



# *Indian Summers*

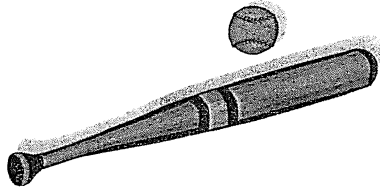
*Baseball at Native American Boarding Schools in Minnesota*

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*Photographs follow each chapter*



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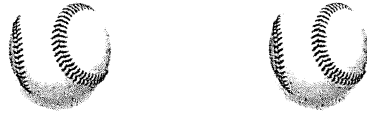
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## **“We Are Brave Men”:**

### *Baseball and the St. John’s Industrial School,*

*1884-1896*

On a pine-covered hill atop Lake Sagatagan, five weathered concrete crosses, beaten by the elements for a century, stand erect. Their plain inscriptions, faintly visible, feature years and initials, letters reading “IND.” One such cross, adorned “1890,” marks the grave of a young boy who, like a century of subsequent college students, spent years at St. John’s, even playing baseball there. Yet this boy’s story calls not to a time of adolescent freedom and not to a heartwarming place, but hearkens back to a different sort of Collegeville tale. Bishigis, it seems, an Ojibwe of the Industrial School, would remember this site in other ways.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *St. John’s University Record*, Vol. 3, no. 5 (May 1890); Thomas Reichert, “Red Lake, White Earth, and ‘Blackgowns’: The Indian Industrial Schools of St. John’s Abbey and St. Benedict’s Monastery, 1884-1896” (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, St. John’s University, 2005), 1. Founded in 1857, St. John’s University and Abbey

Bishigis's memories, however, would not all somber be. His time at St. John's, as for fellow Ojibwes at the school, certainly contained the assimilationist challenges and unfamiliar surroundings characteristic of Indian boarding schools. Yet Bishigis also experienced distinct episodes of enjoyment through participation in baseball—an activity that, as we shall see, also served other types of Native purposes. As with other St. John's Indian ballplayers, Bishigis' involvement in baseball not only provided needed respite and fun in an otherwise arduous Industrial schedule, but also facilitated Ojibwe resilience through the adaptation and reformulation of a traditional American pastime. In this regard, the story of Indian baseball at St. John's is as much a story of success as it is of remarkable challenge.

Although Colledgeville's Industrial School existed for over a decade, one would hardly know it by the extant literature. Past histories of St. John's have virtually ignored the Indian School, much less its Ojibwe ballteams. The University's three most comprehensive histories mention the school only in passing—four of six hundred pages in Colman Barry's *Worship and Work*, for instance—and concentrate on the school's economic woes and its detriment to Ojibwe student welfare.<sup>67</sup> Related accounts of regional athletics also neglect the Industrial School and its ballteams, while two other institutional accounts, rich in detail, lie in relatively obscure

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continues today along the shore of Lake Sagatagan in Colledgeville, Minnesota. Bishigis, whose Ojibwe name translates "Little Calf," captained the 1889 "Little Fellows" baseball team in his first year at the school, but, sadly, fell victim to pneumonia the following spring, passing away on Thursday, May 22, 1890. His burial plot within the grounds of the current St. John's Abbey adjoins four others of pupils who died at the school.

<sup>67</sup> Alexius OSB Hoffman, *Saint John's University, Colledgeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of its History, 1857-1907* (Colledgeville, MN: Record Press, 1907), Chapter III; Colman Barry, OSB, *Worship and Work: Saint John's Abbey and University, 1856-1992* (Colledgeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 147, 230; Hilary Thimmesch, OSB, ed., *St. John's at 150* (Colledgeville, MN: St. John's University Press, 2006), 42. In addition to these narratives, two recent magazine articles published by St. John's Abbey comment on the Industrial School: see "Indian Industrial School Remembered," *St. John's Quarterly*, Winter 1986, 7, and Doug Mullin, OSB, "Saint John's Mission to the Ojibwe People of Minnesota," *The Abbey Banner*, Fall 2007, 9.

sources.<sup>68</sup> Despite this paucity of historical documentation, however, the Indian School and its student-athletes proved integral features of the Collegeville campus during the late nineteenth century.

The St. John's Industrial School was a product of its times. Lauded by its Benedictine founders as a benevolent alternative to Indian extermination, the institution at Collegeville complemented well the Abbey's continuing work in mission schools on the White Earth Ojibwe reservation.<sup>69</sup> Modeled largely upon Pratt's Carlisle School and similar indigenous educational institutions, the St. John's Benedictines quickly established a curriculum centered around the assimilationist goals of industrial training, English language acquisition, and Christianization.

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<sup>68</sup> Dunstan Tucker, OSB, and Martin Schirber, OSB, *Scoreboard: A History of Athletics at St. John's University* (Collegeville, MN: St. John's University Press, 1979), 129; Paul Weide, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," *Stearns County Historical Society Newsletter* 6, no. 3 (June, 1980), 1-11. Tucker and Schirber restrict their narrative to St. John's intercollegiate teams only—and even then with some error, as their stated first baseball game in Collegeville was in 1889 when competitive matches actually date to 1874 or earlier—and Weide, in his history of baseball in Stearns County, overlooks the Native St. John's teams competing within the county's borders.

The two most detailed accounts of the St. John's Industrial School are Olaf Skjolsvik, OSB, "St. John's Indian Industrial School," *The Scriptorium* 16, no. 1 (April, 1957), 111-123, and Thomas Reichert, *Red Lake, White Earth, and 'Blackgowns': The Indian Industrial Schools of St. John's Abbey and St. Benedict's Monastery, 1884-1896*. Besides conducting several intriguing oral histories with former Indian students, Skjolsvik noted that the Ojibwe baseball teams "merited special mention" in the long-lost Industrial School newspaper, *The Bulletin*. Reichert briefly mentions the Indian ballteams in a paragraph on the institution's extracurricular activities, then condemns the Industrial School as a money-making venture by the Abbey. Unfortunately, both Skjolsvik's and Reichert's accounts, both held solely in the Collegeville archives, remain essentially inaccessible to any but visiting scholars.

<sup>69</sup> Reichert, *Red Lake, White Earth, and "Blackgowns": The Indian Industrial Schools of St. John's Abbey and St. Benedict's Monastery, 1884-1896*, 14; Evrard Stueber, OSB, "Apostle of the Ojibway," *The Scriptorium* 5, no. 1 [Christmas, 1944], 16; Mullin, *Saint John's Mission to the Ojibwe People of Minnesota*, 11. Evidencing the benevolent mentality of the era's Indian reformers, St. John's Abbot Alexius Edelbrock wrote Minnesota Senator W. M. Sabin at the school's inception to convey that "the Indians are wards of our government.... The bayonet can exterminate but cannot civilize and educate, as we all know" (Alexius Edelbrock, OSB, to W. M. Sabin, February 14, 1888). Interestingly, Skjolsvik explains that the Collegeville location was actually the Abbey's second choice for a boarding school, behind St. Alexius' Priory in West Union, Minnesota, about forty miles northwest of St. John's. Although Skjolsvik does not discuss why, the Abbey scrapped this original plan in late 1884 in favor of a Collegeville site, and Edelbrock signed a government-issued contract to begin the St. John's Industrial School on January 1, 1885 (Skjolsvik, *St. John's Indian Industrial School*, 113).

On the school at White Earth, Benedictines from St. John's Abbey and nearby St. Benedict's Convent established a mission on the reservation in 1878, although Reichert notes that the Bureau of Indian Affairs had designated Episcopalian the "official" Christian denomination at the agency. Evrard and Mullin describe how within a few years, the White Earth mission included a church, rectory, convent, and an on-reservation boarding school, and a decade later, the Benedictines expanded this on-reservation work by acquiring a mission at Red Lake, which also eventually encompassed an on-site boarding school and a day school. St. John's Abbey continued to operate missions at both sites until the late twentieth century.

Recruiting boys aged ten to seventeen from the northern Minnesota Ojibwe reservations of White Earth, Leech Lake, Fond du Lac, and Grand Portage, training commenced in January 1885 with fifty pupils.<sup>70</sup> Students remained at Collegeville three consecutive years—even through the summers—complementing their half day of academic instruction with four hours of industrial training.<sup>71</sup> Throughout, supervising monastics directed the Indian boys to be “obedient and respectful,” to “observe politeness,” and, most importantly, to “engage in actual labor” so that they might become “useful members of society.” “Idleness,” the school catalogue read, “is banished from the premises.”<sup>72</sup> Occasionally inflicted corporal punishments—including a few whippings—compelled students to comply with these white-designed directives.<sup>73</sup> Despite such harsh discipline, attendance totals steadily increased throughout the school’s tenure, such that enrollment nearly doubled in its first two years, then raised to one hundred fifty pupils, the school’s maximum enrollment, from 1890 to 1896.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, economic challenges marred these enrollment hikes—declining federal subsidies proved the main culprit—such that poor finances proved one significant factor in the school’s closing in June 1896.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Thimmesh, *St. John's at 150*, 42. Likely, St. John’s Indian ballteams reflected this pan-Ojibwe school composition, thus banding together divergent Ojibwe peoples and contributing to a cross-tribal unity that John Bloom argues “created a context for...intertribal cooperation and identity, sometimes on a scale rarely ever seen before” (Bloom, *To show what an Indian can do: Sports at Native American Boarding Schools*, 37; see also Edmunds, Hoxie and Salisbury, *The People: A History of Native America*, 421, 426).

<sup>71</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians Conducted by the Fathers and Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN* (St. Paul, MN: Wanderer Print, 1887), 4; *St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota* (Collegeville, MN: St. John's University Press, 1889), 6; *Indian Industrial School Remembered*, 7; Skjolsvik, *St. John's Indian Industrial School*, 114. Academic coursework at the school included English reading and writing, rudimentary arithmetic, U. S. history and geography, and Christian Doctrine; trade work included printing, tailoring, shoemaking, butchering, gardening, and carpentry.

<sup>72</sup> *St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Skjolsvik, *St. John's Indian Industrial School*, 119. Skjolsvik cites a 1956 interview with former Industrial student Joseph Omen whereby Omen recalled that school discipline was “very severe.” According to Omen, one boy was whipped six times in a single day, and another, David Granwich, “was expelled from school before breakfast on a raw and cold morning after having been given a severe whipping with a belt...and [was] sent packing up the road without any money or anything to eat.”

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, 117.

<sup>75</sup> Financial constraints proved a considerable factor in the eventual decision to close the St. John’s School. As Reichert notes, federal subsidies fell consistently during the school’s existence, from \$167 per student per annum at the school’s opening in 1885 to \$150, \$125, and finally, to \$108 per student per annum from 1888 on (Reichert,



Despite the tumultuous academic record of the St. John's School, however, baseball emerged as a distinct part of the institution's social environment. Remaining records indicate that Indian ballclubs, also called "nines," existed at St. John's for at least five—and probably all—of the school's eleven academic years, although rosters remain for only two seasons. Each year, two age-divided teams—one for the "Little Fellows," boys near age ten, and the other, the "Braves," for teenagers around seventeen—competed in spring and fall, and presumably during summer months as well, as their three-year stint at the school required year-round residency in Collegeville.<sup>76</sup> Practice sessions occurred during the noon hour "free time" or after classes or workshop ended at 4:00 p.m., while matches were held weekday afternoons or weekends.<sup>77</sup> In both instances, the Ojibwe clubs almost certainly did not have their own ballfield, but rather utilized a campus lawn or the diamond of the adjacent St. John's College.<sup>78</sup>

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*Red Lake, White Earth, and "Blackgowns,"* 24). Skjolsvik also makes clear that a burgeoning enrollment at neighboring St. John's College heightened pressure to discontinue the Indian School and turn its Old Stone House into University facilities (Skjolsvik, *St. John's Indian Industrial School*, 122n). Finally, Adams elaborates on the pronounced shift in federal policies of this period, first ending appropriations to denominational institutions and assuming federal control of off-reservation boarding schools in the 1890s, and then progressively abandoning the boarding school concept in the early 1900s (Adams, *Education for Extinction*, Chapter Ten, especially 307-308). A melding of all these factors, therefore, seems likely in sealing the school's fate.

<sup>76</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians Conducted by the Fathers and Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN*, 6; *St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota*, 6. *St. John's University Record* newspaper articles indicate that Industrial School ballteams competed during the 1886-87, 88-89, 90-91, 92-93, and 95-96 seasons, while school catalogues printed rosters for the 1886-87 and 88-89 clubs. In addition, the lone photograph remaining of the Ojibwe teams is of an 1892 squad (see appendix). Most likely, then, ballteams existed for each of the eleven years of the institution, but only were documented periodically.

<sup>77</sup> Skjolsvik, *St. John's Indian Industrial School*, 115. Skjolsvik notes that John Morrison, White Earth Ojibwe and former student and ballplayer at the St. John's School, provided this daily schedule in a 1952 interview to Fr. Roman Homar, former Industrial teacher at Collegeville.

<sup>78</sup> The location of the nineteenth century campus ball diamond is unclear. An 1885 photograph of two St. John's College nines (see appendix) shows the team posed on a grassy field near several brick buildings obscured by trees, while an undated photograph in Barry's *Worship and Work*—probably circa 1900 from the context of the pictures surrounding it—shows two ballteams competing on a diamond perhaps a hundred yards north of the brick Quadrangle, the central building on campus (Barry, *Worship and Work: Saint John's Abbey and University, 1856-1992*, 231). Several articles from the St. John's student newspaper *The Record* reference the diamond, commenting on the extensive use of the grounds, the "multiplication of backstops" suggesting the use of several fields simultaneously, and, in 1893, the construction of a hundred-seat grandstand on campus (*St. John's University*

Remaining documentation, unfortunately sparse, attests to seven games the Braves club played against St. John's College nines, though the teams probably competed in numerous additional contests over the years.<sup>79</sup> Competing against various "Junior," or middling-quality, nines over seven years, the Industrial School Braves, referred to in the *St. John's University Record* as the "Industrials," compiled a 3-4 record and showed noticeable improvements in their skills on the diamond.<sup>80</sup> The May 1889 *Record*, for example, described—without listing a score—how the St. John's Juniors "battered" the Ojibwe team, while just two years later, the "well matched" Industrial and Junior nines vied to a competitive 12 to 18 score.<sup>81</sup> By fall of 1892, the Ojibwe boys secured their reprisal, "handsomely" beating the "reckless" Juniors 40-

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*Record*, August 1889, September 1892, April 1893). Interestingly, the February 1888 *Record* even references a one-hour daily "battery practice in the gymnasium" supervised by a Johnnie student. While likely only students of the college practiced in this indoor space, the Ojibwe ballplayers could feasibly have known of the facility and perhaps had even visited or utilized it (*ibid.*, February 1888).

<sup>79</sup> For the sake of clarity, this article uses the terms "matches," "contests," and "games" interchangeably to designate what we know today as a baseball game, a nine-inning competition between two ballteams. During the late nineteenth century, however, ballclubs (and the general sporting populace) distinguished sharply between "games," usually termed "practice games" or "social games," and the more competitive "matches." While practice games could be arranged informally and usually involved local competition, only written challenges formally accepted by a club's officers constituted matches (Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball*, 17). For excellent examples of formal match challenges in early Minnesota baseball history, see Samuel E. Adams and Henry R. Adams, "Personal Papers and Correspondence," Minnesota History Center, 1877, in which Sam Adams, a 1870s Monticello resident, arranges several matches with ballclubs of nearby farming communities including Foley, Elk River, and Clearwater.

Although no documentation exists citing formal matches between St. John's College nines—all intercampus competitions are referred to as "games"—teams from St. John's did host outside teams for formal matches on campus, as they did with the St. Cloud Arctics on Friday, June 22, 1888 (*St. Cloud Journal Press*, Thursday, June 28, 1888, 3). Almost certainly, then, all the contests between the Industrial School and St. John's College teams would have been regarded by the local community (and by the collegiate players) of the day as practice games. As certainly, however, the Ojibwe students probably possessed little to no comprehension of these technicalities regarding baseball, and thus presumably treated each game as a formal match in its own right.

<sup>80</sup> The "Junior" nine designation refers not to student age but to the (lesser) quality of the team's players. As early baseball historian Warren Goldstein explains, ballclubs usually designated their best players to "first nines" that were given formal names, like the Arctics from nearby St. Cloud or the famous Excelsiors of Brooklyn. Less talented players occupied positions on teams often referred to as "Junior nines," "second nines," or "muffin nines" (Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball*, 7). While we cannot be completely certain that the extramural St. John's College teams labeled themselves according to this same hierarchical principle—they very well could have formed across friendship lines instead—we can be reasonably certain that the *Record's* "Junior" reference indicated teams that, whether younger or older, rested below the competitive level of the officially christened clubs on campus.

<sup>81</sup> *St. John's University Record*, May 1889, 54, April 1891, 86.

5.<sup>82</sup> Between then and the Indians' sweep of a doubleheader in 1896, likely many more Johnnies witnessed Ojibwe success on the ballfield, clearly an accomplishment for Native students with as little as three years' experience in the game.<sup>83</sup> No doubt their increased competitiveness on the diamond boosted the pride of Native athletes and students alike.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to this indigenous pride, leadership of the Indian ballteams provided considerable autonomy for St. John's Ojibwe students. Unlike the other Industrial School organizations, the "St. Meinrad's Altar Boys" and the "Otchipwe Dramatic Association," which were led by Benedictine clerics, both ballteams operated independent of any supervisory staff.<sup>85</sup> A school catalogue attests that Ojibwe boys held all formal leadership roles, including a President, Vice-President, Secretary and two Captains for each team, plus a Treasurer added in 1889; moreover, the Native players appeared—uncharacteristically so, for the era—without a coach or faculty representative in the lone remaining photograph of the club.<sup>86</sup> While perhaps

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, September 1892, 190. The actual *Record* account of the score reads: "The Industrials scored some two score while every Junior had fingers enough on one hand to count up their tallies."

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, June 1896, 160.

<sup>84</sup> Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 190; Alice Littlefield, "The BIA Boarding School: Theories of Resistance and Social Reproduction," *Humanity and Society* 13, no. 4 (1989), 438. After conducting interviews with several Indian boarding school graduates, Littlefield noted that former students reserved some of the fondest memories for athletic conquests, and that subsequently, "athletic prowess became a symbol of Indian identity and Indian pride." Perhaps the much-improved Ojibwe baseballers shared some of these positive sentiments.

<sup>85</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians Conducted by the Fathers and Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN, 6; St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota, 6.* School catalogues listed Br. Edward Karge and Br. Benno Ferstl as directing the St. Meinrad's Altar Boys, and Fr. Meinrad Rettenmaier—also the Industrial School's superintendent—as leading the short-lived Otchipwe Dramatic Association.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, 6; Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball*, 17. The absence of adult governance in sport, while unique in the extant boarding school literature, was quite characteristic of mid-nineteenth century baseball. Goldstein notes that as ballclubs traditionally were "genuine social clubs" first, they rarely had coaches or directors other than the players themselves. (Governing only the bureaucratic and organizational aspects of ballclubs, officer positions were extraneous to the nine on-field positions of the team, which mirrored those of modern baseball.) Both the nearby St. John's College and St. Cloud city nines followed this suit (*St. John's*

suggesting the monks' casual attitudes towards baseball, this lack of faculty governance nonetheless evinces the considerable agency exercised by indigenous ballplayers in running their teams.<sup>87</sup> Likely this student self-direction meant communicating with neighboring St. John's collegians to organize games against American clubs, rounding up necessary equipment, and perhaps even originating Indian teams in the first place.<sup>88</sup> Most significantly, this Ojibwe baseball autonomy likely translated into Native students teaching themselves—and each other—the requisite skills of the game. Even if learning rudimentary fundamentals from passing comments of monks or by observing nearby collegiate players in action, the supervisor-less Ojibwes likely honed their own baseball skills, exercising a degree of Native sovereignty within

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*University Record*, April 1888, and *St. Cloud Daily Times*, June 15, 1867, 3). Still, the independent functioning of the St. John's teams stand in stark contrast to most boarding school environments, which even placed “matrons” within student sleeping quarters to ensure nighttime supervision.

<sup>87</sup> Regarding the monks' possible unconcern with sport, Indian sports scholar Joseph Oxendine has noted a view of play as “unimportant or trivial”—especially in comparison with purposeful “work”—as characteristic of late-nineteenth century Americans (Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*, 9). Oxendine's observation proves particularly insightful when considering the penchant of most Americans of the era, including ethnographer Johan Georg Kohl, to characterize Indians as predisposed to “idle amusement” and “wasting time” (Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, 81). While the evidence remains somewhat inconclusive, Oxendine appears to have uncovered a basic discrepancy between nineteenth century whites and Natives regarding the social, cultural, and spiritual significance of sporting rituals. If so, some monks may well have concurred with Kohl about Natives playing baseball: “It is to be desired that the Indians would display the same attention to more important matters.”

<sup>88</sup> How baseball emerged at the Industrial School is unclear. Certainly, the close proximity of baseball-crazy St. John's University, which shared its campus with the Indian institution, contributed to the game's growth amongst indigenous participants. St. John's collegians, for instance, fielded six nines in 1891 (fully half the student body), filled the student newspaper with baseball poetry and sketches, constructed a hundred-seat grandstand around a campus diamond to seat spectators, held daily “battery practice” inside the gymnasium over the winter, and even capitalized on a “snowless winter” to stage an outdoor ballgame on January 18, 1891 (*Record*, September 1891, 191, April 1891, 83, April 1893, 94, February 1888; Hoffman, *Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of its History, 1857-1907*, Chapter III). Clearly, St. John's college students, enamored with the game themselves, likely provided enthusiastic environs for Natives to initiate baseball play. Moreover, the Ojibwes' duplication of the college ballclubs' organizational committees—and no coaches—to lead the team suggests a close association between Indian School and St. John's College baseballers.

Other possible contributors to the Ojibwe baseball club's beginning are monks from St. John's Abbey. Many of these late nineteenth century clerics had caught baseball fever, fielding a team of “Seminarians” throughout the era (*Record*, October 1896). In addition, Industrial School Superintendent and St. John's cleric Meinrad Rettenmaier appears to have brought a familiarity with athletics with him to the institution, as while stationed temporarily in Pennsylvania in 1883, he told St. John's Abbot Alexius Edelbrock of “a little sport” that would be granted he and his colleagues after a month's work in the fields (Meinrad Rettenmaier, OSB, to Alexius Edelbrock, OSB, August 21, 1883). Perhaps, then, resident monastics facilitated the onset of the Indian ballteams. Although the patchy evidence on this point seems unclear, what does seem likely is that the origination of Ojibwe baseball at the Industrial School resulted from cooperative efforts by Indian students and white community members.

the boarding school environment and rendering the team's successful on-field performances that much more compelling.

Further, since monastics supervised the boarders in morning classes, afternoon workshops, and in the evening barracks, the afternoon ball practice—away from the Industrial building and withdrawn from the earshots and sightlines of monks—offered a distinct, if temporary, escape from the laborious calendar of industrial work and regimented schooling at the institution.<sup>89</sup> As a rare opportunity to evade Euro-American direction, then, baseball likely appealed to the Ojibwe boys not only as an enjoyable activity, but also as a precious respite from the considerable stresses of the institution's assimilationist programming.<sup>90</sup> In this regard, Indian baseball at St. John's surely aided some Ojibwe boarders in enduring the rigors of boarding school life, even if not making the difficult experience entirely palatable.

The degree of independence permitted the Ojibwe baseballers fostered an additional—and rather unexpected—Native purpose: cultural preservation. A transformed ballclub name in particular lends credence to the notion that baseball furthered tribal heritage. According to St. John's Abbey historian Father Olaf Skjolsvik, the Indian School proved uncharacteristically sympathetic to the Ojibwe language; several Native students, for instance, taught Industrial teachers Fr. Simon Lampe and Fr. Roman Homar “much of the Chippewa tongue,” and a few

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<sup>89</sup> Wherever the Ojibwe boys played or practiced ball, it would have been outside the confines of the Old Stone House, home of the Industrial School, and thus provided a degree of autonomy from the direct supervision of clerics. Moreover, it seems quite likely that the only formal outdoor field(s) would have been adjacent the main college buildings several hundred yards inland from the Old Stone House, which sat atop a hill alongside Lake Sagatagan.

<sup>90</sup> Bloom, *To show what an Indian can do*, 3. Bloom reports that in the midst of “oppressive” boarding school schedules—which frequently repeated chores, marching, classes, and exhausting physical labor daily for months—students found “spaces, moments in time” where these strict routines could be temporarily evaded. As Bloom contests, athletic activities including baseball proved one such crucial release.

Ojibwe pupils—including Abitawamadjigabo, Abitawanamat, Politacoles, and, of course, Bishigis—even retained their Indian names in both existing school catalogues.<sup>91</sup> Amidst this liberal linguistic environment, the 1889 Braves changed their team’s name to the Ojibwe “Nin Songideeminanig.” A probable Anglicized jumbling of the Ojibwe words “*nin*,” (meaning “I” or “we”) “*zoongide’e*,” (meaning “brave”) and “*ininiwag*,” (meaning “men”), the poignant translation reads, “We are brave men.”<sup>92</sup> Here, tribal persistence resonates in both medium and in message.

The significance of bravery in this transformation is indeed profound. Commenting on the place of sports in traditional Indian life, for example, Lumbee scholar Joseph Oxendine describes how

Boys in all tribes typically played rough games or others that offered significant challenge. Such games showed how brave and strong they were, and their behavior in these activities signaled to both adults and to the young men themselves when they were ready for the full responsibilities of adulthood.<sup>93</sup>

As such, the Ojibwe boys’ tweak of “brave” from noun to adjective belies a deeper expression of Ojibwe identity emanating from the phrase “we are brave men.” First, the modified name clearly evinces the interest of the older boys in continuing aspects of Ojibwe heritage outside their tribal

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<sup>91</sup> Skjolsvik, *St. John's Indian Industrial School*, 117; *Schools for the Chippewa Indians Conducted by the Fathers and Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN*, 7-9; *St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota*, 7-9. In addition to the use of tribal language, the autonomy of the Ojibwe ballclubs may also have facilitated ritualistic game preparations without fear of being disciplined. On this traditional cultural practice, Joseph Oxendine explains that both individuals and communities historically participated in ritualistic preparations—including restricted diets, dancing and singing, self-decoration, and ceremonial scratching—before athletic competitions (Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*, 10-14). Alongside speaking in tribal language, then, modified forms of these rituals seem feasible sans monastic supervision.

<sup>92</sup> *St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota*, 6. My sincere thanks to Ogimaamakwa (Frank Burton) and Theresa Holubar of St. Cloud State University’s American Indian Center for their invaluable assistance in procuring this translation.

<sup>93</sup> Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*, 123. Oxendine further describes how “tug-of-wars, push-of-wars, mass wrestling, and boxing” proved popular rough activities for Indian boys intent on demonstrating bravery and courage to their kingroups and communities. This mirrors the Native oral traditions recorded by Joe Starita in *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge*, a four-generation history of one Oglala Lakota family, whereby Native boys utilized intensely painful games—including tolerating hot coals placed on the arm and enduring direct kicks to the face—to demonstrate bravery even through the 1950s (Joe Starita, *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge: A Lakota Odyssey* [Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2002], 251).

homelands.<sup>94</sup> More importantly, the “brave men” translation supports the idea that for these Ojibwe schoolkids, playing ball represented nothing less than a weathervane of Indian manhood. Beyond the departure of these Ojibwes to a culturally and geographically foreign boarding school, which itself demonstrated ample bravery, these Indian baseballers manifested their inner courage by participating in the white man’s principal sport.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps the boys even heard echoes of the Ojibwe lacrosse traditions of old: “Great ball-players, who can send the ball so high that it is out of sight, attain the same renown...as celebrated runners, hunters, or warriors.”<sup>96</sup> Clearly, then, this moniker shift evidences the persistence of Native cultural values, even while adopting a traditionally American game.<sup>97</sup>

Remaining evidence reveals the marked continuance of the Indian ballteams throughout the tenure of the Industrial School. By 1889, for example, the self-governing baseball teams had added a member each to their leadership committees, while the cleric-led “Otchipwe Dramatic

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<sup>94</sup> The use of an Ojibwe phrase identifying the team also suggests the receptivity of Industrial School monastics who clearly would have known of (and may have even sanctioned) the title before printing it in the 1889 catalogue.

<sup>95</sup> In *Education for Extinction*, David Wallace Adams excerpts the recollections of Lakota boy Plenty Kill (later Luther Standing Bear) upon departing Pine Ridge reservation for Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania: “I could not prove that I was a brave and would fight to protect my home and land...[so] I went East to Carlisle School.... I thought here is my chance to prove that I can die bravely. So I went East to show my father and my people that I was brave and willing to die for them” (Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 98). Ironic, indeed, that Plenty Kill’s own description inverts the term “brave” from subject to descriptor in this passage, mirroring the shift of the term by the ballclubs at St. John’s.

<sup>96</sup> Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, 89.

<sup>97</sup> This is not to say, however, that baseball facilitated cultural persistence unilaterally. Many Ojibwe baseball participants demonstrated proficiency in “civilization” by receiving a litany of pseudo-military “progress” awards presented annually at the school by the Benedictines. In 1886-1887, for example, Braves player Edward Bisson led the school with eight “premiums for distinction,” while Little Fellows’ player Peter Giard won a medal for “good conduct”; by 1888-1889, four of six school awards—including medals for “order and neatness” and “excellence in Christian doctrine”—went to baseballers. This evidence suggests that many of the school’s baseball participants at least outwardly confirmed to several of the institution’s assimilationist norms, although as David Wallace Adams has attested, this perceived compliance for many signified accommodation rather than acculturation (Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 239-270).

Association” of two years earlier had disbanded. Three of each ballclub’s four officeholders also remained active between 1887 and 1889, showing a desire of many to continue their baseball participation throughout the three-year stay at St. John’s.<sup>98</sup> In addition, Ojibwe baseball competitions near the closing of the Industrial School suggests a notable student attachment to the game. Although Collegeville’s first historian, Fr. Alexius Hoffman, noted the Industrial School’s discontinuance in June 1896, the Ojibwe ballplayers held at least four matches that month, including a doubleheader sweep of the college Juniors on June 14.<sup>99</sup> Clearly, Ojibwe boys remained interested in playing baseball throughout the school’s existence, even down to their last few days in Collegeville.

This extensive involvement in the game generated several surprising legacies of the St. John’s Indian ballteams. Exercising considerable agency in organizing their clubs, the Ojibwe ballplayers continued this activism by teaching themselves the game. Their subsequent on-field improvements and eventual successes against college competition likely boosted Native pride, and their daily independent practices away from Industrial School confines provided a welcome respite from the institution’s onerous curriculum. Most significantly, the poignant rechristening of the “Nin Songideeminanig” ballclub illustrates both the resiliency of tribal language and the continued value of bravery as a foundation of Ojibwe adulthood, even while immersed in the Americana of St. John’s. Ironically, then, the story of baseball at the St. John’s Industrial School reveals the complex and deeply indigenous nature of the boarding school game, ultimately evincing Patty Loew’s recent contention that baseball “was not the tool of assimilation [boarding

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<sup>98</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians Conducted by the Fathers and Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN*, 6; *St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, Collegeville, Stearns County, Minnesota*, 6.

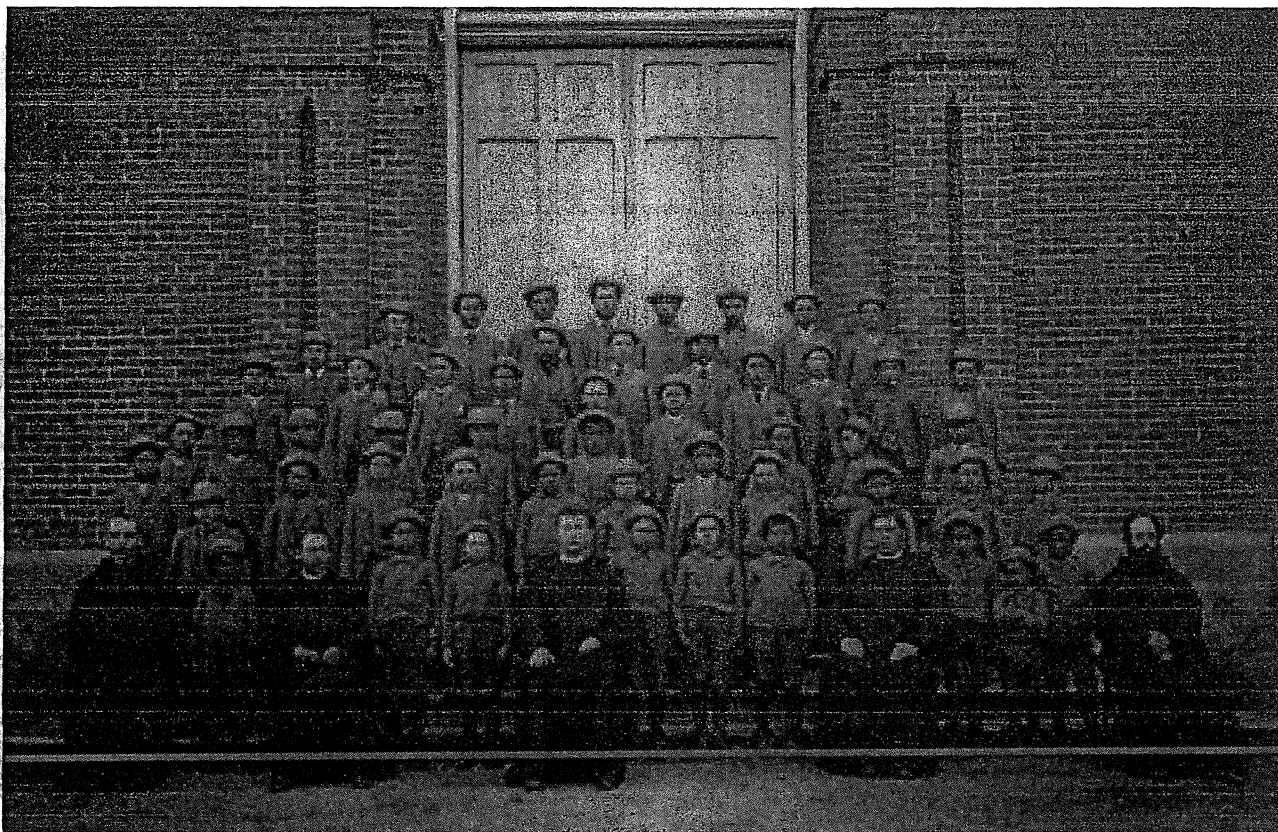
<sup>99</sup> Hoffman, *Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of its History, 1857-1907*, Chapter III; *St. John's University Record*, June 1896, 160. Nin Songideeminanig won these two games convincingly, 11-5 and 21-7, their most impressive victories over St. John’s College nines.



schools] intended it to be.”<sup>100</sup> It is this story—of baseball, of autonomy, of pride, of persistence—that would have comprised a distinct strand in Bishigis’s complicated and bittersweet memories.

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<sup>100</sup> Loew, *Tinker to Evers to Chief: Baseball from Indian Country*, 12.



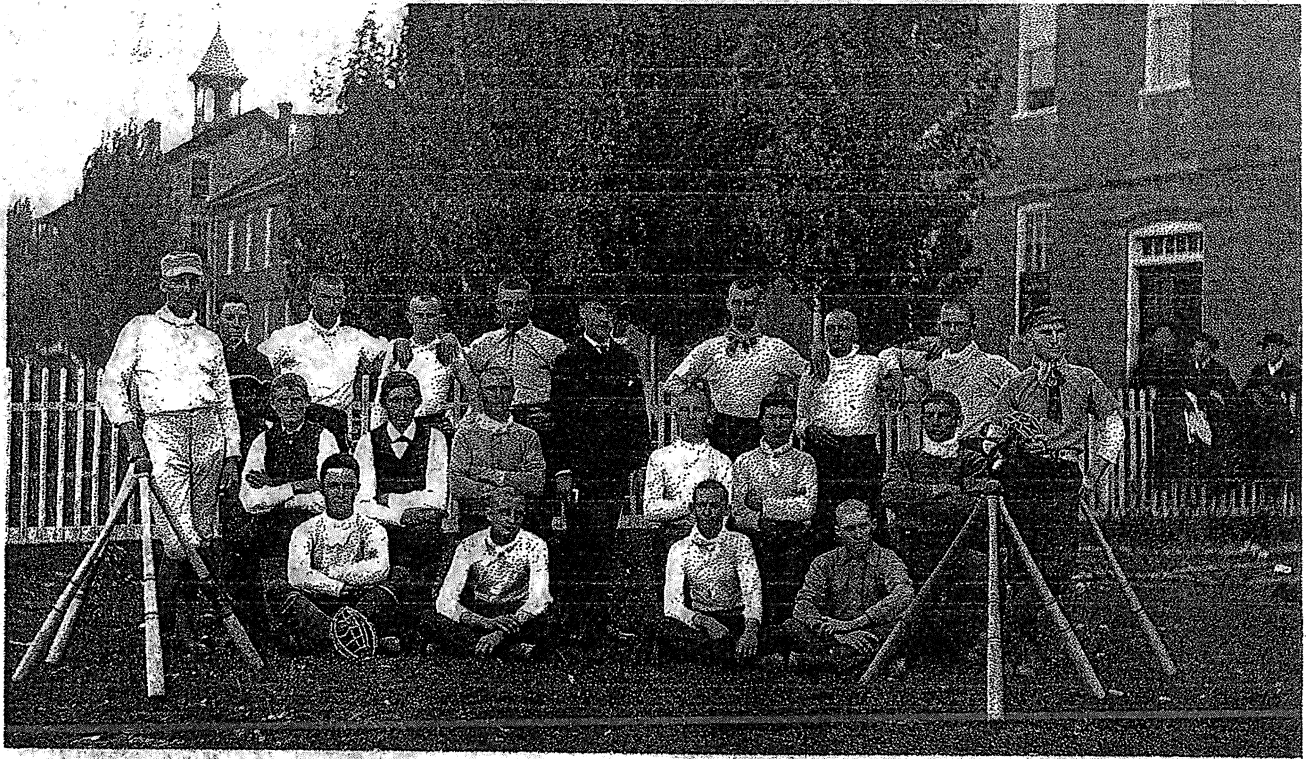
St. John's Industrial School class portrait, 1892. The students here pose beneath the deeply ironic acronym "I. O. G. D.," for the Latin "In Omnibus Gloria Dei"—  
*"In all things may God be glorified."*

(St. John's University Archives)



School pictures (undated) of several St. John's Ojibwe ballplayers. *Left photo:* William Lufkins, 1889 Nin Songideeminanig treasurer, standing left, with Gust Holsetin, 1887 Little Fellows captain, seated right. *Center photo:* Simon Warren, 1887 Braves captain, seated left. *Right photo:* Frank Le Due, 1889 Little Fellows treasurer, standing front left.

(St. John's University Archives)



Two St. John's College nines, 1885. Elder Ojibwe baseballers likely competed against similar clubs numerous times during the Industrial School's tenure.  
(St. John's University Archives)



St. John's University viewed from the south, 1888. While not visible here, the Old Stone House, home of the Industrial School, would have graced the Lake Sagatagan hilltop just west (left) of the prominently spired Quadrangle.  
(St. John's University Archives)



September 1892

— The reckless Juniors were handsomely done up at base ball by the Industrials on the 25th; the Industrials scored some two score while every Junior had fingers enough on one hand to count up their tallies.

*Above and right:* Newspaper articles in the St. John's University Record periodically featured the Ojibwe ballteams—and documented their successes.

June 1896

— The Juniors played four games with the Industrials, two of which they lost. Scores:

Game of June 3:—  
 Juniors.....0 0 1 0 0 0 1 0 5 0 1 0 4—12  
 Industrials.. 2 0 0 1 2 0 0 2 0 0 1 0 0— 8

Batteries— Juniors, McClellan - Rauch;  
 Industrials, Lyons - Couture. Double plays, 2.

Game of June 5:—  
 Juniors.....1 0 6 5 2 0 0 0 \*—14  
 Industrials.....0 2 1 3 0 1 0 0 0— 7  
 Double plays, 4.

Games of June 14:—  
 Industrials.....0 3 0 3 2 0 0 3 0—11  
 Juniors.....1 0 0 0 0 0 2 0 2— 5  
 Industrials.....2 0 2 8 3 0 4 0 2—21  
 Juniors.....0 0 0 4 0 2 0 0 1— 7



St. John's Industrial School Ojibwe base ball team, 1892. The absence of monastics in both this photograph and in the teams' leadership provided distinct opportunities for Native autonomy and cultural persistence.

(St. John's Abbey Archives)

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