

6-1-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Hubener, Hal (1997) "The Cleveland Indians and Spring Training in Lakeland, Florida, 1923-1927," *Tampa Bay History*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

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## THE CLEVELAND INDIANS AND SPRING TRAINING IN LAKELAND, FLORIDA, 1923-1927

By Hal Hubener

On July 10, 1922, the *Lakeland Evening Telegram* reported that the Cleveland Indians had chosen Lakeland as their spring training site for 1923. The selection was not official, however, until August 8, when T.J. Appleyard, manager of the Lakeland Chamber of Commerce, received a telegram from the Indians' business manager, Walter McNichols, confirming the decision. Appleyard, along with Clare Henley, president of the Lakeland Chamber of Commerce, and J.E. Melton, secretary of the Lakeland Baseball Association, were the driving force behind the city's attempt to acquire the major league team.<sup>1</sup>

McNichols of the Indians had gone to Florida in July, after the team had decided not to return to Texas, where it had trained the two previous seasons. He had also considered both Miami and St. Petersburg as training sites. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* noted that in deciding upon Lakeland, Indians' management had selected a "town near several National League clubs' quarters." Moreover, the city had a population of 12,000 and several thousand winter visitors "from whom the tribe [could] draw patrons," along with a "pretty fair baseball park," and a "first-class fireproof hotel."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Lakeland Chamber of Commerce had prepared charts about weather, climate and rainfall, which indicated that the area was ideal for spring baseball.<sup>3</sup>

The excitement about major league baseball in Florida was not confined to Lakeland and the Indians. Seven teams were training in Florida, according to Al Lang, president of the Florida State League. He even suggested that in 1924 the American and National leagues should schedule a series of exhibition games and award a trophy to the best team.<sup>4</sup>

Acquiring the Indians proved to be an economic boon to Lakeland. The Hotel Thelma, which not only accommodated the players but also served as the headquarters of the organization, took in approximately \$11,000 during the six-week training season in 1923. It was originally estimated that the team would spend some \$30,000 while in town. The only cost to the city was \$500 for showers "and other conveniences" at the ballpark.<sup>5</sup>

Baseball fans and visitors observed that Lakeland's ball park, Adair Field, was the best in Florida. In fact, it was acknowledged as one of the best in the South, and the credit for its condition went to Indians' groundskeeper Frank Van Dellen, who had spent the winter of 1922-23 working on the grounds.<sup>6</sup> One sports writer reported that "no infielder should make an error because the grounders should never take a bad hop."<sup>7</sup>

Lakeland was ready for the Indians. On February 28, 1923, seventy-five members of the Elks Club awaited the team at the railroad station. The Elks were there to welcome the players and carry their baggage to the Thelma Hotel. Unfortunately, the team failed to make connections at Jacksonville, and the train that did arrive carried only two players. They were George Dewey Metivier and Frank K. Cross.<sup>8</sup> According to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, both players were bewildered to see seventy-five Elks all grabbing for their baggage as they stepped off the train.



**Lakeland's Main Street during the 1920s.**

Photograph courtesy of Lakeland Public Library Special Collections.

That same day a few more players arrived and worked out at Adair Field, including pitcher Guy Morton from Alabama and catcher Al Spaulding. Joe Shaute, a “giant left hander” from Juanita College, was also seen in town but apparently had checked in at the wrong hotel.<sup>9</sup>

By March 1 several members of the team, including player/manager Tris “Spoke” Speaker, were working out at Adair Field. Comparing Lakeland favorably to Dallas, where the Indians had trained the previous year, one sports writer noted, “It’s funny how [Speaker] can wear a diamond ring around here in Lakeland – while over in Dallas last year he had to place his stone in the bank. Speaks pretty well of the law-abiding citizens of this community.”<sup>10</sup> The players rapidly discovered the amenities of local life. When workouts were over, they took up tackle and went looking for fishing holes or headed for the golf course. Still others were the guests of sporting organizations. Tris Speaker, for example, accepted an invitation to take part in the weekly shoot of the Lakeland Trapshooters Club.<sup>11</sup>

During the first week of training, speculation already focused on the starting lineup. Speaker reported on March 4 that he had not yet decided the batting order for the regular season, but sports writers believed that Charley Jamieson would lead off, followed by Bill “Wamby” Wambsganss and then Speaker. Wamby’s claim to fame was an unassisted triple play in the 1920 World Series between the Indians and the Dodgers. Concerning relief pitching, Speaker was hoping that Sherrod Smith, purchased from Brooklyn in the off season, would be the team’s ace. According to one scribe, Smith had the best pick-off move in the majors. The Indians were in good shape at the catcher position. Steve O’Neill, who batted .311 with the Indians, and Glenn



**Lakeland's Hotel Thelma during the 1920s.**

Photograph courtesy of Lakeland Public Library Special Collections.

Myatt, who led the American Association the previous season with an average of .370, were expected to share playing time at the position. They were backed up by Luke Sewell.<sup>12</sup>

With the exception of Jim Edwards and Phil Bedgood, the rest of the team arrived March 7. Attention that day turned to first base where Louis Guisto of California was competing against Frank Brower of Virginia.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the exhibition season, however, the newspapers were referring to Brower as a utility outfielder, who was a “dangerous batter, fair gardener and pretty fast on the paths.”<sup>14</sup> At third base, the club had Walter Lutzke, who was replacing veteran Larry Gardner, considered at that time to be one of the greatest third basemen in the history of the game. Sports writers were interested not only in Lutzke’s ability, but also his hands – reportedly the largest in baseball.

The lineup was rounding into shape by March 10. Jamieson was in left field and Speaker in center. Competing for right field were Homer Summa and Brower. The other positions were: first base, Guisto; catcher, O’Neill and Myatt; Lutzke, third base; Sewell, shortstop; and Wamby, second base. Larry Gardner and Riggs Stephenson were extra infielders. Joe Connolly was an outfield sub. Ken Hogan had a good shot at making the team as a pinch runner. Starting pitchers included Coveleskie, the knuckleballer George Uhle, Morton, and Smith.<sup>15</sup> “A more willing and ambitious bunch of players never wore Cleveland uniforms,” one writer reported, “and already they are beginning to discuss among themselves their chances of finishing better than fourth.”<sup>16</sup>

Lakeland residents took every opportunity to mix with the star athletes. On Sunday, March 11, several dozen “prominent citizens” attended a fish-and-chicken fry for players, hosted by the



**Tris Speaker and his wife playing golf in Lakeland during Spring training.**

Photograph courtesy of Lakeland Public Library Special Collections.

manager of the Hotel Thelma. A few players had other plans, however. Some went picking oranges, and Tris Speaker played golf in Sebring. Golf was the favorite pastime of several players, including Coveleskie, Uhle and Myatt.<sup>17</sup>

The next day Speaker announced a starting lineup and batting order for the first game. It was also announced that baseball's commissioner, Kennesaw Mountain Landis, would be in Lakeland as a guest of honor at an Elks Club banquet. Before they opened the exhibition season against the Cincinnati Reds, the Indians had an intrasquad game on March 14. Speaker captained the second-team, called the "Yannigans," and played center field. The five-inning game ended in a 2-2 tie, and one writer noted that some World Series games did not present as many thrilling plays. Speaker, the "gray eagle of the Texas plains," caught his opponents flat footed in the first inning with a bunt single and made two fine catches in the outfield.<sup>18</sup>

On March 16, 1923, the Indians opened the exhibition season in Orlando and defeated the Cincinnati Reds by a 10-2 score. It was a close game until the ninth inning when the tribe scored six runs.<sup>19</sup> On March 19 Adair Field was the site of the Indians' first home game of the exhibition season. Unfortunately, the Indians were victims of poor base running and lost 2-1. The attendance at this game was nearly 2,000 – almost twice that for the first game in Orlando. Businesses and schools closed at 2:30, as the town made the day a half-holiday. Cincinnati hurler

Rube Benton, whose pitching career had coincidentally begun in Lakeland fourteen years earlier as a semi-pro player, made the following observation about his first stint in the area: "Wish I had \$1,000 to invest down here then.... I would be worth a lot of money today."<sup>20</sup>

Almost daily games followed. On March 20 the Indians defeated St. Louis 6-5 in Bradenton. Cardinal second baseman and future Hall of Famer Rogers Hornsby played in the game, but in four at bats, Hornsby failed to hit the ball out of the infield. On the twenty-second, Guisto failed to touch first base after hitting a home run, and the Reds won 4-3 in Orlando. The Brooklyn Dodgers went to Lakeland on the twenty-third and lost 6-5. The next day, the Indians defeated the Reds 7 to 4. At that time Speaker was "about set" on his players.<sup>21</sup>

On the twenty-sixth, Judge Kennesaw Landis, "the most talked of jurist in America," was the distinguished guest at the game between the Indians and the Philadelphia Phillies. He also spoke at an American Legion luncheon that evening. The Indians won the game 7 to 2, as Jamieson hit a triple and a double and Lutzke starred at bat and in the field.<sup>22</sup>

In the next game, on March 27, the Dodgers went down to defeat 9 to 6, as Guisto and Summa homered. Coveleskie kept the Dodgers off balance with his darting spitball. The game was played in Clearwater, and future Hall of Fame pitchers Dazzy Vance and Burleigh Grimes pitched for Brooklyn.<sup>23</sup>

The following day, St. Louis played in Lakeland. Though the home team led after seven innings, the Cardinals prevailed 5-4. Rogers Hornsby, the highest paid player in baseball, had one hit in four at bats and hit into a double play. George Uhle became the first pitcher in the major leagues to go nine innings that spring. Max Rosenblum, whom the newspaper described as the "world's greatest amateur athletic promoter," arrived from Cleveland and attended the game.<sup>24</sup>

Towards the end of the exhibition season it became clear that Speaker's gamble to bring in new players was reaping benefits. Sensing that his veterans were "crashing" after the 1922 season, Speaker had released seven players who had been stars. According to sports writer Hugh Fullerton, the new team had all the earmarks of a first division club. In discussing Spoke's "get tough" policy, Fullerton said the ball club of 1923 "realizes there is a Volstead Act, and cigarette smoking on the bench has been cut out."<sup>25</sup>

With the pre-season almost over, the Indians staged a fund-raiser for local teams. On April 4 they turned out for a game against the Lakeland Highlanders of the Florida State League. The contest benefited the athletic associations of Florida Southern College and Lakeland High School. The Highlanders made a "creditable showing" but lost 15-2.<sup>26</sup>

The Indians left Lakeland the next day, full of optimism and with plans to return. According to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the whole city turned out to say farewell. Everyone from Indians' President E.S. Barnard down to the trainer Lefty Weismann, as well as the press, was optimistic about the Indians' season. A finish near the top was predicted by many.<sup>27</sup> The ball club intimated it would return to Lakeland the next season, but the decision was contingent upon the city making improvements to the ball park. The Indians had been impressed with community support



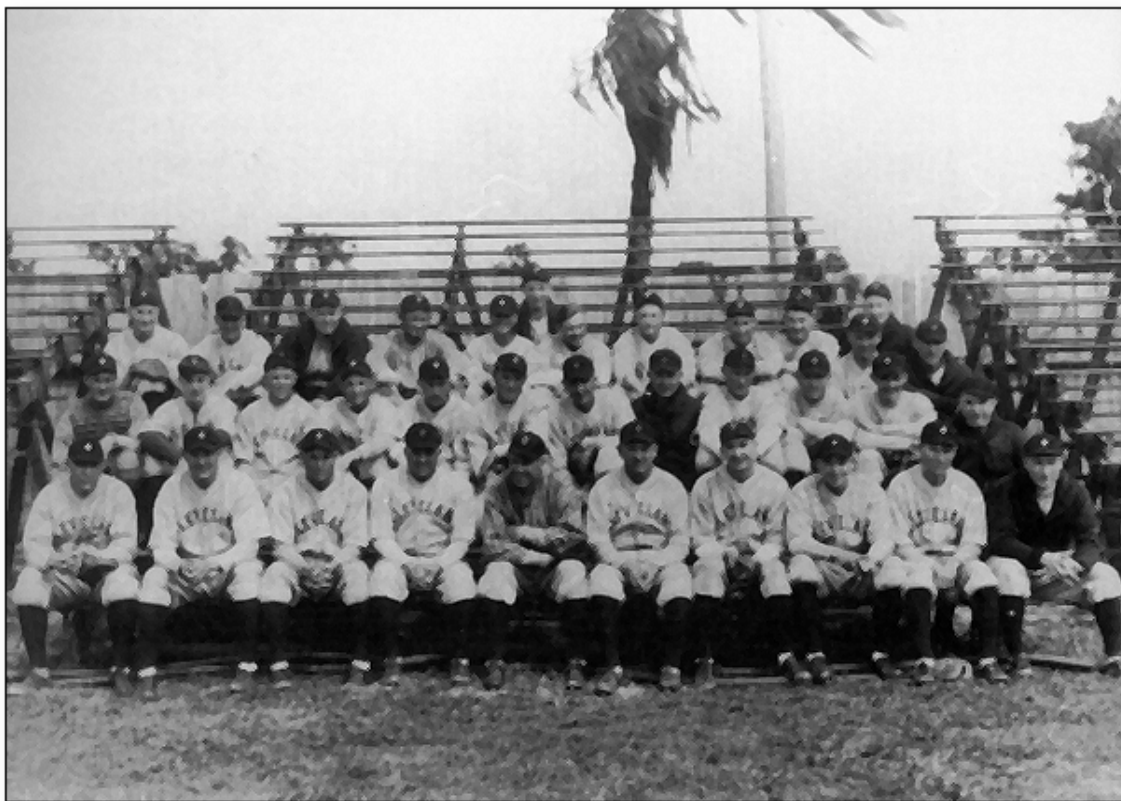
**Players Frank Gross (left) and Louis Guisto at the Thelma Hotel in 1923.**

Photograph courtesy of Cleveland State University Archives.

for the team. The exhibition games had been well attended, in part because Henley's Drug Store had sold both tickets and parking spaces, and the city had made the team feel welcome by inviting the players to community events.<sup>28</sup>

The optimism felt at the end of the exhibition season continued into the regular season as the Indians won the first six games of the 1923 campaign. Indeed, predictions of a good year proved to be accurate as the team finished in third place with an 82-71 record. What kept the team from an even better record was inconsistent pitching. As Speaker said the following spring, "No team ever won a pennant with only one first-class pitcher and that is all we had last year [with George Uhle getting 26 wins]."<sup>29</sup> In the off season, Indians management made a major trade. Steve O'Neill, Joe Connolly, Bill Wambsganss and Dan Boone went to the Boston Red Sox in exchange for first baseman George Burns, catcher Allie Walters, and utility infielder Wilson (Chick) Fewster. Who "got the better of the deal" was one of the hot pre-season questions.<sup>30</sup>

The tribe arrived in Lakeland for the second year of spring training March 10, 1924. "For the first time in the history of Cleveland, its major league ball club tomorrow will be able to start its spring training with every member of the team in camp," the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported. "Every man is signed; every man is here; every man is eager to get to work tomorrow." The



**A team photo of the Cleveland Indians in 1923.**

Photograph courtesy of Cleveland State University Archives.

article also noted that several of the players had brought their wives with them, and two men, Summa and Smith, had also brought their children.<sup>31</sup>

The March weather hardly fulfilled the players' expectations of "sunny Florida." On the train trip to Lakeland, the team was met at the state line by "the heaviest rainfall since Florida had boasted of a weather bureau." Two days later, the temperature in Lakeland stood at a mere four degrees above freezing, and practice was confined to loosening up and fielding bunts. The cold weather did not stop Speaker from playing golf later in the day, nor did it impede players from fishing after practice. Later that evening Speaker went to the Elks' Club with some materials and tools and constructed a minnow box for a fishing trip which he had arranged for the following Saturday. On March 13 the team had a fish dinner at the Elks Club with some of the fish provided by Coveleskie.<sup>32</sup>

March 17 was opening day of the pre-season, and Spoke's boys crushed the Cincinnati Reds 16-1 at Adair Field. The next day a game with Indianapolis was scheduled at Plant City, but it was rained out. The tribe defeated the Reds again on March 19, trimming the Ohio club 8-7 in Orlando. Cincinnati led 65 in the eighth inning when Frank "Turkey" Brower hit the longest home run in Tinker Field history to provide the winning margin. On March 20 the team drove to St. Petersburg only to see their game against the Boston Braves rained out.<sup>33</sup>



On the twenty-second, the team fell to the Brooklyn Dodgers by a score of 12-7 in a game played in Clearwater. Sports writers blamed the team's poor performance on a lack of practice. Two days later, Speaker scheduled an intrasquad game in which the second-team Yannigan pitchers were given the opportunity to "show their stuff" and they won 4-2. That evening the team went to the Elks Club and saw a film made the previous year by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer Motion Picture Magazine*.<sup>34</sup>

On March 25 the Philadelphia Phillies went down to defeat 6-4. Coveleskie displayed his "old form," and Speaker hit an inside-the-park home run. The game also featured a home run by Phillie Cliff Lee. One staff writer stated that it was the longest Adair Field home run he had ever seen by a right hander hitting to right field.<sup>35</sup>

At that time the *Plain Dealer* predicted that before the week was over, E.S. Barnard would sign to bring the team back to Lakeland for two or three years. The signing was in expectation that a bond issue would pass in June. The citizens of Lakeland did take that step which authorized the sum of \$87,000 "for the purpose of purchasing and improvement of park to be known as 'The Athletic Field.'" The large sum of money was required to cover the cost of a concrete grandstand and re-orienting the field so that the sun would no longer be in the faces of the spectators. According to the *Plain Dealer*, Bernard assured Lakeland's city manager and T.J. Appleyard of the Chamber of Commerce that the team "would make their permanent camp here if the desired improvements were made."<sup>36</sup>

On March 28 the Indians played their last pre-season game in Lakeland. George Uhle, called "the premier hurler of the American League" by one staff writer, pitched seven innings and gave up only one run in a 4-3 victory over the Columbus team of the American Association. There remained only a workout on the twenty-ninth and an intrasquad game and a team golf match on the thirty-first. In the golf game Glen Myatt turned a score of 84 to take honors. Twenty-one players participated.<sup>37</sup>

The team left town the following day. A large crowd of Lakelanders turned out at the railroad station to bid them goodbye. McNichols, the team's business manager, issued a glowing review of the Indians' second year in Lakeland:

I don't think we made any mistake in agreeing to come back. This is a town that is showing an unusually healthy growth, not a tourist boom town, but one which is not likely to experience a set-back. We are going to be mighty glad some day we picked it for a training camp.<sup>38</sup>

Upon leaving Lakeland, Speaker summed up the pre-season with praise for the players. He remarked that he had never seen a team hit so hard in the spring. And according to a *Plain Dealer* staff writer, the team was one of the strongest that had represented Cleveland in recent years. In addition, the World Champion Yankees said that they had to defeat the Indians in order to win the pennant again. Unfortunately, the Indians' performance did not meet expectations. The team finished the 1924 season in sixth place with a 67-86 won-lost record.<sup>39</sup>



**Grange Alvas, Tris Speaker and Eddie Loos.**

Photograph courtesy of Lakeland Public Library Special Collections.

Prior to the start of the 1925 season the consensus was that for Cleveland to become a contender again, both the pitching and fielding had to show major improvement. Run production was not one of the concerns, inasmuch as the team had finished the 1924 season second in the league in hitting. In addition to looking at a number of rookie pitchers, including Lakeland pitcher Watt Luther, the Indians also made some trades. One deal brought submariner Byron Speece to the team from Washington.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, former Cleveland players were making Lakeland their permanent home. Outfielder Tom Gully, who had been sold in the off-season to Little Rock, had relocated to Lakeland, where he and Lakeland shortstop Whitey Kowalski were selling real estate for the H.A. Stahl Company. Indian pitcher Phil Bedgood, on the voluntary retired list, had also moved to Lakeland and was an automobile salesman.<sup>41</sup>

Chick Fewster was the first player to arrive in Lakeland for the 1925 spring training season. Accompanied by his wife, he arrived the afternoon of February 21 and told the press that he was “down here a week ahead to get in some golf and then start real hard work with the pitchers March 1.”<sup>42</sup>

Although weak pitching and fielding were the reasons generally accepted for the team's poor finish the previous season, E.S. Barnard indicated that there were other problems, none of which had to do with athletic performance. The *Plain Dealer* reported on March 4 that the team president believed the club performed poorly because some players failed to observe training rules. In a letter mailed to each player, Barnard enclosed a circular detailing two rules adopted by the club's stockholders. One rule prohibited the consumption of alcoholic beverages from the beginning of the training season until the conclusion of the regular season. The other established a midnight curfew. Apparently Barnard was not alone in his assessment of the team's failure. Speaker himself alluded to "disturbing elements" on the 1924 club.<sup>43</sup>

Preparation for exhibition games followed a familiar routine in 1925. March 2nd was picture day as the men donned their uniforms and posed for the cameras. Later, the manager and players headed for the golf course. Light workouts were held on March 4 and 5. No intrasquad games were planned until after the exhibition season began on the thirteenth.<sup>44</sup> On March 8 the bulk of the veterans arrived, including three who had recovered from injuries. Jim Edwards and Riggs Stephenson had overcome knee problems, and George Uhle had rehabilitated his throwing arm. They were met at the railroad station by a number of townspeople. One player whose appearance "created something of a sensation" was Garland Buckeye. According to the *Plain Dealer*, he made Babe Ruth "look like a midget." Thirty-seven men were competing for positions. The only veterans missing were Harvey Hendrick, purchased from the Yankees, and Homer Summa, who was due the following day. On the twelfth, the Yannigans defeated the regulars 4-2 in a three-inning intrasquad game.<sup>45</sup>

The first spring training game was on Friday the thirteenth, and the team lost 9-8 to Indianapolis, a minor league team, in a game played in Plant City. The score was tied after nine innings and the tribe lost in the tenth. Poor throwing contributed to the horror show. Pitching honors went to Watson Clark, a Mississippi College and Cleveland sandlot player who gave Indianapolis only one run in three innings.<sup>46</sup>

Indianapolis traveled to Lakeland four days later and again won, but that game also featured the dedication of the new stadium. Judge Landis attended, as did several other baseball officials, including the president of the National Association. J. Hardin Peterson, Lakeland city attorney and later a Congressman, led the dedication ceremony, along with Walter McNichols of the Indians. The festivities included the gift of a baby alligator to each player by Chamber of Commerce president D. Hodson Lewis. The *Lakeland Evening Ledger* bragged that the new field was the state's best ball park. Confirmation came from Billy Evans, named the "world's greatest umpire," who was visiting Lakeland and called the park "the prettiest baseball plant I have seen in the whole south."<sup>47</sup> That evening the Junior Chamber of Commerce held a banquet at the Thelma Hotel for the players, sports writers, club officials, Judge Landis and others. One hundred twenty-five people attended. As one of the speakers at the dinner, Landis pointed out that the presence of so many baseball teams in Florida in March meant all the newspapers in the country were screaming "Florida" every day to 100,000,000 people for the entire month. "Every time he reads something about Lakeland," Landis said, "the Northerner thinks it is the best place in the world at this season of the year."<sup>48</sup>

After playing several minor league teams, the Indians finally took on a major league club, the Cincinnati Reds, and defeated them 6-3 on March 20. Several days later the *Plain Dealer* noted that with the trade of Coveleskie the team did not have a spit ball pitcher for the first time since 1915.<sup>49</sup> Playing the Reds in Orlando on March 26, the tribe won 2-0. Shaute and Smith combined for the shutout. According to the *Plain Dealer*, the team, which usually traveled to away games in automobiles, made the trip to Orlando in one of H.A. Stahl's huge Cleveland Heights buses, "which made the 64 miles in about two hours." Two days later, the Indians lost to the Boston Braves in St. Petersburg. It was the first time in the pre-season that George Uhle pitched. The Indians stranded sixteen runners, giving some cause for concern about the effectiveness of the pre-season hitting.<sup>50</sup>

The Indians held their last practice on March 31 and that night headed for New Orleans, where they remained until two weeks prior to opening day. Team president Barnard was optimistic about the chances for a good year. But that optimism was not shared by everyone. American League statistician Irwin M. Howe said that several things had to fall into place for the tribe to be a contender. The catchers had to improve, Uhle had to regain his 1923 form, Lutzke had to hit better and the new pitchers had to produce. The pessimists were correct. With a record of 70 wins and 84 losses, the team again finished the regular season in sixth place.<sup>51</sup>

With Lakelanders looking forward to spring training in 1926, the *Ledger* reported on February 26 that "the first detachment" of players was scheduled to depart Cleveland that day. Boarding the train were George Uhle, Pat McNulty, Homer Summa and Rube Lutzke. Luke Sewell was already in Lakeland, inasmuch as he had become a winter resident.<sup>52</sup> Twenty-two players stepped off the train on the last day of February, and they took the field the next day.<sup>53</sup>

The *Ledger* carried an interesting story about two young New York sandlot players who wanted Manager Speaker to give them a shot at making the team. The two young men claimed to have walked from New York to Lakeland. Speaker promised to help them catch on with the Lakeland team in the Florida State League.<sup>54</sup>

At that time local baseball fans were engaged in the task of raising money to ensure that the city would be represented in the Florida State League for the 1926 season. Clare Henley, owner of Henley's Drug Store, was the impetus behind the fund-raising effort for the Lakeland Highlanders.<sup>55</sup>

Five home games were scheduled for Cleveland's 1926 exhibition season in Lakeland. In the opener on March 10, Cincinnati went down to defeat, 12-3. Commissioner Landis threw out the first pitch. For that game, Walter McNichols had reserved a section of the stands for the Ohio Society of Lakeland, which included both Cleveland and Cincinnati residents who rooted for their respective teams. The game also featured Lakeland's municipal band, under the direction of John Francis Fingerhut. In the return match, played in Orlando two days later, the Reds prevailed by a 2-1 score.<sup>56</sup>

On March 18, John McGraw brought his three-time National League pennant winners to Adair Field. The game was the feature attraction of spring training and the first appearance of the New York Giants in Lakeland. The Indians won 9-3, and Speaker had three of the team's twelve hits.

The game also featured the appearance of future Hall-of-Famer Mel Ott, just seventeen years old at the time. “No player has a more brilliant future than this kid,” McGraw correctly predicted.<sup>57</sup> March 24 featured the final home game of the pre-season. The crowd went home disappointed, however, as the Boston Braves won 2-1. Cleveland managed only four hits.<sup>58</sup>

After the final game, several Lakeland citizens hosted a farewell banquet at the Thelma Hotel. The entertainment featured roasts of Commissioner Landis and Tris Speaker with someone imitating Speaker by carrying golf clubs under one arm and a fishing rod under the other. On a more serious note, toastmaster and sportswriter Henry P. Edwards described Speaker as “one of the greatest outfielders of all times.” Later that evening the team departed Lakeland by train. After exhibition games in Waycross, Atlanta and New Orleans, the ball club returned to Cleveland to begin the regular season.<sup>59</sup>

With a record of 88 wins and 66 losses, the Indians finished the 1926 season second to the Yankees. But in the off-season, charges were made against Tris Speaker and Ty Cobb, claiming that they had bet on a “thrown” game between their two teams in September 1919. Both men resigned as managers of their respective clubs, but they were ultimately exonerated by Commissioner Landis. Speaker then signed with the Washington Senators for the 1927 season.<sup>60</sup>

Jack McCallister was named the Indians’ new manager. He had been with the club for several years, serving as coach, scout and assistant manager. In addition to the change in manager, the team had new accommodations in Lakeland. The Terrace Hotel was selected for the 1927 exhibition season. It was also announced in early February that the Indians would play fewer exhibition games than any other major league club, in keeping with management’s belief that routine practices were more beneficial to the team than actual games.<sup>61</sup>

Most of the team arrived in Lakeland on March 1, 1927. They were greeted at the railroad station by “Fingerhut’s [town] band, a crowd of fans and damp drizzle.” The players had their first workout the next day. The practice attracted few fans due to the “extreme cold, wind and dampness.” The following day featured the photographers and moving picture crews. George Burns, who had hit a record sixty-four doubles the previous season and won the American League Most Valuable Player Award, demonstrated the art of sliding for the cameramen.<sup>62</sup> March 6 featured an intrasquad game, with the Yannigans defeating the regulars 4 to 1. On the eighth, the team lost to Cincinnati in Orlando 5-1, but defeated their Ohio rivals 6-5 the next day at Adair Field.<sup>63</sup>

In their free time, the players were involved in a number of activities. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* showed Garland Buckeye fishing in Lake Morton, Homer Summa lawn bowling, Martin “Chick” Autry tossing horse shoes and Joe Shaute singing along with Fingerhut’s band in the town bandstand. Photographs also captured several players playing pinochle in their hotel room and two others listening to a phonograph.<sup>64</sup> Aside from the exhibition games, golf was the principal local attraction for people in town for spring training. On March 27 a number of ball players, officials and journalists tried out the links as guests of H.A. Stahl. Baseball moguls included the president of the Washington Senators and Indians’ officials Barnard and McNichols. Cleveland sports writers teed up with George Dailey of the *New York World* and Richard Vidmar of the *New York Times*, and a few ball players also participated.<sup>65</sup>

The tribe departed March 28 amidst speculation that they might not return. Barnard said that although attendance was down in 1927, finances were not the only consideration, and management was “satisfied with Lakeland as our spring training headquarters.” However, he added somewhat cryptically that if the team did not return, “It [would] not be our fault.”<sup>66</sup> Although the city commissioners were quoted as saying they believed the Indians would return, at least one commissioner mentioned that Lakeland “must retrench in many ways.” The *Lakeland Evening Ledger* acknowledged that there were “certain expenses incidental to the team” that the city had paid through the Chamber of Commerce. Apparently D. Hodson Lewis, Chamber president, did not want to continue paying those expenses. When the Indians left Lakeland at the end of the 1927 training season, there was no “formal proposal” from the city.<sup>67</sup>

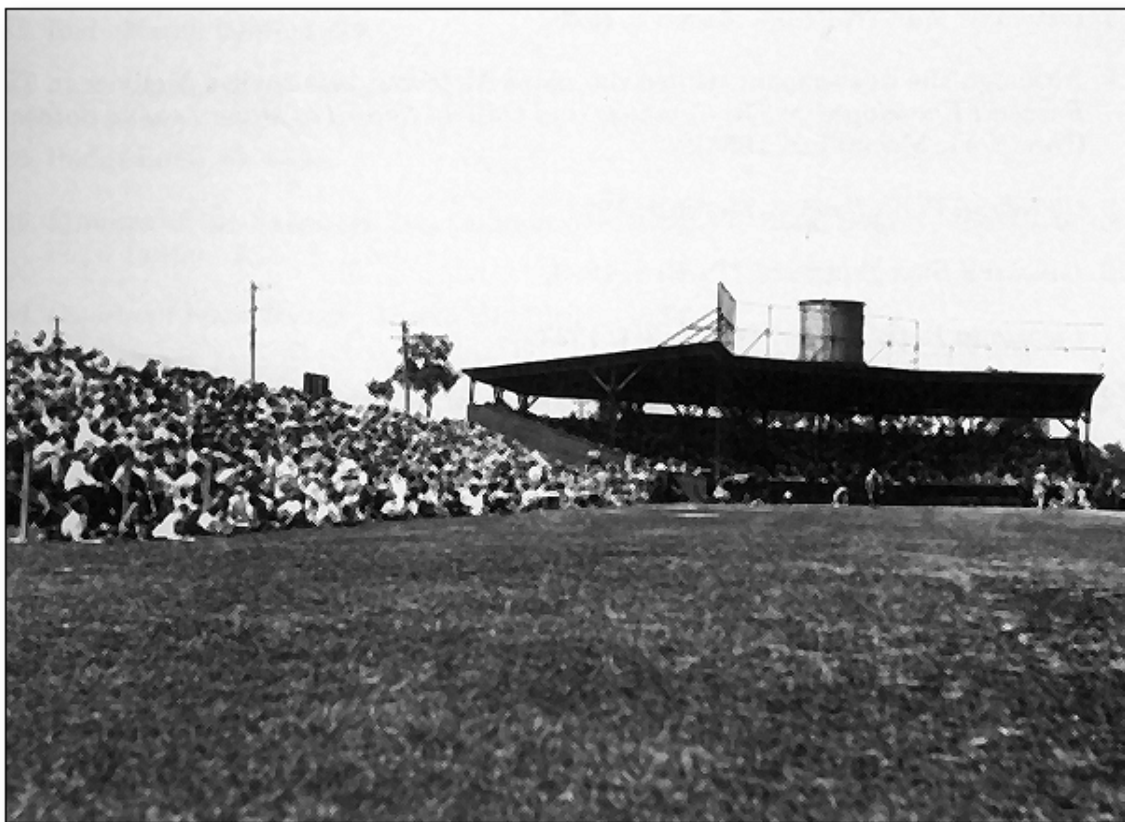
As it turned out, the 1927 season was the last for the Indians in Lakeland. There were several reasons why the team did not return. One had to do with the sale of the ball club. Citizens of Cleveland opened their *Plain Dealer* on November 16, 1927, and read of the purchase of the club by “Fifth City businessmen.” Two weeks later the Lakeland Chamber of Commerce received a telegram from Walter McNichols announcing that the new owners had decided to select a new spring training site.<sup>68</sup> If change was desired, New Orleans was a natural choice. Each spring, after leaving Lakeland, the team had gone to New Orleans for a few more exhibition games. Moreover, the team had trained in New Orleans in 1920, the last year the Indians won the American League pennant. That fact did not escape the attention of the new general manager, who in announcing the team’s return to New Orleans for 1928 said that “the Crescent City may be lucky for the tribe.”<sup>69</sup> A second reason for the team’s departure was financial. The state of Florida had seen its early 1920’s boom turn to bust by 1927. Indications of Lakeland’s financial problems showed in the sparse attendance at Adair Field for exhibition games in 1927. “Lakeland is not supporting the team in the exhibition games,” said McNichols flatly in March 1927. For the Baltimore game on March 17, the paid attendance at Adair Field was only 110. “Avon Park turned out 1,100 the other day,” explained McNichols, “and in other places not half the size of Lakeland the crowds are three or four times the size of ours.” Even the local fans had noticed the poor attendance, and “the more far-seeing [were] perturbed about it,” according to a Lakeland newspaper.<sup>70</sup>

Very little was required of a central Florida town to attract a team. Major league clubs trained in Leesburg, Orlando, Tampa, St. Petersburg and Plant City, and exhibition games had been played in other Polk County cities, including Winter Haven, Lake Alfred and Auburndale, all within “spittin’ distance” of each other. The fact is that the region itself was the major draw. To acquire a team, a town needed only a good ball park, sufficient hotel accommodations and a steady stream of paying fans. Unfortunately for Lakeland, it could not put the fans in the stands that final season.

Questionable financial practices on the part of the city manager and other city employees of Lakeland may also have influenced Indians’ management in its decision. During the spring of 1927, at the request of the Lakeland City Commission, the City Advisory Board investigated charges that were brought against the city manager, Anton Schneider. The board concluded that the charges were not sustained, but it acknowledged “considerable testimony ... alleging certain irregularities” and recommended “a thorough and further investigation.” On April 6, Schneider submitted his resignation.<sup>71</sup>

The local baseball scene probably gave the Indians concern as well. The Lakeland Highlanders, the Florida State League's oldest team in point of continuous membership, ceased to exist on March 21, 1927. Since neither the city nor the Chamber of Commerce wanted to invest money in the organization, Clare Henley offered the club for free to anyone who was willing to keep it in Lakeland. No one accepted the offer. Both Bradenton and Ft. Myers also forfeited their clubs at that time, and West Palm Beach, which had applied for admission, withdrew its application after lack of financial support. These developments were undoubtedly a result of difficult economic times in the Sunshine State.<sup>72</sup>

Given that the Indians and their fans spent tens of thousands of dollars in Lakeland each exhibition season, city fathers and businessmen undoubtedly realized their mistake in letting the ball club leave. It did not take them long to get back into the spring training business. On December 21, 1927, D. Hodson Lewis advised the City Commission that the Chamber of Commerce had made arrangements for the International League's Reading, Pennsylvania, team to train in Lakeland the next year. There were also efforts to land the Pittsburgh Pirates. City Commission meeting minutes for 1929 record the fact that both the city manager and the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce wrote to the Pittsburgh Pirates in hopes of acquiring that team for the 1930 exhibition season. Lakeland's efforts were finally rewarded with the arrival of the Detroit Tigers in 1934. Except for a couple of seasons during World War II, the Tigers have maintained their spring training relationship with Lakeland – the longest affiliation in the major leagues.<sup>73</sup> In 1966 the city built anew ball park – Joker Marchant Stadium – for the Tigers. Adair Field, renamed Henley Field in 1942, is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and its notable history includes the five pre-seasons that it hosted the Cleveland Indians for spring training.



**Adair Field (c.1938) showing an exhibition game by the Detroit Tigers.**

Photograph courtesy of Lakeland Public Library Special Collections.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lakeland Evening Telegram*, July 10, August 9, 1922. It should be noted that the Indians were not the first professional baseball team to hold spring training in Lakeland. That distinction went to the Louisville Colonels of the American Association, who trained there in March 1915.

<sup>2</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 31, August 9 (quote), 1922.

<sup>3</sup> *Lakeland Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1922.

<sup>4</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 8, 1923.

<sup>5</sup> *Lakeland Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*; March 8, 1923; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 10, 1923.

<sup>7</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 8, 1923.

<sup>8</sup> Although the newspapers spelled the name Metevier, it is spelled Metivier in *The Baseball Encyclopedia: The Complete and Official Record of Major League Baseball* (New York: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 1, 1923.

<sup>10</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 8, 1923.

<sup>11</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 3-4, 1923.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, March 3, 5, 1923; *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 1, 7, 1923.

<sup>13</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 8, 1923.

<sup>14</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 1, 1923.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, March 11, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, March 9, 1923.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, March 12, 1923; *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 4, 1923.

<sup>18</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 13-14, 1923.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, March 16, 1923.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, March 20, 1923.

<sup>21</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 22, 1923; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 23, 25, April 14, 1923.

<sup>22</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 27, 1923.

<sup>23</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 28, 1923.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, March 29, 1923; *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 28-29, 1923.

<sup>25</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 30, 1923.

<sup>26</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, April 5, 1923.



<sup>27</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 1-2, 6, 15, 1923.

<sup>28</sup> Adair Field was renamed Henley Field in 1942.

<sup>29</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 24, 1923, March 2, 1924.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, March 3, 5, 9, 16, 1924.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, March 10, 1924.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, March 12, 14, 1924.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, March 20-21, 1924.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, March 23-24, 1924.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, March 26, 1924.

<sup>36</sup> Minutes of the Lakeland City Commission, June 11, 1924, Book 4, 184; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 1, 1924.

<sup>37</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 29, April 1, 1924.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, April 2, 1924.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, March 30, April 4, 1924; *Baseball Encyclopedia*, 292.

<sup>40</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 1-3, 1925.

<sup>41</sup> H.A. Stahl was a Cleveland businessman who developed Lakeland's Cleveland Heights subdivision in the mid-1920s. *Ibid.*, February 22, 1925.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, February 22, 1925.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, March 4, 1925; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 23, 1925.

<sup>44</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 3, 6, 1925.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, March 9, 1925; *Lakeland Evening Telegram*, March 9, 1925.

<sup>46</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 13-14, 1925.

<sup>47</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 18-19, 1925.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, March 18, 1925.

<sup>49</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 21-22, 1925.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, March 27, 29, 30, 1925.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, March 30, April 1, 1925; *Baseball Encyclopedia*, 296.

<sup>52</sup> In the 1925 season Sewell struck out only four times in 608 at-bats. *Gainesville Sun*, June 28, 1995.

<sup>53</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 2, 1926; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 2, 5, 1926.

<sup>54</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 4, 1926.

<sup>55</sup> *Lakeland Sunday Ledger*, March 7, 1926.

<sup>56</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 9, 11, 13, 1926; *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 10, 1926.

<sup>57</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 13, 19 (quote), 1926.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, March 25, 1926.

<sup>59</sup> *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, March 31 (quote), 1926; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 31, 1926.

<sup>60</sup> *Baseball Encyclopedia*, 299; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, January 27, February 1, 1927.

<sup>61</sup> *Lakeland Sunday Ledger*, February 13, 1927; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, February 19, 1927; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 7, 1927.

<sup>62</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 2, 3, 1927; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 6, 1927.

<sup>63</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 10, 1927.

<sup>64</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 9, 13, 1927.

<sup>65</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 28, 1927; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 28, 1927.

<sup>66</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 28, 1927.

<sup>67</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 28, 1927.

<sup>68</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 16, 1927; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, December 2, 1927.

<sup>69</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, December 6, 1927.

<sup>70</sup> *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 19, 1927.

<sup>71</sup> Minutes of the Lakeland City Commission, March 3, 1927, Book 5, 158; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, April 6, 1927.

<sup>72</sup> *Lakeland Sunday Ledger*, March 20, 1927; *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, March 22, 1927.

<sup>73</sup> Minutes of the Lakeland City Commission, December 21, 1927, Book 5, 263, and March 20, 1929, Book 6, 23. Since 1934, the Tigers have trained continually in Lakeland, with the exception of the 1943-45 seasons when they remained in the North as a "war measure."