



The World's

Tom Sweeney

"TAKE me out to the ball game," go the words to the popular song, and here Sweeney takes us out to Nicollet Park for a glimpse of baseball as it used to be played in Minneapolis. Born in St. Paul and a graduate of Central High School in Minneapolis, Sweeney lived near the park in the mid-1930s before joining the Civilian Conservation Corps. Now a retired banker, he is an avid fisherman and author of magazine articles about the outdoors. These affectionate and accurate baseball memories bring back the time when he lived on Nicollet Avenue and rooted for a very special "home team."

FIFTY YEARS AGO the Flour City did not have a major league baseball team. Instead, the Minneapolis Millers, along with teams from St. Paul, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Columbus, Toledo, Indianapolis, and Louisville, belonged to the American Association. Besides providing many exciting games, the association often was the last step up for a young player before reaching the big time and the first step down for a major leaguer who could not quite cut it any more.¹

The Millers' stadium was Nicollet Baseball Park at Nicollet Avenue and East 31st Street in the south part of town. It was a cozy park seating about 8,500, with neat, gray stucco exterior walls. There were no bleachers in the outfield; the left field wall abutted an alleyway on the other side of which were the rear entrances of shops facing Lake Street. The right field wall ran

along Nicollet Avenue, a traffic-laden thoroughfare with many stores across from the ball park.²

It was the right field that gave unusual character to Nicollet Park. While the other dimensions were normal, those on the right side were very short; the right-field fence was only 279 feet from home plate. (Baseball fans will instantly recognize this as being within easy range of almost any professional ballplayer.) To compensate for the abbreviated distance, the 12-foot wall was topped by a wire mesh that made the fence 40

¹ For the history of the Millers, see George A. Barton, *My Lifetime in Sports* (Minneapolis: Olympic Press, 1957), 277-288; National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, *The Story of Minor League Baseball* (Columbus, Ohio: National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, 1952), 89-90; Dave Mona, comp., *The Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome Souvenir Book: A Pictorial History of the Twins, Vikings, Gophers, Millers, Saints—and Metrodome!* (Minneapolis: MSP Publications, 1982), 22-25, 44-47.

² Here and below, see Mona, *Souvenir Book*, 22-25, 44; Sanborn Map Co., *Insurance Maps of Minneapolis, Minnesota* (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1912, updated to 1949), 4:425-426. Michael J. "Mike" Kelley, a Millers owner from 1923 to 1946, sometimes increased attendance by unorthodox means. "One day Mike got stiff and told the ushers not to close the gates. There were 15,216 people there," recalled George Brophy, a former team business manager. "They were sitting along the foul lines and when the umpires demanded that the fans get off the field, Mike invited some to sit in the dugout"; Mona, *Souvenir Book*, 24.

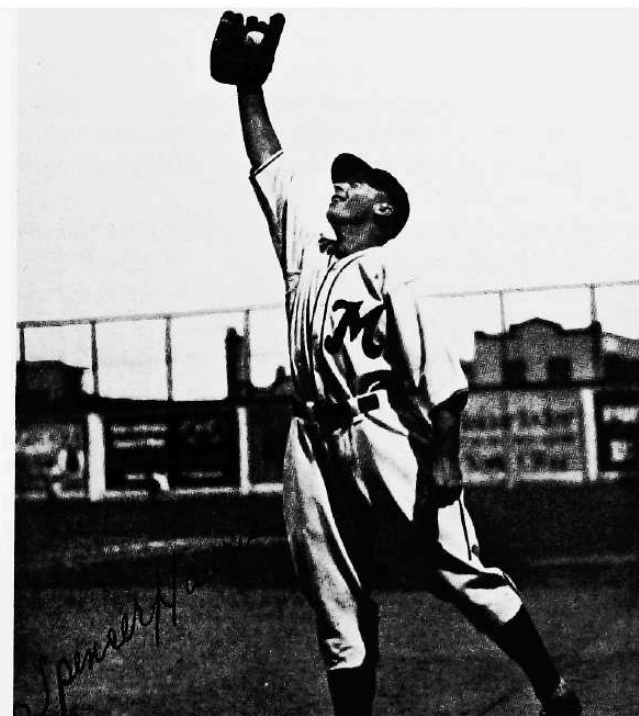
Greatest Outfielders

feet high. A somewhat similar situation is seen in Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox, where the famous "Green Monster" wall looms in left field.

Some peculiar things happened in Nicollet Park because of this close, tall barrier. Powerful hitters like

³ Brophy remembered that Kelley "used to build his team around that right field fence. . . . He'd take a strong left-handed hitter and give him a full year of play where he'd hit 30 home runs and never have to chase a ball in right field. Then he'd sell him to the big leagues for a bundle of cash and some more players. He used to break even on expenses and make his profit selling players. Most of the guys he sold to the majors never did anything again after they left Minneapolis and that right field fence"; Mona, *Souvenir Book*, 24. For Hauser's home-run record, see Barton, *My Lifetime*, 279.

CENTER FIELDER *Spencer Harris of the 1933 Millers team stretches for a catch in front of the famous right-field fence.*



Theodore "Ted" Williams, who played for the Millers in 1938 before going on to the majors, had a hard time hitting home runs over the fence, since line drives were still going up when they struck the wire. What would have been homers in virtually any other park were here only singles that did nothing but dent the fence. On the other hand, a player like Joe Hauser of the Millers, who didn't reach the big leagues because of his tendency to hit towering flies easily gathered in by outfielders, found in Minneapolis a paradise beyond belief. In 1933, Hauser made 69 homers, surpassing the major-league record of 60 set by Babe Ruth in 1927.³ Most Nicollet Park round-trippers were lofted shots that cleared the short right-field fence. The Brooklyn Dodgers had a comparable setup when they moved to Los Angeles and played in Memorial Coliseum until their new stadium was completed. Because the Coliseum was built for football and track, the left field was so short that Los Angeles sportswriter Jim Murray once described a home run in this manner: "The shortstop was still fading back when the ball went over the fence."

Nicollet Park's right field presented other, related problems. The outfielder had to play up so close that he often nabbed line drives that would have been clean hits in any other park. Even hard grounders getting by the second baseman were apt to be caught by a charging right fielder who would throw the frustrated and embarrassed runner out at first base. And so it was that fly-ball hitters dominated the game. If a player were left-handed and could loft the ball like a niblick shot on the golf course, he had it made in Minneapolis.

But one thing I will guarantee—the greatest fielding catches I have ever seen were made there. Not just one, but hundreds of gems the like of which have never been observed in any major league stadium. Before you get



DEPARTING SPECTATORS (left) join the busy traffic passing by shop windows at the intersection of Nicollet Avenue and East 31st Street; Miller Ted Williams (upper left) takes a swing in 1938; fans watch a flag-raising ceremony (above) from the windows and rooftops of buildings on Nicollet Avenue and Lake Street; after recovering from a knee injury, Joe Hauser (upper right) shows a pitcher and Millers owner Mike Kelley that he's raring to start the 1935 season; this Twin City Rapid Transit Company lot (right) was the practice park for Nicollet Avenue outfielders.

excited, I should explain that these catches were made not inside Nicollet Park, but *outside*.

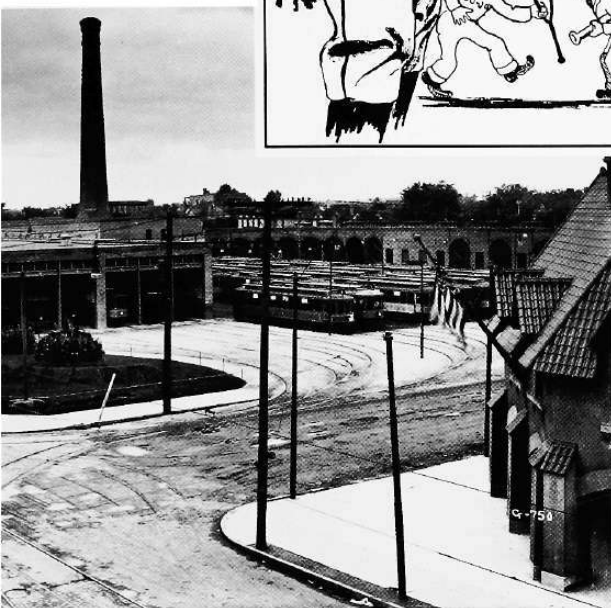
LET ME ELABORATE. Nicollet Avenue, just over the right-field fence, was bustling with pedestrians, automobiles, big yellow trolleys (known in Minneapolis as streetcars), horse-drawn ice wagons, trash carts, and milk wagons, for the era of animal power had not yet come to an end. The traffic was heavy in all directions, especially during the day, and remember, there were no night games at the time. There were also many shops that sported big glass windows facing in the direction of home plate.

All of this traffic, along with the windows, was literally bombarded with balls before and during each game.⁴ The havoc would have been enormous except for two or three dozen young men, mostly teen-aged but some older, with a penchant for adventure and for

a little money on the side. All had dilapidated baseball mitts and keen eyesight. These were depression years, and the Millers as well as visiting teams could ill afford to lose the numerous balls hit out into the street each day. Therefore, the canny team managements rewarded anybody who turned in an errant baseball at the entrance gate with free admission to the game in progress or about to start.

Each one of the raggedly dressed youngsters lined up on the far side of Nicollet Avenue was out to get a baseball. He then had two options: going to the game himself, or selling the ball for 25 cents to a grown-up who could return it instead of paying 50 cents for an adult ticket. In some cases, the ball would be kept for a

⁴ "We had so many windows broken in the President Cafe and Johnson's Appliances that only Lloyd's of London would insure us by the time we moved out [in 1955]"; Brophy, quoted in Mona, *Souvenir Book*, 25.



“rainy day,” but eventually the vast majority came back to the park. So, two important things happened. Teams saved a lot of money on baseballs, and pedestrians, vehicle owners, and shop proprietors were spared damages and the trouble of putting in claims.

I lived during those years in a second-floor apartment above a retail store on the section of Nicollet Avenue overlooking the ball park close to center field, where no wire extension had been erected. From my front window I had a distant but clear view of the infield and the activity around home plate. Like the many nonpaying spectators atop the shop buildings behind both the right- and left-field fences, I got a pretty good idea of the game’s progress even though I didn’t have what you might call a loge or box seat. My pri-

⁵ For more on the records of players Hauser and Cullop, see NAPBL, *Minor League Baseball*, 703, 712.

mary interest was not the game itself but what happened on the avenue when a high fly ball descended upon it. For this I did indeed have a fine seat, and what I witnessed was far more exciting to me than the dull plays made by the professionals inside the park.

Let’s look at a typical baseball day at Nicollet Park during the 1930s. The teams warm up and there is the usual batting practice. Hitters take great delight in smashing balls out of the park. Some, like Joe Hauser or fellow Miller Henry “Nick” Cullop, will hit as many as eight or nine before the game starts.⁵ Out on the avenue eager eyes are gazing skyward. The expectant youngsters can’t see home plate or who is hitting, but they can hear the crack of the bat. Suddenly, high in the air the ball magically appears, headed for the street. Then comes one of the most spectacular catches ever seen anywhere. Snaring the ball is no problem if the fielder can position himself without trouble. But given the heavy traffic and the speed of the plummeting horsehide, the closest youngster has to calculate several perfectly timed moves, gauging the vehicles coming from all directions while keeping his eye on the ball. He makes a sudden spurt across the path of an onrushing automobile, side-steps another from the opposite direction, and executes a one-handed catch with his glove up against a halted streetcar. This, believe it or not, is *routine*. The truly difficult catches are hard to describe, let alone believe.

TAKE the time when two streetcars are approaching each other from opposite directions, and a ball is about to land at the point where they meet and pass. An enterprising star, shod in battered tennis shoes, jumps onto the “cowcatcher” on the front of one slow-moving trolley and reaches up to make a backhanded catch just as the ball skims by the windshield of the other streetcar. The astonished motormen don’t know whether to get mad or applaud, and before they can decide the youngster is back on the street for another go.

Then there is the springing catch made by a fellow hanging onto the reins of a horse standing in the path of the ball, steadying the animal with one hand while he fields with the other. And what about the capture of the mighty fly ball that clears the traffic, clears the windows, hits the second floor of a building, and caroms back into the street and the waiting glove of yet another fielding whiz (obviously a trigonometry expert), who is standing between two automobiles and calmly chewing gum?

I have seen leaping catches, sliding catches, diving catches, and twisting catches, all of which would have been classified as sensational in just about any professional ball park—but made in the midst of roaring traffic and fierce competition, they were out of this world.

Amazingly, there were few injuries. Most people

were accustomed to conditions during baseball season, so pedestrians were wary and drivers watched the brakes, alert for the sudden appearance of rampant outfielders. More important, all the Nicollet Avenue youngsters had served an apprenticeship, playing for the farm team, so to speak. Before any of them ventured onto the heavily traveled street, they spent at least one season behind the park, catching fouls that soared over the stands behind home plate. Most landed on the property of the Twin City Rapid Transit Company, known as the carbarns, across East 31st Street. Here idle streetcars were parked in a large open lot where aspiring fielders learned to gauge the flight of a ball while dodging obstacles, with a minimum amount of danger.

There were, of course, no written rules governing graduation to the "big time" on Nicollet Avenue. The fellows knew instinctively when they were ready and whether they had what it took. As in organized baseball, there were many who lacked the skill, the coordination, and the timing to compete with the real pros. The most inept would soon give it up as a bad job. Those with minor skills would relegate themselves permanently to the carbarns. Only the stars, those who could contend with and overcome danger, graduated to the avenue. Without doubt, these kids and young men were the greatest fielders ever to catch a fly ball.

WHO AM I to say this? Well, nobody special. I have watched baseball games for better than half a century. From Ebbets Field in Brooklyn to Candlestick Park in San Francisco, I have sat in the stands admiring the prowess of the major leaguers. On television screens I have seen most of the important games played. What do I think of the great outfielders of baseball? Let me tell you something. I saw the 1954 World Series and Willie Mays's immortal, last-ditch, over-the-shoulder catch, executed while speeding away from the ball, and I say this: If he had caught that ball while running full

speed down Broadway during New York's peak traffic hour, I would allow, "Yeah, that was passable! Yeah, quite passable!" But I've seen better on Nicollet Avenue!⁶

The park has long since been torn down and most of the shops have vanished. An interstate highway now runs nearby, and all traces of the baseball once played there are gone. Only a plaque marks the spot.⁷ But when I speed through this area today, I can still hear the loud cheers ringing out from Nicollet Park as the crack of a bat signals a high fly soaring over the fence. Is it coming at me? Am I in danger? Of course not! Somehow, from out of nowhere, a bounding form will materialize, a shabby glove will appear, the ball will be snatched off my windshield in the nick of time, and I will proceed on my wondering way.

⁶ Willie Mays had a brief career with the Millers in 1951. "He was hitting .477 after 38 games and leading the league in everything when Leo Durocher (managing the Giants) called Willie on the phone . . . Leo says, 'What are ya hitting?' Willie answers, '.474' [sic]. There's dead silence for about 15 seconds . . . Leo then roars, 'You get your \$!&*#% on the first plane for New York!' So up he went, and the rest is history," reminisced Halsey Hall, broadcaster and sports-writer in the Upper Midwest for over 50 years. See *Mona, Souvenir Book*, 25, 44-45.

⁷ Nicollet Park opened in 1896 and closed in 1955 following a spectacular last game which won the Millers their only Junior World Series championship. Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington then became the main place in Minnesota for professional baseball until it too was razed and replaced by the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in downtown Minneapolis. A commemorative plaque of Nicollet Park, dedicated in 1983, is located at the Norwest Bank, built approximately on the former sites of center and right fields. See *Mona, Souvenir Book*, 22-25, 34-36; *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 29, 1955, p. 40; *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Aug. 20, 1983, p. 1D, 6D.

THE CARTOON on p. 21 is from the *Minneapolis Journal*, March 31, 1985. All other pictures are from the MHS audio-visual library.

A CROWD enters Nicollet Park in September, 1955, for one of the last games held in the stadium.





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