

The Keokuk Cardinals

1958 – 1961, Midwest League

A Class D Farm Club of the St. Louis Cardinals

By Steve Smith

Keokuk baseball has a long and illustrious history. At its peak in 1960, the small city—located on the bluffs of the Mississippi River in the southeast corner of Iowa—had a population of 16,300. Keokuk's professional baseball history began in 1875 when the Keokuk Westerns became the State of Iowa's only major league team. For over three quarters of a century until the Dodgers and Giants moved west in 1957, the City of Keokuk shared with St. Louis the distinction of being one of only two cities west of the Mississippi River to have a major league team. In 1875, the Keokuk Westerns became a member of the then-major league National Association. Keokuk competed with the likes of Boston, Hartford, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, and New Haven. However, the company proved too fast as Keokuk compiled a 1-12 record before it withdrew from the league on June 16, 1875.

Over the next 75 years, Keokuk was a member of the Western Association (1885), the Iowa State League (1904-1906), the Central Association (1907-1915), Mississippi Valley League (1929-1933), Western League (1935), the reorganized Central Association (1947-1949) and Three-I League (1952-57) prior to entering the Midwest League in 1958 as a farm club of the St. Louis Cardinals. Future major leaguers who passed through Keokuk on their way to the major leagues included Charlie Hollocher, Ken O'Dea, Joe Becker, Gus Bell, Roger Maris (32 HRs and 111 RBIs with the 1954 Keokuk Kernels) and Stan Pitula. The 1955 Keokuk Kernels won the Three-I League Championship with a 92-34 record and, as part of Minor League Baseball's 100th Anniversary celebration in 2001, were named as the 30th best Minor League team of all-time. Future major leaguers on the 1955 team, which was managed by former Philadelphia Phillie Merrill (Pinky) May, were Gordy Coleman, Mudcat Grant, Bill Dailey, Bobby Locke, Russ Nixon, Hank Izquierdo and Billy Williams (Seattle Pilots 1969, not the Cubs HOFer). In addition to May, Keokuk managers of note included future Pittsburgh Pirate coach Frank O'Connell, who is often seen in photos congratulating Bill Mazeroski on his historic home run in the 1960 World Series; Phil Seghi who, as General Manager of the Cleveland Indians in 1974, named Frank Robinson as the major leagues first black manager; former Brooklyn Dodger catcher Charlie Hargreaves and former Detroit Tiger outfielder Jo Jo White.

As could be expected of a town the size of Keokuk, the teams were often in financial trouble. Accordingly, at the end of the 1957 season, Keokuk discontinued their four-year affiliation with the Cleveland Indians in the Class B Three-I League and arrangements were made with the St. Louis Cardinals to field a team in the less expensive Class D Midwest League for 1958. The affiliation with St. Louis was greeted with elation by the local population as many Keokuk citizens followed the National League St. Louis Cardinals, only 200 miles south of Keokuk down Highway 61. The local radio station,

KOKX, carried the St. Louis Cardinal broadcasts so the sounds of Harry Caray and ads for Busch Bavarian beer could be heard on radios throughout the town.

During the four years that Keokuk was a Class D Midwest League farm club for the St. Louis Cardinals, the Cardinals also had lower classification affiliates at such locations as Wytheville VA (Appalachian League), Johnson City TN (Rookie League), Daytona Beach (FL State League), Winnipeg (Northern League) and Billings MT (Pioneer League) among others, so players were often shuttled among these communities. During this four year period, 128 different players passed through Keokuk, some more than once, sometimes on the way up and sometimes on the way down. Of these 128 players, 10 (8%) reached the major leagues.

1958

Frank Calo, a 34-year-old -12-year minor league veteran, managed the 1958 and 1959 Keokuk Cardinals. Calo was a player-manager participating in 72 games for the 1958 Cardinals and 26 games for the 1959 Cardinals. In 1958, Calo managed the Cardinals to a 30-30-1 first half record and a 5th place finish and a 32-30 3rd place second half finish in the Midwest League split season for an overall record of 62-60-1 good for an overall 5th place in the eight team league. Keokuk's attendance of 41,133 was good for 5th highest in the eight team league.

Left-handed hitting outfielder Sy Bonem batted .333 in 121 games to finish runner-up to future Los Angeles Dodger Lou Johnson in the league batting race. Bonem led the league in at bats (487) and hits (162). Bonem was the classic "singles" hitter as only 23 of his 162 hits went for extra bases.

Future major leaguer Fred Whitfield played in all 123 games at 1B batting .309 and leading the league in total bases (258), doubles (29) and RBI (118). Fred's 23 homers were good for 3rd in the league.



Frank Calo

Three other future major leaguers played for the 1958 Cardinals. Future St. Louis Cardinal and Minnesota Twin Bud Bloomfield batted .259 in 101 games at SS. Jack Hamilton (Phillie, Tiger, Met, Angel, Indian, White Sox) went 12-16, 4.55 ERA, as the workhorse of the pitching staff (190 innings). Jack led the league in Games Started (29), losses (16), runs allowed (136), earned runs allowed (96), walks (156) batters hit by pitch (19) and wild pitches (32). The dominant pitcher in the Midwest League for 1958 was Michigan City's Juan Marichal who compiled a 21-8 record while striking out 246 in 245 innings. Dick Hughes began his Cardinal career by going 1-1 with the 1958 Cardinals before being promoted to Winnipeg early in the season.

Other players of note on the 1958 Cardinals were C-3B, Lamar (Bulldog) Drummonds and OF Elmer (Bee) Lindsay. Drummonds and Lindsay (who reportedly received a \$68,000 bonus) were St. Louis Cardinal bonus babies who came to Keokuk with high expectations that were never realized.

In 1958, Keokuk conducted the famous "Talking Home Plate" experiment. The talking home plate, which basically was a microphone set under the plate which could pick up conversation for 30 feet around was conceived by General Manager Don Shupe and was first used in a game on May 16, 1958. The experiment lasted for only the 1958 season and was written up in the August 1958 edition of Popular Science.

1959

Returning as manager for 1959, Frank Calo led the Cardinals to an identical 62-60-1 record and an overall 3rd place finish. With the Midwest League playing a split season, Keokuk went 34-27-1 3rd place finish in the first half and 28-33 6th place finish in the second half. Attendance declined to 39,045, good for 6th place in the 8 team league.

Switch-hitting OF Don Branson led the Midwest League in batting with a .336 average. 1B Gary Dobereiner led the league in hits with 148 while finishing 3rd in the batting race at .330. Dobereiner played in all 123 Keokuk games while also tallying 102 RBIs.

Selected by the vote of the fans, OF Joe Patterson was named the Most Popular Player for the 1959 Cardinals. Patterson played in only 87 games having come down from Omaha of the American Association but batted .338 with 24 doubles and 11 HRs. He was referred to by a local sportswriter as "the popular, hustling little outfielder (who) may turn out to be another Willie Mays." The writer may have been guilty of some hyperbole as Patterson never played a game in the majors.

The 1959 season saw the professional baseball debut of Tim McCarver. McCarver was signed by the Cardinals out of Memphis Christian Brothers High School in June 1959 and sent to Keokuk. His debut with the Cardinals was June 14 at Waterloo in the second game of a doubleheader. Although Tim went 0-3 in his debut, he went on to bat .360 for the Cardinals but on August 19 left for Rochester (AAA) where he took the place of injured Rochester catcher Dick Rand. Tim's last games for Keokuk were a doubleheader

with Michigan City on August 18 at Joyce Park. Tim ultimately got into 8 games with the parent Cardinals near the end of the 1959 season. Thus, Tim became the youngest player (17) to play in the majors in the decade of the 1950s and also became a 4-decade major league player when he retired at the end of the 1980 season.



Ron Nay was a C-OF on the 1959 and 1960 Cardinal teams and went on to a long career as an NFL scout. Tom Schwaner was a \$50,000 St. Louis Cardinal bonus baby who batted .269 in 33 games with Keokuk in 1959. Although he never made the majors, Tom went on to a 14 year career as head baseball coach at the University of New Orleans. Left Handed Pitcher Cliff Politte (8-6, league leader in hit batters with 17) never made the big club. However, 30 years later his son, also named Cliff, made his Major League debut as a right-handed pitcher for the 1998 St. Louis Cardinals and played with the Chicago White Sox in the 2005 World Series. Roy Majtyka played all 123 games at SS for the 1959 Keokuk Cardinals and then had a long minor league managing and major league coaching career. Jimm Hendren began the season with the 1959 Cardinals, was sent to Daytona Beach when Tim McCarver joined the team, then went on to become Chief U. S. District Judge for the Western District of Arkansas where he currently serves.

Two other future major leaguers played on the 1959 Cardinals. Jeoff Long was assigned to Keokuk as a pitcher where he went 2-7 with a 5.10 ERA. He subsequently made the parent Cardinals as a 1B-OF although he hit only .250 with no HRs and 3 RBI for Keokuk in 1959. Future Cardinal and Met Johnny Lewis played the first week of the season with Keokuk batting .133 in 7 games before being assigned to Wytheville.

Gary Groce (14-10, league leader in pitching appearances with 50) and Warren Roddenberry (13-9) were the heart of the pitching staff. Arzell Robins was 6-0 before leaving the team to enter Military Service.

During the season, the Cardinals signed University of Iowa pitcher and Keokuk native Bob Pearl to a contract. Pearl went 6-4 in 79 innings for the 1959 Keokuk Cardinals. In 2002, the softball field at the University of Iowa was named Pearl Field in honor of Bob, the first African-American baseball player at the University of Iowa.

Another note to the 1959 Midwest League season involves broadcaster Brent Musberger. Musberger was an umpire in the Midwest League for the 1959 season. Contrary to various articles published after Tim McCarver began his broadcasting career, Musberger was not the plate umpire in Tim McCarver's *first* game as a Keokuk Cardinal, however, he did umpire in subsequent games during the 1959 season with McCarver behind the plate.

Three Cardinals, Dobereiner 1B, McCarver C and Branson CF were named to the Midwest All-Star Team at the conclusion of the season.

1960

The 1960 season brought a new manager to town. Al Unser, former major league catcher and father of future major leaguer Del Unser, would manage the Keokuk Cardinals for the 1960 and 1961 seasons.

The 1960 Cardinals went 21-39 in the first half of the season finishing in last place. In the second half, the Cardinal finished in third place with a 32-30 record. Overall, the Cardinals went 53-69 and finished in 7th place for the season. Attendance declined for the 2nd consecutive year, 38,427 being good for 7th place in the league.

1B-OF John Mason was the team leader playing all 122 games and batting .308 with 5 HR and 86 RBI. John was the only Cardinal to be named to the All-Star Team at season's end. OF DeMorris (Mickey) Smith played 120 games batting .255. DeMorris Smith is the son of Hall-of-Fame pitcher Hilton Smith and represented his father at the 2001 Hall-of-Fame induction ceremonies. Catcher Jim Saul who went on to a long minor league managing career played in 107 games and hit .232 with 13 HRs.

Future major leaguers on the 1960 club were Gary Kolb, signed out of the University of Illinois, who batted .313 in 37 games and Tom Hilgendorf (2-0) and Gary Dotter (3-3).

Jim Keith was the leading pitcher at 10-10 with Ernesto Figuero going 9-5. The St. Louis Cardinals also signed another local product, Byron Klapprott, to a contract. Klapprott went 4-10 in 109 innings for the 1960 Cardinals.

Another player of note on the 1960 Cardinals was Roy Cromer, 3B, who batted .230 in 63 games. Cromer is the father of former major leaguer Tripp Cromer who played with the St. Louis Cardinals from 1993 to 1995. \$50,000 Bonus baby SS Gerry Marx from Cincinnati had high expectations from the Cardinals but never made the majors.

1961

Returning as manager for 1961, Al Unser was dealt a losing hand by the parent Cardinals. Although a total of forty players appeared on Keokuk's roster during the 1961 season, none ever played an inning of Major League baseball. The 1961 Cardinals compiled a 40-82-1 record good for the cellar in the Midwest League. Keokuk went 22-39-1 for a last place finish in the first half of the split season and 18-43 for another last place finish in the second half of the season. Overall, the Cardinals were 33 games out of first and 16 games behind seventh place Decatur. One of the victories was a forfeit by Waterloo on June 14. The forfeit resulted from a wild rhubarb with one of the Waterloo players stomping on the umpire's foot. As the team finished on the field, Keokuk finished last in the stands among the 8-team league with a total attendance of 25,064. How dismal a season was it? Keokuk finished 8th in team batting with a .234 team average and 8th in team fielding at .939. They did manage to finish 7th in team pitching with a team ERA of 5.44. Even Manager Al Unser at the age of 44 put himself into one game to pitch. No Keokuk players were named to the league All-Star Team.

The leading batter was 1B Martin Beltran at .310 in 57 games. Only two players were in more than 100 games; OF Jose Silva hit .258 in 115 games and 1B-OF John Kepic batted .260 in 104 games.

The leading pitcher, Mike Roberts, had a 7-9 record or maybe Dave Galligan at 6-14 was the leading pitcher. The low ERA was the property of Rafael Steffani (6-9) at 3.98 in 122 innings.

Perhaps a sign of the times for the 1961 Cardinals was Pitcher Mike Jones, the youngest player in professional baseball in 1961. Touted as the "hottest pitching prospect since Bobby Feller" by *Ebony* magazine, the parent St. Louis Cardinals had signed the 15 year old \$10,000 bonus baby from Webster Groves MO and assigned him to Keokuk. Manager Unser was quoted "Figuring out what to do with Mike was a problem and no matter what happened he had to suffer." Jones didn't pitch until May 23, went 1-0 in 3 games with Keokuk, and was assigned to Johnson City TN of the Rookie League in June. Mike Jones played three seasons in the minors and was out of professional baseball before his 19th birthday.

Finances began to catch up with the Keokuk Cardinals during the 1961 season. On August 7, with only 7 home games remaining, it was reported that Keokuk would finish the Midwest League season. This was announced after team President John Marion met with St. Louis Cardinal farm club officials. Earlier Marion had said that if help was not forthcoming, the Keokuk franchise would fold. Marion said the team was more than \$5,000 in debt. The parent Cardinals agreed to meet the payroll of approximately \$5,100 for the remainder of the season. The working agreement with the Cardinals was severed after the 1961 season.

Epilogue

The Keokuk Citizens Baseball Association, although not yet dead, was on life support. Keokuk officials negotiated a working agreement with the Los Angeles Dodgers for the 1962 season. However, on August 3, 1962, due to a denial by the Los Angeles Dodgers of a request for \$8,000, which was labeled necessary to continue by Keokuk baseball officials, the Keokuk franchise folded and was transferred to Dubuque IA where the team completed their season under the team name Midwest Dodgers.

Minor league baseball has never returned to the City of Keokuk.