

## **‘Pop’ Dillon of Normal found baseball success in LA**

Bloomington-Normal’s ties to the national pastime are long and deep.

Most famously, National Baseball Hall of Fame inductees Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn and Clark Griffith were raised in the Twin Cities. Although these two larger-than-life characters garner the most attention, other local figures made a substantial mark on the game—at the plate, on the field and even managing from the dugout.

One such talent was Frank “Pop” Dillon of Normal, who appeared in 312 Major League Baseball (MLB) games over five seasons, seeing the most action in 1901 and 1902 as a first baseman with the Detroit Tigers.

The Normal boy then made a bigger name for himself in Los Angeles as a player-manager for the Angels of the Pacific Coast League, which at the time was becoming one of the preeminent minor leagues in North America (Major League Baseball did not come to California until 1958 when the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants relocated to LA and San Francisco respectively.)

“Dillon was in fact among the top names in California baseball during the first two decades of the 20th century,” notes Brian McKenna in a biographical sketch for the Society for American Baseball Research. “He was a hard hitter and one of the top fielding first baseman on the coast.” Not only that, but the Normal native skippered the LA club to four league pennants.

Unlike many early ballplayers, Dillon, who was born in Normal on Oct. 17, 1873, did not come from hardscrabble circumstances. Frank’s father, Levi Dillon, was a prominent Normal businessman who partnered with an uncle and nephew to become a leading importer, breeder, and seller of French draft horses. Normal and the surrounding McLean County countryside became a national center for the “Norman” horse trade thanks in great measure to the Dillon family’s pioneering work in the business.

If a love of horses ran in the Dillon bloodline, so too did baseball. Frank Dillon’s mother, Mary Wright Dillon, was the sister of Sarah Wright Griffith. Sometime in the early 1880s, a widowed Sarah relocated her family, including her adolescent son Clark, from Missouri to Normal, where she would come to run a boarding house and do washing for university students.

That made Frank Dillon and future hall of famer Clark Griffith cousins, born four years apart. Today, “The Old Fox,” as Griffith would become known, is regarded as a seminal figure in the game’s history. After a stellar career pitching for the National League Chicago Colts and Orphans

(two early nicknames of the Cubs), Griffith became a principal founder the American League, the first manager of the Chicago White Sox franchise, and the longtime manger and owner of the Washington Senators.

While his older cousin Clark made a name for himself in the big leagues, Frank Dillon attended the University Wisconsin, playing baseball and maybe some football as well. It appears he graduated in 1896, but by that time had lost his amateur status because he was already playing professional baseball.

Dillon spent most of his minor league career in the Western Association. In 1894, he played part of the year with the Peoria Distillers and part with the Des Moines Prohibitionists!

At this time, after finishing a season in the minor leagues, Dillon would return to Bloomington-Normal to play for various local "nines" into late autumn. In September 1895, for instance, he helped Chenoa defeat a visiting club from Pontiac by a score of 9 to 7. "An immense crowd witnessed the game," reported The Pantagraph, "and the cheering at several stages ... was simply deafening."

In 1896, during the baseball offseason, Dillon began teaching physical education part-time at Illinois State Normal University. He's even credited with coaching the first women's basketball team in school history. It was also at ISNU that he met his wife, Freeport native Blanche Ada Reitzell.

In early Sept. 1899, Dillon, then toiling for Buffalo, N.Y. of the Western League, was sold to MLB's Pittsburgh Pirates for \$1,500. With a month left in the big league season, he became the Pirates everyday first baseman, batting .256 in 129 plate appearances.

Dillon then played for the Detroit Tigers during the first two seasons of the newly organized American League, 1901 and 1902. One of Dillon's claims to fame was becoming the first American Leaguer to hit four doubles in a nine-inning game. Remarkably, he accomplished the feat on April 25, 1901, in Detroit's very first game in the inaugural A.L. season! Two of his four doubles were hit in a furious ten-run, bottom-of-the-ninth-inning rally against Milwaukee. Dillon's last two-bagger scored the tying and winning runs, and for his heroics with the bat his teammates carried him off the field.

No one in the American League would smack four doubles in a single game again until Billy Werber of Boston did it during the 1935 season.

After two years in Detroit, Dillon headed West to play for the minor league Los Angeles Angels, quickly becoming one of the California League's best hitters (the Angels would join the Pacific Coast League the following season.) In early 1904, Dillon, who was readying for a third season in LA, found himself at the center of a bitter contract dispute between Angels owner James F. Morley and Major League Baseball. He ended up being shipped to Brooklyn that year and appearing in 135 games for MLB's Superbas (as the club was called before becoming the Dodgers).

In the spring of 1905, Morely coughed up \$1,700 (equal to about \$48,000 today, adjusted for inflation) to bring Dillon back to LA. Reports at the time said it was "the biggest price ever paid by a minor league club for the purchase of a big league player."

Dillon remained in LA, playing for and managing the Angels for another decade. He eventually earned the nickname "Pop," partly because of his long tenure as Angeles manager, and partly because his hair prematurely turned gray in his 20s. As a player-manager, Dillon was LA's regular first baseman through the 1912 season, and he was still getting into an occasional game during his final year as the club's manager, which came in 1915.

After baseball, Frank and Blanche Dillon bought and managed an apple farm in Yucaipa, Cal. They eventually made their way back to Los Angeles, running a bakery known for its delicious pies. So although we can't speak about hot dogs, Dillon's all-American life directly involved baseball and apple pie.

"The gray-thatched veteran who was beloved by old-time Los Angeles fans for his fighting tactics on the diamond, is fighting now against big odds and little hope is held out for his recovery from the malady from which he has been suffering for several years," reported The Los Angeles Times shortly before Pop Dillon's death on Sept. 12, 1931, at the age of 57.