

People from our Past: Ezra Ballou Sutton

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As published in *Times of Wayne County*, March 5, 2016

One sure sign of the spring season is baseball spring training, which has begun in Florida. All baseball fans have heard of the Cleveland Indians, but few are aware of Cleveland, Ohio's first professional team, the Forest Citys.

The Forest Citys were organized in 1865 as the Forest City Baseball Club, an amateur organization with 150 members. They formed the second fully-salaried professional baseball team in the 1869 season, following a similar move by the Cincinnati Base Ball Club, which later took the name Cincinnati Red Stockings. Despite their dismal win-loss records during the early years of their brief existence, the Forest Citys professional team produced a history-making player who had ties to Palmyra, NY.

Ezra Ballou Sutton was born September 17, 1849, in Seneca Falls, NY. As teenager he honed his baseball skills playing for amateur clubs in the Rochester area and in 1869, he

joined the Alerts of Rochester, an amateur member of the National

Association of Base Ball Players. Shortly after Sutton joined the Alerts, they played the newly-formed professional Forest Citys twice in September 1869.

Although the Citys defeated the Alerts in their first game, they were impressed with Sutton who was Rochester's leadoff hitter and third baseman. Less than three weeks later, Cleveland recruited him for the 1870 and 1871 seasons. He was only 20 years old, but quickly gained a national reputation for his fielding skills, speed and strength, and was praised by *The Daily Cleveland Herald* as "the best third basemen in the country."

It has been reported that on May 8, 1871, he made history twice in one game against the Chicago White Stockings. He is credited with becoming the first player in professional baseball history to hit a home run and the first player to hit *two* home runs in the same game, although it is not recorded if they were in- or out-of-the-park runs. However, his efforts did not save the game for Cleveland, as they lost 14 - 12.

Sutton stayed with the Forest Citys through 1872 then signed with the Philadelphia Athletics for two years, traveling with them to England and Ireland to play both baseball and cricket. One source states that as third baseman for those teams he had the unique distinction of playing in both the first National Association game on May 4, 1871 and the first National League game on April 22, 1876.

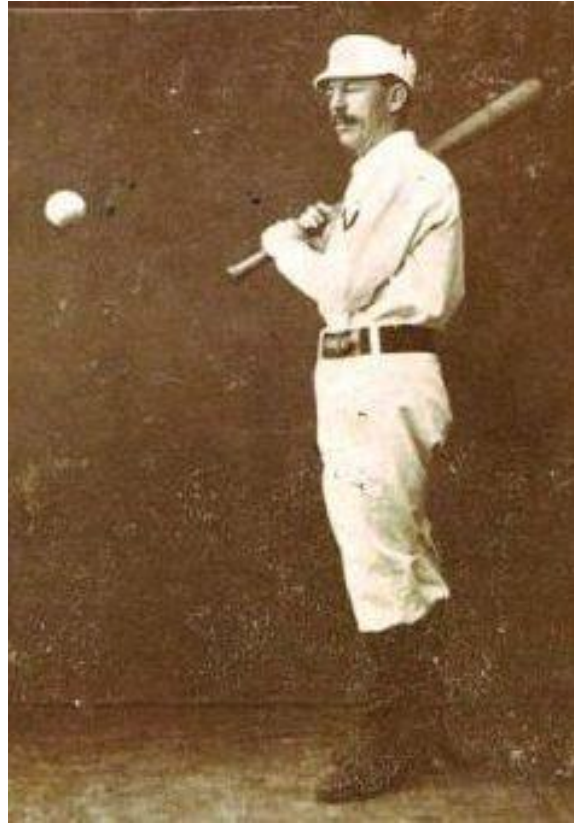


Image from Ezra Sutton's 1887 baseball card

He injured his right arm in 1876, which affected his throwing strength and speed for the rest of his career. Following the injury he became a master of the “trapped play” where fielders deliberately dropped a pop-up in an attempt to trap runners off their bases. The success of the play throughout the league eventually led the National League to enact the “infield fly rule” in 1894, designed to counteract the effectiveness of the play.

In those early days of professional baseball, teams averaged about one game a week, a total of 65 games the first year, and players’ statistics were not as impressive as modern baseball. During his first season, Sutton hit three home runs with 23 runs batted in for a .352 batting average, but the next season he hit no home runs and his batting average dropped to .280. He finished his career with a lifetime batting average of .294. Regardless of his injury, according to Rochester Baseball History records, he made history a third time and was the first player to accumulate 1000 hits in the major leagues after the National League was formed in 1876.

His fielding and hitting abilities drew attention from the Boston Red Stockings. In 1877, he joined Boston for a salary of \$1200, or about \$22,750 in today’s dollars. He stayed with them batting over .300 three years straight and was among the league leaders in hits, runs, total bases, RBI’s and on-base percentage. The following year, as the league’s oldest player, he led the National League in hits and placed third in batting average while helping his team win pennants in 1877, 78 and 83. Later in his career, he reportedly scored six runs in the August 27, 1887 game against the Pittsburg Alleghany, although none were home runs.

His age had begun to catch up with him and his final major-league game was on June 20, 1888, after which he signed with the International Association Rochester club for two years. Then he became player-manager for the Hartford team of the Atlantic Association in May 1890, but they disbanded that August and he continued to play with Rochester area semi-pro and amateur teams through the mid 1890’s.

After he was released by Boston in 1888, his family moved to Palmyra where he and his brother Robert had previously bought the Ezra Chapman estate on Vienna St., now the residence of Timothy Wizeman, in 1885 which included a grist mill and a saw mill. The grist mill business failed four years later, after which Sutton worked an ice route until their ice house burned in September 1891.

About that time he began to suffer symptoms of locomotor ataxia and by 1900, both his legs were paralyzed and he became entirely dependent on his family. Consequently, on November 26, 1905, all he could do was watch when a lamp exploded on the dinner table and his wife Susan suffered severe burns when her dress caught fire. She died in the hospital six weeks later and was buried in Palmyra Village Cemetery.

After her death, Sutton spent several months in the long-term care facility Homeopathic Hospital in Rochester where he wrote to sportswriter Tim Murnane seeking financial help. Parts of the letter were published in The Boston Globe on June 11, 1906. Former Boston manager John Morrill reportedly raised a sufficient amount to have Sutton transferred to a private hospital in Braintree, Massachusetts where he died at age 57. He was buried in Palmyra Village Cemetery.

Interestingly, Ezra Sutton was born in September and played his first life-changing baseball game twenty years later in September. His last professional baseball game was on June 20, 1888 and his earthly life ended on the same date nineteen years later on June 20, 1907.