

The Rise of the Midwest League and the Decline of the Three-I League

by Tim Rask

Introduction

Although minor league baseball has prospered in recent years, we are not far removed from a time in which teams and whole leagues struggled to survive. The baseball landscape that Iowa fans know today was shaped by the tumultuous times of the 1950's. During that decade, minor league baseball nationally faced declining support from fans as well as from their Major Leagues sponsors. It was a time when two founding members of the National Association—the minor leagues' governing body—faded from Iowa's baseball scene and a post-war upstart rose to prominence in the upper Midwest. This is the story of how “the oldest class B circuit in baseball,” the famed—Three-I League—faded into oblivion as the Midwest League rose to become the top circuit in the region.

Setting the Scene: What was The Three-I League?

When I first began following minor league baseball, I was vaguely aware that there had once been a circuit called “The Three-I” that operated in the upper Midwest. This league was no baseball legend. The Three-I was a successful league that operated in the low minors during the first half of the 20th century. In 1901, representatives from cities in Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa formed an eight-team circuit that was christened the Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League. The circuit came to be popularly known as the Three-I League (or Three-Eye, to some headline writers), and upon its formation the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* gushed, “The league is without a doubt the best ever organized in the middle west.”¹ The inaugural season saw teams in the Illinois cities of Decatur, Rock Island, Bloomington, Rockford, Illinois; Terre Haute and Evansville, Indiana; and Cedar Rapids, and Davenport, Iowa. Later that year, the Three-I became a founding member of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, the governing body of the minor leagues. Under the minor league classification scheme, the Three-I became one of the first “Class B” leagues, the second tier in a structure that included A, B, C, and D leagues (Double-A and Triple-A would come later).

During the first decade of the 20th Century, the Three-I enjoyed stability and success by bringing competitive professional baseball to the upper Midwest. During the 1910's, the Iowa-based clubs gradually drifted out of the circuit, as the minors experienced a period of decline, culminated by the suspension of many leagues during World War I. After the war, the Three-I bounced back with a configuration that looked very similar to 1901. In 1921, however, the westernmost cities in the league, Rock Island and Cedar Rapids, split to form the Mississippi Valley League, a circuit comprised mostly of Iowa cities that lasted until 1934. In the late 1930's, Iowa cities such as Clinton, Cedar Rapids and Waterloo drifted back into the Three-I, as the circuit frequently shuffled its lineup of clubs during the Great Depression. Cedar Rapids claimed the pennant in 1942, the final season before the Three-I suspended operations due to World War II.

In its first half-century of existence, the Three-I carved a solid niche in minor league baseball. Although often derided as the epitome of the term “bush league” (Paul Dickson's *Baseball Dictionary* notes that “Three-I” was used to define the ineptness of minor league play²), the circuit developed its share of future Major Leaguers. Among those who ascended to the bigs from Iowa's Three-I clubs were Red Faber (Dubuque, 1909), Clarence “Pants” Rowland (Dubuque

¹ Source: Three-I League Archives, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, p. 2.

² *The Dickson Baseball Dictionary*, 1989, p. 394.

manager, 1908 and 1910-13), Ray Chapman (Davenport, 1911), and Cedar Rapids alumni Lou Boudreau (1938) and Allie Reynolds (1941). Even Clyde Sukeforth, who gained later fame when he scouted Jackie Robinson for Branch Rickey's Brooklyn Dodgers, played for the Clinton Owls in 1937. Like many minor leagues, the Three-I suspended operations after 1942 season while many ballplayers served in the Armed Forces during World War II.

The Post-War Rebound

After the war, professional baseball came roaring back as the nation embraced a return to peace and prosperity. Whereas only a dozen minor leagues played in 1945, 42 circuits took the field in 1946, among them the venerable Three-I League. Although defending 1942 champion, Cedar Rapids, had to forfeit its former slot in the league (Hill Park burned to the ground during the war years and the club had no suitable place to play), Davenport and Waterloo joined six Illinois and Indiana cities in the renewed league. During the 1946 season Waterloo debuted Municipal Stadium, while Davenport's Cubs took the regular-season pennant (the Cubs dropped their semifinal series in the leagues Shaughnessy Playoff).

The following year, the resurgence of the minor leagues continued in Iowa. Two more leagues joined Iowa's baseball landscape. The Class A Western League, like the Three-I a charter member of the National Association, returned from its wartime sabbatical with franchises in Sioux City and Des Moines. A new Class C league, the Central Association, brought professional baseball back to Clinton, Burlington, and Keokuk.

The late 1940's are considered the boom times of minor league baseball. In 1949, the minors attracted over 35 million fans, a record that was not broken until 2004 (although in 1949 there were considerably more cities fielding minor league teams). The good times extended to Iowa. Sioux City took the Western League pennant in 1947, the same year that Waterloo drew an all-time Three-I League record 174,064 fans to Municipal Stadium. Clinton copped back-to-back Central flags in 1947-48, while Burlington took the top spot in that league in 1949.

So many clubs prospered that even Cedar Rapids, one of Iowa's most reliable minor league cities, had a difficult time finding a league with a vacancy. After Veterans Memorial Stadium was constructed in 1948, Cedar Rapids found no openings in either the Western or Three-I Leagues, and the city explored the possibility of fielding a team in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, or even in the national fast-pitch softball circuit. Cedar Rapids finally gained a berth in the Central Association for the 1949 season only after Hannibal, Missouri forfeited its franchise and Fort Madison failed to come up with the funds necessary to join the Central.

The Clinton *Herald's* Bob Howard commented on the region's excess of baseball riches, "Now with the class A Western League, the Class B Three-I league, the Class C Central Association, and the class D Illinois State loop, this immediate area of the nation is to be blessed with just about the greatest array of organized baseball in its history."³

The last league noted by Howard, the Illinois State League, opened play in six cities, including Marion, Belleville, and Mattoon. During the upcoming decade, this downstate Class D circuit would grow to become the upper Mississippi Valley's most prominent minor league.

The Early 1950's: The Decline Begins

The 1950's was a decade of decline for minor league baseball. After the initial postwar surge in the number of leagues and teams, the business of minor league baseball fell on lean times, as baseball had to compete with a multitude of other entertainment options, most notably the new medium of television. The Three-I continued to enjoy national fame as the "symbol of the bushes"

³ Clinton *Herald*, December 19, 1946, p. 21.

as a 1950 *Collier's* magazine profile described the circuit,⁴ but the circuit was not immune to the hard times to come.

Cedar Rapids finally rejoined the Three-I in 1950. After spending a season "slumming" in the Central Association, C.R. acquired the failed Springfield, Illinois franchise. Unfortunately, the membership shakeup prompted by Cedar Rapids' departure effectively killed the Class C Central. The Three-I League's fortunes worsened, as well in 1951, when Decatur and Danville dropped out. That left the Three-I with only six clubs, three of them in Iowa. Those three clubs (Cedar Rapids, Davenport, and Waterloo) made up the second division in the league standings, although they still combined to draw a healthy attendance of 272,117.

The following year brought better news to the league. After the Central Association failed to muster enough clubs to make a comeback in 1952, Burlington and Keokuk accepted Three-I franchises, and once again the league fielded eight clubs (five in Iowa). Keokuk made the return to professional ball in grand fashion by also having one of their residents, former Chicago broadcaster Hal Totten, elected to the Three-I presidency. (Totten later relocated to Cedar Rapids, where he continued to preside over Three-I affairs).

Decatur and Danville also resurfaced in 1952 in the Mississippi-Ohio Valley (M-O-V) League, that tiny class D loop formerly known as the Illinois State League. The erstwhile 3-I clubs accounted for almost half of the total attendance in the 8-club M-O-V. Things were less prosperous in Davenport, where a debt that was reported as anywhere from \$17,000 to \$50,000 forced the city out of professional baseball. Fortunately, President Totten convinced Peoria to take Davenport's slot in the Three-I.

Totten and the league had to deal with other issues beyond the day-to-day operations of the league's members, as the turmoil in baseball was just getting started in 1953. That year, two changes at the Major League level would eventually affect prospects in the minors. In the first National League franchise shift in half a century, Boston's Braves moved to Milwaukee, where they shattered attendance records. In St. Louis, the giant Anheuser-Busch brewery purchased the Cardinals, and set about expanding the Redbirds radio network. The fear among minor league magnates was that fewer people would come out to the ballpark for live minor league baseball when they could enjoy Harry Caray's call of Major League action at home. Even worse, more Three-I league cities gained television outlets, providing even more competition.

Colorado Senator Edwin Johnson (who also happened to be president of the Western League), tried to lead the fight against radio and TV in 1953. Senator Johnson threatened Congressional action to bring any ballclub owned by a beer or liquor concern under antitrust laws. The Senator accused Cards owner, August Busch of using baseball "merely to sell a few more bottles of beer. Baseball to August S. Busch is a cold-blooded beer-peddling business and not the great American game which sportsmen revere."⁵

The broadcast of Cardinals games into Three-I markets was a legitimate concern, as local stations in seven of the league's eight carried Cardinal baseball. Waterloo General Manager, Tom Rigney, minced no words in a letter to President Totten. Rigney urged the league to "inform the Cardinals that we, as a league and as individual clubs, are ready to do all in our power to discredit them and their product (Budweiser beer) publicly in an effort to prevent them from annihilating one of the finest old leagues in baseball, the Three-I. It is my opinion that the Cardinals will smash us by the end of this season--1954. Under their broadcast plans, it will take no longer. I have in mind free advertising for the Cardinals and their product as the 'Stranglers of the Three-I and Minor League Baseball' on the fences and in the scorebooks of Three-I clubs." ⁶

⁴ "Night Life in the Three-Eye League," by Tom Meany, *Collier's*, July 15, 1950, pp. 16-17, 64-65.

⁵ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, February 23, 1954, p. 17.

⁶ Clinton *Herald*, February 12, 1954, p. 10.

In the end, both Johnson and the Cardinals stepped down. Johnson said he would not press action against the Cards, saying his only intent was to "give a warning" to baseball and Congress. For their part, the Redbirds left it o each minor league club to decide whether Cardinal broadcasts would be carried in the city while the local club is playing at home.⁷

Totten for his part, downplayed the competition of television later in 1954, when he stated to the Chicago Tribune, "Television can make people conscious of the technicalities and fine points of baseball. TV warms them up and they come to the ballpark more often...I think I'd like to see stations in the Three-I territory telecast our games, which are played at night. Unfortunately, small town stations cannot telecast night baseball. So they pick up the network entertainment shows. And that's when TV hurts your gate--your baseball game is competing against Ed Sullivan, Joe Friday, etc. for the public's attention. But we must live with this new entertainment medium and make it an asset instead of a liability."⁸

Perhaps Totten realized that part of the league's troubles in 1954 stemmed more from bad weather than other entertainment outlets. Cedar Rapids experienced seven rainouts in its first 19 games. Overall, the league lost 47 games to weather before June. The Burlington *Hawk-Eye* commented that "Not only the Burlington Bees but the rest of the Three-I league faces difficulties due to the horrible spring weather."⁹

Whether due to foul weather or competition from radio and TV, Three-I attendance dropped by more than a third in 1954. Burlington was hit the hardest. Unable to obtain an agreement with a Major League club in 1954, the Bees fielded an independent team that took a beating on the field and off. The situation reached crisis levels for the cellar-dwelling Bees, and the local organization feared they would have no choice but to withdraw from the league. A mid-season infusion of cash kept the club afloat, but one Bee official summed up the situation this way: "The minors and the Three-I league in particular are in a bad way. The majors will have to subsidize them or there will soon be no minors or majors. The entire league is in bad shape, whether anyone realizes it or not."¹⁰

While the Three-I dealt with crisis, the Western League was faring even worse. Although the old Class A league's attendance had not dropped as precipitously as the Three-I's, the Western was robbed of its two of its top markets after 1954 season. After the St. Louis Browns moved to Baltimore in 1954 and the Athletics relocated from Philadelphia to Kansas City in 1955, the premier minor league in the Midwest, the American Association, had to replace two of its charter members, since the Blues were forced from Kansas City, and Columbus shifted to the International League to take Baltimore's old Triple-A slot. For replacements, the loop raided the Western League, plucking Denver and Omaha (naturally, the two top-drawing clubs in the circuit). Des Moines and Sioux City remained, along with Lincoln, Wichita, Pueblo, Colorado Springs. During the 1955 season, both the Western and the Three-I drew fewer than half a million fans. The postwar boom was definitely over. The leagues could count themselves lucky, though, as the Wisconsin State League folded after 1953 and the Western Association folded after '54 as a result of the Major League competition from the Braves and Athletics, respectively. Cedar Rapids *Gazette* sports editor, Gus Schrader noted that the Three-I "seems to be fortunate in that there are no large cities in its territory that are likely to attract a big-league franchise. The Three-I league, the oldest class B circuit in the country, has proved for years that it can operate in an area that is heavily populated with fans who like to jog into Chicago or St. Louis to see major league ball."¹¹ As events would show, it was the Midwest League, not the Majors, that would pose the biggest threat to the venerable Class B loop.

⁷ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, March 10, 1954, p. 7.

⁸ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, October 21, 1954, p. 17.

⁹ Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, May 7, 1954, p. 14.

¹⁰ Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, August 30, 1954, p. 10.

¹¹ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, August 20, 1953, p. 15

The minutes from the Three-I League's annual meeting in November, 1953 record a curious footnote. "A map of Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana, with a fringe of Kentucky, submitted by Mr. C.C. Hoffman, President of the Class D M-O-V League and showing a number of cities circled, was introduced by the President [Totten], along with Mr. Hoffman's suggestion that the Three-I League and the M-O-V league choose eight cities each along close geographical lines with the intent of forming two Class C leagues in place of the present B and D leagues."¹² The correspondence was "placed on file" by the Three-I. "Mr. C.C. Hoffman" was Clarence C. "Dutch" Hoffman, a Belleville, Illinois soda distributor and ex-baseball player (Hoffman had a cup of coffee with the White Sox in 1929), who had been elected to the M-O-V presidency in 1949. As the decade progressed, one can only wonder what would have happened had the Three-I acted upon Hoffman's suggestion. The old ballplayer would prove to be a pesky adversary for the old Class B loop.

1954—Dubuque and Clinton hit the M-O-V

After the 1953 season, the six-team M-O-V League sought to expand by two. In February of 1953, representatives from Clinton and Kewanee, both former members of the postwar Central Association, met with Hoffman. Both cities joined the league, but Kewanee's bid faltered when the city's parks board refused to allow the club to use the local ballpark. Undaunted, Hoffman quickly turned to plan B and offered the franchise to Dubuque. Although Dubuque I been without minor league ball since 1932, the city jumped at the chance to get back into the professional ranks and it took little time for the two newcomers to become friendly rivals. Clinton issued a challenge to see which of the two would draw the higher attendance for the year, a challenge the spurred a great deal of pre-season hype in the two river towns. The barrage of publicity paid off—in early May, the two squared off in a home-and-home series. In both cases, the home club won, and over 2,000 fans packed the respective ballparks. By season's end, Clinton and Dubuque led the M-O-V in attendance drawing a combined 140,761, more than a third of the league's total attendance.

Back in the Three-I, hopes were high going into 1955. Burlington's troubles were resolved and the Bees even garnered a coveted working agreement with the Chicago Cubs. League President Totten predicted a banner year for the league in '55. "Spurned by the re-kindled interest in every one of our cities, I believe that, conservatively, Evansville and Peoria will draw 125,000 each; Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, and Terre Haute will hit 100,000 apiece; Quincy will draw 90,000; Keokuk, 75,000 and Burlington, 70,000. That totals 785,000, or 2090 more than 1940." Gus Schrader of the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* was skeptical of Totten's numbers, writing, "Come now, Hal. Those may sound like "conservative" figures to you, but I'll tell you what: if Quincy, Keokuk, and Burlington come within 20,000 paid admissions of your "estimates," I'll buy you a new pipe. You must need a new one if your old pipes are doing that to you."¹³ (Let the record show that Totten's predictions proved to be far off base, for the most part. Burlington did draw over 90,000, but Evansville, Peoria, Terre Haute, and Quincy all fell well below Totten's targets).¹⁴

The following season, Dubuque surpassed Clinton in attendance. In fact, Dubuque's 94,925 outdrew all other Class D clubs in the minors. Considering that was more than any of the clubs in the Three-I League, Dubuque began to consider the possibilities of moving up to the Class B league. Dubuque restrateur, John Petrakis, the president of the local baseball organization, campaigned actively for making the move. A survey showed 98% of Dubuque fans favored the move, but despite the lackluster attendance in the Three-I, no clubs folded, and thus the league

¹² Minutes of the Three-I annual meeting, November 6-7, 1953.

¹³ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, March 24, 1955, p. 21.

¹⁴ According to the *Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, Evansville drew a mere 47,414 fans, Peoria, 62,357, Terre Haute 50,334, and Quincy 39,081. Keokuk's runaway pennant-winning club drew only 39,179.

had no available slot for Dubuque or any other city.¹⁵ Clinton, meanwhile claimed not to be interested in a jump to the Three-I, with the club's GM stating that Clinton had "found its niche in Class D."¹⁶

Darker Days for the Three-I

During the 1955-56 off-season, the M-O-V again opted for a name change. Prior to the 1955 season, the league had expanded into Indiana, adding Lafayette and Kokomo to its ranks, so the league opted to change its name to the Midwest League after it added yet another Indiana club (Michigan City) for the '56 season. (The name change actually had been proposed for 1955, but the clubs had already printed materials using the M-O-V name.¹⁷ With the new cities, the circuit continued to draw 400,000-plus annually, with Dubuque leading the way.

While the Midwest League prospered, The Three-I and its Class A brother Western League faced hurdles in 1956. The times were particularly rough for the Western, after the Triple-A American Association again reached into the W.L to grab plucked one of the Western's top cities, Wichita, in 1956. To replace the three clubs lost to Triple A the Western had added Topeka, Kansas (formerly of the defunct Western Association), along with Amarillo, Texas and Albuquerque, New Mexico (from the West Texas-New Mexico League) to get back up to eight teams for 1956. Attendance for both years proved to be lackluster, which did not help to alleviate the added travel expenses.

The Three-I, meanwhile, had a near-disaster during the 1956 season, as the Terre Haute club folded in June. Hal Totten hoped to find some city to take over the franchise—"As I see it, the first city to say 'Yes' is in.," but he found no takers. To make matters worse, Evansville's Braves dominated play on the field making a mockery of the pennant race. Attendance suffered, and for the first time the Three-I drew fewer fans than the Midwest League. Pessimism reigned around the league. The Waterloo Courier's, Al Ney, lamented, "It's almost impossible to imagine the Three-I League operating again in 1957. Each and every club has been sweating out season after season, cutting expenses, getting contributions, making pleas to fans, etc. One of these days more cities are going to decide it isn't worth the effort, and the Three-I could cease to exist."¹⁸ A common lament was express by the Cedar Rapids Gazette's Gus Schrader, when he wrote, "I think it's high time the Iowa members of the league took the bull by the horns and found a league that is more desirable for geographical reasons."¹⁹ That desire would go unheeded by the Three-I.

1957-58—The Midwest League's "Happy State of Confusion"

After losing Terre Haute in the middle of the 1956 season, the Three-I dwindled further when Quincy and Waterloo lost their affiliations with the Yankees and White Sox, respectively. The White Sox opted to bringing minor league ball back to Davenport, giving the circuit six clubs (four in Iowa). As always, President Totten put a positive spin on the situation, noting "We are, of course, unhappy that such old standbys as Waterloo, Quincy, and Terre Haute will not be with us this year. But we have good reason to believe that at least two of them will be able and eager to return, very possibly in 1958, which will bring back many of the old associations and rivalries that have meant so much to all of us."

¹⁵Cedar Rapids Gazette, Jan 7, 1955, p. 13.

¹⁶Clinton Herald, September 10, 1954, p. 13.

¹⁷The Sporting News, Dec. 7, 1955, p. 7.

¹⁸Waterloo Courier, June 8, 1956, p. 13.

¹⁹Cedar Rapids Gazette, June 28, 1956, p. 17.

"In the meantime, we know from experience that a six-club league more often than not produces closer pennant races, which leads to greater interest and increased attendance. Reports from the major league clubs give credence to the belief that all six clubs can expect particularly strong playing personnel, which further supports our expectation of a highly successful year."²⁰ It was another lackluster year at the gate, however—there was a close pennant race between Evansville and Peoria, but the four Iowa clubs finished well behind the frontrunners.

Dubuque and Clinton continued their box office success in 1957. Dubuque outdrew all six Three-I league clubs, while only the Davenport Dav-Sox outdrew Clinton. Not surprisingly, Hal Totten saw the two Iowa cities as prime candidates to invigorate his circuit. Dubuque club president John Petrakis, was only too happy to get the word out that Dubuque was interested in joining the Three-I. "I feel our record for the last three years proves Dubuque deserves a higher classification of baseball...I have written a letter to Hal Totten to get the details of a class B operation. I have written George Weiss of the New York Yankees and to John Mueller of the Milwaukee Braves to see what they have to offer in the event they decide to transfer their present farm operation in the Three-I league. I feel the fans have always been interested in an All-Iowa league. I feel we will be able to create this only if Dubuque moves into the Three-I."²¹

Dutch Hoffman was not about to let his top two markets go without a fight and pledged to invoke his territorial rights under baseball's rules to keep the Key City in his league. "I'm not saying I will do that," he noted, "I'm just saying I can."²² Clinton, for its part, remained non-committal about its intentions. While will to consider the move to Class B, Clinton's baseball club was content to remain in the background while Petrakis beat the drum for league reorganization.

Petrakis staged a furious effort to plead Dubuque's case at the minor league meetings in December. The Dubuque president had become something of a celebrity in minor league circles, and he was invited to address the convention so that he could related the attendance success that had led to the "Miracle of Dubuque." The attendees may have been interested in Petrakis' promotional ideas, but any pleas for help in switching leagues fell on deaf ears. Some potential Major League sponsors said Fourth Street Park was not fit for Class B baseball. Minor League boss, George Trautman claimed his hands were tied, telling Petrakis, "I can not order a league to give up two cities that make up its backbone." Hoffman refused even to discuss the situation, as he had just lost Mattoon, the last charter member of the league, and was in no mood to create two more vacancies in his circuit. In the words of Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald* sports editor, Mitch Milavetz, "The men who control the reins in organized baseball played a clever game of pass the buck with Dubuque until, in the end, it was too late to get out of the Midwest League for 1958."²³

Petrakis returned to Dubuque fighting mad, vowing "I want this to be the biggest year yet," Petrakis said upon returning to Dubuque from Colorado Springs, where his last hope of getting into the Three-I was dashed. He has adopted a new slogan for Dubuque: 'Dubuque is going places; just try and stop us.'²⁴ Petrakis continued to fire jibes at Dutch Hoffman, and openly campaigned for a berth in the Three-I. At a hot stove banquet appearance in Cedar Rapids, Petrakis said he looked forward to the day when Dubuque and Cedar Rapids could compete in the same league. A *Gazette* photo showing the Dubuque president holding up three fingers left little doubt which league Petrakis thought that should be.²⁵

As 1958 began, Hoffman had more worries beyond keeping Dubuque and Clinton. Along with losing Mattoon, the Midwest lost another club when Lafayette, Indiana turned in its franchise. Michigan City also claimed to be on shaky ground. Hoffman acted quickly and courted Keokuk,

²⁰ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, January 27, 1957, pp. 1-2.

²¹ Cedar Rapids *Gazette* August 22, 1957, p. 13.

²² Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald*, Sept. 5, 1957, p.20.

²³ Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald*, December 17, 1957, p. 14.

²⁴ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, December 27, 1957, p. 17.

²⁵ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, April 10, 1958, p.17.

which just months before had dropped out of the Three-I. Encouraged by the opportunity to jump back into baseball so quickly, Keokuk put together an organization, including an affiliation with the Cardinals, and signed on for the 1958 season as the Midwest league's newest member. Still, by late March, Hoffman still had not filled the eighth and final slot. President Hoffman's "happy state of confusion" (in the words of the Clinton Herald's Tom Wark) finally was resolved when Waterloo agreed to join the circuit as a Red Sox affiliate. The *Telegraph-Herald's* Mitch Milavetz dubbed it a "major victory" for Hoffman to add the two Iowa cities to the Midwest League. "

"Despite this minor confusion at the start, one thing is obvious to the most casual observer. Hoffman has not only saved his league this year but he may have saved it for years to come. During the winter months, the Dubuque Packers have requested to pull out of the Midwest League and seek a place in the Three-I circuit. Dubuque officials admitted their interest in the Three-I was based primarily on finding more natural rivals for the Packers. They had no quarrels with the Midwest League, only with the lack of mutual interest of the teams. It's true that Hoffman's choice of Waterloo was probably based on necessity rather than planned strategy. But either way, he has accomplished the same thing.

"By adding two more Iowa cities--Keokuk and Waterloo--he has made his league twice as attractive. Dubuque baseball fans can get much more enthusiastic about beating either of those two Iowa cities than they could beating Mattoon and Lafayette, the replaced cities. Now Hoffman's league has four good cities of interest to Dubuque. He has Clinton, Waterloo, Keokuk, and Decatur. The Three-I League, with only Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Davenport, no longer looks half as attractive."²⁶

Reeling from the loss of its Keokuk, Peoria, and Evansville franchises, the Three-I League looked to the north for replacements. For the 1958 season, the league added two franchises in Wisconsin—Green Bay and Appleton (Fox Cities) and one in Rochester, Minnesota. Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Davenport held fast, allowing the league to have representation in one of its namesake "I's."

At least the name of the league provided some hot stove fodder for the area's sports columnists. Most suggested a change to the W.I.M. league, in honor of the states that now made up the circuit. Or perhaps, as the Gazette's Gus Schrader noted, the WIM league, could stand for "WIM, vigor, and vitality"²⁷ The Clinton *Herald's* Tom Wark offered the practical solution that the Midwest League and the Three-I simply swap names. "After all, wrote Wark, "Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa ARE in the Midwest; and the class D circuit now called the Midwest IS made up of cities in Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa."²⁸

On the subject of names, Wark had earlier written, "What's important in this case, I think, is prestige. The name of the Three-I league is as old as the minor leagues themselves. For years it was virtually synonymous with minor league baseball. Every baseball fan in the country has heard of it. There's an area of identity connected with it that has a positive value to the gate and the major league farm directors who respect it as probably the nation's fastest B league. Changing the name, in this case, would detract something--an intangible perhaps, but important nonetheless--from the national pastime. The Three-I is an institution--one worth preserving, even if two of the I's are missing."²⁹

One thing was certain—by 1958, both the Three-I and the Midwest Leagues had become reliant on Iowa-based teams to keep their circuits afloat. The final makeup of the minor league baseball map in the state was coming into focus.

²⁶ Dubuque *Telegraph-Herald*, April 9, 1957, p.12.

²⁷ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, November 28, 1957, p. 51.

²⁸ Clinton *Herald*, 1958 p. 13.

²⁹ Clinton *Herald* Dec 16, '57, p. 13.

1958-59: This is Winning?

By the close of the 1958 season, it was debatable just how prestigious the Three-I remained. For the third consecutive year, the Midwest League outdrew its Class B brother (albeit with two more teams). Once again, experienced a mid-season shakeup, as Rochester faltered and moved its franchise to Winona, Minnesota. As Winona struggled to put together a game plan for 1959, Davenport once again lost its berth in the league, as the Chicago White Sox pulled the plug on their support of the Dav-Sox.

With the league down to just four solid franchises, it might have seemed a perfect opportunity for Dubuque and some other Midwest League clubs to finally make the step up to Class B. Dutch Hoffman, however, continued to block any attempts to raid the Midwest League. "Hoffman finesses Totten at every turn. Clinton, Dubuque, and Waterloo would be the finest thing possible for the Three-I, but Hal just can't get 'em." ³⁰

That winter's meeting of the National Association brought more talk of devising a realignment plan to redraw the minor league map, but no action was taken. Totten, Unable to move into any of the Midwest League's markets, instead looked to the west. The sprawling Western League was beginning to fracture under the weight of lengthy travel distances and was about to suspend operations. Western members Sioux City, Topeka, and Lincoln all looked to the Three-I as a more geographically convenient circuit. Des Moines entertained thoughts of jumping up to Triple-A, but when the capital city's bid to obtain the Toledo franchise in the American Association failed, Des Moines agreed to join the three other Western League refugees in the Three-I.

A headline in the Des Moines *Register* declared the Three-I to be the big winner in the league shuffle.³¹ True, the Three-I did pick up four attractive markets, but many observers were concerned about the new "W.I.N.K." league that stretched from Green Bay to Topeka.

The Gazette's Gus Schrader commented, "It's back to geography class for us Three-I league fans, as the 1959 arrangement gives the old circuit the most Western atmosphere of all time. Obviously, the addition of Des Moines, Sioux City, Lincoln, and Topeka is the best lineup that could be obtained under the circumstances, and the functioning of an 8-team league should compensate for the longer traveling distances.

"The longest trip for Cedar Rapids last year was the 299 miles to Green Bay. This time it will be 379 miles to Topeka and 315 to Lincoln. But there is a shorter trip, too--the 116 miles to Des Moines, which should be a good rival for C.R. First time the 2 cities have been in a league together back in the 30's when they were in the old Western.

"Fortunately, Cedar Rapids is near the league's geographic center. I'm just feeling sorry for those players who have to ride a bus in one stretch from Topeka to Green Bay--678 miles! Maybe we can call it the "Aching Back" league."³²

The Death of the Three-I League

The Three-I League kept all 8 of its cities in line for 1960, although they did lose their president. Declaring that the worst was over, Hal Totten stepped down as Three-I president prior to the 1960 season. Vern Hoscheit of Terre Haute, Indiana, took over, although he relocated to Cedar Rapids to maintain the same league office..

³⁰ Clinton *Herald*, October 10, 1958, p. 9.

³¹ Des Moines *Register*, December 5, 1958, p. 17.

³² Cedar Rapids Gazette, December 4, 1958 p. 21.

The Midwest League dealt with its own franchise shifts in 1960, although the league came out stronger. The easternmost member, Michigan City, Indiana, was dropped in favor of Quincy, Illinois, and when Paris, Illinois gave up its slot, Davenport opted to give minor league baseball another try and joined the Midwest League. With the addition of the new Davenport franchise, which renamed itself Quad Cities in 1961, five of the Midwest League's eight cities now were in Iowa.

After two seasons of relative calm, the Three-I again experienced troubles. Citing excessive travel costs, both Sioux City and Green Bay bowed out of the league after 1960. Once again, Dutch Hoffman refused to consider allowing any of the Midwest League clubs to move into the Three-I. Waterloo *Courier* sports editor, Al Ney, a longtime advocate of an all-Iowa league, once again floated the idea as a practical solution to baseball's problems.³³ Three-I President Hoscheit agreed, but seemed resigned that it would never be implemented. "I don't believe the 2 leagues themselves ever could agree to such a proposal," Hoscheit said. "Realignment like this is necessary if minor league baseball is going to survive, but it must come from the minor league office. They must get the approval of the major leagues and simply decide to order realignment."³⁴

With no other choice Hoscheit vowed to press on as a 6-club league in 1961, and hoped for better days to come. "We will expand when feasible, even before the opening date for the coming season," Hoscheit said. "If the expanding American or National league clubs wish to arrange working agreements and we can secure the cities we want, we will gladly accept them."³⁵ Jim Eland of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye-Gazette* sounded a more pessimistic note: "How much longer can the Three-I League exist with its scattered geographical layout? The fact is, the Three-I may be in jeopardy during the entire 1961 season, if it gets off the ground. It's bad enough, when you figure the Bees will have to make the Wisconsin trek three or four times at 375 miles and get only a three- or four-game stay. If the Three-I goes with six clubs, it will mean the teams will virtually meet themselves coming and going on the big road trip."³⁶

The National Association continued to ignore the issue, and in the end, it was a final shift of the Burlington franchise from the Three-I to the Midwest League that finished off the Three-I. Burlington had been struggling for years to pay off its debts, much of which the club incurred during the disastrous 1954 season. In the fall of 1961, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the parent club of the Bees, decided to cease their Class B agreement with Burlington, promised that a Class D affiliation was available. Despite their reluctance to leave their fellows high and dry, Burlington nevertheless jumped in to replace Kokomo in the Midwest League. Burlington's directors voted 5-0 in favor of dropping out of the Three-I and entering the class D Midwest league.

New Three-I president Ken Blackman, who had only ascended to the position in November, 1961, stated emphatically that he would not release Burlington, which needed the unanimous vote of the league for such a switch. Blackman was willing to part with Burlington if the Midwest League would permit Davenport to jump back into the Three-I, but Davenport was hesitant about agreeing to such a trade. but the minor league office Monday was trying to use its influence in an effort to keep the Three-I.

Blackman also failed in his efforts to round up Major league sponsors for class B affiliations. Only four clubs stepped forth, with another offering a "Half: affiliation. At the league meeting in Des Moines on January 7 1962, the Three- I League voted to cease operations. The league considered lodging a protest against Hoffman and the Midwest League for tampering with the Burlington club, but the motion died with a whimper. On February 1, 1962, the "oldest Class B circuit in baseball" died after a lengthy illness. It was 61.

³³ Waterloo *Courier*, February 10, 1961, p. 13.

³⁴ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, February 19, 1961 Sec. 4, p. 4.

³⁵ Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, Nov. 30, 1960, p. 3B.

³⁶ Burlington *Hawk-Eye Gazette*, Nov. 30, 1960, p. 17.

Eager to stay in baseball, Cedar Rapids and Fox Cities quickly followed Burlington into the Midwest League. The newly expanded ten-team Midwest League drew over half a million fans in 1962 for the first time in its history. Seven The 1962 version of the loop featured ten teams, with a whopping 7 teams in Iowa, drew over half a million fans for the first time in league history. The old Three-I may have passed on, but minor league baseball in one of those "I's" continued to survive.

The Aftermath

For the 1962 season, the Midwest League was a healthy ten-club circuit. The shakeup in the roster of teams was not done, however, as Keokuk faltered late in the season. In August, Keokuk forfeited its franchise to the league and the team played out the string as the Midwest Dodgers, playing "home" games at Dubuque. Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin replaced the southeast Iowa city in 1963. Keokuk has been out of professional baseball ever since.

Just before Wisconsin Rapids agreed to enter the Midwest League, Dutch Hoffman, the man who had piloted the league since 1949, died at his home in Belleville, Illinois. He was 59.

Des Moines was left behind in the minor league shuffle of 1961-62. Iowa's capital The Major Leagues expanded in 1969, which triggered a minor league expansion. With more Triple-A affiliations available, the American Association was revived and Des Moines was granted a franchise as the Iowa Oaks. The A.A. was folded into the Pacific Coast League in , where Des Moines continues as the Iowa Cubs.

The shuffle was harder on Sioux City. The city was without professional baseball until 1993, when the inaugural season of the independent Northern League. Sioux City's Explorers later left the league, along with St. Paul, Sioux Falls, and Lincoln to form a reorganized American Association in 2006.

Cedar Rapids, Davenport, Burlington, and Clinton continued on as Midwest League stalwarts. Although by the late 1970's the league had dwindled to an 8-team circuit of Iowa and Wisconsin cities, the circuit's fortunes began to turn up with the minor league boom of the 1980's and 90's. Today, the league consists of 14 teams stretching across Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio. The Clinton club retains its status as the Midwest League's senior member, while Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Davenport (aka Quad Cities) have continuously maintained franchises. Among the four, they have claimed a dozen Midwest League Playoff Championships over the years.

Despite its success in the Midwest League, Dubuque never was able to arrange for a replacement for outdated Fourth Street Park. After years of declining attendance, Dubuque lost its franchise after 1968 then returned for a three-year encore before folding for good. Dubuque flirted with acquiring the beleaguered Battle Creek franchise, but the Key City's voters rejected a December, 2003 referendum to build a new ballpark, which would have stood where old Fourth Street Park did.

Waterloo lost its Midwest League franchise prior to the 1994 season. During its years in the Midwest League, the city won seven Midwest League Playoff Championships. While the city no longer has a professional team, Riverview Stadium does host the Bucks, a summer collegiate team that competes in the Northwoods League.

In a final note of irony, Marion, Illinois, a charter member of the old Illinois State League, was rejected in its bid to join the Midwest League. At the 2005 Winter Meetings, the Midwest League decided Marion, Ill., fell "outside of the territory of the league" and turned down Marion's

application for a franchise.³⁷ Don't weep for Marion—the Southern Illinois Miners began play in 2007 in the independent Frontier League.

³⁷ *Baseball America*, January 16-29, 2006 p. 31.