



# The Cunningham Museum Week

Discoveries and Interesting Items

From Dennis Wilson, Molly Smith, and Joe Sherwin



It was a cold and windy night. The thermometer read five degrees below zero. Newspapers were sporting headlines reading “COLDEST WEATHER OF YEAR IN STATE” and “MERCURY DROP SETS NEW MARK.” The Manitowoc Herald-News reported the next day that the temperature had fallen 52 degrees in 24 hours. Wet or exposed fingers and toes froze quickly in the blowing night air. It was a night for getting the chores done fast and getting inside to stoke up the fire. There were only twelve days left until Christmas. Then as now this was often the coldest time of the year. It was a good night to go to a movie and stay warm.

The smoke wasn't noticeable at first to the moviegoers watching the late show at the Strand Theater, which occupied the second floor of Platteville's beautiful city hall. About 150 people were oblivious, focused on the images flickering across the screen as a slight scent of smoke wafted up the stairwell. We don't know what the movie was that night, but it was not interesting enough to delay for long the sight of smoke entering the theater. The crowd panicked. They could not go down the stairwell and live. Reporter J.H. Lewis, who was in the audience, led them up stairs to the balcony. Several women were overcome by “smoke and fright”, and had to be carried out, but were revived. Faced with death, even the most timid of the rest clamored in turn down the fire escape and into the icy cold. Now it was a matter of fighting for the building, the police department's equipment, and the city's records.

Frank Goodell, the Chief of the Platteville Fire Department was not in town. He was deer hunting in the north woods. He would not see the aftermath until the next afternoon. Mayor Adam Miller quickly assessed the situation and realized the city would need help. With the wind blowing from the southwest, fire could spread to the whole east and northeast sections of the city. He appealed to Dubuque for help.



1926 American LaFrance Fire truck

The memory of fire and death was still fresh in the memories of the citizens of Platteville. In 1919 the Forehand Block, one of the largest buildings in the city had burned to the ground, killing eight who were crushed below a collapsing wall. Merchants were called upon to open their stores and provide warm mittens, gloves and socks to the firefighters. Others brought pails of hot coffee and sandwiches. It was misery nonetheless for the firemen. They became encrusted in ice from head



to foot and could only move about in stiff, mechanical motions. They were forced to retreat inside time and time again to warm frostbitten hands, ears and cheeks. The old world styled building, constructed in 1883 was a fire trap. The theatergoers were fortunate to have made the escape by the only route available. As soon as the flames were controlled in one quarter, they broke out in another. When the fire broke through the wall behind the Strand Theater stage upstairs they knew the battle was lost.

Acting chief Nuremberg, and Fire Chief Fisher of Dubuque decided to give their full attention to saving the adjoining properties by trying to contain the fire within the walls and guard against incendiary outbreaks from hot flying ash. The loss was about \$80,000.00, twice the amount of insurance on the building and contents. It was thought that the furnace had overheated, being taxed to its limit by the intense cold. Now the improvising and rebuilding began.

A reporter for the Dubuque Telegraph-Herald wrote two days later; "the city is practically disrupted as an organization because of utter lack of a place at which at this time to transact any business in any of its departments." The city fire trucks were kept at the Eagle Garage. There was no fire alarm system left, so the Methodist Church tower was pressed into service to sound fire alarms with the church bell. There was no suitable space to serve as a temporary home for the city offices and the police department, so they were placed wherever possible. No time was lost in deciding that a new city administration building would be constructed, and that it would be, as far a humanely possible fireproof.



By December 19<sup>th</sup> it was decided to build the new complex where the English Lutheran Church stood on North Bonson Street. The estimated cost to purchase the church property and construct the building was \$150,000.00. The actual cost was \$180,000.00. In today's dollars that would be \$2,348,032.37. Plans were discussed in May 1927, but it was not until October 11, 1928 that the cornerstone was laid for the new building. It was completed in August of 1929, and was lauded as one of the finest municipal buildings in Wisconsin. It still serves the city.



**What it looks like to fight a night fire at subzero temperatures**



**Maquoketa Iowa January 2008**



# MADISON TEAM CLASHES WITH LANCASTER TODAY

"RUBE" NOBLE TO  
HURL FOR LOCALS

WISCONSIN NOT EXPECTED TO BE AS  
EFFECTIVE AS HE WAS  
AGAINST HUGABO'S MEN  
THREE WEEKS AGO

JACK IS BROKE!  
TRYING TO KEEP  
WOLF FROM DOOR

CHICAGO — Jack Dempsey,  
world champion boxer,  
will fight tomorrow in Chicago.  
There is a big crowd expected  
when he steps back in.

MILWAUKEE RED SOX  
PLAY STOUGHTON

MUS CITY MINE WILL TRY TO  
AVENGE EARLY LOSS  
TO ST. LOUIS

This Crew Is Doped to Win at Poughkeepsie

SPETHS' CLASH  
WITH DODGEVILLE

THEY HAVE GOOD  
OTHERS WOULD  
FOR JULY  
FIFTH

# SPITBALLER!

Like Coveleskie and Quinn, Jimmy  
Dodge Still Throws the "Spitter"

By BRYN GRIFFITHS.

While teams of copy are being  
pounded out these days by sporting  
writers around the two major league  
circles regarding the prowess of  
the best spitballers in organized  
baseball who are doing some  
splendid pitching, a Madison fan  
comes forward with a few remarks  
about our old friend Jimmy Dodge,  
one of the best known spitballers out  
of organized ball.

Jimmy Dodge is doing through-  
out independent baseball circles just  
what Walter Quinn, Russel Bab-  
er, Gathorn, Grimes and Mitchell,  
spitball heavies are doing in the  
majors," writes the fan.

In other words, Dodge is turning  
in a lot of victories for the capital  
city aggregation, of which he is  
half owner.

There isn't a dyed-in-the-wool ball  
fan in Wisconsin who doesn't know  
Jimmy—and Milwaukee fans in par-  
ticular remember him for his great  
work for the Milwaukee Red Sox  
when that team won the Lake Shore  
league pennant in 1921.

Jimmy is now about 35 years  
old, has been called "spitter"  
throughout the state since he was in  
short trousers—and that was when  
he was at the advanced age of 13.  
Dodge and other teams near Prai-  
rie du Sac, Dodge's home until re-  
cently, were looking high for the  
best pitchers in those days. Grad-  
ually stronger teams heard of him  
and they too sought his services.  
Now he is in his first game for  
Barnaboo fifteen years ago, or there-  
abouts, Jimmy has seen action with  
practically every team of any con-  
sequence in the state and today he is  
going just as cool as ever, despite  
the theory that spitball pitchers  
can't live.

The theory was that throwing the  
"spitter" raised for too great a strain  
on the elbow, hence the early dis-  
cussions of the fellow who scouted to  
sign him for that post.

"It is throwing spitters when a  
lot of the youngsters who are now  
breaking into baseball are 'gassing  
out,' Jimmy told the writer recently,  
and no believe me a right.

A spitball pitcher in independent  
baseball is more rare than in the  
majors' age, and when Dodge is an-  
nounced as the pitcher in any one of  
the Madison teams' games it is a safe  
bet that a good crowd will be on  
hand to see him in action. Besides  
the novelty of seeing a "spitter"  
they are sure of witnessing a game  
pitched as though it were a series  
war of attrition—this is how Jimmy  
Dodge takes his work, and it is  
in the spirit that makes him one of  
the most popular pitchers out of  
organized baseball.

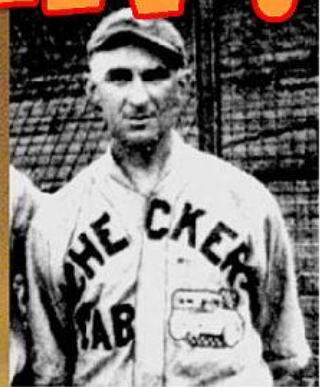


THANE E. (JIMMY) DODGE

One of Wisconsin's outstanding semi-pro baseball  
pitchers. Born at Spring Green in 1889. Pitched more  
than 25 years in such Wisconsin cities as Baraboo,  
Prairie du Sac, Sauk City, Lancaster, Whitewater,  
Milwaukee, and Madison. Hurled numerous no-hitters  
and regularly struck out 10 to 12 batters each game.  
Adept at throwing the spitball, he once won a double-  
header, hurling a no-hitter in the opener and fanning  
35 batters in the two contests. In 1924 he was credited  
with more than 30 of the Madison Blues' 52 victories.  
Earned as much as many major league pitchers,  
sometimes working five games a week. Died Aug. 4, 1947.

ENSHRINED JUNE 4, 1975

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PRESENTED BY THE PEN AND MIKE CLUB



THE LEGEND OF  
JIMMY DODGE  
WAS MADE IN  
LANCASTER AND  
OTHER  
WISCONSIN  
TOWNS



*"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.**

# LAW ENFORCEMENT THE WAY IT WAS

Ed Long (center) and his fellow Platteville Police Department officers, along with the trusty police dog face the camera, probably in the 1890's



## **PLEASE REMEMBER US IN YOUR YEARLY PLANNING**

Financial support for our efforts to preserve the history of Grant County is necessary and always appreciated

Grant County Historical Society, 129 E. Maple Street, Lancaster, Wisconsin 53813. Telephone [\(608\)723-4925](tel:6087234925)

Hours of operation: Tuesday's and Thursday's from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm, or call us for an appointment. See our Website at: [Grant County History](http://GrantCountyHistory.com)

Look at our facebook page at: [Grant county Historical Society](https://www.facebook.com/GrantCountyHistoricalSociety) and photo albums at: [Lost Images of Grant County](#) and: [Lancaster 1942](#) and: [Lancaster 1942 Annex](#)