

— HISTORY —

The Willimantic Colts turn to pro players

Part five of seven

After Willimantic Colts' manager Danny Dunn resigned at the end of the 1904 season, a local attorney, Thomas J. Kelley, took over the reigns for 1905. The Willimantic Baseball and Athletic Association subsequently decided to hire several well-known professionals, after some of the Colts leading players were lured away by fat paychecks.

The Colt's opening game was with Bristol at Windham Field, and resulted in a 9 -2 victory for the home team. The 1905 season was relatively successful season, but the WBAA had gone deeply into debt. Crowds had dropped because many of the local stars had left. It was hoped to provide more competitive games for 1906 to attract more fans to Windham Field.

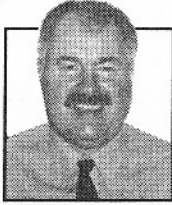
On Friday, March 23, 1906, the representatives of five Connecticut baseball clubs met at the New Dome Hotel in Hartford. Director Thomas J. Kelley represented Willimantic. Also repre-

sented were Manchester, Rockville, Windsor and Bristol. The meeting to organize a "Big Five" Connecticut baseball league was a success. A rules committee was organized.

Three days later Thomas J. Kelley reported back to the annual meeting of the WBAA. The organization of a Big Five league met with great approval from the members.

A baseball fair was organized to raise much needed cash for the increased expenditure expected for the 1906 season, an idea stolen from Rockville, who had 200 members contributing a dollar a month.

For one game with their hated rivals from Manchester, the Rockville club paid out hundreds of dollars for the services of the New York Giants pitcher Christy



Tom Beardsley

Mathewson.

The WBAA appealed to Willimantic's businessmen to support the club during the 1906 season. A successful team had pulled in baseball fans from surrounding towns during the last five years. There were large contingents of Colts fans living in Baltic and Colchester who regularly came into town on match days.

The committee reminded Willimantic's businessmen that, "Many of these people would not come here were it not for the ball games and if there are no ball games here many men from this city with money to spend will be sure to go to Norwich Saturday afternoons to see the state league games there."

Thomas J. Kelley addressed the gathering and gave a report of the meeting in Hartford.

He didn't think that Windsor would enter a team so there would be a "Big Four" league consisting of Willimantic, Rockville, Manchester and Bristol. Rockville had wanted all their games with Manchester to be

played on Saturdays and holidays, and Bristol had demanded a ceiling on players' wages of \$800 per player, per season.

This was rejected as Manchester paid one of their star players \$250 a month.

It was decided to begin the tournament after June 16, as college ball players would then be available for selection.

A future meeting was arranged to draft a constitution and rules. Finally, the WBAA formed a committee to arrange a baseball fair, and sub committees were formed for dancing, entertainment, music, refreshments, booths, canvassing, sales of tickets and contributions.

The "Big Four" League was inaugurated after a meeting in Hartford on April 5, 1906. The season ran from June 23 until September 8. Two games a week were to be played, midweek and Saturdays, with double headers on July 4 and Labor Day.

The Willimantic club's average attendance for home games was around 3,000, whereas Rockville

and Manchester often played before 5,000 and 6,000 people.

Kelley for Willimantic suggested that all gate receipts be shared equally between the clubs. This was voted down but it was agreed to guarantee minimum expenses to visiting clubs, at \$35 for mid-week games, \$75 on Saturdays, and \$25 in case of rain, with only the receipts from holiday games being shared equally.

The 1906 Willimantic baseball season was keenly anticipated.

Continued next week



Attorney Thomas J. Kelley

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

where is our hand? Shall we never jewelry store in Willimantic? All