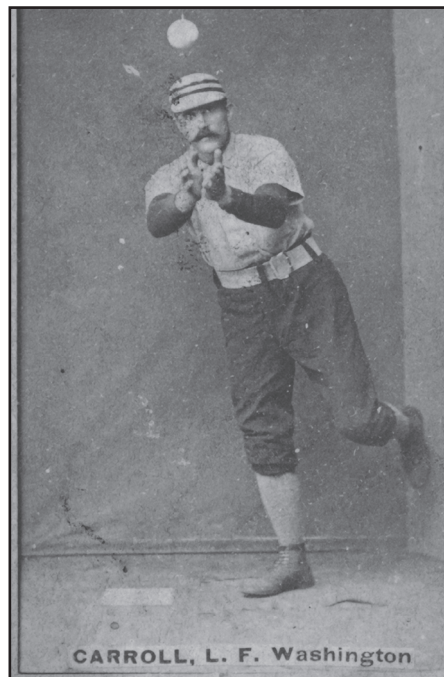


Read the excerpt from a book about the early days of professional baseball and answer the questions that follow.

from **Fifty-Nine in '84**

by Edward Achorn

- 1 Ballplayers knew full well what miseries they risked by playing such a game. There was little protective equipment—no batting helmets, no batting gloves, not even fielding gloves, which did not come into universal use until the 1890s. Fielders caught the hard ball *barehanded*—taking stinging, hard throws and spearing hot line drives with their unprotected or, as they put it, “meat” hands. Everybody knew that was a hazardous business. “The ball is a combination of cast iron and India rubber nearly as hard as a cannon ball, and propelled as rapidly,” one writer observed in 1884, only half joking. “To occupy the grand stand of a base ball park is a dangerous proceeding, while the players take the ball and their lives in their hands at the same time.” In 1882, a thrown ball shattered the left forefinger of Phillies shortstop Mike Moynahan, and the mangled digit had to be amputated at the first joint. Moynahan, undeterred by the loss, returned to the game as soon as the stump healed over.
- 2 The barehanded outfielders in the 1880s were every bit as good as the top fielders of the twentieth century, Chicago sportswriter Byron E. Clarke asserted, with this major difference: “they got hurt more and were always getting their fingers broken.” Cliff Carroll, the graceful left fielder of the Providence club from 1882 through 1886, displayed his mauled and misshapen hands in a 1911 newspaper photo, under the heading “FAMOUS NATIONAL LEAGUER CARRIES PROOF OF LONG CAREER ON DIAMOND.” Barehanded play made for a nerve-rattling brand of baseball, since no one could feel certain that a sprinting fielder would hold on to a spinning fly ball or a wicked liner.
- 3 To survive in baseball in that era, professionals needed more than talent. Cunning and fearlessness were prerequisites. Most club owners limited their rosters to twelve or thirteen players, about all they could afford on the slim profits that went with drawing two thousand customers per game. If a man was not up to the intimidating task of standing at the plate while fastballs whistled past his unprotected head, or catching blazing line drives with his bare hands, or making quick decisions on the fly, he was liable to be abruptly replaced. So men played with abandon, suffering constant scrapes and bruises and subjecting themselves to broken bones, torn



Cliff Carroll

ligaments, and gashes from shoe spikes. A long season of it placed a severe strain on even the most resilient players. Most were addicts of what they called “fruit cake,” or chewing tobacco, and they spat streams of brown spit everywhere while fueling themselves on nicotine, which helped to relieve pain. The bitter, prematurely aged faces that stare out from early team photos and baseball cards bespeak the stress and physical toll men endured in that profession.

- 4 Like most working Americans, players had no union and thus few protections against the will of management. They were “owned” by their club, blocked from signing with a team willing to pay them more. If they attempted to break their contract or otherwise failed to toe the line, they could be placed on the owners’ dreaded blacklist and effectively banished for life. If an injury waylaid them, management could, and often did, halt their pay, as Cleveland center fielder Al Hall discovered when he shattered his leg in a ghastly collision with teammate Pete Hotaling on May 13, 1880. Hall received the courtesy of an ambulance ride to Cincinnati Hospital but from then on was on his own, without salary or medical insurance. He never played again, and died in a Pennsylvania insane asylum five years later. From the owners’ perspective, a man who could not play deserved no pay.
- 5 No matter how long a player served his team, he received no pension and was on his own once the cheering stopped. Some ballplayers were educated in college or trades and could look forward to some sort of career after baseball. Some had the native sense to set aside part of their money for the harsh world that awaited them. But all too many lacked both education and sense, blowing everything they earned, and more, on women and drink while the going was good. The *New York Times*, among others, was distinctly unimpressed, describing the typical ballplayer as a “worthless, dissipated gladiator; not much above the professional pugilist¹ in morality and respectability.” Boisterous and arrogant, clueless about how to behave in polite company, ballplayers were “more or less despised and looked down upon,” recalled Sam Crane. “They graduated from the ‘dump’ and the big salaries they received gave them an altogether exaggerated opinion of their own importance.” Mothers were horrified when their sons revealed a burning ambition to join these traveling hooligans. The courtly Connie Mack helped make baseball respectable and was an American icon by the time he retired as manager of the Philadelphia Athletics in 1950, but when he got his start in the 1880s some of his higher-toned neighbors considered it a step *down* for an Irish immigrant’s son and shoe factory worker to become a professional ballplayer. “Baseball was mighty glamorous and exciting to me,” he remembered, “but there is no use in blinking at the fact that at that time the game was thought, by solid, respectable people, to be only one degree above grand larceny, arson and mayhem, and those who engaged in it were beneath the notice of decent society.”
- 6 However dishonorable and dangerous this profession was, young men struggled to get into it, because the alternatives were often even less pleasant. They hailed from the hard-luck farms of the Midwest, the claustrophobic coal mines of western Pennsylvania, the sweatshops of New England, the festering slums of New York and Philadelphia and San Francisco. They were all too aware that their fellow workingmen frequently ended up smothered, crushed, or horribly mutilated in industrial accidents—some 35,000 Americans killed and 536,000 injured each year, on average, from 1880 to 1900, by one estimate. Daily newspapers were filled with stories of on-the-job horrors—severed fingers and hands, scalding burns, and cracked skulls. There was no safety net for the injured or

¹ pugilist — boxer

the poor, other than meager handouts by local churches or by corrupt politicians and gang bosses who expected some favor in return. Those lucky enough to avoid injury on the job might put in ten or even twelve hours a day in a factory doing tiresome, repetitive tasks that made their neck, arms, and back ache, or outdoors performing hard labor such as digging ditches, carting bricks, or laying rail, often under a blazing sun. Construction jobs in the cold, wind, and ice were even worse—though a man felt fortunate to get any work at all in winter, the season of dread and starvation.

7 With the money they earned, blue-collar workers could do little more than survive. In 1880, a long, hard day's work earned a farm laborer a pittance, an average of \$1.31. Blacksmiths made \$2.28 per day, on average; carpenters, \$2.42; masons, \$2.79; printers, \$2.18; woolen-mill operatives, \$1.24; shoemakers, \$1.76. By those standards, a ballplayer's salary of \$1,000 to \$2,000 a year—roughly \$10 to \$20 per game—was princely. But it was not just the money that drew young men to baseball. Decent society might disparage the profession, but there were thousands of Americans who keenly appreciated the talent, guts, and artistry required to survive at the game's highest level. The sport offered many men born into the working class their only means of rising above the common herd, of winning respect in a money-obsessed society. Fastidious mothers, college presidents, and snobby editors at the *Times* might view a professional ballplayer with nothing but disdain, but, as the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* observed, the “small boy worships him, the young girls dote on him, and his friends and neighbors look upon him as immense, perfectly elegant, the howlingest kind of a swell.”²

² *swell* — slang for a fashionably dressed gentleman