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Article Summary: This is the story of Hall of Fame major league baseball pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander, who rose to greatness in the world of professional baseball and died poverty-stricken in his hometown of St Paul, Nebraska. His life was marked by professional success and personal failure.

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Photographs / Images: Grover Cleveland Alexander as a St Louis Cardinal, 1926-1930; Grover Cleveland Alexander in World War I uniform; Thirteen inductees into baseball's Hall of Fame; Alexander as a player-manager with the House of David baseball team from 1931-1936; Inset poem "Alexander the Great" by Walt Mason; Grover Cleveland Alexander pitching to Douglas Fairbanks Sr with Bill Killefer of the Chicago Cubs catching; Aimee Alexander with Ronald Reagan during filming of *The Winning Team*; Inset "Nebraskans in Major League Baseball including photos of Bob Gibson, Grover C Alexander



*Grover Cleveland Alexander with the St. Louis Cardinals, 1926-30. Courtesy of National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, New York.*

# HIS OWN WORST ENEMY: THE RISE AND FALL OF GROVER CLEVELAND ALEXANDER

By Andrea I. Paul

The life of Grover Cleveland Alexander, a Nebraska farm boy who scaled the heights of baseball greatness and died poverty-stricken and virtually friendless in his hometown, was marked by great successes professionally and miserable personal failures. As the third winningest pitcher in major league history, the legend known as "Alexander the Great" holds national league records for victories, career shutouts, and complete games; the rookie record for victories; and the season record for shutouts. In one three-year span, he won ninety-four games for the Philadelphia Phillies. The height of his success came in 1926 when he pitched the St. Louis Cardinals to a world championship, in the process striking out Tony Lazzeri with the bases loaded, in what many consider to be the game's most famous strikeout.

In contrast to his baseball career, Alexander's personal life was marred by physical and emotional problems. Deafened by artillery shells during World War I, he also suffered from epilepsy.<sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether these afflictions contributed to his alcoholism, a problem that reached legendary proportions. After a twenty-year major league career, Alexander was removed from the lineup by the Cardinals after a drinking binge and ended his career with a barnstorming House of David team. After his retirement from organized baseball, Alexander joined a

New York flea circus and appeared in a penny arcade, earning pocket money by answering questions about his glory days. Only a few months after his 1939 induction into baseball's Hall of Fame, Alexander summed up his financial condition by complaining, "They gave me a tablet up at the Cooperstown Hall of Fame, but I can't eat any tablet."<sup>2</sup> Twice married and divorced from the same woman, Grover Cleveland Alexander died alone in a St. Paul, Nebraska, rooming house on November 4, 1950.

The son of William Alexander, an Elba (Nebraska) farmer, and his wife, Martha, Grover Cleveland Alexander was born on February 26, 1887, and was named after the president of the United States. Baseball's influence was strong in rural areas during the early years of this century, and it's likely that Grover and his twelve brothers were involved in the sport during their childhood. In reviewing his local career, the *St. Paul Phonograph* reported in 1926 that Grover Alexander played with the Elba team, as well as with other local teams that needed a good pitcher. In the fall of 1907, he attracted outside attention when he pitched a game for Ord at the Valley County Fair, winning 8-0 while striking out thirteen batters. During a game the next day, he held Ord's opponent scoreless for four innings, earning another victory and a reputation in central Nebraska.<sup>3</sup>

In 1908 Alexander was working for the Howard County Telephone Company, doing field construction work and

earning \$1.75 a day. His Sundays were spent playing baseball for the St. Paul team. In June he was recruited by the Central City team, and on June 30 he recorded his first victory for his new team by downing Aurora, 7-2. The local newspaper referred to their new pitcher as *George Alexander*, a mistake the reporter would not make again, and claimed that his pitching "proved to be a mystery to the South Platte warriors."<sup>4</sup> During that season with Central City, Alexander's pitching remained a mystery to the opposition as he won twenty-one games, including a no-hitter, while losing only four contests.

From Central City, Alexander went to Burwell, where he pitched during September and early October 1908, compiling a winning record. Among his victories were two against the celebrated Green's Nebraska Indians, one of the best semi-pro teams in the Midwest.<sup>5</sup>

Word of Alexander's success reached semi-professional teams outside Nebraska. In 1909 his professional career began when Alexander signed a contract with Galesburg of the Illinois-Missouri League. Alexander's physical attributes - over six feet in height with red hair and freckles - were immediately reported by a Galesburg newspaperman, who described him as

a blonde of the ruddy type . . . (with) the build of a switch engine. Manager Jap (Wagner) figures he can see the big strawberry slinger floating up puzzles to the opposing batsmen already and is much taken with his looks.<sup>6</sup>

The Galesburg Boosters' first test

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was an exhibition game against hometown Knox College, a 6-4 win. Alexander ended the game as a relief pitcher, keeping the collegians "guessing all the time." His legendary pinpoint control was not yet evident as he walked three batters during this brief appearance.<sup>7</sup> He was back in form for the season opener against Monmouth, striking out nine men but losing the game 5-4 because of three errors committed by his teammates. After two victories over Pekin in mid-May—a one-hitter in which Alexander himself got three hits and a shutout in which Alexander struck out sixteen—the Galesburg press nicknamed him "Alexander the Great."<sup>8</sup>

The St. Paul newspapers followed Alexander's success with unabashed glee, although the nickname attached to him in the local press was "Dode." After his first victory over Pekin, the *St. Paul Phonograph-Press* reported, "It is evident that 'Dode' has won a home in Galesburg. May he continue to strike them out at every game."<sup>9</sup>

There were many highlights in Alexander's first season of organized baseball. In one game, Alexander hit a ball out of the park, over a Regal shoe sign in left field. He received a bonus of ten dollars after the players passed a hat among the fans and presented the collection to Alexander after the game. In addition, he was awarded a pair of Regal shoes.<sup>10</sup> In another game, Alexander led the Boosters to a 1-0 eleven inning victory over Pekin, allowing only five hits by the opposition and driving in the winning run himself.<sup>11</sup>

As his fame grew, Alexander was given still another nickname, "O. U. Alexander" (to be read as "Oh, you Alexander") and was sometimes

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*During World War I Alexander served with the 342nd Artillery Battalion of the Eighty-ninth Infantry. A shrapnel wound to his right ear and partial deafness caused by the roar of artillery contributed to his later health problems. Courtesy of National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, New York.*

## Grover Cleveland Alexander



*Alexander was one of the original thirteen inductees into baseball's Hall of Fame. Here he poses in 1939 with greats of the game: Honus Wagner (standing at left), Alexander, Tris Speaker, Napoleon Lajoie, George Sisler, Walter Johnson; Eddie Collins (sitting at left), Babe Ruth, Connie Mack, and Cy Young. Courtesy of National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, New York.*

referred to as "O. U. Alex."<sup>12</sup> After Alexander pitched a no-hitter against Canton on July 22, the Galesburg newspaperman took dramatic license to describe the game and the front page news of a local fire: "Emulating the example of Nero who fiddled while Rome was consumed by the flames, Alexander the great fiddled with Canton while the Methodist religious edifice went up in smoke."<sup>13</sup>

Alexander's next game was even more spectacular, as he made league history by pitching an eighteen inning 1-0 victory. He allowed only eight hits, not giving up any hits during the first nine innings of the game and striking out nineteen batters overall.<sup>14</sup>

Alexander's extraordinary season came to an end just a few days later in a freak accident, which occurred while he was running the bases. Alexander was

on first base when the ball was hit to the second baseman, who tossed the ball to the shortstop, forcing out Alexander. In attempting to throw out the runner at first for a double play, the shortstop struck Alexander in the head with the ball, knocking him unconscious.<sup>15</sup>

For the next three weeks, Alexander remained in bed. When he tried to stand up, he complained of a dizziness and problems with his eyes.<sup>16</sup> In an



Alexander (left) was a player-manager with the barnstorming House of David baseball team from 1931 to 1936. From *Wide World Photos*, St. Louis Bureau, collections of National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, New York.

effort to help Alexander receive the treatment he needed (and to dump a perhaps permanently injured player), the Galesburg franchise sold him to Indianapolis of the American Association. In Indianapolis Alexander was placed under the care of an eye specialist for the remainder of the season.<sup>17</sup> The best wishes of his St. Paul neighbors went with Alexander as the *St. Paul Phonograph-Press* wrote, "We hope to be able to tell our readers, within a short time, of his complete recovery, and that he is back in the game once more and doing his usual effective work."<sup>18</sup>

Although Alexander didn't pitch for Indianapolis that season, he did return to St. Paul to pitch for the locals against Scotia on October 1, against Greeley on October 3, and against North Loup two

days later. His blurred vision gone, Alexander won all three games, causing the local press to brag, "With Dode on the hill for the locals... we can take care of any team in this section of the country."<sup>19</sup>

Alexander never got a chance to pitch for Indianapolis, because the manager felt his injury was a career-ending one. In what was considered by Indianapolis management to be a shrewd move, Alexander was "unloaded" to the Syracuse Stars of the New York State League in a cash deal. Ultimately, it was Syracuse that benefitted from this transaction, as Alexander won twenty-nine games for the Stars in 1910, pitching thirteen shutouts over the season and holding the opposition scoreless over the last fifty-two innings that he worked. After

pitching and winning both games of a double-header against Wilkes-Barre on July 20, Alexander also won a new nickname, "Iron Man."<sup>20</sup>

Until then, the Stars were mired in sixth place. Alexander soon began a streak in which he would win his last twelve games. By August 27 with league-leading Wilkes-Barre in Syracuse to face the Stars in a double-header, Syracuse had moved into second place. After shutting out Wilkes-Barre 4-0, the *Syracuse Journal* claimed that Alexander had

accomplished what no other player has even come close to doing and he has substantial cause to feel proud, although he isn't. Alexander is one of those unassuming chaps that takes things as they come, good, bad, or indifferent. He is the same quiet individual at all times. However, his friends, and he has an army of them, did the gloating for him.<sup>21</sup>

His army of friends in St. Paul met him at the depot after the 1910 season ended to congratulate him on his accomplishments and to claim that "the big 'Sorrel Top' is the king of them all when it comes to pitching."<sup>22</sup> The local fans were anxious to see Alexander pitch before he joined the major league Philadelphia Phillies the next season. They got their opportunity in September and October as he beat Ravenna and Ord easily, carrying his shutout streak through sixty-two successive innings.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his exceptional seasons with Galesburg and Syracuse, Alexander was not a shoo-in to make the Phillies roster. The Philadelphia sportswriters were withholding judgment until they could see Alexander tested against a worthy opponent. Alexander got his chance in an exhibition game against cross-town rival and reigning world champions, the Philadelphia Athletics. To everyone's surprise, he held Connie Mack's team hitless during his five-inning appearance. The St. Paul newspaper picked up the story from Philadelphia and reported, "Five mixed veterans and bushier curvers scaled the pitching peak and all did high class work, but honors easily belonged to Emperor Alexander, the giant pitcher from Syracuse."<sup>24</sup>

By June 1 Alexander's record stood at eight and two, tops in the National League. The Philadelphia press concluded that he was a consistent winner because of his "torpedo speed and an unhittable curve."<sup>25</sup> By the end of his rookie season, Alexander led the league in victories (28), shutouts (7), complete games (31), and innings pitched (367). Alexander's praises were sung by Phillies fans, particularly in his hometown of St. Paul, where praises were sung in rhymed verse (above).

On his return to St. Paul at the end of his first major league season, he was greeted by hundreds of fans. After winning twenty-eight games for the Phillies, Alexander's St. Paul fans were upset with the salary of \$3,200 offered by the team for the next season. Calling

### Alexander the Great

"How big was Alexander, pa, that people called him great?"  
"My son, he used to swat the ball when'er it crossed the plate.  
I've seen him knock it half a mile, and thereby save the game;  
No wonder that the nations ring with Alexander's fame.  
I've seen him in a crucial place leap twenty cubits high,  
And claw the blooming firmament to catch a whizzing fly.  
In all departments of the game he is a humming bird,  
And would-be rivals seem to me incompetent, absurd.  
I've seen him plunge for seven yards then slide upon his face  
Until the umpire called him safe at third or second base.  
I've seen the fans stand on their heads and tear their clothes and howl  
When Alexander jumped the fence and nailed a soaring foul.  
The conduct of our public schools is sure a thing of shame,  
When growing youths have never heard of Alexander's fame.  
Our educators should reform; their system's out of plumb;  
They'll have to hump themselves and change their whole curriculum."

— Walt Mason<sup>26</sup>

Alexander unappreciated, the *St. Paul Phonograph* adopted the local favorite's cause by stating,

If it hadn't been for the St. Paul ball player this year, the Phillies would never have been heard of. During the time they were making history on the ball field it was the 'big fellow' from here done the work.<sup>27</sup>

Alexander returned to the Phillies in 1912 and although his won-loss ratio, 19-17, was somewhat disappointing, he again led the league in innings pitched. His earned run average (ERA) at 2.81 was also well below the 3.00 mark, the number considered the dividing line between an average pitcher and a superior one. Over the next five years Alexander compiled a stunning record of 143 wins and fifty losses for the Phillies, nearly three times as many victories as defeats. During the seasons of 1914, 1915, 1916, and 1917, he led the league in victories and innings pitched. Three of those years he led the league in ERA.

According to his contemporaries, Alexander's most amazing feat was pitching sixteen shutouts in 1916, four in a row coming in Baker Bowl, a "cracker box" of a stadium that was the Phillies' home park. The right field wall, only 280 feet from home plate, invited left-handed hitters to pull the

ball that way. Rube Bressler, who battled against Alexander while playing for the Cincinnati Reds, said,

I always felt that perhaps Grover Cleveland Alexander was the greatest of them all, because of the conditions under which he played. Sixteen shutouts in 1916 in Baker Bowl, where there was practically only a running track between first base and the right field wall. Only a giant could do a thing like that.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly the Phillies' greatest achievement during Alexander's peak years was their first pennant and subsequent appearance in the 1915 World Series. In the series, Alexander pitched one victory over the Boston Red Sox, the Phillies' only victory in the five-game series. (Although the Phillies also appeared in the World Series in 1950, it wasn't until their 1980 appearance that another Phillies pitcher notched a World Series win.) In his second game, Alexander allowed the Red Sox only two runs, but his teammates could not solve the opposing pitcher and the Phillies went down to defeat.

After the 1917 season, Alexander and catcher Bill Killefer were traded to the Chicago Cubs for pitcher Mike Prendergast, catcher "Pickles" Dillhoefer, and \$55,000. The Phillies were known for running a tight-fisted operation and

Alexander's steadily increasing salary—up to \$7,000 in 1915—and the \$55,000 cash incentive led to completion of the deal.

World War I disrupted the baseball careers of many, and Alexander spent most of 1918 serving in France with the 342nd Field Artillery. Controversy surrounded Alexander's arrival in the army as some newspapers had pinned the label of "draft dodger" upon the thirty-one-year-old star. The *St. Paul Phonograph*, always Alexander's staunch supporter, came to his defense by detailing his "perfect willingness to go to war" and his "biggest single piece of patriotism . . . when he invested \$500 in Third Liberty Loan Bonds."<sup>29</sup>

Alexander was married to Aimee Arrants, a St. Paul neighbor, before being sent to Europe. He went overseas with the Eighty-ninth Division and saw service in the Argonne, rising to the rank of sergeant. He endured what appeared to be a minor shrapnel wound to his right ear. This injury would require medical attention years later.

On his return to major league

baseball in 1919, Alexander became the mainstay of the Cubs pitching staff, recording sixteen wins and leading the league with a 1.72 ERA. After the 1920 season, he was proclaimed the league's leading pitcher after notching twenty-seven wins and, for the second year in a row, allowing the fewest runs per game.

During his years with the Cubs, Alexander's reputation for drinking came into public view. According to his wife, his drinking became a problem after his return from Europe. The nation's prohibition law did not stand in the way of Alexander, who, as a professional ballplayer, found it easy to gain admittance into speakeasies wherever the Cubs played.

In 1926 Joe McCarthy became the new Cubs manager. According to Aimee, problems started when Alexander broke his ankle and McCarthy, who had to pass the hospital every day, did not choose to visit the ailing superstar.<sup>30</sup> Early in the season, Alexander had to be sent back to Chicago after a drinking binge, and he was

placed on indefinite suspension.

The Cubs placed Alexander on waivers, and the Cardinals' player-manager, Rogers Hornsby, picked up the veteran pitcher for \$6,000. At the age of thirty-nine, the man called "Old Pete"<sup>31</sup> by his teammates, made his first start for the Cardinals and beat McCarthy's Cubs, 3-2. He went on to win nine of his sixteen starts for his new team and helped to propel the Cardinals to their first pennant.

It is ironic that Alexander's most remembered achievement is a game that he saved, rather than won, in the 1926 World Series against the Yankees. Alexander easily beat the heavily favored Yankees of Ruth and Gehrig in games two and six by scores of 6-2 and 10-2. The world championship was to be determined by game seven.

The stories of Alexander's appearance in that final game are many. According to some, Alexander knew that he might be called upon to pitch in that game so he held off on a victory celebration after his game six win. Others claim that Alexander celebrated so thoroughly the night before that "he practically needed a seeing-eye dog to guide him in from the bullpen" when he was called upon to protect the Cardinal 3-2 lead in the bottom of the seventh inning.<sup>32</sup>

When Alexander arrived at the pitcher's mound, the Yankees had the bases loaded and Tony Lazzeri at the plate. Lazzeri, a rookie who had played in the Pacific Coast League the year before, had acquired the nickname "Poosh 'Em Up" by batting in 222 runs for his minor league team. During his first year with the Yankees, Lazzeri had knocked in 114 runs, second only to Ruth.

After starting Lazzeri out with a ball, Alexander delivered a called strike. On the next pitch, Lazzeri lashed at an inside fastball that whistled down the left field line and curved foul at the last moment. Alexander later recalled, "A few feet more and he'd have been a hero and I'd have been a bum."<sup>33</sup> On the next pitch, Alexander broke off a sharp

Grover Cleveland Alexander (left) pitching to Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. Catcher is Bill Killefer of the Chicago Cubs. Courtesy of The Sporting News, St. Louis, Missouri.



## Grover Cleveland Alexander

curve, low and away, that Lazzeri missed. To many, this was the most famous strikeout in World Series history. It should not be forgotten, however, that Alexander came back to hold the Yankees hitless for the final two innings, preserving the Cardinals' victory.

Although Alexander asserted that Cardinal starting pitcher Bill Sherdel was the hero of the series,<sup>34</sup> the *St. Paul* press would have none of it. Never prone to understatement, the *St. Paul Phonograph* viewed Alexander's performance as

a wonderful exhibition of nerve and good judgment. That is why we verily believe Alexander was a superman when he faced the Yanks on last Sunday afternoon and pulled the game from the yawning abyss of defeat and safely stowed it away in the archives of the baseball commission where it will remain for all time as one of the greatest feats in world's series conflicts. And again we claim Alexander as the hero of the series and entitled to all the credit for winning the world's series.<sup>35</sup>

Alexander's homecoming celebration attracted some 20,000 people on October 27, 1926. The *St. Paul Phonograph* detailed the day's events, which included a baseball game between Ord and Howard County players, speeches in honor of Alexander, the presentation of a watch charm to the hero, a barbecue in which some 12,000 sandwiches were served, and a street dance that lasted until midnight.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1927 season, the forty-year-old Alexander recorded twenty-one wins for the Cardinals with a 2.52 ERA. He contributed sixteen victories to the pennant-winning effort of 1928, but his World Series appearances that year were a contrast to his showing two years earlier. Pitching in two games against the Yankees, the "Bronx Bombers" had their revenge on Alexander by scoring nine runs in the five innings that he worked. The Yankees swept the Cardinals easily in four games.

In 1929 the veteran pitcher won nine and lost eight, maintaining a record of never having a losing season. With his ninth victory that year, Alexander recorded his 373rd win, putting him one win ahead of Christy Mathewson and



Alexander's life story was depicted in *The Winning Team*, a Warner Brothers film of 1952 starring Ronald Reagan as Alexander and Doris Day as Aimee Alexander. Mrs. Alexander, shown with Reagan, served as an advisor to the project. Courtesy of National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, New York.

atop the National League list of career win leaders.

It was to be Alexander's last major league victory. After a colossal drinking binge in Philadelphia, where he disappeared for three days, he was placed on vacation at full pay, rather than suspended, for the rest of the season. That winter he was traded to the Phillies, the team with which he had first gained

stardom. He lost his three decisions with the Phillies in 1930 and was released early in the season.

Alexander retired, believing that he had captured the National League mark for total career victories, third in the major leagues behind Cy Young and Walter Johnson. Ironically in the late 1940s, a statistician discovered that Christy Mathewson had won a game in

## NEBRASKANS IN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Of the more than eighty Nebraskans who have played major league baseball, only three have been enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Besides Grover Cleveland Alexander, the other Nebraskans at Cooperstown are Wahoo Sam Crawford (his Hall of Fame plaque is the only one that designates a home town as part of the honoree's name) and Omaha native Bob Gibson.

Crawford played in the same Detroit outfield as Ty Cobb, whose fame tended to overshadow the Nebraskan's accomplishments. During his nineteen-year major league career (1899-1917), Crawford stroked 2,964 hits, led his league in home runs three times, and recorded 312 triples, the still existing mark for three-baggers. His power and speed accounted for his ability to hit for extra bases. Many baseball historians believe that if Crawford had played during the live-ball era, he would have contended for home run titles with Babe Ruth.

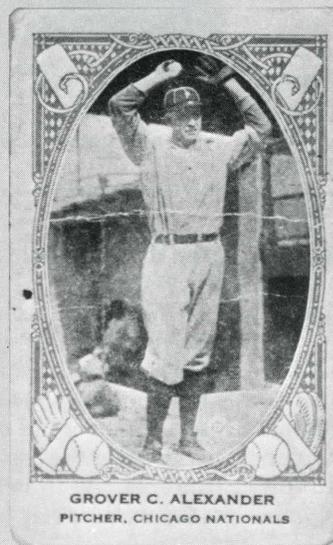
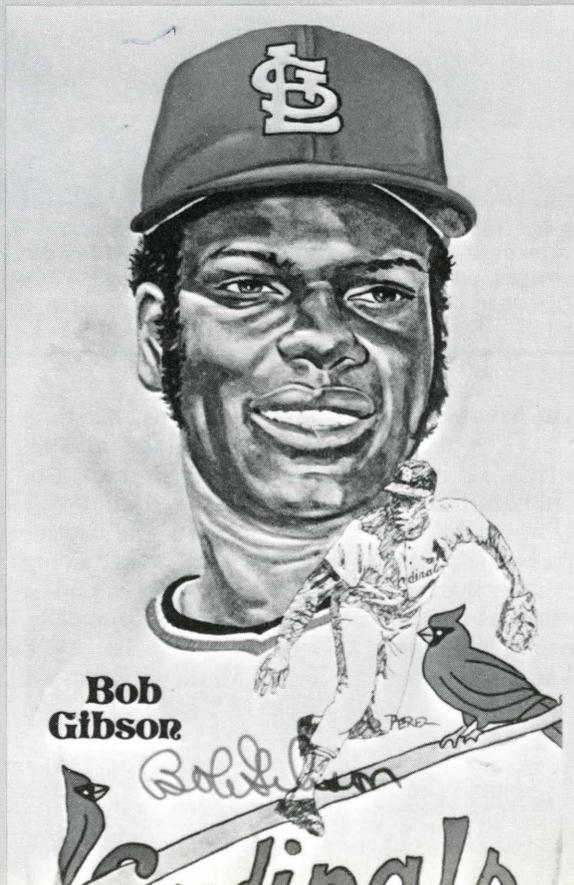
Unlike Crawford, who had to wait forty years before entering the Hall of Fame in 1957, Pitcher Bob Gibson was elected in 1981, his first year on the ballot. During his seventeen-year career with the St. Louis Cardinals (1959-75), Gibson earned a reputation as an intimidating presence on the mound, whose pitches could be overpowering. Much of his drive to succeed was engendered by racism he encountered in the South, first with Creighton University's basketball team and later in spring training with the Cardinals. Of such experiences Gibson said, "It taught me toughness, on top of having to pitch to hitters like Willie Mays."

The recipient of two Cy Young Awards and the 1968 National League most valuable player, Gibson's win-loss record was 251-174, with a career ERA of 2.91. His major league record ERA mark of 1.12 over 300 innings in a single season (1968) still stands.

In Bob Gibson and Grover Cleveland Alexander, Nebraskans can claim two of the greatest right-handed pitchers

ever to play the game. They would form the nucleus of a hypothetical all-Nebraska all-star team. As a starting point for further debate, here are my choices for the other players on the roster:

- 1B Johnny Hopp, Hastings
- 2B Bob Johnson, Omaha
- 3B Wade Boggs, Omaha
- SS Ron Hansen, Oxford
- OF Sam Crawford, Wahoo
- Richie Ashburn, Tilden
- Billy Southworth (player-manager), Harvard
- C Les Nunamaker, Malcolm (A sentimental choice — he was Alexander's catcher in St. Paul.)
- P Grover Cleveland Alexander (RH), Elba
- Bob Gibson (RH), Omaha
- Mel Harder (RH), Beemer
- Clarence Mitchell (LH), Franklin
- Tim Burke (RH reliever), Omaha
- Gregg Olson (RH reliever), Omaha



From NSHS Collections

1902 for which he had not been given credit, thus placing Mathewson and Alexander in a tie for National League career victories. By that time, it was much too late for Alexander to break the record.

The remaining years of Alexander's life were marred by frustration, illness, and poverty. Aimee had divorced him in 1929 after stating in court that Alexander had tried to take "the cure" six times but had reverted to his old habits shortly after each attempt.<sup>37</sup> From 1931 to 1936, he played with the traveling House of David team.<sup>38</sup> Unlike his religiously influenced teammates, Alexander was permitted to shave every day. He tried to land a job as a major league pitching coach or manager, but his reputation insured that he would not be considered. The \$250,000 that Alexander was thought to have earned during his career had long since been spent on high living.<sup>39</sup>

He was in and out of both jail and court, once being sued for \$25,000 for alienation of affection by a St. Paul husband of Alexander's childhood sweetheart. He faced a variety of charges in Omaha in 1930, most relating to violation of liquor laws.<sup>40</sup> Although he and Aimee were remarried in 1931, his promise to her that he would quit drinking was soon broken. However, Alexander's remarriage apparently served to convince the wronged St. Paul husband to drop his suit.

In 1936 Alexander was thrown out of his Evansville, Indiana, hotel room for nonpayment of rent. He awoke in a local hospital, unable to explain how he had received a large lump on his head.<sup>41</sup> By 1939 he could be found sharing billing with a trained flea in New York. He was able to support himself by answering baseball questions and by serving as a greeter at a local tavern.

Under the title "One of the Greatest Pitchers of All Time Now Walks the Streets, Looking for a Job and a Bite to Eat," a St. Louis newspaper chronicled Alexander's situation in 1944. At that time, he was living in Cincinnati. He

had gone there as part of a lecture tour and had awakened alone after the other members of the tour group left. He then worked as a guard at Wright Aeronautical Corporation and as a cafe floor manager. Both jobs were too hard on his legs, and at the time the article was written, Alexander was unemployed and wondering if he would be expelled from his current hotel room. He was also worried about his right ear, which had been nearly eaten away by an infection related to his World War I shrapnel wound.<sup>42</sup>

Turning up in Long Beach, California, four years later, Alexander had lost his right ear and the hearing in his left ear was impaired. The local newspaper there reported that he had recently fallen down the stairs of an Albuquerque hotel.<sup>43</sup> Later that year, Alexander was arrested in East St. Louis when he was found wandering through the streets in his pajamas. Wherever he went during his last years, a story would appear in the local press detailing his pathetic condition.

Alexander returned to St. Paul in 1950 with a new lease on life after being hired by the American Legion to serve as an advisor to their junior baseball program. Alexander's assignment was to tour Nebraska during the summer, teaching good sportsmanship and providing coaching tips. His first tour stop was St. Paul, and the town set May 24 as Grover Cleveland Alexander Day. Unlike his 1926 homecoming, the people of St. Paul chose to ignore their native son and largely avoided the parade, baseball game, banquet, and Nebraska Navy admiralship presentation. The *St. Paul Phonograph* chastised its readers by stating that the celebration "would have been a much bigger one if more folks would have bothered to attend and pay respect to a man who has brought fame and recognition to 'their home town' even though he HAS had his 'ups and downs.'"<sup>44</sup>

That same year, the Phillies won their first pennant since 1915, when Alexander had led them with thirty-one

victories. After associates had made arrangements, Alexander attended the last two games of the World Series in New York, unrecognized in the crowd and by the press. Back in St. Paul, he found himself unable to get a drink in town as the local bartenders refused to serve him. In a letter to Aimee (from whom he was divorced again in 1941), Alexander expressed his discontent with life in St. Paul, writing, "I can't figure out why I was such a fool to come here to be treated as I am and after the days when I had been heard of."<sup>45</sup> Less than a month after penning that line, Grover Cleveland Alexander, at age sixty-three, was found dead in his rooming house. His old team, the St. Louis Cardinals, paid for Alexander's steel casket and his funeral service. He was buried in St. Paul's Elmwood Cemetery in the Alexander family plot.

At the time of Alexander's death, nationally syndicated columnist Grantland Rice recalled Alexander to be the most cunning, the smartest, and the best control pitcher that baseball had ever seen. He wrote,

Above everything else, Alex had one terrific feature to his pitching — he knew just what the batter didn't want — and he put it there to the half-inch. I would say that Alex was top man among hurlers. He knew more about the true art or science of pitching.<sup>46</sup>

It was Alexander's tragedy that although he could control a baseball, he could not control his life or his destiny.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Alexander's Philadelphia teammate, Hans Lobert, recalled that Alexander had epileptic seizures throughout the years Lobert played on the Phillies, 1911-15. Lobert remembered that Alexander had to be held down and his tongue grabbed to prevent choking. Brandy was kept on the bench to be poured down his throat in case a seizure occurred. Lawrence S. Ritter, *The Glory of Their Times* (Collier Books, New York, 1978), 186. Ironically, the Yankees' Tony Lazzari also suffered from epilepsy.

<sup>2</sup>*The Sporting News*, November 15, 1950.

<sup>3</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph*, October 13, 1926; *St. Paul Republican*, September 19, 1907; *Ord Journal*, September 19, 1907.

<sup>4</sup>*Central City Nonpareil*, July 2, 1908.

<sup>5</sup>Green's Nebraska Indian baseball team was

organized by Guy W. Green, a Lincoln resident, in the 1890s. Supposedly comprised of native American baseball players, the team actually had a majority of white players. A photograph of the team in the Society's collection substantiates this.

<sup>6</sup>*Galesburg Republican-Register*, April 13, 1909.

<sup>7</sup>*Galesburg Evening Mail*, April 14, 1909.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, May 18, May 21, 1909; *Galesburg Republican-Register*, May 21, 1909.

<sup>9</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph-Press*, May 21, 1909.

<sup>10</sup>*Galesburg Republican-Register*, June 18, 1909.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, July 20, 1909.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, July 3, 23, 1909.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, July 23, 1909.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, July 26, 1909.

<sup>15</sup>*Galesburg Evening Mail*, July 28, 1909.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, August 5, 1909.

<sup>17</sup>*Galesburg Republican-Register*, August 19, 1909.

<sup>18</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph-Press*, August 27, 1909.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, October 8, 1909.

<sup>20</sup>*Syracuse Post-Standard*, July 21, 1910.

<sup>21</sup>*Syracuse Journal*, August 29, 1910.

<sup>22</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph-Press*, September 23, 1910.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.* It is interesting to note that the catcher for these games was Leslie Nunamaker, a native of Malcolm, Nebraska. Nunamaker had a twelve-year major league career as a reserve catcher for the Boston, New York, St. Louis and Cleveland teams of the American League, 1911-22.

<sup>24</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph*, April 13, 1911.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, June 1, 1911.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, June 22, 1911.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, October 12, 1911.

<sup>28</sup>Ritter, *Glory*, 200.

<sup>29</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph*, May 9, 1918.

<sup>30</sup>*The Sporting News*, May 2, 1951.

<sup>31</sup>Alexander acquired the nickname "Old Pete" from Bill Killefer during a hunting trip in which Alexander fell into a pool of alkali and mud. Killefer at first called Alexander "Alkali Pete" after a cartoon character, but the name was shortened to "Pete" by Alexander's teammates.

<sup>32</sup>Tom Meany, *Baseball's Greatest Pitchers* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1951), 8.

<sup>33</sup>*The Sporting News*, June 14, 1969.

<sup>34</sup>*Omaha World-Herald*, October 17, 1926.

<sup>35</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph*, October 13, 1926.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, November 3, 1926.

<sup>37</sup>*Omaha World-Herald*, October 4, 1929.

<sup>38</sup>Known as the "Whiskered Wizards" and the "Bearded Beauties," the House of David travel-

ing baseball team barnstormed throughout the Midwest during the 1920s and 1930s. The House of David was a Protestant sect founded by Benjamin Purnell in 1903. The players on the House of David baseball team, like all male members of the sect, kept their hair and beards unshorn "in emulation of Jesus." The extra hair and beards proved not to be a hindrance, as the House of David teams routinely beat the best of the local teams sent to face them.

<sup>39</sup>According to an interview with Alexander's niece, Elma O'Neill of St. Paul, Alexander's salary also went towards the support of his widowed mother and other members of the family. Interview with Mrs. O'Neill took place on February 23, 1989. Tape available in Nebraska State Historical Society Archives.

<sup>40</sup>*Omaha World-Herald*, September 25, 1930.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, August 4, 1936.

<sup>42</sup>*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, August 22, 1944.

<sup>43</sup>*Omaha World-Herald*, June 27, 1948.

<sup>44</sup>*St. Paul Phonograph*, May 31, 1950.

<sup>45</sup>*The Sporting News*, April 25, 1951.

<sup>46</sup>"Focus," *Lincoln Journal and Star*, March 31, 1974.