

THANE “JIMMY” DODGE – WISCONSIN SPITBALL LEGEND

By Dennis A. Wilson

“Jimmy Dodge is rated one of the best mounds men in the state” the Wisconsin State Journal said in announcing the Lancaster would play the Madison Club. It was 1922 and baseball was the top sport in “you name it” America. In those days even small towns like Shullsburg and Lancaster traveled afar to sign the best talent they could get. The players were paid and up to 1500 paying fans attended games in Lancaster. That year, they had signed Thane “Jimmy” Dodge, known to all as one of the best spitballers anywhere, including the major leagues. Jimmy had been playing for 13 years at that time, and he was to continue pitching well into the 1930’s. The big leagues didn’t pay salaries like today’s players receive, so a person like Jimmy, who didn’t want to travel all over the country did very well signing with Wisconsin semi-pro teams. In 1922 he not only pitched for Lancaster, but for Menasha as well. He traveled a lot going to these games.

Sam Levy, writing for the April 1953 issue of *Baseball Digest*, describing the first time he ever watched hall of famer Al Simmons play said; *“Well, we were playing Eddie Stumpf’s Milwaukee Red Sox the day Al joined us. Jimmy Dodge of Madison, one of the best spitball pitchers in baseball at that time — he was good enough to be a big leaguer but didn’t like to travel — was working for the Sox.*

“The score was 0-0 in the sixth or seventh inning. Connie Reik was my first hitter. Dodge had struck him out three times. I decided that this would be a good time to test the kid (Simmons) as a pinch hitter. You should have seen Al swing at the first pitch, high, outside. He missed it a mile. Dodge threw him another one, high, outside. Again Al swung and missed. The next two were pretty close to the plate. I thought they were strikes, but the umpire called them balls.

“Then came the payoff ball. Simmons hit it to left field, a country mile, for a home run. He fell halfway between third base and home and almost crawled to the plate. We won, 1-0. After that, Simmons was a regular. He asked for more money. Ellis gave him a raise. Later, he asked for more, but didn’t get it.”

Henry McCormick in the Wisconsin state Journal wrote of Dodge when he died; *“just before World War I “Jimmy” was paid \$35 if he lost and \$50 if he won (note: \$885 in today’s dollars). That was magnificent pay in those days, and Dodge was worth every cent of it. He had a fast ball that hopped and danced, and he never gave anything but his best... That was an era when some semi-pro teams actually hired players away from the big leagues... That’s the kind of competition that Dodge pitched against, and the broad shouldered guy with the smoking fast ball never looked out of place in such company.”*

He was only with Lancaster's team for a year, but what a year it must have been for Grant County baseball fans.

Sources

1. Baseball Digest, April 1953, pages 27-28
2. Wisconsin State Journal May 28, 1922 page 18
3. Wisconsin State Journal, August 6, 1947 page 15 – McCormick column “Playing the Game”
4. Capital Times Aug 12 1922
5. Wisconsin State Journal May 28, 1922 p18