

In 1906, major league manager Connie Mack was quoted in the Sheboygan, Wisconsin *Telegram* chatting about one of the stars of the local semi-pro team, George Wilson: "Without exception, Wilson is one of the greatest players in the country, there being but few who can put up work in a game of baseball that can touch him." The *Telegram* was similarly effusive: "His playing has become popular in these parts and it is stated that people from many miles around come in to the games when they know Wilson is to be in the pitcher's box."

Wilson, about 30 years old with 11 or 12 years of professional baseball experience, saw his fame spread across the Midwest. In 1907, a tourist coming through Manitowoc, Wisconsin, sent home a postcard picturing the hometown team. The image looks like just about any other turn-of-the-century team portrait, except for the conspicuously dark-skinned fellow at the far left of the middle row. The postcard sender scribbled, "How you like these? The chocolate chip beats them all."

It's no surprise that people were talking about George Wilson in 1906 and '07. One of the very few black players competing in white baseball at the time, he completely dominated the semi-pro Lake Shore League of southeastern Wisconsin. On July 29, the visiting Kenosha squad knew better than to try to compete with their regular team: they paid Chicago White Sox hurler <sup>Lon</sup> Ray Fiene and a Texas League player named Block to play with them. Nine innings later, Kenosha had to catch a train, though the score was knotted at zero. Fiene had given up six hits, Wilson only two. Both struck out nine. It was an unusual performance for Wilson only in that he didn't also drive in a couple of runs.

Wilson, as you've probably deduced by now, was much more than your typical local semi-pro star who couldn't take his game to the next level. Indeed, Wilson *had* pitched with and against some of the greatest players in the country by the time he turned up in the Lake Shore League. But as a black player in 1906 who didn't want to barnstorm year-round to make ends meet, he was lucky to find the LSL. In the extremely race-conscious baseball world of the turn of the century, few white leagues would include an all-black team; fewer still would permit a black player on an otherwise all-white team.

As a 19-year-old rookie pitcher in Adrian, Michigan, Wilson started his career as he would end it: on a mostly white team. One of three black players to spend more than a couple of games with the club, Wilson went 29-4 on the mound and hit .327 at the plate. He was caught by Vasco Graham, another black player, who spent part of 1894 with a White team in Dubuque, Iowa. For part of the season, Bud Fowler played infield for the Adrian team. Fowler was among first professional black players and played in the white minor leagues for more than a decade and kept playing until 1904 with all-black squads. Interestingly, Adrian was an early stop in the Hall of Fame career of Honus Wagner; Wilson pitched and won Wagner's debut there.

Wilson played for most of the next 10 years with a succession of top black clubs. He spent 1896, 97, and 98 with the Page Fence Giants, based in Adrian, Michigan, with some of his teammates from the Adrian minor league team. In fact, he pitched a single game with the Page Fence club before he began his impressive season with the white team in Adrian. Wilson played in 1899 and 1900 with the Columbia Giants, and became a member of the Chicago Union Giants in 1901, staying with the team until 1904 or '05.

His performance with these teams earned him a mention in Sol White's *History of Colored Baseball*, acknowledging his nickname of the "bronzed Waddell."

In 1905, he found his way back to white baseball, although he would never crack the ranks of "organized baseball" again. In the ten years that bridged the turn of the century, integrated teams in organized baseball went from scarce to virtually non-existent. In fact, aside from a handful of black players who successfully "passed" for white and a handful of others who played in the farthest reaches of organized ball in North America, no black player would appear in the majors or minors until Jackie Robinson.

Making his mark in Illinois and Wisconsin as a star with the Chicago Union Giants, he somehow came to the attention of a semi-pro club in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. Documentation of this team and the league or leagues it played in isn't as plentiful as that of the Lake Shore League, so most of what I can tell you about Wilson's performance is third- or fourth-hand information. That said, the Sheboygan *Telegram* reported that the Chippewa Falls team was 68-12. Wilson went 40-5. The paper didn't provide any batting stats for the pitcher, but judging from his performance later that year and the next, he was probably responsible for many of the team's runs, as well.

Wilson was recruited for the Sheboygan "Chairmakers" by Fred Ristow, a powerful hitter who would be a fan favorite in Sheboygan for 10 years. He joined the Chairmakers on September 15, 1905, after he completed his season's work with the club in Chippewa Falls. He made an immediate impact. Attendance had been dwindling all season, and it's not clear whether the Sheboygan management brought him in as a drawing card or a pitcher who would help them win games. Regardless of motivation, he

fulfilled both roles. The first game he pitched was against the Milwaukee team of the American Association. Wilson shut out the Association club until the 9<sup>th</sup> inning, fanning fourteen along the way. He ended up losing the game 3-2. The following week the Chairmakers took on the “Blatz” club of Milwaukee—a fellow member of the Lake Shore League—and beat them 6-1. Attendance was up to 1500 (only about 600 was required for management to break even, perhaps more when paying the salary of someone like Wilson). Wilson kept the crowd happy by fanning eleven.

The game of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1905, would've cemented George Wilson's reputation among Lake Shore League fans had he quit the next day. With at least one hundred dollars on the line—some of it his—Wilson shut out a team from Fon du Lac, Wisconsin, striking out eleven on the way to a 1-0 shutout victory. Wilson drove in the only run on a fifth-inning triple, one of dozens of three-baggers he would hit as a member of the Lake Shore League. A week later, Wilson didn't disappoint the season-high 1800 fans in at Lake View Park in Sheboygan. The Chairmakers beat Kenosha 7-3 with another \$100 on the line. Wilson struck out sixteen and didn't allow a hit until the 8<sup>th</sup> inning.

A rematch was scheduled for the following week, but rain prevented what could have been a historic matchup. The Kenosha squad realized they had no chance against Sheboygan's star pitcher, so they did what Lake Shore League teams would do against Wilson for years to come: hire ringers. Usually the ringers came from the high minors, particularly the American Association team in Milwaukee. Occasionally Wisconsin State Leaguers were brought in, as well as the occasional 3-I or Texas League player. Kenosha had grander designs: they reportedly hired pitcher Frank Smith and outfielder Nixey Callahan of the Chicago White Sox for the game. Callahan had hit .272 in 1905 – nearly

the best on this early edition of the “Hitless Wonders” team – and Frank Smith had gone 19-13 with a 2.13 ERA over nearly 300 innings. Even surrounded by semi-pro players, it would be great to know just how well George Wilson could have performed against a couple of established major league players.

In the offseason, Wilson returned to his home in Palmyra, Michigan. When he came back to Sheboygan in late April of 1906, the *Telegram* welcomed him back like an old friend. Both the *Telegram* and later the Manitowoc *Herald* suggest to the present-day reader that Wilson was well-known to everyone in town, as was his color. After the first couple of mentions in September 1905, the *Telegram* completely stopped referring to Wilson’s race. Newspapers in other towns did, perhaps because their fans were not as familiar with the star pitcher, or because they more closely heeded the conventions of the day.

It would be tiresome to recount each of Wilson’s successes in 1906, but for at least a few months, he kept up his incredible pattern from the previous season. He usually batted 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> in the lineup and hit an alarming number of triples. He almost always struck out 10 or more batters per game, and rarely gave up more than a run or two. Calculating his ERA would be impossible, since local papers didn’t report errors and, when Wilson was occasionally relieved mid-inning, it isn’t clear who would be charged with the appropriate runs. But it would be fair to estimate his ERA in the 1.00 to 1.50 range.

Because the Lake Shore League played most of its games on Sundays, with an occasional Thursday or holiday game in between, Wilson was able to pitch nearly every

inning of the season. He took advantage of the long breaks between games; he and Ristow, the Sheboygan player who discovered him for the Chairmakers, would often travel throughout Wisconsin as a battery-for-hire. However, Wilson's heavy workload appeared to wear on him a bit by mid-season; more and more often he gave up his only runs in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning and later, and every once in a while the Chairmakers tried out a young pitcher in his place. But even on those rare Sundays when Wilson didn't pitch, he manned right field and kept banging out extra-base hits.

While the newspapers have effectively shielded the present-day researcher from some of the uglier epithets that were doubtless tossed Wilson's way, a few snippets have made it down to us that suggest all wasn't well in integrated Wisconsin baseball. But first, a little background information. Nearly every season, the Lake Shore League was on the brink of collapse for some reason or other. Sheboygan and Manitowoc were strong franchises and usually made plenty of money. But keeping six other teams afloat was more of a challenge than these two could meet. Inevitably, by June each season, a couple of clubs were floundering on the edge of bankruptcy, threatening the existing League schedule and the integrity of the results. The most popular solution bandied about 1906 was to join the strongest teams in the Lake Shore League with the best clubs of the Fox Valley League. LSL clubs often played exhibitions against FVL teams, so they were familiar with each other, and it appeared that they would be fairly competitive. Despite talk all year of the impending merger of the two leagues, it never happened. Why? On July 13<sup>th</sup>, the Sheboygan *Telegram* reported that "Mgr. Coppes of the Kaukauna club was very much against the formation of a six-club league but it was understood among the other representative that the Kaukauna manager had a case of cold

when he thought of Wilson, pitcher for the Sheboygan club, and his visions of a pennant winner went sailing.” Was Coppes really afraid of finishing second, or did he fear the backlash if a black player frequented his grounds? Earlier in the season, the *Telegram* reported on early rumors of an LSL-FVL merger, but noted that “the local [Sheboygan] fans here do not like the objection made to Wilson at other cities [Kaukauna, Fon du Lac, and Menasha].”

The other suggestion of racial difficulties stems from Wilson’s eventual departure from Sheboygan. The fans loved him, they turned out in droves to see him, and it seemed that everyone—Wilson included—was making plenty of money in the process. But in 1906, employing a black man was a very different thing from working for or working with one. And that’s just what George Wilson seemed to have in mind. The *Telegram* on October 26<sup>th</sup> reported that Wilson held the lease on the grounds where Lake View Park was located. But at the same time, baseball promoter John Powers was engaged in his yearly quest to expand his Wisconsin State League, a low minor league. Sheboygan and Manitowoc, because of their proven support of the sport, were frequent targets. And in 1906 and 1907, it looked as if Sheboygan might finally host a WSL team. So another group of investors built a new ballpark on the other side of town. It appeared that Wilson would continue to play with the Chairmakers, who would play at the old grounds, while the new WSL team, managed by the Chairmakers’s former manager, William Leibl, would play at the new park.

Unsurprisingly, the WSL team never materialized. But the new grounds—of which manager Leibl held a stake—did. The result seems inevitable:

**"But Few Can Touch Him: George Wilson and Integrated Wisconsin Baseball: 1905-1908."  
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Cartoon from Manitowoc Daily Herald, June 8, 1908.  
 Team postcard courtesy Rob Morgan (private collection).