Firpo Creason, p, Cooleemee; Razz Miller, of, Landis; Herman "Ginger" Watts, c, Landis; Marvin Watts, 3b, Landis; Frank Hopkins, 1b, Landis; Harvey Black, 2b, Mooresville; Bill Carrier, of/1b, Mooresville; Chic Suggs, of, Landis; and Rusty McCall, of, Mooresville.

Before the Carolina League fell apart, many of those players had been thought ineligible to play organized baseball in 1939. Many others in the same category went to other leagues. Among them were Claude Capps, former Valdese first baseman, who led the Class D Coastal Plains League in runs scored with 99 for Goldsboro and tied for the league lead in hits with 153; and Witt Guise, former Concord all-star pitcher, who led the new Class D Tar Heel League with a 2.82 earned run average at Lenoir in 1939.

Even though outlaw baseball died, however, its spirit would live on in the hearts of fans. They had gotten used to the high-quality baseball of the free-wheeling outlaw league and were hardly satisfied with anything less.

To keep the teams competitive, many outlaw practices continued in Concord and Kannapolis, whose fierce rivalry, as always, dictated winning at almost any cost. That was often in conflict with the basic purpose of Class D baseball, which was, as it is in the low minor leagues today, to develop young ballplayers for higher-level play. As indicated in *Concord Tribune* columnist Shelley Rolfe's column June 12, 1941 -- almost three years after the last Carolina League game -- Concord and Kannapolis leaders had no intention of letting organization get in the way of fielding a winning team:

"If baseball goes down in Concord -- and right now it's even money, take your choice and lay the cash down -- the whole thing may very well be tracked back to the old Carolina League days, when the crying idea was to win ball games and let the expenses worry about themselves....

"The [organized Class D] Weavers have never made a financial go of it and it hasn't been so much because the team didn't draw 'em in the gate. No, even though the club was in pro [organized] ball with a rigorous salary limit, the melody of the Carolina League lingered on. When the club needed a player it went out and got an old timer....

"The purpose of a Class D league is to develop players. Class D clubs work on a narrow margin and look for youngsters to sell at the end of the season. Concord developed no players for higher ball....

"The roof started caving in last Summer. The club lost money, even though it drew upwards of 40,000....

"The fans aren't coming out, just that, and that too goes back to the old Carolina league. That was fast baseball -- as good as the game they play in the Piedmont League -- and the fans ate it up. It's all very possible that they've never been able to reconcile Class D ball with the baseball of the days gone by.... It is a baseball days that can never come back. The sooner the fans realize that the better."

Death from inner and outer pressures

The Carolina League was, finally, a product of hard economic times; the ambitious competitiveness and civic pride of its leaders; and a rebellious loyalty that drew Southern mill people of all classes together and united them against outside control. As such it was a facet of the independent, un-Reconstructed spirit that lingered in the South for a century after the Civil

War.

Was outlaw baseball killed by organized baseball, or did it kill itself? Probably the best answer is that it was a little of both.

Without the drastic contraction of the minor leagues during the Depression, a full-time, professional outlaw league never would have been possible. The dozens of top-quality players who left organized ball and joined Piedmont textile teams -- prompting the move to a full-time, professional independent league -- never would have been tempted to look for work outside organized ball. There would have been plenty of demand for their services, and only the very most undesirable players ever would have become outlaws in the first place. Judge Bramham's black list was ridiculed in the heyday of the Carolina League; but it certainly loomed in the backs of at least the younger players' minds in 1938: If the independent league fell apart, as it was showing signs of doing by early 1938, they feared their participation in it would affect their futures in the hierarchical purgatory of the organized minor leagues, and their prospects of rising to the majors.

The mere fact that the NAPB ignored the black list as soon as the Carolina League disbanded does not prove that the list had no effect; it shows only that after the league folded, the blacklist was no longer needed, whereas the talented players of the Carolina League were.

But the Carolina League did have a strong hand in its own demise. In fact, the very behavior that helped make it a success also helped wreck the league. Spending freely in open one-upmanship and competition against each other and against organized ball, outlaw teams brought in the players who gave the league both of its main reputations: high-quality play and roguish behavior. Fans loved both, at least in the beginning. The league's roots in textile baseball -- players literally rubbing shoulders with fans at work,

eating at their tables at home -- gave it a homespun appeal that no organized baseball franchise could ever have equaled. And the quality of baseball that was played by these highly paid players is beyond dispute; salaries that were highly competitive with organized baseball's Class A leagues -- at the time just two steps below the majors -- were drawing Class A-quality and even better players, particularly as long as jobs in organized ball were scarce.

At its most successful, the league represented an attractive balance of popular veterans such as "Struttin' Bud" Shaney, young collegiate athletes like Broadus Culler and local boys like "Coddle Creek" Taylor. But when the appealing younger stars began abandoning the league, leaving mostly disgruntled veteran outlaws behind, the tone changed. Fans idolized players less and resented them more, and the constant fund-raising needed to support the team began to look less like a grand, community-spirited civic enterprise and more like payoffs to surly, greedy players whose unruliness already had gotten them kicked out of organized ball. As the minor leagues came out of the Depression, higher and higher salaries were needed to keep the kinds of players that had made outlaw baseball possible at such a high level. Soon rising salaries and declining fan enthusiasm became a matter of simple mathematics; the costs rose too high to sustain, even for teams that were outdrawing their organized baseball neighbors by four or five to one. The chaotic rule-changing that eventually became necessary to help teams survive only hastened the inevitable end.

In the 1980s and '90s, with owners applying pressure to hold down player pay throughout organized baseball, independent minor leagues made another resurgence, again becoming developers of talent for cost-conscious major league organizations. But with the disappearance of the tightly knit, paternalistic mill town family and the career minor league player, it is

unlikely that the quixotic like of the Carolina League will ever arise again.

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