

A Centennial Field Scrapbook

Memories of the minor league's oldest ballpark

by Dominick Denaro

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The Northern League

The most colorful era in Centennial Field history began on June 23, 1936, when 1,300 curious spectators paid their way into the ballpark to see the brand new Burlington Cardinals defeat the Saranac Lake Red Sox in Vermont's debut performance in the semi-professional Northern League. Over the next 15 years, countless fans at Centennial and throughout the state were entertained by the self-proclaimed "League With the College Atmosphere."

The Northern League started as an amateur circuit in upstate New York in 1924. By the mid-'30s, it had evolved into a semi-pro league centered in resort towns like Saranac Lake, Tupper Lake, and Lyon Mountain. The Northern League season ran from mid-June through Labor Day to accommodate the vacation season of both the tourists, who were the main clientele, and the collegiate ballplayers hired by the teams to perform for the hotel guests. In those innocent days before NCAA legislation, student-athletes could earn \$125 a month in the league without jeopardizing their amateur eligibility. Though numerous veteran professionals dotted league rosters, collegiate talent dominated. By the time Burlington was invited to join Plattsburgh, Malone, and the aforementioned cities for the 1936 season, the Northern League had acquired a reputation as one of the best college summer leagues in the country.

The Cardinals gained entry into the league thanks to the efforts of a Chamber of Commerce committee headed by Jack W. Goss and Sabin Abell, who directed the club's fortunes for over a decade. The franchise was awarded just eight days before the season opener, leaving little time to recruit ballplayers. The lack of preparation effected performance on the field, and the Cards limped to a fifth-place finish.

Success at the turnstiles was another matter. Burlington set a Northern League attendance record with 38,299 spectators for the season. League operators were quick to capitalize on the potential held by other Vermont markets, and over the next two seasons, St. Albans, Montpelier, and Rutland joined the circuit. By 1940, all of the original New York cities were gone, Bennington and Brattleboro joined, and the Northern League remained for the rest of its days a primarily Vermont-based venture.

On the field, the Flock (as the headline writers dubbed the Cardinals) rebounded from their inaugural season disappointment to post a strong second place record in 1937. Five games ahead of the Cards were the Plattsburgh Majors, led by their fiery manager, Vin Clancy. Determined to dislodge their cross-lake rivals from the top of the standings, Burlington hired Clancy away from Plattsburgh, initiating the wildest and most successful era in team history.



"Burlington was like the New York City of the Northern League, with the biggest ballpark and the biggest crowds and the greatest baseball fans I've ever seen."

*- Dick Smullen,
Burlington Cardinal
pitcher, 1946-1948*

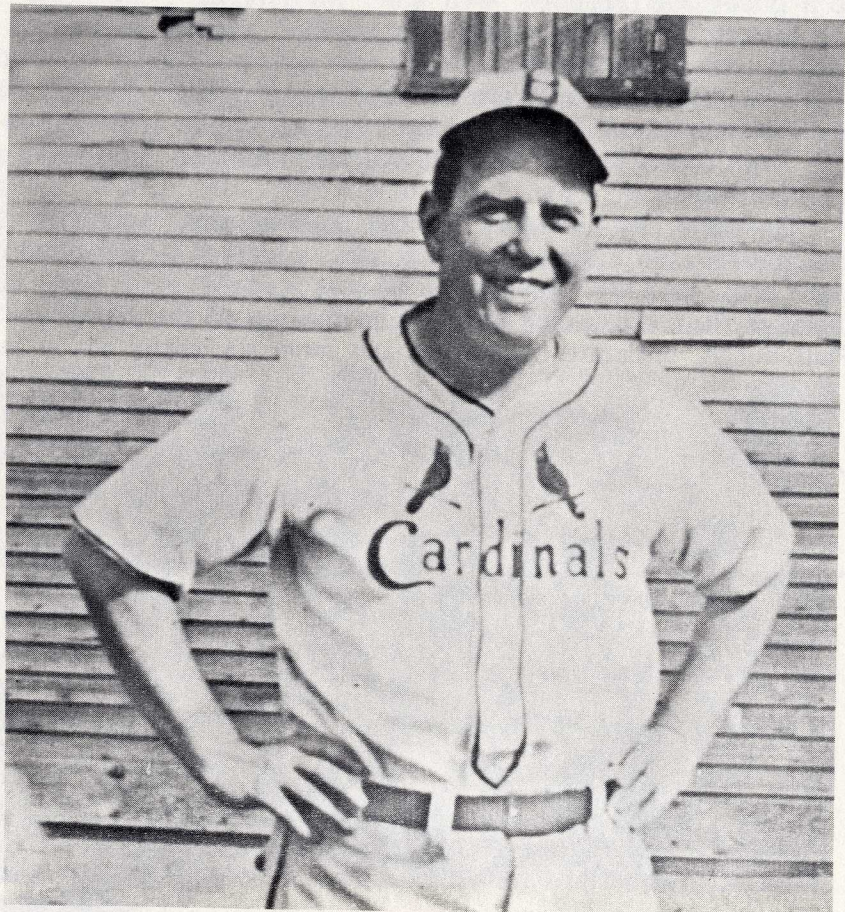
Vin Clancy was the Leo Durocher of the Northern League, a brilliant manager and irrepressible showman with a flamboyant and combative style. A fan favorite if he was fighting for your team, but despised by the opposition, Plattsburgh fans loved him in 1937 when he arrived from Fordham to guide the Majors to the pennant. They hated him one year later when he jumped across the lake to Burlington.

For four years, Clancy delighted the Centennial Field faithful with his antics. He was a notorious competitor whose arguments with umpires and opposing managers were legendary. He also waged verbal battles with heckling fans, whom he called "wolves," and was known on occasion to toss a bone or raw meat into the crowd for the wolves to chew on.

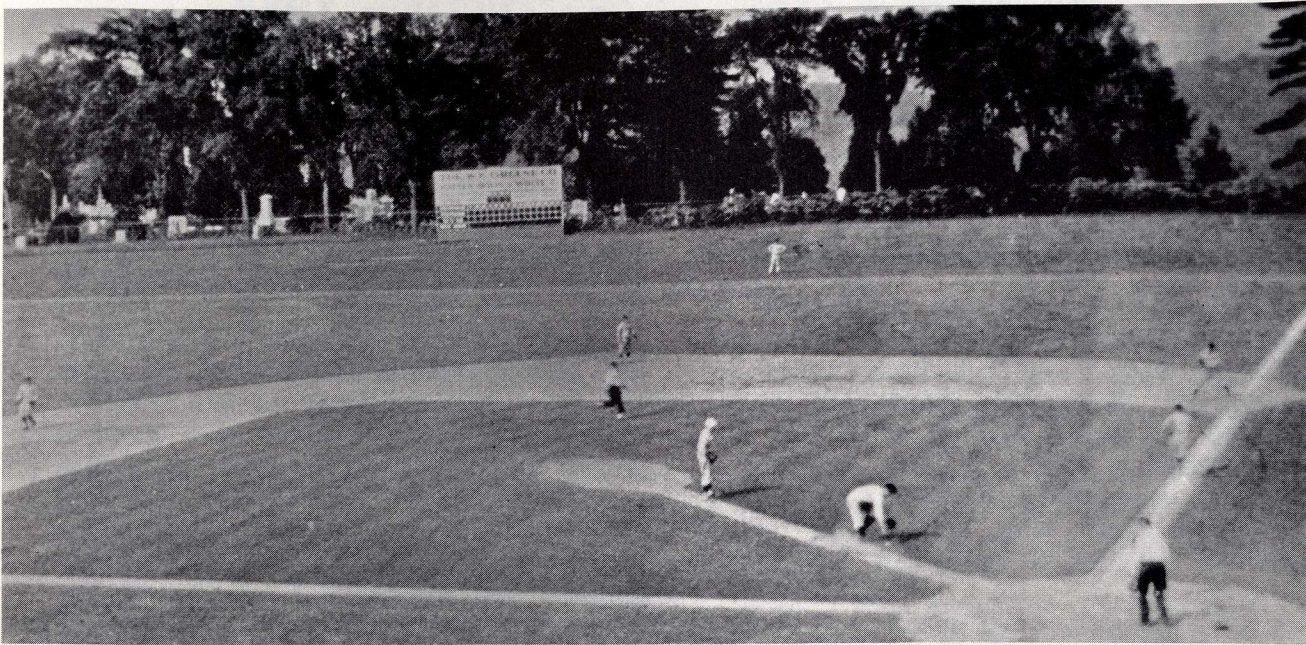
More importantly, Clancy backed up his performances with remarkable success on the field. He led the Cardinals to three consecutive pennants after his arrival in Burlington.

Clancy's Cards

The team Vin Clancy took over was already one of the Northern League's strongest. The 1937 Cardinals were managed by Middlebury's Ray Fisher, a legendary coach at the University of Michigan who returned to Vermont after World War II to make Montpelier's Twin City Trojans a Northern League powerhouse. Fisher's second-place squad included future big



*Burlington Cardinal manager
Vin Clancy.*



Panoramic view of Centennial Field action, mid-1930's.

league pitcher Frank Hoerst and longtime Chicago Cub shortstop Lennie Merullo, both of whom returned to play for Clancy in 1938.

Over the next several seasons, Clancy brought aboard other outstanding talent, such as slugger Sam Mele, who played for six teams in a ten-year major league career before becoming a successful manager with the Minnesota Twins; future big league umpire Jim Honochik, who batted .295 for the Cards in 1938; UVM standout Bud Kimball, a Northern League star who later played in the Brooklyn Dodger organization; and future basketball Hall of Famer Bob Davies.

Burlington's 1938 season may have been the most memorable of the Clancy years. The Cardinals and Majors were locked in a tight pennant race all summer long, and Burlington entered the final weekend of play just one game behind Plattsburgh. On Saturday, August 27, Clancy's Cards fought to a thrilling 10-inning win over the Montpelier Senators before a Centennial Field crowd of 5,200, while Plattsburgh lost to Malone. That knotted up the standings heading into Sunday's season finale.

The two pennant contenders each had double headers to close the season, Burlington at home against the Tupper Lake Rangers and Plattsburgh in Rutland versus the Royals. The Cardinals twin bill was held at Burlington's South Park because Sunday baseball was not permitted at Centennial Field until after the war. In the first game, the Cards rallied for two runs in the bottom of the ninth and added another in the eleventh for a stirring 6-5 win. The Majors kept pace with their own eleven inning triumph in Rutland. Burlington cruised to an easy 6-1 victory in the nightcap, then gathered around a radio in the clubhouse awaiting word of Rutland's 4-2 win over the Majors

(continued on page 23)

THE MAJORS COME TO CENTENNIAL - 1938

The Burlington Cardinals exciting 1938 season was made even more memorable when they came within one out of defeating the American League's Philadelphia Athletics in a July 6 exhibition before 4,500 spectators at Centennial Field.

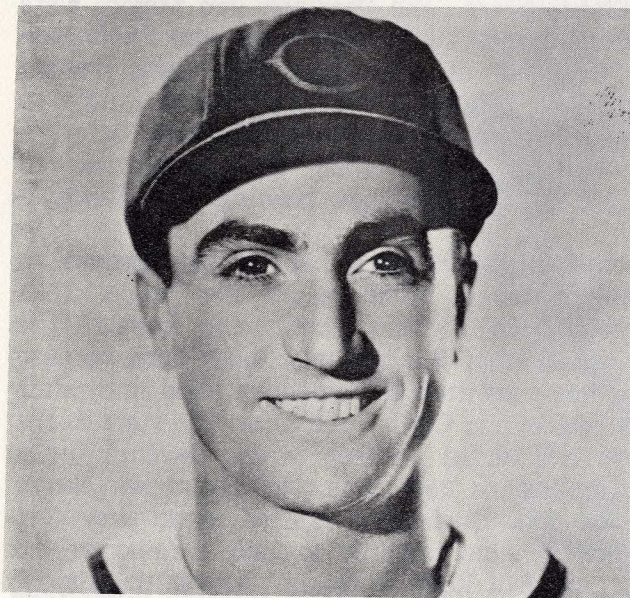
The A's were brought to Vermont by their venerable Hall of Fame manager Connie Mack, who scheduled exhibitions with the Cards and Plattsburgh Majors during the major league's three day All-Star break. It took a four-run ninth inning rally by Philadelphia to beat the Majors 9-7 in Plattsburgh, with similar late inning heroics required to down the Cardinals a day later.

Vin Clancy's crew opened the scoring in the first when leadoff man Mike Hearn was safe on an error by Athletics' rookie sensation Sam Chapman and then scored on Jimmie Seargeant's single. A double by Bud Kimball and single by Jackie Hearn in the fourth gave the Cards a 2-0 lead.

Meanwhile, a parade of Burlington pitchers mesmerized the big league opposition. Cardinals ace Rosey Waugh started for the home team, and was successfully relieved by Gene Bowe and Jim Kiernan. The A's picked up a run in the

top of the fifth, but Burlington got it back in the bottom half on Lennie Merullo's home run under the football stands in left. The two clubs exchanged runs again in the seventh, and the Cards added another in the eighth on a line drive homer by Bud Kimball that eluded A's right fielder Mule Haas.

That gave the Cardinals a 5-2 lead as new pitcher Duke Walck took the mound in the ninth. Walck quickly retired Chapman for the first out, then gave up a triple to second baseman Dario Lodigiani. Lou Amber grounded out for the second out, but pinch-hitter Frankie Hayes singled home Lodigiani and leadoff man Lou Finney walked. That brought up center fielder Ace Parker, a two sport star whose gridiron exploits later earned him a place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Parker hit a slow roller to the left side of the infield that should have ended the ballgame, but third baseman Jackie Hearn fumbled the grounder to load the bases. Philadelphia made the most of its second chance as star third baseman Billy Werber doubled to clear the bases and give the Athletics a 6-5 lead. Burlington threatened in the last of the ninth but left Jim Honochik stranded on third as the final out was recorded.



Lennie Merullo, Burlington shortstop from 1937-38. Merullo spent seven seasons with the Chicago Cubs, and was the regular shortstop on their 1945 pennant winners. Still active in baseball, Merullo was Chicago's head scout for 25 years, and currently works for the Major League Scouting Bureau.

that clinched the title for the Flock.

Burlington and Plattsburgh locked horns one week later in the finals of the Weiner Cup Championship, the Northern League post-season playoff tournament. The Majors exacted a measure of revenge on their Vermont rivals by winning the playoff, 3 games to 2. An interesting highlight of the series was a Labor Day doubleheader with a game played in each city. Special ferry accommodations aboard the steamship Ticonderoga transported rivaling fans across Lake Champlain, and over 4,300 caught the afternoon clash at Centennial.

Further Triumphs

The Cardinals rebounded from their post-season disappointment to capture both the regular-season and Weiner Cup titles in 1939. The pennant race was another thrilling affair that ended with Burlington just a half-game ahead of the Rutland Royals and St. Albans Giants. The Flock then completed the championship sweep by beating Rutland in the first round of the playoffs and the Saranac Lake Red Sox in the finals.

The 1940 season brought Burlington its third straight pennant, Manager Clancy's fourth in a row. In a refreshing change of pace, the Cards ran away with the title, finishing with an outstanding 41-19 record, five games ahead of second-place Rutland. The Weiner Cup tournament was discontinued after the 1939 season, so Burlington's regular-season title represented the only championship to be won that year.

BASEBALL FANS!

**THE PLAYERS NEED YOUR SUPPORT TO WIN THE
GAME LABOR DAY MORNING AT PLATTSBURG**

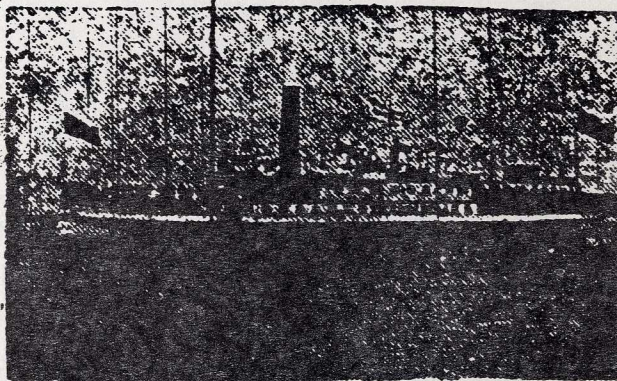
LET'S GO

STEAMER "TICONDEROGA"

WILL TAKE YOU OVER AND BRING YOU BACK FOR

50 CENTS

And You Can Enjoy Your Favorite Refreshment On the Boat.



**Boat leaves Burl. King St. Dock 8:00 A. M. D. S. T. Sharp,
returning at 12:30 P. M. or immediately after the game.
LET'S SHOW PLATTSBURG WE APPRECIATE CLANCY**

1950 Burlington Cardinals.
Left to right, bottom row:
 unidentified batboy, Rabbit
 Pritchard. **Middle row:**
 Mickey Cochrane, Dick
 Johnson, Joe Ferrie, Paul
 Bletz, Norm Benfer, Bill
 Doyle, Fred Harrison, John
 Kucks. **Top row:** business
 manager Fuzzy Evans,
 manager Clary Anderson, Bill
 Wiltrout, Charles Haskell,
 Johnny Podres, Bob Deacon,
 Augie Setien, Julie LeBoff,
 team president Dr. Clarence
 Beecher.



Centennial Field's Vin Clancy era ended with a disappointing third place finish in 1941. The highlight of that season was an August exhibition win over the International League's Montreal Royals, which drew 5,000 fans to Centennial.

In early 1942, Northern League directors voted to suspend operations for the duration of World War II. When play resumed in 1946, the Cardinals invited Vin Clancy to return to the club, but the popular manager chose instead to accept an offer to join J. Edgar Hoover's team as a special agent for the FBI. Clancy eventually re-settled in the Burlington area, where he lived until his death in 1994.

Northern League Visitors

Over fifty future and former major leaguers played for Northern League teams during the Cardinals tenure at Centennial Field. Some of the most significant visitors of the pre-war era were St. Albans Giants second baseman George "Snuffy" Stirnweiss, the 1945 American League batting champion; Hank Borowy of Saranac Lake, who won 20 games while pitching the Chicago Cubs to their last pennant; Plattsburgh's Ron Northey, a slugging outfielder for five big league teams; Brattleboro Maple Boo Ferriss, who twice won 20 for the Boston Red Sox; and Chuck Connors of Bennington, who played both major league baseball and NBA basketball before reaching greater fame as TV's "Rifleman."

Prominent Northern Leaguers of the post-war years included Rutland's John Antonelli, twice a 20-game winner for the New York Giants; Brooklyn Dodger pitcher Billy Loes of the Brattleboro Maples; and St. Albans' Joey Jay, pitching star of Cincinnati's 1961 pennant winner.

The most successful Northern League alumnus was Hall of Famer Robin Roberts, who pitched for the Twin City Trojans in 1946 and '47. Roberts was brought to Montpelier by manager Ray Fisher, the former Burlington Cardinal skipper whose Trojans came within two wins of sweeping the Northern League's five post-war pennants. Roberts posted a phenomenal 18-3 won-loss record in 1947, and began his outstanding 19-

*Burlington Cardinals who played
in the major leagues:*

Dick Farrell

Frank Hoerst

Johnny Kucks

Walt Lanfranconi

Sam Mele

Lennie Merullo

Bud Metheny

Johnny Podres

year major league career with Philadelphia the next season.

Robin Roberts made five mound appearances at Centennial Field, winning two and losing three. Two of the three losses came while pitching in relief, and one of them ended Roberts' league record 12-game winning streak in 1947. More indicative of the righthander's ability was the 4-hit shutout he threw against the Cards to begin his streak, played before the largest opening-day crowd in Northern League history.

Post-War Decline

Burlington never managed to duplicate its pre-war success after the Northern League resumed play in 1946. Though the Cardinals remained the league's annual attendance leader, they rarely finished over .500. The Cards' lone pennant run in 1949 pulled up one game short of the champion Brattleboro Maples. A year later, future big league pitchers Johnny Podres and John Kucks anchored the Cardinals' mound staff, but the team still finished a disappointing fourth.

The 1950 season proved to be the last for the Northern League. The circuit's decline began in 1948, when an organization of the most prominent eastern colleges, the East Coast Athletic Conference, voted to bar students at its schools from participating in professional summer leagues. The ECAC's announcement came just two weeks before opening day and forced Northern League teams to scramble for new ballplayers. Deprived of its chief source of talent, the quality of play in the league decreased noticeably, and soon attendance dropped as well.

Teams fought desperately to stay afloat. One innovative response to the problem was night baseball, which was introduced to the league in 1948 and debuted at Centennial two years later. Though night games were popular around the league, they were unable to combat the decreased quality of play and the competition for entertainment brought about by post-war prosperity. Riddled with debt, the Northern League closed shop after the 1950 season, ending a glorious chapter in Centennial Field history.

Cards manager Clary Anderson shakes hands with team president Dr. Clarence Beecher. Anderson, a legendary baseball and football coach at Montclair High School and Montclair State College in New Jersey, was Burlington's skipper from 1942 to 1952. Beecher was a longtime supporter of Burlington baseball who brought lights to the ballpark in 1950.

