

## History

# Local politician was also a talented ball player

John O'Rourke was born in Willimantic in 1871. He prematurely died in 1925 after a serious bout of pneumonia. He lived for many years in the "lace-curtain Irish" section of town at 222 Jackson St. At the time of his death, O'Rourke was well known as a central figure in the city's Democratic Party — a group that was known as the "Irish Mafia." However, many had forgotten that "Jake" O'Rourke was a talented baseball player in his youth, and had played professionally for several clubs, including the Willimantic Colts, for a dozen years at the turn of the century.

John O'Rourke was educated at St. Joseph's Parochial School and started work at age 14. He trained to be a molder at the Gorry iron foundry on Mansfield Avenue. Before being involved in urban politics, O'Rourke had built a strong reputation as a skilled athlete. He was highly proficient with the baseball bat. In 1894, Oscar Tanner's Willimantic Colts recruited him. This was the first season that Willimantic had fielded a professional nine in the Connecticut State League since 1883. The original professional club played its home games on the new fairgrounds, and 11 years later, the Willimantic Linen Co.



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agreed to lease its grandstand and diamond to Tanner's new combination.

The Colts disbanded in 1895, but were reorganized in 1897 by another up-and-coming Irish politician, Daniel Patrick Dunn. Danny Dunn's new Colts combination played challenge matches around the state for the next four summers. O'Rourke and Dunn were well known to each other. They both ran errands for the city's Democratic Party, and ensured that the Irish population of the city registered with the "Demmy-cratics."

Dunn made O'Rourke the Colts club captain. Two years later, Dunn and the city's baseball fans were horrified when O'Rourke was lured away by the Rockville Baseball Association. O'Rourke was given a job in Rockville's silk mills and remained with the Rockville combination for two summers. He was lured back to Willimantic, however, when the Willimantic Baseball Association was formed in 1901. The WBA hired Danny Dunn as coach, and Dunn was quick to lure O'Rourke back from Rockville with a healthy playing contract.

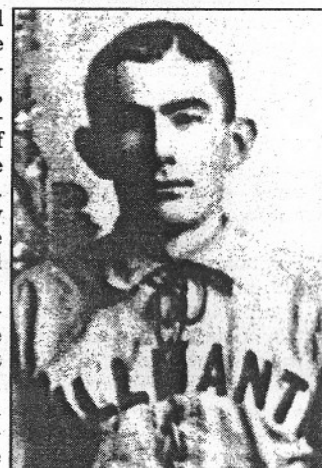
O'Rourke captained the Colts for the next six summers, until the team disbanded in 1906. He became a close friend of teammate Mike Healey. He was particularly devastated when "Homerun Healy" was crushed to death by the freight train on Milk Street in 1904.

When his playing days were over, O'Rourke concen-

trated on a political career. He became the foreman of the Montgomery Hose Fire Co., and was later appointed chief engineer of the Willimantic Fire Department. O'Rourke held many minor positions in the city government, and from 1915 until 1924, served as Willimantic's postmaster. He was succeeded in that position by Walter R. King, but was then appointed as city sidewalk officer. O'Rourke was also active in the local Elks organization and was an officer in the San Jose Council No. 14 Knights of Columbus.

It was a great loss to the city of Willimantic when Captain "Jake" was taken by pneumonia. Like Mike Healey a generation before, his funeral attracted crowds of mourners.

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John O'Rourke

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