

Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn (1854 – 1897)

Charles Radbourn was born on December 11, 1854 in Rochester, New York.¹ He was the son of Charles and Caroline Gardner Radbourn. His parents were from Bath, England and moved to the United States in 1854. When Charles Jr. was less than a year old, his father moved the family west to Bloomington, Illinois.² Charles Sr. continued his lifelong trade of butchering for a few years in Bloomington, eventually opening his own meat market on Front Street in May 1857.³ However, it appears that the family moved to Lexington, Illinois by 1860, where Charles Sr. engaged in farming.⁴ The family spent several years there, returning to Bloomington by 1866, settling in a house on the corner of Lee and Olive streets.⁵ Upon the family’s return to Bloomington, Charles Sr. opened another meat market, this time located at 16 West Washington Street.⁶ When Charles Jr. was old enough, he worked there for a time before he started playing baseball. It was in Bloomington where he first learned how to play baseball on corner lots. Charles Jr. had three brothers: Albert, William, and John, and four sisters: Sarah, May, Selina, and Minnie.

Charles Jr. made his first appearance on the baseball scene in 1869 playing for the Bloomington Juniors.⁷ He appears again in 1876 when he played with a Bloomington baseball club, the Bloomingtons.⁸ He then went on to pitch for a baseball club in Peoria in 1878. Next he was recruited for the National League in 1880 playing six games with the Buffalo Bisons in the outfield and at second base. In 1881 Charles became a pitcher for the Providence Grays at Rhode Island. Going into this season, Charles’ right arm was sore from all his pitching, so he pitched with Charlie Sweeney, who was somewhat his rival because he was an up-and-coming young pitcher. Radbourn went 25-11 that year leading the league in winning percentage. In 1882 he went 31-19 and led the league in strikeouts, and in 1883 he went 49-25 breaking the all-time record for wins in a season.

Radbourn also had a tendency towards belligerence both on and off the field. He was known as a heavy drinker which led him into trouble back in 1876 when he agreed to a bribe while intoxicated. The night before a Bloomington Semi-Pro game in September 1876 Charles and several other team members had been offered bribes by Ed Fitfield, Jim Conners, and Ed Stahl to purposely play poorly in an effort to “throw” the game. These three men had placed large bets for the opposing team, Springfield, and Springfield defeated Bloomington 4 to 1. Charles claimed that his drunkenness freed him from responsibility over his actions and he turned down the bribe on the following day. More controversy arose when Stahl and Conners claimed that Charles had proposed the bribe.

In July of the 1884 season, Charles, who was playing for the Providence Grays in Rhode Island, was suspended from the League because of his turbulent temper. In the

¹ “Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S. Marriages, 1838-1911 for Charles Radbourn, 1892-1895,” Ancestry.com, date accessed January 27, 2024

² Edward Achorn. *Fifty-nine in 84’: Old Hoss Radbourn, Barehanded Baseball, and the Greatest Season a Pitcher Ever Had.* (Harper Collins: New York, 2010) 18-19

³ J. Wesley Wolfe, *Bloomington City Directory, 1855-1856*, p. 37; “New Meat Market,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 19, 1857

⁴ “1860 United States Federal Census for Charles Radbourn,” Ancestry.com, date accessed January 27, 2024.

⁵ Bailey and Hair, *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1866*, p.172.

⁶ Ibid, p.172; “Fine Show of Meat,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 27, 1867

⁷ “Base Ball,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 24, 1869

⁸ “Base Ball Matters,” *The Daily Leader*, August 21, 1876

eighth inning of a game against Boston, he became upset over a balk call by the umpire and “promptly began to throw the ball with reckless haste and wildness, giving little Gilligan [the catcher] false signs and seemingly striving to break up the little fellow.”⁹ After this incident, rumors began to circulate that Charles had been intentionally pitching poorly because he had just signed a \$5,000 contract with the St. Louis Unions for more than twice the usual player’s salary of \$1,000 – \$2,000 a season. The rumors were disproved after the fourth game following Radbourn’s suspension, when Charlie Sweeney walked off the field in the middle of the game. It turned out that it was Sweeney who had signed with St. Louis after all and not Radbourn. Out of desperate need for a pitcher, the Grays reinstated Radbourn who consented to pitch every game for the rest of the year on the condition that management give him Sweeney’s pay on top of his own. Radbourn said, “I’ll pitch every day and win the pennant for Providence even if it costs me my right arm.”¹⁰ Charles played a fantastic season pitching 59 wins, 12 losses, and two ties, and the Grays defeated the New York Metropolitan for the championship. His record of pitching 59 wins in one season still stands to this day.

Pitching every day did in fact cost Charles his right arm to the point where it hurt to lift it to comb his hair. He earned the nickname “Old Hoss” because of his hard work and devotion to the game. Charles was actually one of the first players to effectively utilize the curveball which he had used when practicing against the family barn on West Washington Street. When he started with the Grays, the pitching distance was 50 feet and overhand throws were not allowed which made his use of the curveball that much more revolutionary. He also continued to pitch underhand even when overhand pitching became legal. He eventually came up with variations of the curveball such as a “dry spitter,” a precursor to the knuckle ball, and the hardball, which was a combination of a slowball and a curveball.

When asked if he was ever going to tire out from playing baseball, “Old Hoss” answered “Tire out? Tire out tossing a little five-ounce ball for two hours a day? Man, I used to be a butcher. From 4 in the morning until 8 at night I knocked down steers with a 25-pound sledge. Tired of playing 2 hours a day for 10 times the money I got for 16 hours a day?”¹¹ After his five years with the Grays, Charles joined the Boston Beaneaters in 1886. It was during his time in Boston in 1887 when he met his future wife Caroline “Carrie” Spafford Stanhope (they were not officially married until January 16, 1895 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin¹²). In an interview with *The Daily Bulletin* in 1887 (while Radbourn and his wife were spending the off season in Bloomington), Radbourn said that “he had about concluded to retire from base ball.” He said he was “heartily tired of the slavery under the present arbitrary league contracts where men are bought and sold like cattle.” He stated that he would not play under the Boston management any further and would retire to Bloomington. However, he went on to play for the Boston Beaneaters for another four years. This was most likely due to the hefty salary he was paid by the

⁹ “Charles ‘Old Hoss’ Radbourn, Pitcher,” www.providencegrays.org, Charles Radbourn Evergreen Cemetery Walk folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

¹⁰ “McLean County Hall of Fame Pitchers,” Charles Radbourn file, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

¹¹ Achorn, 22; “Great Pitchers of the Past,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 27, 1915

¹² Achorn, 298; “Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S. Marriages, 1838-1911 for Charles Radbourn, 1892-1895.”

Boston club, having earned \$4,500 during the 1886 season.¹³ He then went on to finish his career with the Cincinnati Reds in 1891.

His career was filled with many memorable moments, such as pitching a no-hit game against Cleveland of the National League on July 25, 1883 winning by a score of 8-0. He also struck out 411 batters in 672 innings in 1884 which was the season in which he won 59 games. One of his most famous moments occurred on August 17, 1882 during a game against Detroit in the National League when he broke up a scoreless game with a home run in the 18th inning. Charles finished his major league career with 308 wins and 191 losses.

Shortly after returning to Bloomington, Radbourn was interviewed by a reporter from *The Weekly Leader*. In that interview he stated that he was out of the business. "I've been playing a good many seasons and I guess it's about time to take a rest." He also said that after he had rested up a little, he would remain in Bloomington from "this time hence forth and devote my whole attention to business."¹⁴ Radbourn opened and ran a pool hall and saloon for six years. "Radbourn's Place" was located at 214 West Washington Street (now the current location of Commerce Bank) in downtown Bloomington. An 1891 advertisement for his saloon read "Best of Everything in Wet Goods and Cigars; Base Ball Headquarters."¹⁵ After Radbourn passed away in 1897, his brothers William and Albert took over running the saloon (possibly purchasing it from Radbourn's wife Carrie). By 1899, Albert was no longer running the saloon with William. William continued to operate it until about 1911.¹⁶

In addition to his fame as a baseball player, Radbourn was considered a hero by some because of his courage in stopping a run-away buggy on the evening of July 12, 1892. On the evening in question, George Fletcher, his wife, and son had come into town for supplies. While Mr. Fletcher was inside a store, he left his wife and son waiting in the carriage. Not long after Mr. Fletcher got out of the buggy, something spooked the horse and the horse took off running. The horse, buggy, Mrs. Fletcher and their son were careening out of control down West Washington Street. As the runaway carriage passed by Radbourn's billiards hall and saloon,

"a young man wearing a white jacket dashed suddenly, and with the stride of a professional sprinter...like a flash was at the running horse's head. With his right hand he seized the bit and with his left put a powerful clamp upon the horse's nostrils. The plunging horse dragged the man along with him, and would possibly have gotten away had not the man dexterously turned him so sharply as almost to upset the buggy, thus bringing the animal suddenly almost to a standstill."

Bystanders rushed to the carriage to see if Mrs. Fletcher and her son were okay, and they were unharmed. The man in the white jacket (whom people at the time did not know was Radbourn) quietly walked back to the sidewalk and back into the saloon. Because of Radbourn's quick reflexes, nerve, and grit, a terrible accident had been averted.¹⁷

At some point in his life it is thought that he had contracted syphilis. It was thought that this is what caused him to grow steadily sicker during his last few years in

¹³ Bill Kemp. "Famed 19th-Century ballplayer 'Old Hoss' came from Bloomington," *The Pantagraph*, April 5, 2008

¹⁴ "He Quits the Business," *The Weekly Leader*, August 28, 1891

¹⁵ *1891 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*

¹⁶ Achorn, 299; Bloomington Normal City Directories 1897-1911

¹⁷ "A Courageous Act," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 13, 1892

Bloomington. His obituary in *The Daily Pantagraph* noted that the disease “gnawed at his mental and physical being, robbing him of speech, feeling, and locomotion long before his final day.”¹⁸ In addition, Radbourn had lost his left eye due to a hunting accident on April 19, 1894. Radbourn had been an avid hunter all his life and while he and a friend were hunting near the city limits, he received a portion of shot in the face. His friend was attempting to shoot at a bird when Radbourn had stepped from behind a tree into the line of fire. Radbourn was taken to Dr. Hallam’s office where the wound was dressed but because of the severity of the wound, there was no way to save his eye.¹⁹

Charles passed away at the age of 42 on February 5, 1897 at his home located at 814 East Washington Street. It has been noted that his death was caused by a hunting accident which took his life before syphilis could finish him off. On the day of his death, *The Daily Bulletin* reported that the sporting world will learn of “‘Rads’ death with sincere regret” and that he was an “honorable exponent of the national game and the game was the better for his entrance.”²⁰ In his will, (which he had written two years before his death) he left all of his personal property and real estate to his wife Carrie.²¹ After a short funeral service, he was buried in the southwest part of Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. His wife Carrie died six years later and was buried next to him.²²

In 1939 Charles was posthumously inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. He was one of the few 19th century baseball players to be inducted. In 1941 a replica of his Hall of Fame plaque was placed on his headstone in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. A 1943 article in *The Charleston Daily Mail* remembered Charles stating that “Old Hoss Radbourn was one of the men who helped establish baseball as America’s national game.”²³ In fact, Clark Griffith, a future Baseball Hall of Famer who grew up in Normal, said “Old Hoss” was the one who had inspired him to become a pitcher in the first place. In Radbourn’s obituary, *The Daily Pantagraph* stated that “he was the greatest baseball pitcher of his day...His name was used as frequently as the president’s...Radbourn’s matchless pitching, followed by his winning hit in the 18th inning, placed him head and shoulders above any player either preceding or present.”²⁴

For a more information on Radbourn and baseball in the 19th century, please see the books *Old Hoss: A Fictional Baseball Biography of Charles Radbourn* by James Bennett and Donald Raycraft and *Fifty-Nine in 84’: Old Hoss Radbourn, Barehanded Baseball, and the Greatest Season a Pitcher Ever Had* by Edward Achorn

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¹⁸ “Radbourn is Dead,” *Daily Pantagraph*, February 6, 1897, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

¹⁹ “Loss of an Eye,” *The Weekly Leader*, April 19, 1894

²⁰ “Rad Has Passed Away,” *The Daily Bulletin*, February 5, 1897

²¹ Copy of “Last Will and Testament of Charles Radbourn, Jr.,” McLean County Museum of History Archives

²² “Widow of Famous Ball Player Dead,” *The Daily Bulletin*, August 3, 1903

²³ “Hoss Radbourne Won 60 Games in One Season,” *The Charleston Daily Mail*, July 20, 1943, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

²⁴ “Radbourn is Dead,” *Daily Pantagraph*, February 6, 1897, McLean County Museum of History Archives.