

The "Famous" Ironton Tanks

by Carl M. Becker

In the 1920s, the "famous" Ironton Tanks were the sovereigns of semi-professional football in the upper Ohio Valley, indeed even in the state of Ohio. Through a stretch of six years, from 1920 through 1926, they won sixty-one games, tied eight and lost but four, defeating alike small-town elevens in the valley and big-city teams throughout the state. They became the pride of Ironton, an institution representing, so businessmen and sportswriters asserted, the intrinsic worth of the city and standing as an advertising notice for it.

Organized in 1919 by former players at Ironton high school, several of them veterans of the Great War, the team took its name from the innovative weapon of the Great War implying brute rolling power. The name was also appropriate for Ironton, a city of about 15,000 and a center of the pig-iron industry in the Hanging Rock district. Hundreds of men in the city were workers toughened by the touch of iron.

Leading the Tanks in the early years were Charlton "Shorty" Davies and William "Bill" Brooks, both ex-collegians. Davies, who had played behind the great Chic Harley at Ohio State, was a shifty back standing five feet, seven inches and weighing about 160 pounds. He ran as a tailback from the single wing, the dominant offensive formation of the day. He also called signals (plays) and was coach and captain of the team. Brooks, who had played on the freshman eleven at Ohio State in 1916, was a hulk of a tackle at 250 pounds. An emotional man, he cried when play did not go well for the Tanks. He served as the Tanks' first business manager, scheduling games and negotiating financial terms, especially the split of the gate.

The Tanks played their home games at Beechwood Park on the east side of Ironton. Owned by the city school district, the field there had no grandstand or bleachers in the early years. Spectators stood along the sidelines, sometimes rushing on to the field during brawls among the players. A fence of some sort encircled the field, but boys and young male adults, so-called "fence thieves," "fence monkeys" and "fence lizards," climbed over it and crawled under it. Additionally, spectators perched on nearby trees and a huge dirt pile and saw games for nothing. At first adults paid fifty cents for admission, later a dollar. Depending on opponents, the Tanks drew crowds of three hundred to 1,500 before they and the school district erected a grandstand and bleachers. Whenever they were at Beechwood, fans saw the Tanks attired in red jerseys, khaki pants and brown leather helmets. As the Tanks enjoyed increasing success, fans and sportswriters began to call them the "Big Red" or the "Big Red Machine."

Like nearly all other semi-professional clubs, the Tanks had problems arranging schedules. Usually not knowing what teams would be playing and available for games, Brooks did not begin working up a schedule until late in the summer or early in the fall, with the result that it was jerry-built, an adventure in tentativeness and improvisation. Often he was arguing with other managers over the split of the gate, selection of officials and sites of games. Sometimes fans did not know with certainty the Tanks' opponent for a coming game (nearly always played on Sundays) until a week or so prior to the contest. At the outset the staple of the Tanks' schedule were teams from Portsmouth, the "ancient and hereditary foe" of Ironton in vitality, civic improvements and above all sports. Downriver about thirty miles from Ironton, Portsmouth was more than twice the size of Ironton but for years could not field a semi-professional team equal to the Tanks. Nonetheless, the games between the Tanks and the Portsmouth teams often sparked bitter and sardonic controversies. Sports columnists for the newspapers in the communities, the *Register* and *Morning Irontonian* in Ironton and the *Times* and *Morning Sun* in Portsmouth, were quick to exacerbate them.

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The Tanks played an abbreviated schedule in 1919, winning two games, losing one and tying one against teams from Ashland, across the Ohio in Kentucky, Portsmouth and New Boston, a small town near

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Portsmouth. Workers from the classification yard of the Norfolk & Western yard in Portsmouth played for the N. & W. team of that city. Irontonians paid little attention to the games, and the Tanks played before small crowds at Beechwood.

In 1920 the Tanks played seven games and began to take their place as the "town team." After losing their opening game 14-0 to Morris Harvey College in West Virginia, they were undefeated. Among their subsequent opponents were another semi-professional team in Ironton, the Lombards, and the Smoke House, a team sponsored by a tobacco shop in Portsmouth. The Tanks had to fare well against them to forge a modicum of loyalty in Ironton. Older than the Tanks, the Lombards saw the rise of the Tanks as a challenge to their status in the community; but the Tanks easily defeated the lighter Lombards and were thus on the road to displacing them.

The Tanks met the Smoke House twice. In their first meeting at Millbrook Park in Portsmouth, a "large" crowd saw a "furiously" fought game replete with "thrill after thrill." Rooters for the Tanks, whether "from Kansas City or Hong Kong," said the *Times*, were quiet until Davies, slightly injured and standing in street clothes on the sidelines in the first half, entered the fray in the second half and, evoking an image of Frank Merriwell, the fictional football hero of Yale, ran eighty yards with an intercepted pass to give the Tanks a tie, 6-6. On more than one occasion, the players became "entangled" in brawls on the field.

The teams met for their second game at Beechwood but only after Brooks and August Putzek, the Smoke House manager, engaged in a protracted quarrel over whether the Ironton crowd might come on the field. Putzek demanded that the Tanks post a bond of \$500 against that prospect; Brooks refused but agreed to have fifteen policemen on hand to control the crowd. On the eve of the game, the Tanks accused the Smoke House of "loading-up." Loading-up occurred when a team added new players, not necessarily ringers, to its roster for a game. (Rosters numbered about eighteen men, who played on offense and defense.) Sometimes, a week before a game, teams exchanged "eligibility lists," lists of men who had played in the last preceding game. Thus they agreed not to load-up. In the absence of lists, teams might add as many new players as they wished. The Smoke House seemed to be loading-up in violation of its eligibility list, but the Tanks finally decided not to press the issue.

Certainly the game said something about the growing interest in the Tanks -- or in controversy. As many as 4,000 fans, the largest crowd in the history of Ironton football until then, stood on all four sides of the field and in a newly erected grandstand. All trades and professions, said the *Register*, had representation -- preachers, priests, social leaders, churchgoers and plain garden variety fans. For the first time at any game in Ironton, women -- "fanettes" -- were standing in large numbers along the sidelines. Gate receipts were about \$3,500. The game was grueling, a "regular bearcat of a battle." Davies scoring two touchdowns, the Tanks won 14-0. Bettors in the crowd won and lost about \$300. The victory closed off a good season for the Tanks, their record five wins, a loss and a tie. Besides the Smoke House and Lombards, they bested Marshall College, the New Boston Tigers and a team from Nitro, West Virginia.

The Tanks lost no games the following year, two ties marring their record, but suffered an embarrassing revelation in a controversial game with the Smoke House. After opening the season with three victories over teams from Jackson, Charleston and Ashland, the Tanks met the Smoke House at Beechwood. Reportedly "great excitement" in both cities attended the game. Reporters leveled charges and counter-charges about the teams loading-up. But the game proved to be as exciting as a "croquet match," with neither team able to score.

More exciting was the commentary after the game. The officials, Ray Eichenlaub and Don Hamilton, both Notre Dame men, assessed twice as many penalties to the Tanks as to the Smoke House. As a result, asserted a reporter for the *Register*, the Tanks lost their "fight and heart." Supposedly, after the game Hamilton and Eichenlaub admitted that they had "watched [Ironton] more closely than Portsmouth." By that admission, said the reporter, they made themselves "ineligible" to officiate any game in which the Tanks played. His editor concurred, saying that Hamilton meted out more penalties than did a local judge in a recent hunting case.

Before going to Portsmouth in two weeks to play the Smoke House again, the Tanks had to deal with the Lombards, a team still disputing the Tanks' primacy in the city. The Tanks easily defeated the Lombards, who now disbanded, two or three players going over to the Tanks. Now the Tanks turned their attention

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to the Smoke House. In many respects, the game summed up the nature of semi-professional football. Brooks and Harry Doerr, the new manager of the Smoke House, argued at length over selection of officials before they chose three men with close ties to the collegiate game, so-called "outsiders." All the newspapers ran stories of loading-up by both teams.

The largest crowd in the history of sports in Portsmouth, about 4,000, came to Millbrook. Nearly a thousand were Irontonians. Because the Tanks arrived late, play did not begin until well after 2:00 p.m. The game was not "ze battle royal" predicted by the *Register*. For the Tanks "completely out played, out ran, out fought, and out classed" the Smoke House. A battle royal developed, nonetheless. With the Tanks leading 14-0 and threatening to score again with but four minutes to play, the officials halted the game at the refusal of the Smoke House coach to continue play on the darkening field. Then they declared that the Tanks had won by forfeit, 1-0, and that all bets were off.

Chaos followed. Fans were fighting in the stands and continued to pummel one another outside the field. A "big scrap" broke out among them in East Portsmouth, with "considerable blood spilled" before police arrived on the scene. Meanwhile, at Millbrook Doerr refused to give the Tanks their share of the gate, 40 percent of what appeared to be a healthy sum, and publicly offered no explanation for his action. Perhaps at urging of bettors, the Tanks first sought a ruling from the rules committee of the National Collegiate Athletic Association on whether the officials could forfeit the game as they had. A representative of the Association said that the decision for forfeiture was incorrect. The Tanks sent that "word" to Portsmouth; but, as the *Irontonian* saw it, "the howling birds" there were not likely to hear or heed it.

At the same time, Ironton reporters were condemning the Smoke House for withholding the Tanks' share of the gate. Pete Burke of the *Register* called Doerr's decision "the cheapest, rankest low-downed, crawfishiest, most childish, utterly despicable trick of the whole affair. ..." A reporter for the *Irontonian* declared that Doerr had pulled the "cheapest trick ever known in what can be called CIVILIZATION." At nearby Waverly, a small town that had recently been feuding with Portsmouth over an untoward incident involving baseball teams from the communities, the *Herald-Republican* joined in the attack. The Smoke House men, its reporter wrote, showed a "streak of yellow the entire length of their backbone" in halting play; and their refusal to pay the Tanks was a "cheap squeal from a cheap bunch of sports and only reflects the character of the city."

Soon, readers of the newspapers read explanations for Doerr's action. According to the *Times*, early in the game the captain of the Smoke House team, Lonnie Chinn, realized that the Tank playing as Art Hall, the quarterback, was, in fact, Art Hammond, then the quarterback for Marshall and once a player for an Ashland team. He confronted Bill Schachleiter, a Tanks' tackle and temporary manger of the Tanks in Brooks' stead, with his knowledge; and Schachleiter assured him that the Tanks had no more ringers -- "All Bill did was blink his eyes and throw a blank stare." Chinn decided to play on, later explaining that Hammond had never "shown much" at Ashland. Then later in the game, he and other Smoke House men discovered that a Tank running as a halfback was Earle "Red" Shannon, who was on the roster of Morris Harvey, and that Howard Fritz was Ashby Blevins, a tackle who had recently played for the Ashland Tigers. Another story had it that Chinn and Doerr had learned at the same time, early in the game, of the Tanks' use of the three ringers but had consented to their continuing to play. None of the men was on the Tanks' eligibility list. The *Times* alleged that the Tanks had three other "out-of-town" men in their lineup.

Though acknowledging in essence that they had used ringers, the Tanks justified it on the ground that they had consented to the Smoke House's resort to ringers in 1920. They hired a lawyer, Edgar Miller of Portsmouth, to represent them and instructed him to initiate a civil action, a breech of contract, to claim their purse. Miller never filed such a suit. Schachleiter, muddying the waters, then "revealed" that a Portsmouth man -- he did not name him -- had offered Hammond \$200 to deliver the Tanks' signals to the Smoke House. Another story making the rounds was that four "well-known" Ironton men had "engineered" the deal for the three ringers and then had sent off \$5,000 to Portsmouth to bet on the Tanks.

The caterwauling continued for weeks. On at least two occasions, Schachleiter journeyed to Portsmouth to discuss the issue with Doerr and returned empty-handed, Doerr insisting that he would not give the Tanks one red cent. Meanwhile, the Tanks played out their schedule, defeating Morris Harvey in a "thrilling" game and winning and tying games against a rugged eleven from Wellston, the Eagles.

Nearly a month after the game at Portsmouth, the Tanks still did not have their purse, and Doerr seemed intransigent. Finally, Harry Taylor, the editor of the *Times*, evidently cut the Gordian knot. In measured prose yielding little of the high ground for the Smoke House, he condemned the Tanks for use of the ringers and asserted that the Smoke House might legally withhold their portion of the gate. But then he argued that the Smoke House men could have refused to play at the discovery of the ringers or could have protested and continued to play. They chose the latter course and now as a matter of statesmanship and the good name of the game, they should pay the Tanks. Very soon, amicability prevailing, Schachleiter and several other Tanks met with one Raymond Saddler, who had momentarily replaced Doerr as manager of the Smoke House. Saddler, rehearsing Taylor's arguments, computed expenses of the game and wrote out a check to the Tanks for \$725, full payment for their share of the gate.

Undeclared in 1921 and now becoming a fixture in, even an adornment to, the community, the Tanks moved into the next season's play confident, even cockshure, about their prowess, expecting to continue their winning ways. They strengthened themselves with the addition of a few new players, notably John Andrews, a halfback from Purdue who was working as an electrician in a local steel mill. They also acquired a feisty new manager, Jimmy Lambert, an auditor for the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad.

Lambert built a schedule far different from that of 1921. At the close of the dispute with the Smoke House, the *Register* and *Irontonian*, which had called for all athletic teams of Ironton to break relations with Portsmouth, urged the Tanks and Smoke House to continue play in 1922, saying that the rivalry had been a healthy one. Though without binding contracts, Lambert thought that he had arranged two games with the Smoke House, but less than a week before the teams were to meet in Ironton for the first game, Dick McKinney, the new manager of the Smoke House, cancelled the game, explaining that the "rivalry was too strong for the game." For Ironton writers, the Smoke House men simply recognized the superiority of the Tanks and wished to avoid a defeat. The *Register* denounced the decision as reflective of the spirit animating Portsmouth for years. What would Portsmouth say, asked an editorialist for the *Register*, if the city built a good team that other teams would not play because it was too good. At Portsmouth, the *Times* dismissed the comments of the *Register* as a "cheap chirp from Cannnonville."

Lambert found a compensatory opponent in the Huntington Boosters of West Virginia, a good draw and a strong team. Newly organized, the Boosters had on their roster eight or nine former collegians, among them men who had played for Ohio State and West Virginian University. Ironton writers saw in the competition with the Boosters a prospective showcase for a collegiate-like spirit and sportsmanship in semi-professional football. The Tanks and Boosters, they asserted, expected to set a high standard in their play, refraining from "rag-chewing" against the officials and all forms of "rough stuff." "Clean, intelligent fellows," the players were "good sports" who would elevate the state of football in the valley. Even as sportswriters employed the language of purity, many Tanks' fans were going to Huntington "with several truck loads of jack to wager that the Tanks would roll over the Boosters."

The teams met three times in 1923, all good games drawing crowds running from 2,000 to 3,000. After defeating the Boosters 18-7 at Huntington, the Tanks could barely earn a tie against them, 7-7, at Beechwood. With some justification, sports columnists in Ironton and at the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* called the third game "the greatest," the "most spectacular" ever played in the Ohio Valley. With the Boosters leading 10-9 and a minute to play, Andrews drop-kicked a field goal from the thirty-yard line to give the Tanks the victory, 12-10. Tanks' fans threw their "dicers, caps and candy ankles into the breeze" in their excitement.

The tie with the Boosters the only blemish on their record, the Tanks completed the season unbeaten in nine games. Besides the Boosters, they defeated teams from Columbus, Athens, Williamson, Jackson, Lancaster and Washington Court House. Their schedule, though, gave them little visibility outside of southern Ohio.

Lambert was able to broaden the schedule in 1923. The Tanks faced two teams from Columbus and two from Cincinnati, members of the Greater Cincinnati Football Association, the so-called Spalding league. Again they played the Boosters three games. The Smoke House returned to the schedule for two games, the second game becoming enshrined in the annals of Tanks' history for its bizarre nature.

Early in the season, the Tanks defeated the Columbus West Side eleven, a leading team in the city, 7-6, in a game creating a cat fight among reporters for the *Irontonian*, the *Register*, and the *Ohio State Journal* over penalties assessed the West Side team. They had no trouble smothering the Smoke House 40-0 at home. They remained undefeated through six games and then, surprisingly, lost 12-6 to the Boosters at Beechwood. Two weeks later, they met the Smoke House at Millbrook for their second encounter. Though anticipating another easy win, the Tanks heard a litany of bravado from Portsmouth. Sam Ackroyd, another new coach of the Smoke House, was drilling the team hard and was convening special meetings of his men, who then issued a pronouncement that they intended to go beyond merely beating the Tanks: "The Tanks are going to be squashed, emptied, shot-full of holes and flattened."

A crowd of about 3,000 came to Millbrook to see whether the Smoke House could make good on their word. Tanks' fans were worried because Davies, Brooks and Clarence Poole, who had gone to the Carnegie Tech-Notre Dame game at Pittsburgh on Saturday, had not arrived. They were curious, too, as to why only a few Smoke House men were on the field for warm-up drills. At 2:15, said the *Irontonian* in sarcasm, a huge truck used for "moving household goods, bonded liquor, monkeys, and football players" drove up to the main gate, the driver demanding entrance. A lone sentry, seeing a countersign, allowed it to pass through. No one could see its cargo, airtight as it was. At one end of the field, the truck backed under the goal posts. Then over the lowered tail gate, a group of football players attired in Smoke House jerseys tumbled on to the ground. Almost immediately, the crowd was able to identify them as players for the Columbus West Side club, the team that the Tanks had defeated earlier in the season in the game of penalties.

As the Smoke House partisans cheered the West Side men, Irontonians felt a "sickening fear," made all the queasier as they looked in vain for the missing Tanks. But just as the game began, Davies, Brooks and Poole rushed through the gate ready to play. The Tanks, contemptuous of the imposters, scored in the first half and gave up a touchdown to the West Side in the third quarter. Smoke House fans went "wild with joy"; but Davies turned shouts into silence when he ran for seventy yards for a touchdown, and the Tanks then scored another touchdown to win 21-6.

Reaction to the scene at Millbrook, predictably, varied among sportswriters. Pete Minego of the *Times* said little about it, simply that the West Side team had "represented" Portsmouth and that thus the Tanks could glory in a "double" victory, one over Portsmouth, one over Columbus. At Ironton, Burke facetiously reported for the *Register* that the crowd thought that the West Side men were really the Columbus Tigers because they were in a cage in the truck. His editor thought that Portsmouth had acted in a reprehensible way: "The pulling of such an unsportsmanlike stunt as hiring an entire team to take the place of their regular team, has been heard of but few times in the annals of sport. Our sympathy Portsmouth is yours."

Following their play in 1923, over the three seasons of 1924, 1925 and 1926, the Tanks reached the pinnacle of their success and repute. They won thirty-one games, lost but two and tied four. Each year they claimed the mythical championship of the Ohio Valley. Lambert going outside of southern Ohio for much of their schedule, they played eighteen games against teams from Cleveland, Akron, Columbus, Dayton, Cincinnati and Louisville. They also met two NFL clubs, the Canton Bulldogs and the Kansas City Cowboys. They continued to play the Boosters for two years, two games each year. After 1924, they no longer had quarrelsome encounters with Smoke House, which disbanded in 1925. In 1926, twice they did meet a new team from Portsmouth, the Presidents. And in 1925 they began playing two games each year with the Ashland Armcos, an eleven representing the American Rolling Mill company (Armco) in the city.

As good as their cumulative record was, the Tanks suffered disappointing reverses each year. They won eleven straight games in 1924 and needed to defeat the Smoke House in their last game of the year to remain undefeated and untied. Having demolished the Smoke House earlier in the season 44-0, they expected to win again. But on an ice-covered field defying traction by men, the teams played to a scoreless tie. The next season the Tanks were unbeaten going into their tenth game. Then they played the Canton Bulldogs of the NFL. Though remnants of the Bulldogs that won NFL championships in 1922 and 1923 in Canton and in 1924 in Cleveland, the Canton team was playing reasonably well in league competition and handed the Tanks their only loss of the season, 12-0. The Tanks had an unsullied record

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through ten games in 1926: they had lost none, tied none and yielded no points. Then they played a scoreless tie with the Kansas City Cowboys, one of the stronger teams in the NFL, and in an upset lost to the Cincinnati Potters at Redland Field 26-0. A reporter for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* exulted in his story describing the defeat of the "famous" Tanks.

The Tanks were also facing the loss of some of their identity, wholeness and independence. At the opening of the season in 1924, George Hatcher, sports editor of the *Ashland Independence*, attempted an appellative hi-jacking of the Tanks. He argued that three or four of the Tanks were from Ashland and that many Tanks' fans at Beechwood were from Ashland. So for weeks he referred to the Tanks as the Ashland-Ironton Tanks but found few readers willing to support his campaign.

But he could take solace in 1925 in the decision of Armco, a pioneer in welfare capitalism, to sponsor a semi-professional team, the Armcos, for the employees and the community. At first the Ashland people offered to buy the Tanks lock, stock and barrel and move them to Ashland. They refused, though, to meet the Tanks' price, \$1,500 a game. But at least three Tanks defected to the Armcos. Worse yet for Ironton, Davies, the icon of football in the city, accepted their offer to become the Armcos' coach at \$150 a game. His decision precipitated a controversy splitting Tanks' fans apart. Davies was then the athletic director at Ironton high and coach of the football team. Many fans called on Davies to resign, insisting that a general "understanding" in the community called for the director to be the coach of the Tanks. Otherwise, the Tanks could not afford to hire a good coach. Other fans argued that no such link existed, that the public school was not a hiring hall for the Tanks. Hearing *vox populi*, the Board of Education virtually forced Davies to resign his position and gave it to Lingrel "Sonny" Winters, who then became the Tanks' coach.

By their very success on the field, the Tanks, who, as one put it, had first freely played "for the hell of it," became the emotional property of the community, their proprietor calling on them to serve its interests in controlling their destiny. Acting in the name of the entire community, a group of leading businessmen organized the Ironton Stadium Association in 1926 and sold over \$30,000 in stock for the building of a covered grandstand at Beechwood seating 3,500 spectators. Thereafter, the Association, concerned about retiring the shares of stock, increasingly directed the affairs to the Tanks, especially in scheduling, recruiting and determination of salaries.

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After 1926, the Tanks lost much of their sheen. Probably they were as good as they had ever been, even better; but now the Armcos and Portsmouth were fielding teams capable of beating them regularly. Recruiting more collegians, the Armcos offered stiffer competition to the Tanks, defeating them twice and tying them twice over a span of three years. At Portsmouth, a new team, the Shoe-Steels, backed by owners of steel mills and shoe factories and coached by the legendary Thorpe, were playing in 1927 and beat them that year. The next year, the businessmen of Portsmouth organized the Spartans, a wholly professional team, and recruited some truly remarkable players, among them were Roy "Father" Lumpkin, a burly fullback who had starred for Georgia Tech in the famous Rose Bowl game of 1929 when Roy Riegels of California ran for the wrong goal line, and Carl Brumbaugh, a shifty halfback from the University of Florida who was second in the nation in scoring in 1928 and who later quarterbacked the Bears' rehabilitated T. In 1930, further strengthened, the Spartans entered the NFL.

In response, in 1928 the Stadium Association, arguing that the Tanks were good "advertising" for the community (but not citing the specific benefits of the advertising), raised money for a recruiting campaign and signed several outstanding collegians, three from the University of Nebraska, one of them Glenn Presnell, a triple-threat halfback who became a NFL luminary in the 1930s. That year they were undefeated but tied four times.

The following year, they suffered their first and only losing season at five wins and six losses, scoring but two touchdowns in their last eight games and taking two drubbings from the Spartans. In 1930, they enjoyed a winning season, numbering victories over the New York Giants and Chicago Bears at Redland Field in Cincinnati and the Spartans at Portsmouth. The Spartans beat the Tanks twice in close games.

The victories were the last gasp for the Tanks. They played but three games at Beechwood, and attendance there slipped in the face of the depression. The Association was losing money and could not afford to sign good collegians or pay the guarantees demanded by good teams for coming to Beechwood;

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and fans were not willing to come out in large numbers to see small-town teams from the area around Ironton. The city was simply too small to sustain the Tanks. The Association abandoned the team at the close of the season, and apparently the Tanks would not play again. But in 1931 seven Tanks, including the venerable Brooks, reformed the team and joined a new league composed of squads from Ashland, Huntington and Charleston in West Virginia. They played and won six games, but few fans coming out to see them, the "famous" Tanks stored their togs in mid-season, never to play again, becoming a cherished memory in Ironton. Old Tanks would long remember "with advantages what feats they did" at Beechwood. Even today, one can walk on to the field there on a fall Sunday and see and hear, if he will, men attired in red jerseys and khaki duck pants groaning and grunting as they block and tackle against their foe, perhaps the Smoke House of Portsmouth.