

Billy Williams “Slashed the First Ball for a Hit.”¹

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The name Billy Williams was often mentioned in Twin Cities’ news at the turn of the twentieth century. There was Billy Williams the touring comedian; Billy Williams the boxer; Billy Williams, a.k.a. Henry F. Gorman, a notorious criminal from Chicago; and Billy Williams the Minnesota Labor Commissioner, who served the state from 1905 to 1909; among others. Then, there was Billy Williams the ball

player from St. Paul, Minnesota, whose name appeared during baseball season in the sports section of local papers.²

This Billy Williams started his semi-professional career with the St. Paul Spaldings and Hamm’s Exports in the mid-to late-1890s, playing right field. He was tall, strong, and caught the attention of the crowds and other teams from the get-go.³



Billy Williams played for the Knoblauch Lands Carver team in the 1905 and 1906 seasons. Team members include (front row L-R) Tony Hoffman, pitcher; Herb Mahoney, catcher; John Funk, pitcher and left fielder; and George Brown, right fielder; (second row) Tim Lynch, short stop; Billy Williams, first base; Clarence Funk, captain and second base; Fred Kinkie, centerfield; and George Lawton, third base; (third row) John J. Farrell, president and manager, with J. C. Bruninus. From the *Baseball Old Timers Hot Stove League* collection at The Nickel Joint, courtesy of Frank M. White.

Notes were made in short news blurbs, mostly about upcoming games, but when it came to player recognition, Billy often commanded the spotlight. He was described as “The heavy hitting Billy Williams,” “the colored giant,” “the colored twirler and first baseman,” and “captain of the Lennon team and the only colored player in that club.”⁴

Yes, Billy was “colored”—biracial, the son of a Black father and a white mother. Yet, Billy played for mostly white ball clubs—either in right field or as first baseman. He even captained some teams.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there were a number of Black teams in the state—Fergus Falls North Stars, Minneapolis Unions, St. Paul Blue Stars, St. Paul Quicksteps, Minneapolis Brown Stockings, and others as reported in Black-owned newspapers such as the *Western Appeal*.⁵

Yet, at the amateur or semi-pro level, some teams invited Black players to join here and there. It is believed Stillwater was the first to do so in 1884. Despite the “integration,” that didn’t mean Billy and other Black players never encountered racist comments or actions. They most certainly did.⁶

Many local baseball fans admired how Billy handled himself on and off the field. He was known as a noteworthy player, who “carried off the batting honors, getting two three-base hits and one two-base hit in five times up.”⁷ Perhaps these qualities caught the attention of John A. Johnson, a Minnesota politician who won the governor’s seat in late 1904 and asked Billy to join “his team” as messenger at the State Capitol. Gov. Johnson assured the young athlete that he could continue to play ball on weekends and vacations, which he did for several more years, as noted in this news item:

The Knoblauch Land team of Carver is out again this season and the management expects to have even a stronger team than that of last year. Billy Williams of [St. Paul] will cover the first base sack and, as he has a past reputation that will hold, the team will be strong in that spot.⁸

The arrangement suited the new governor’s messenger/ballplayer just fine. For Billy, who played for nearly twenty different regional and local teams over the years, the game of baseball was a forever love.

NOTES

1. “Lexington Park Sports,” *St. Paul Globe*, July 30, 1900, 7.

2. “Bill of the Play,” *Minneapolis Daily Times*, September 13, 1897, 4; “Tim Hegarty to Try Conclusions with Tim Callahan at San Francisco,” *St. Paul Globe*, June 16, 1901; “Bad Men Run Down,” *St. Paul Globe*, August 26, 1894, 5; “‘Billy’ Williams Gets Warm Reception Here,” *The Labor World*, March 11, 1905, 5.

3. “Hamm’s Exports and the League Club at Lexington Park,” *St. Paul Globe*, April 3, 1898, 10; “Diamond Dashes,” *St. Paul Globe*, April 15, 1898, 5.

4. “Athletics vs. Shakopee,” *St. Paul Globe*, August 14, 1898, 8; “Lexington Park Sports,” 7; “Lennon & Gibbons Team Beaten in the Return Match,” *St. Paul Globe*, August 6, 1900, 5; “Amateurs Look for Many Games,” *The Appeal*, May 17, 1902, 3.

5. Frank M. White, *They Played for the Love of the Game: Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 10-15.

6. White, 6; Frank M. White, “They Played for the Love of the Game: Adding to the Legacy of Minnesota Black Baseball,” *Ramsey County History* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 4; Tracy Mumford, “The History of Black Baseball in Minnesota,” *MPR News*, February 23, 2016. By the early 1900s, most organized baseball “had signed on to the so-called gentleman’s agreement banning African Americans.” That’s when amateur and semi-pro clubs around the Twin Cities formed, including the popular St. Paul Colored Gophers (later renamed Twin Cities Gophers and Minneapolis Gophers—1907-1916) and the Minneapolis Keystones (1908-1911). The Negro Leagues formed in the 1920s.

7. “Lennon & Gibbons Won,” *St. Paul Globe*, August 27, 1900, 5.

8. Frank McInerney, “All of the News and Gossip of the Players on the Amateur Ball Fields,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, May 6, 1906, 38.