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Article Summary: Civil War veterans brought baseball with them on their westward migration to Nebraska. As this collection of photographs shows, most small towns could field a team of local players by the end of the nineteenth century.

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Photographs / Images: outfield of the baseball diamond in Wausa, 1906; 1892 Anselmo team; Wymore ballplayers wearing padded pants in the late 1800s or early 1900s; the Brady High School baseball team of 1905, which included future Nebraska governor Roy Cochran; state prison team playing against an amateur team from Roberts Dairy in 1914; 1885 Wilber team facetiously called the "Giants"; photo taken in Superior in 1912, probably the Superior team in a game with Table Rock; Clarence Mitchell from Franklin playing for Alliance in 1909; outstanding pitchers Grover Cleveland Alexander and Clarence Mitchell; posters advertising a game between Burwell and Sargent; unidentified game played on a field where the crowd watches from behind fences; Nebraska Penitentiary Black Diamonds, a team of black inmates; Nebraska State Penitentiary integrated team; Genoa Indian School team; Landis Field in Lincoln, the site of many Western and Nebraska State League games

LOCAL HEROES

NEBRASKA HOMETOWN BASEBALL

BY ANDREA I. FALING

Although Americans would like to attach a homegrown pedigree to baseball, it is likely that the sport evolved from the English games of cricket, rounders, and other stick-and-ball games popular among both English children and their colonial cousins.

Bat-and-ball games of various kinds were played in towns and villages of rural areas, but Abner Doubleday notwithstanding, the game deemed the direct ancestor of today's baseball was devised in New York City, probably around 1842.

With rules drawn up by Alexander

Joy Cartwright, the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club was established in 1845. Local clubs made up of policemen, firemen, doctors, actors, and other professions soon challenged the Knickerbockers, a team that prided itself upon being made up of "gentlemen."



By 1849 Cartwright had brought the game to gold-rush emigrants in California, before taking it across the Pacific to Hawaii. Rather than impeding the spread of baseball, the Civil War seemed to extend its reach. It was a portable game, and a diamond could be improvised on almost any piece of ground, including the prisoner of war camps of both the North and the South.

Civil War veterans brought the game with them on their westward migration to Nebraska (and it is likely that some of those veterans first experienced the game in Civil War prison camps). Omaha and Nebraska City in 1867 were probably the first

Nebraska towns to sponsor teams. In 1875 the state champion Nebraska City "Otoes" claimed to be "the best team west of the Mississippi."

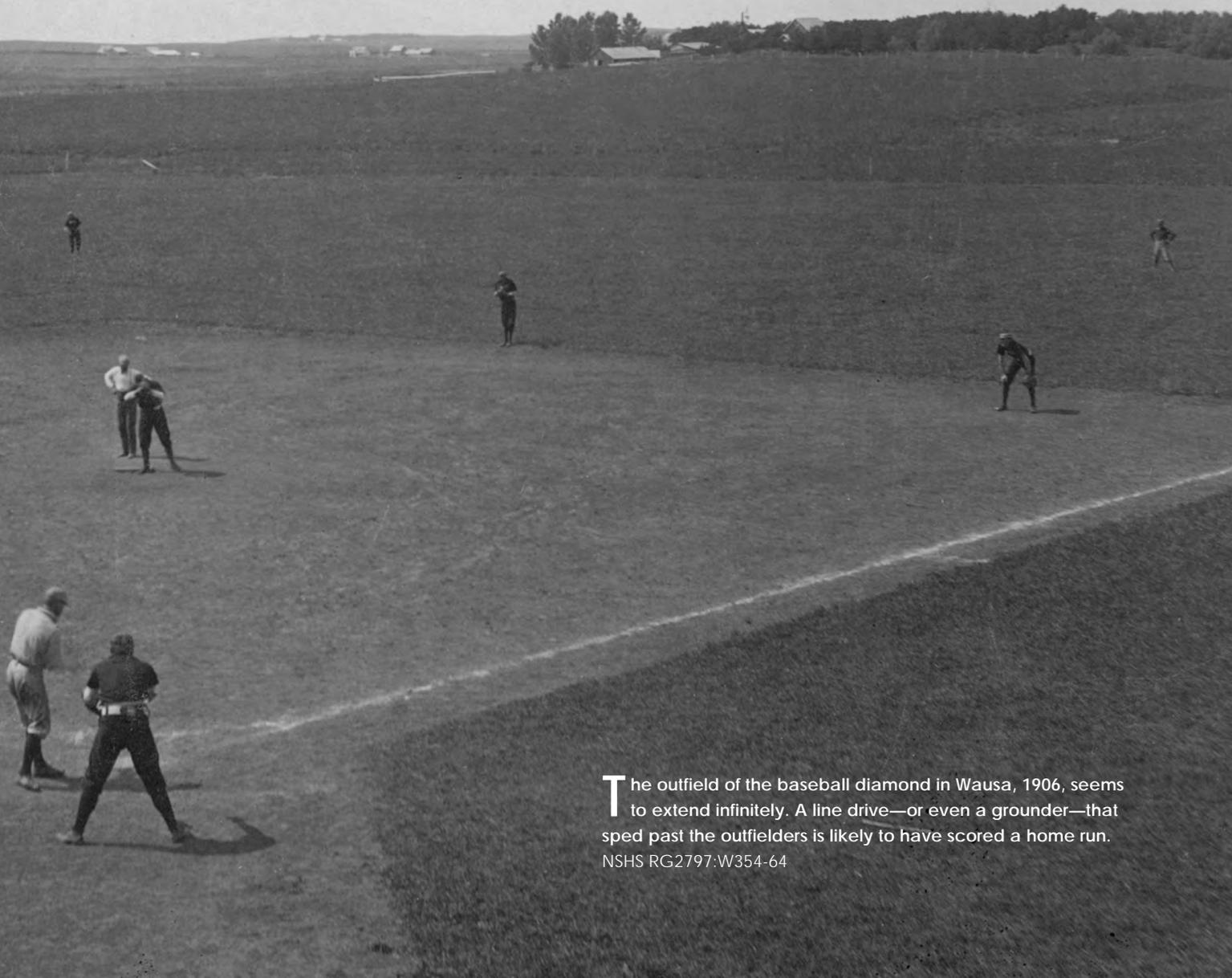
Businesses often sponsored teams, promoting their products and services, while also building employee loyalty and morale among their players. As immigrants took up the game alongside their neighbors, the new arrivals were "Americanized," by virtue of their participation in their new home's national game.

By the end of the nineteenth century most small towns, both within and outside of Nebraska, could field a team of local players. More than two hundred images in the Nebraska State

Historical Society's photograph collections attest to the universal support of the game and to the teams.

The sampling of images from the Historical Society's collection that follows includes examples from all areas of the state, all types of teams, and all kinds of playing environments. The overwhelming sense they convey is that the local baseball team was a source of community, school, and business pride, and the town, the school, or the business was worth boasting about, because its team was ready to play ball.

Andrea I. Faling is Associate Director, Library/Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society



The outfield of the baseball diamond in Wausa, 1906, seems to extend infinitely. A line drive—or even a grounder—that sped past the outfielders is likely to have scored a home run.

NSHS RG2797:W354-64





Most of the players on the 1892 Anselmo team look as if they might be more comfortable at a rodeo, but more than a half-dozen bats and a catcher's mask and chest protector testify that they are ready to take the field. NSHS RG2608: B983-756





The Brady High School baseball team of 1905 did not appear to have a standard uniform, but it included future Nebraska governor Roy Cochran (front row, second from left, with catcher's mitt). NSHS RG3447: C663-26

The well-dressed Wymore ballplayer of the late 1800s or early 1900s apparently appropriated the padded pants more commonly seen on football players of the time. The padding might have been useful to a hard-sliding base runner. NSHS RG3466: F798.2-11





Biennial Reports of the State Penitentiary show that in 1914 a prison team played ninety games against Lincoln amateur teams. Although this game against Roberts Dairy appears to have been played at the prison, most games were played outside the penitentiary walls because the prison yard was so small. The team and as many as 125 inmates sometimes left the penitentiary for the games. NSHS RG2418: P959-39



Perhaps the "Giants" nickname was attached to the 1885 Wilber team facetiously—the only game summary found in the local newspapers recorded a 70-10 drubbing by Friend.
NSHS RG0813: K90-117

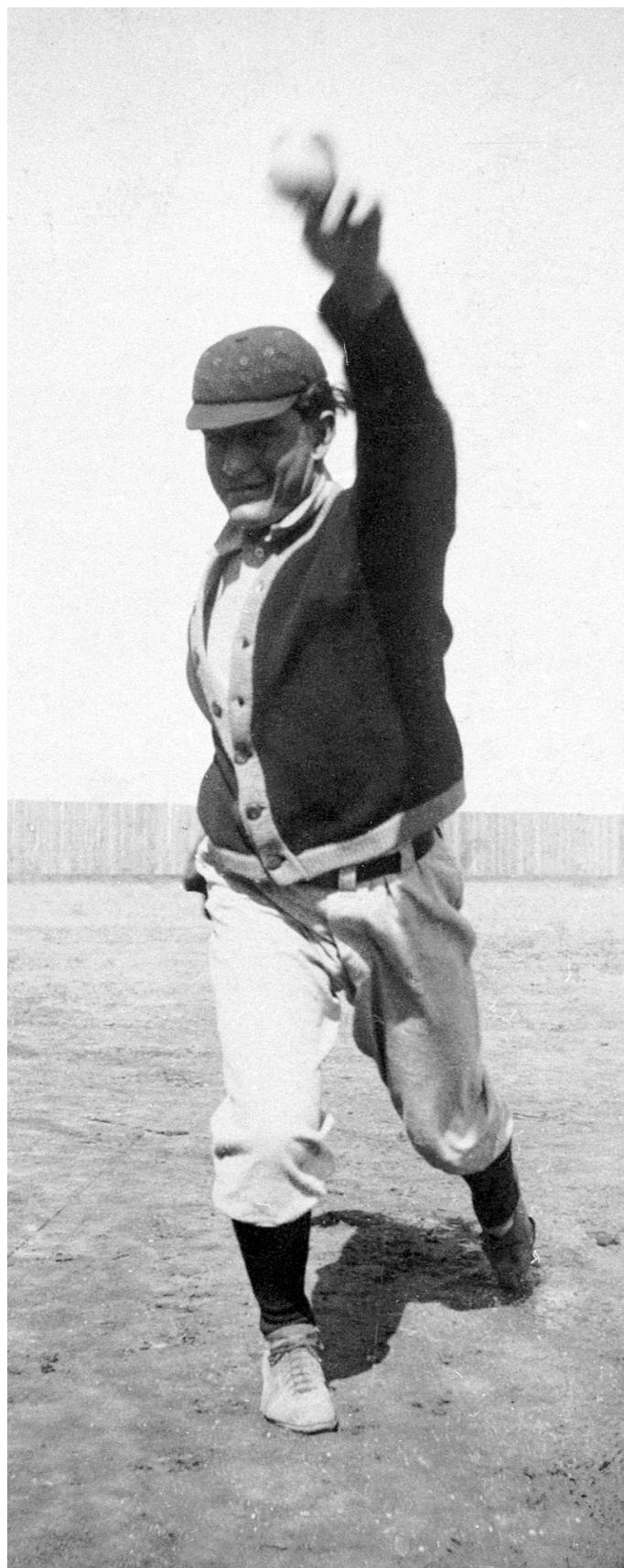


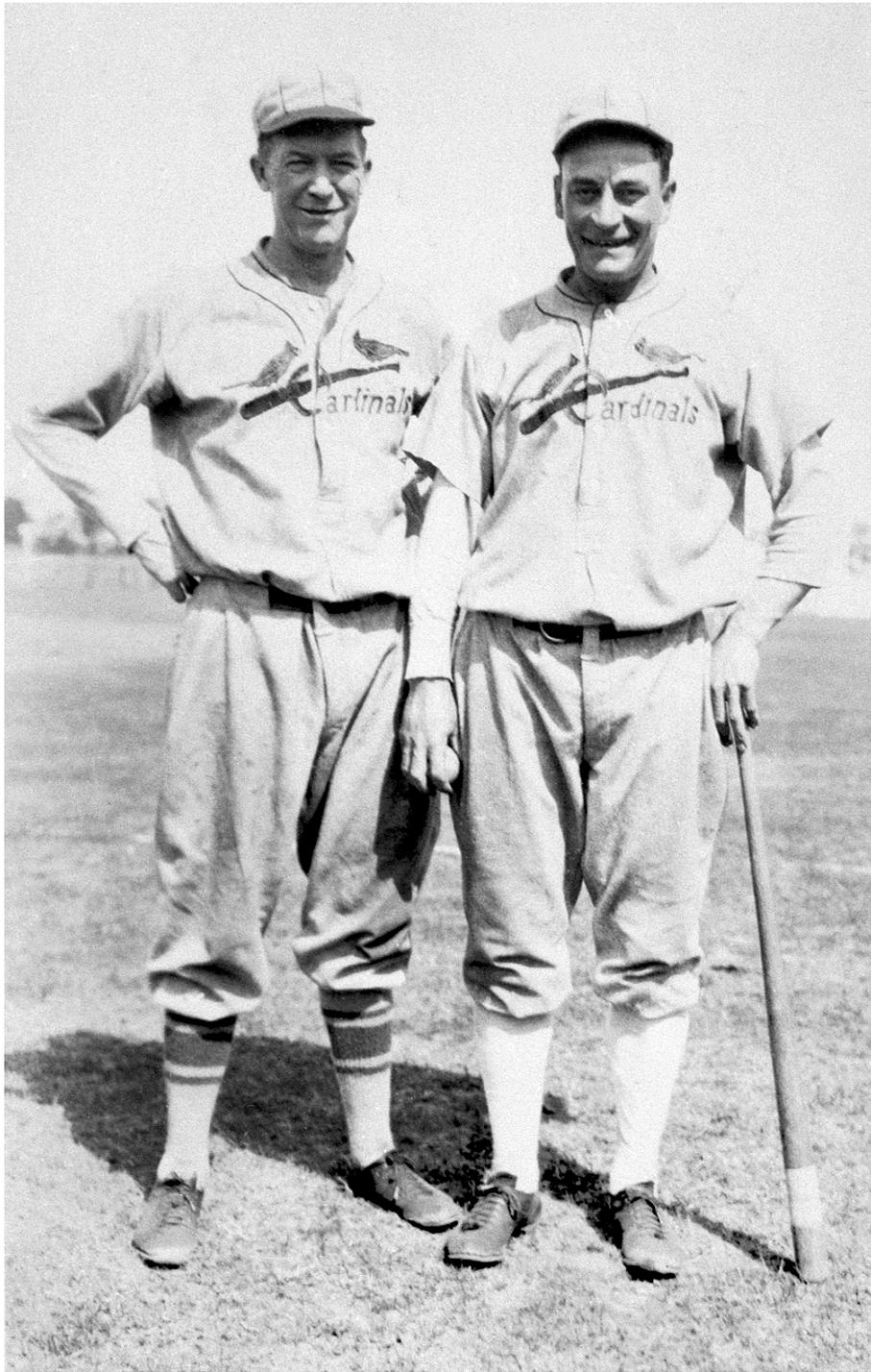
Notes on the back of this photograph indicate that it was taken in Superior in 1912, and the "S" on the team uniforms on the left seems to substantiate this. The team's supporters posed behind their players, but few fans of the unidentified team with T.R. on their jerseys (possibly Table Rock) appear to have traveled to Superior for the game. NSHS RG3064: B299-9



Clarence Mitchell, a left-handed pitcher from Franklin, played for several town teams including Alliance in 1909, where this picture was taken. His eighteen-year major league career included stints with Cincinnati, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and New York. By the end of his career in 1932, he was the last southpaw spitballer in the major leagues.

NSHS RG2261: M681





Two outstanding pitchers of the dead-ball and early live-ball eras were Nebraska natives Grover Cleveland Alexander, left, and Clarence Mitchell. Alexander, with a 373-208 record over twenty years, entered the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1938. Mitchell, although not a Hall of Famer, based his long career on guile and a tricky spitball. Both were with the pennant-winning St. Louis Cardinals in 1928.

NSHS RG3661: M168.1



Although the crowd at this unidentified game is separated from the players by sturdy fences, at many ball fields only the crowd ringing the diamond delineated what was in fair or foul territory. The home crowd would make way for its fielder to make a play, but an opposing fielder might not receive such consideration.

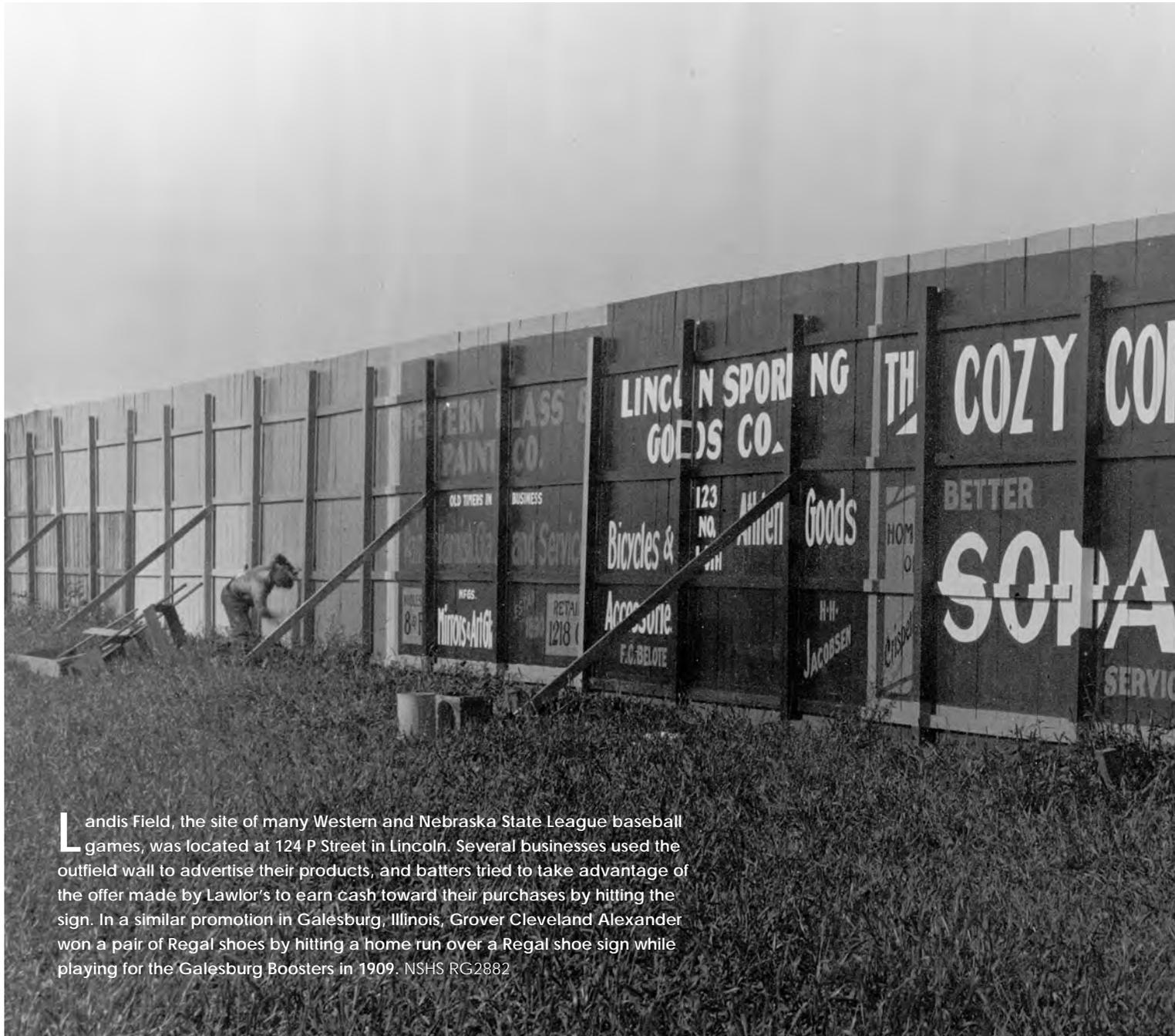
NSHS RG3064: B299-1





Along with educational and vocational skills, extracurricular activities were provided to students of the Genoa Indian School. The school's baseball team—along with its football, basketball, and track teams—competed successfully against white schools. NSHS RG1298: P268-58

The Nebraska State Penitentiary Black Diamonds fielded a team of black inmates. The picture of an integrated penitentiary team was probably one of the earliest integrated baseball teams in twentieth century Nebraska. NSHS RG2418: P959-37 and P959-40



Landis Field, the site of many Western and Nebraska State League baseball games, was located at 124 P Street in Lincoln. Several businesses used the outfield wall to advertise their products, and batters tried to take advantage of the offer made by Lawlor's to earn cash toward their purchases by hitting the sign. In a similar promotion in Galesburg, Illinois, Grover Cleveland Alexander won a pair of Regal shoes by hitting a home run over a Regal shoe sign while playing for the Galesburg Boosters in 1909. NSHS RG2882

