

Ask the Archivist: Was the University a Player in the Invention of Baseball?

A question for Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian.

For a number of years I have been interested in the history of baseball, culminating with the recent commemoration of Cartwright Field in Honolulu—named for the true “Father of Modern Baseball,” Alexander J. Cartwright Jr. Can you shed any light on when baseball started at the University, and whether Cartwright played any role?—Capt. Brian Bennett ’79 (U.S. Navy, Retired), Honolulu

A comprehensive study of baseball and Rochester by Priscilla Astifan appeared in *Rochester History* (published by the Rochester Public Library) between 1990 and 2002. Rochester—either as city or university—played no special role in the early development of the game.

Possibly the first team in Rochester was the Flour City Club, formed on April 28, 1858, and the University was on deck in fielding a team, despite President Anderson’s notable discouragement of athletics. According to a box score in the *Union & Advertiser*, Flour City beat “University Club” on June 19, 1858, 25-8. The *Interpres* yearbook issued that same month confirms a University Base-Ball Club with 29 members: a comparison of the rosters shows that these two University teams were one and the same.

The Civil War caused a hiatus in club baseball on campus and in the United States: no club is listed in the *Interpres* for 1864 and 1865, but soldiers did play the game in camp. Samuel Porter, Class of 1864, describes a match in a January 1863 letter to his brother Farley, Class of 1866: “I played 2nd base and think if you had been here you would have been proud of your brother. Although our adversaries were from New York City they admitted that our 2nd base was played up to the handle.”

Sadly, there are apparently no letters from Cartwright in our collections. Astifan credits Rochester astronomer Lewis Swift with determining in 1877 that the curve ball was not an optical illusion; the University granted Swift an honorary degree in 1879, although probably not for his contribution to the American pastime.

I am a massive fan of Frank Zappa—borderline obsessed. One time I saw a list of student activities at the U of R from the ’70s, and I thought I saw a Frank Zappa or Mothers of Invention concert. I know that he toured through Rochester a few times, but did he ever play a show on the River Campus or the Eastman school?—Steven Torrisi ’16, Cambridge, Massachusetts

A 1970 article in the *Campus Times* bemoans the high cost of bringing in outside speakers and performers: “. . . Walter Cronkite demands \$5,500 for an appearance, Senator Muskie and Mike Wallace each ask \$2,000, and even Frank Zappa wants \$1,000.”

Although the Palestra has seen its share of music legends, Zappa was not among them. He and various configurations of his band did perform in Rochester, first appearing at the War Memorial on October 28, 1967, then alternating between the War Memorial and the Dome Arena on May 5, 1973, November 17, 1973, November 14, 1974, November 5, 1975, and March 11, 1988.

There are a number of online sources which list dates, venues, and even setlists for performers, but the *Campus Times* concert reviewers provide a richer picture of the experience of being there. G. Joshua Matusewitch had this to say in the May 9, 1973, issue: “The new Mothers seem to be a return to the Motherness of about three years ago,



BATTERS UP: While no image of the 1858 team is known to exist, a photo donated by team manager Charles Bostwick, Class of 1891, shows the 1891 lineup in (likely) gray uniforms with blue trim.

while retaining some of the jazz of the Hot Rats and Grand Wazoo. The important thing here is the music, with little silliness. . . . That’s not to say that Zappa has lost his weirdness. Untrue, it will be said.”

The November 7, 1975, post-concert review by “K.C.” concludes with an affirmation. “Like Dr. Demento said on the advertisements last week, “If you miss this concert, you will forever be an incomplete person.”

To quote Frank Zappa, “Information is not knowledge.” It would be untrue if I were to say that I am well acquainted with the man or his music: my thanks to music historian Ron Fritts for his assistance in verifying the performance dates.

For extra innings on baseball at the University, and reviews of Frank Zappa in the *Campus Times*, visit <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/blog/ATA-May2018>.

Need History?

Do you have a question about University history? Email it to rochrev@rochester.edu. Please put “Ask the Archivist” in the subject line.