

Associating in Obscurity

1920

By PFRA Research

1920 was a good year for saints, women and isolationists, three categories not necessarily mutually exclusive. In 1920, Joan of Arc was canonized, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution -- women's suffrage -- was ratified, and the League of Nations, without the ratification of the U.S. Congress, held its first assembly in Geneva. Sinclair Lewis published *Main Street* that year, and on most American Main Streets they would have toasted congress's refusal to get us entangled with all those foreigners, had Americans been allowed to toast anything in public. Prohibition was the law of the land. Few found it a serious inconvenience. The U.S. population was up to 106,466,000 people in 1920. Whatever the number had been in 1919, not enough of them went to professional football games to insure the survival of the sport.

This is story of what a few dedicated and desperate pro football entrepreneurs did to change things. America skipped the League of Nations in 1920, but in the American midwest another kind of league began -- a pro football league.

The National Football League today regards 1920 as its initial season -- ranking that treasured year only below 1492 and 1776 as an American benchmark -- but that year has not always been the hallowed birthdate. During the 1930s, when the league first began to think of itself as having a history, several NFL- endorsed sources identified the next season -- 1921 -- as the league's first outing. Some even went with 1922, apparently considering the American Professional Football Association -- the name used in 1920 and '21 -- as too loose to be called a true league.

Loose or not, the 1920 season saw the first semi-successful attempt at a pro football league, and certainly we can trace direct descendancy from that year right down to the latest Super Bowl. It seems a logical place to begin the NFL's history. The structure was reorganized and reshaped the very next season and then again reorganized and even renamed in 1922, but the basic clay was formed into a rough shape in 1920.

But recognizing 1920 as the NFL's first season isn't at all the same as saying it should be judged by modern standards, or even the standards of 1921. By later ways of evaluating such things, the 1920 organization falls short of being a real league on several counts. All the same, it WAS, at long last, a beginning -- a major advance over the chaotic, buccaneer ways that had been in existence before.

The Source of Confusion

Part of our modern misunderstanding of that initial season stems from the way fans look at a professional sports league. To the typical fan today, the NFL, National and American Baseball

Leagues, NBA, NHL, and so on are embodied in the leagues' standings. They think of their favorite sports league as a competitive enterprise created for their rooting enjoyment -- an altruistic affair that in some mystical way "belongs" to them. They care, often deeply, about winning and losing games and championships. They are the "fans."

The hell they are!

In truth, the "fan" is a customer purchasing a product -- the game. The "league" is both a manufacturer producing "games" and a marketer selling the viewing of those games -- whether in person or on radio or television -- to the public. The league's only real aim is to make as large a profit for its team owners as it can.

There's nothing particularly wrong with that of course. The National Football League's teams are in business to make a profit, just as is the supermarket at your shopping center. If the items offered at the supermarket are sufficiently attractive in price and quality, customers will keep coming back and a profit will be made. If the goods are shoddy or overpriced, the customers will evaporate both for the supermarket and the NFL.

Sports writers will often tell of the Good Olde Days, when kindly NFL-team owners directed all their energies toward "sport" and to hell with profit. They cared only for the "good of the game," it's said. Don't believe it.

It may be true that team owners then and now can often get caught up in winning and losing, just like any other fan. But, to say an owner then was unaware or uncaring of his team's profit or loss is to assume that he was a fool. Genius has not always been in abundance at league meetings, but neither has downright stupidity. Today's owners care about the bottom line, but it may be true that in times past owners cared much more deeply about profits and losses simply because a higher percentage their personal income was directly related to their team's ticket sales.

Decisions made by today's team owners are in one way or another related to making money. The same thing was true -- absolutely true -- in 1920.

And that's why the first version of what was to become the NFL was such a mess.

Problems and Prototype

The pro football pioneers of 1920 may have had foresight, but they didn't have second sight enabling them to see what the NFL would become some day. They built their first shaky organization along

The Professional Football Researchers Association

lines they already knew. And, because the Ohio pro teams had the most to say in shaping the new arrangement, they modeled it after the so-called "Ohio League," that loose and totally unofficial arrangement that had served to make some varying sense of Ohio pro football races for more than a dozen years.

By 1919, four northeastern Ohio clubs -- the Canton Bulldogs, Cleveland Tigers, Massillon Tigers and Akron Indians -- were the "league's" prestige teams, although prestige couldn't keep Massillon or Akron from going bust by season's end. A few clubs from other parts of the state qualified as "second-class" members, particularly the high-scoring Dayton Triangles, the mediocre Cincinnati Celts, the aging Columbus Panhandles and the once-strong Toledo Maroons.

The problems that beset pro teams in 1919 -- and put Akron and Massillon under -- looked to become worse in 1920. Spiraling salaries, team jumping, and the use of college players beset pro football like the three witches bugged Macbeth. Birnam Wood was about to trample all over Ohio. Unless the surviving teams regulated themselves better, salaries would continue to rise like good bread, players would go on changing teams almost as often as they changed their socks, and collegians would keep popping into pro lineups as "Smith" or "Jones."

Ohio faced the ironic likelihood of going third-rate in pro football just when a native son was about to become President; both Democratic nominee James M. Cox and Republican candidate Warren G. Harding were Buckeyes.

Ohio had a long pro football history. But the Ohio team managers were near panic. Strong teams emerging in Illinois, Indiana and western New York threatened Ohio's pro football leadership and could be expected to bid for the services of the best players in 1920. Star players translated into big crowds. But Ohio managers could get only so much blood out of their turnips. Teams situated in cities larger than, say, Canton had potentially stronger economic bases simply because they could, with the help of star attractions, draw more fans. On that promise, they could offer star players more money than the Ohioans, leaving the Buckeyes the dregs. And dregs wouldn't draw flies in an Ohio used to the best. If Ohio pro football -- and each manager's investment -- was to be saved, something drastic had to be done.

From a fan's standpoint, a pro football league was a swell idea that sounded big-time and could produce a legitimate championship and lots of honor for the old hometown. But from the standpoint of the Ohio managers -- the men who would have to make things work -- a league was their chance for survival. Pro football's imminent demise in Ohio, rather than any irrepressible desire to form a football league, forced the pro team managers to take drastic action in 1920.

The First Meeting

They began taking it on the evening of August 20.

The meeting was held in the office of Ralph Hay's Hupmobile agency in Canton. In addition to selling automobiles, Hay owned and managed the Canton Bulldogs, pro football's most famous team. His coach, star, and primary reason the Bulldogs' were known outside Ohio -- Jim Thorpe -- accompanied Hay to the

meeting. Big Jim was available during the summer because he was playing minor league baseball for Akron.

From Akron came cigar store proprietor Frank Nied and Art Ranney, another Rubber City businessman. They'd promised to put a new team in the field to replace the defunct Akron Indians of the year before and had already signed several of the same players who'd failed to generate any great enthusiasm among Akron fans in 1919.

Cleveland Tiger Manager Jimmy O'Donnell, an experienced, albeit small-time, sports promoter, brought along his coach and star, erstwhile Notre Dame luminary Stanley Cofall, the field leader at Massillon in 1919. When the backers there decided to throw in the towel after blowing over \$5,000 to finish behind Canton, Cofall abandoned the Tigers of Massillon for the cats of Cleveland.

In 1919, O'Donnell and Hay had been on less than friendly terms when the Bulldog manager refused to add Cleveland to his schedule. Hay insisted he had no open dates, but O'Donnell -- who badly needed Jim Thorpe's drawing power to boost his sagging gates -- accused the Bulldogs of cowardice. Exactly what Hay may have privately accused O'Donnell and his forebears of can be imagined, but publicly he stuck to his story and was vindicated when the 'Dogs played every weekend. At any rate, things were patched up by now.

There was hope that Massillon steelman F.J. Griffiths might show up with plans to form a new team in his city, but the meeting passed with no word from Griffiths either way. However, a fourth Ohio team -- the Dayton Triangles -- made an appearance in the bulky form of owner-manager Carl Storck, who had taken his basic training in sports "mogulism" as a physical education director for the Y.M.C.A.

Although sports pages lauded these gentlemen as "magnates" and "moguls," they were in reality five middle class Ohio businessmen and two football players who had come together to try to make a few bucks from a sport they loved.

Calls for a league of some kind had begun in Ohio as long ago as 1904 and continued intermittently. The idea never had got past the talking stage because the calls came from outside the "establishment" made up of men who were willing to risk their hard-earned money to back teams for local prestige and -- hopefully -- slight profits. Forming a league meant each team would relinquish some control of its own affairs: scheduling, signing players, guarantees.

Only insiders knew how desperate the situation had become.

That morning, the Canton *Daily News* stated unequivocally, "the meeting will not hatch an Ohio football league." The reporter had been misled, perhaps intentionally so that expectations would not run too high. Calling a meeting and reaching agreements were not the same thing. The "cover story" said that the meeting was strictly to arrange schedules. As it turned out, scheduling took up only a small portion of the time and then only after more important problems had been dealt with.

The Professional Football Researchers Association

The minutes of the meeting were sketchy and left out much that was important. To find out what really happened, one must compare newspaper accounts based on interviews of the participants. The Akron *Beacon-Journal* spoke of a "working agreement," but Canton, Dayton, and Cleveland papers were more specific as to what had been accomplished in the Hupmobile office: The group gave itself a name -- American Professional Football Conference -- and elected an officer -- Ralph Hay as temporary secretary. Although later pro football histories would call this a "preliminary meeting" in the formation of what eventually became the National Football League, a more accurate description would recognize this effort as a league itself. The four Ohio teams had finally banded together into something more substantial than the diaphanous "Ohio League."

It was not the first pro football league. Among the less- than-illustrious predecessors was the 1903 National Football League, "national" in that it was made up of two Philadelphia teams and one Pittsburgh team. In 1917, three Indiana semi-pros styled themselves a "league" but failed to produce much excitement even among Hoosiers, and the idea disappeared with World War I. Both before and after the war, Chicago newspapers spoke of a "league" of local independent teams, but some of the clubs weren't even semi-pros. Considering the prestige of Ohio pro football, the American Professional Football Conference marked the most ambitious effort to date.

But names, officers, and brave words had meaning only if they made some progress in solving the three major programs -- rising salaries, team jumping, and the use of undergraduates in pro games. As reported in Ohio newspapers, a great deal had been accomplished.

The Canton *Repository* explained: "The purpose of the A.P.F.C. will be to raise the standard of professional football in every way possible, to eliminate bidding for players between rival clubs and to secure cooperation in the formation of schedules, at least for the bigger teams."

On the problem of using undergraduates, the Dayton *Journal Herald* reported: "The league voted unanimously not to seek the services of any undergraduate college player." It added this bit of gossip: "Last season there were quite a number of intercollegiate stars who padded their bankrolls by slipping away on a Sunday, and performing with a pro team, using every name under the sun but their own to hide their identity. Some startling disclosures came later that brought the wrath of the intercollegiate heads down on the pro game."

The *Repository* discussed team jumping: "Members of the organization reached an agreement to refrain from offering inducements to players to jump from one team to another, which has been one of the glaring drawbacks to the game in past seasons. Contracts must be respected by players as far as possible, as well as by club managers."

Most newspapers only hinted at the most significant action, as when the Canton *Daily News* said: "Business representatives of the elevens came to an understanding on financial terms of players' contracts." Perhaps the managers felt it not in their best interests to tell the whole world that they had put a ceiling on salaries. After all,

their fans were told that no stone was being left unturned in bringing them the finest in pro football talent. But, up in Cleveland, the *Plain Dealer* put it plainly indeed, stating the managers had placed a "maximum on financial terms for players."

Although the three major problems had been addressed, the "solutions" bound only the four teams attending the meeting. Perhaps it was in recognition of this narrow scope that the group chose to call itself a "conference" instead of a "league." Regardless of what the Conference did, if the other major teams refused to join in the pledges and promises, the Ohio Quartet would soon find itself victimized by the very practices it was swearing to forgo. Secretary Hay was instructed to contact the rest of the nation's leading pro football teams and invite them to the next meeting.

The Phantom Members

Actually, three teams had written to Ralph Hay before the August 20 meeting. It's dollars to doughnuts that all they really wanted was to arrange a game with the Canton Bulldogs, but they were considered by the Ohio Quartet to be members already enrolled in the Conference. It is unlikely that the letter writers considered themselves to have joined anything. We can only speculate as to their identities.

A letter from Rochester, N.Y., almost certainly came from the Rochester Jeffersons. Not only did the Jeffs' ambitious young manager Leo Lyons attend the next meeting of the group, but his team was easily the strongest and most successful in Rochester and had been for several years. Assuming that a letter directed to Hay requested a game with the Bulldogs, the Jeffs were the only Rochester team in a position to logically make such a request; Hay always demanded a hefty guarantee to go anywhere, and only a team of reasonable consequence would have been invited to Canton.

It is not so clear that a letter from Buffalo, N.Y., came from Frank McNeil of the Buffalo All-Americans. There was no Buffalo representative at the next meeting, and the All-Americans conducted their 1920 season as though they had never heard of any pro football organization. Moreover, the All-Americans were a new team that had not operated in 1919. No one could know for certain in mid-August that they would be one of the country's top teams by the time the season opened in October. On the other hand, historians have always included the All-Americans as charter members of the 1920 league. More significantly, the Bulldogs scheduled Buffalo for a key November game.

A third letter came from a "Hammond team" and might seem likely to have come from Dr. Alva A. Young, the owner of the Hammond, Ind., Pros. Young attended the group's second meeting and his team was the only major squad in Hammond. However, there's more to it than that.

In 1919, the Hammond Bobcats made an all-out effort to win national honors. They signed so many "name" players, with presumably high salaries, that they were known throughout the Midwest as the "\$20,000 team." At one end for the 'Cats was University of Illinois alumnus George Halas, making his first stab at professional football. The \$20,000 went for naught; the Bobcats not only couldn't beat Canton in two tries, they couldn't even beat

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Cleveland. Nevertheless, their roster of stars made them an attractive draw.

But Doc Young's 1920 Hammond team was a different club from the 1919 Bobcats. Although Young was reportedly a part owner, the 1919 Bobcats were really a Chicago team that played in Cubs Park, present day Wrigley Field. Both Hammond and Chicago newspapers identified the Chicago Tigers of 1920 as the descendants of the 1919 Bobcats, although this seems to have referred to the personnel rather than the owners. Because Ralph Hay's Bulldogs played the Bobcats twice in 1919, the lines of communication were open. It is not out of the realm of possibility that the "Hammond" letter actually came from the Chicago Tigers rather than Doc Young. Still, for all the speculations, Hammond is not the same city as Chicago. Probably Ralph Hay was aware of that fact.

The best that can be said for the A.P.F.C. membership at this time is that it DEFINITELY included the Canton Bulldogs, Akron Pros, Cleveland Tigers, and Dayton Triangles, PROBABLY included the Rochester Jeffersons, and MAY have included the Buffalo All-Americans and Hammond Pros.

Later events of 1920 were to relegate the A.P.F.C. to the Footnote File in pro football history, but for a brief span of less than a month, it was the game's best hope for survival. Then Hay began getting replies to his letters and phone calls, and football's horizons expanded.

A Gathering of Eagles

During late August and early September, Ralph Hay and Jim Thorpe tried without success to find a backer for a new Massillon team. The Tigers consistently lost money for themselves, but they were always a good draw for others. It had been the rebirth of a strong Tiger team in 1915 that served as a catalyst for Canton to build itself into a power. In effect, it was because of Massillon that Thorpe was in Canton.

F.J. Griffiths, the steelman, gave the Tigers a lot of thought and then said thanks, but no thanks.

At one point, the story was that only a "star" to serve as field leader was needed to bring Massillon back. The name of "Cupid" Black, an All-America guard from Yale, was bandied about, but Black turned down all entreaties and no other star was found.

Even without a team in Massillon, the Ohio Quartet had one cudgel with which to coerce other pro teams into joining them in their conference -- the promise of scheduling games. Because of Ohio's pro football fame, any of the four would likely be a good draw in Indiana or Illinois. Of course, the plum was Canton with Jim Thorpe, and it was Ralph Hay who sent out the invitations to come to Canton and talk things over.

One of the managers Hay contacted was 25-year-old George Halas who was busy putting together a team in Decatur, Ill., to advertise the A.E. Staley Starch Company. Sponsorship of a sports team was a popular advertising gimmick in that pre-radio and pre-television era. Staley hired Halas to play on the company baseball team -- George had made it to spring training with the New York Yankees before a hip injury ended his major league prospects --

and to coach the company football team. Halas had even better football credentials than baseball; he'd starred as an end under famed Coach Bob Zuppke at the University of Illinois, played with the tough Great Lakes Naval Training Station team during World War I, and been a regular with the \$20,000 Bobcats in 1919.

Halas began building a powerhouse for Staley, using promises of regular employment with the starchworks, ample practice sessions on company time, and excellent remuneration for football services rendered, as inducements. In no time at all, he'd hired former Notre Dame center George Trafton, his ex-Illinois teammate halfback Ed "Dutch" Sternaman, and some of his Great Lakes buddies: tackle Hugh Blacklock, guard Jerry Jones, and colorful halfback Jim Conzelman. One reason Ralph Hay may have contacted Halas about an organization of teams that would forswear swiping each other's players was the man George hired to play the end opposite himself: Guy Chamberlin, who'd been a steller flanker for the Canton Bulldogs in 1919.

The Second Meeting

The second organizational meeting of the American Professional Football Whatchamacallit was held on September 17, a hot Friday in Canton. None of the managers sneaked into town, but no one in Canton stopped the presses to announce their arrival. The day's big news was that Wilbur Henry, the huge All-America tackle from Washington and Jefferson, agreed that same morning to play for the Bulldogs in 1920. Henry was 5-11 and nearly 250 pounds. He looked like a roly-poly pudding, but his unusual speed, great strength, and remarkable agility made him a great tackle. When the Pro Football Hall of Fame opened its doors in 1963, it made Henry one of the original enshrinees. His signing of a Bulldog contract in 1920 was a great coup for Ralph Hay, and newspapers properly headlined his acquisition. Only incidentally did the Canton *Daily News* note that most of the country's important football managers were in town to talk shop.

The original four Ohio teams were back with the same representatives: Hay and Thorpe for Canton, Nied and Ranney for Akron, O'Donnell and Cofall for Cleveland, and Storck for Dayton. Leo Lyons represented his Rochester Jeffersons in person this time, and Doc Young was there in the flesh for his Hammond Pros. Also present were Walter H. Flanigan, the veteran manager of the Rock Island, Ill., Independents; Earl Ball of the Ball Mason Jar Company, who was backing the Muncie, Ind., Flyers; George Halas and Morgan O'Brien, representing starchmaker A.E. Staley's Decatur, Ill., team; and Chicago painting and decorating contractor Chris O'Brien who had operated his Cardinals most seasons since 1899.

Art Ranney, who took the minutes, added some confusion for future readers. O'Brien's Cardinals -- as did many of the Chicago teams of the time -- took their name from their location in the city, in this case Racine Avenue. Ranney mistook the Racine Cardinals of Chicago for a team from Racine, Wisconsin, and labled them so in the minutes. Later observers sometimes compounded the mistake by taking "Racine Cardinals, Wisconsin" for two teams -- the Racine Cardinals AND Wisconsin.

Everybody who'd been invited did not show up. Two famous teams -- the Minneapolis Marines and the Ft. Wayne Friars -- ignored the summons. More surprising were the absences of the Detroit

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Heralds, Columbus Panhandles, and Toledo Maroons, three teams that usually played the Ohio Quartet. If any team was represented by letter this time, Ranney failed to note it.

Despite the absentees, there were so many present -- fourteen men representing ten teams -- that the meeting was held in Ralph Hay's auto showroom rather than his office. Some of the men sat on running boards. To alleviate the Ohio heat, Hay had thoughtfully provided several buckets of beer which hung over the fenders. Had the police shown up and arrested everyone for violation of the Prohibition Law, the whole future of professional football might have been changed.

Although the meeting was officially called to order at 8:15 p.m., the men had all been there for several hours by then. The beer was free and so was the talk. Presumably, they'd settled all the tough questions by the time Hay suggested they go on the record and make it official.

Sidestepping Maginnis

The first order of business was to settle up Massillon. The managers were confronted with an unwanted, last-minute backer. Vernon "Mac" Maginnis, the manager of the unsuccessful Akron Indians in 1919, wanted to field a road team and call it the "Massillon Tigers." No one but Maginnis thought the idea would work. Ralph Hay probably calculated the number of angry Massillonians who would NOT buy Hupmobiles if he helped someone take the name of Massillon Tigers in vain. Ranney and Nied had been associated with Maginnis in the Akron flop of the year before and were apparently not enthusiastic about the experience.

Maginnis' representative was not admitted to the meeting, but Massillon was counted as present anyway. Hay, who'd tried to get a real Massillon team started, considered himself as their spokesman because, as soon as the meeting started, he stood up and announced that Massillon was withdrawing from professional football for the season of 1920. That was that. With Maginnis neatly outflanked -- Hay's announcement was tantamount to telling the non-Ohio managers: "Do not schedule any 'other' Massillon team" -- the meeting went on.

Real Business

They decided to change the name of the organization slightly to the American Professional Football ASSOCIATION. This may have simply reflected a broadening of the geographic area covered by the organization, but the choice of "association" rather than "league" is interesting. One possibility is that the managers felt "association" was a milder word, denoting less of a commitment for the members -- an "association" was loose and general, a "league" was tight and specific. Considering how things went in 1920, "association" was the right word.

Several managers urged Hay to take the association's presidency, but he realized his name meant little anywhere but northeastern Ohio. The way to earn instant respect on the nation's sports pages was to choose the one man any football fan would recognize -- Jim Thorpe. Old Jim was promptly elected, and sure enough, the headlines in those few news stories that announced the APFA the next day led with Thorpe's name. Everyone in the room knew that Thorpe's executive ability did not match his playing skills, but they

figured they could count on Ralph Hay as the power behind the throne.

Stanley Cofall was named vice-president and Art Ranney was elected secretary-treasurer, giving the three main Ohio clubs all the executive positions.

The group decided to charge a \$100 fee for membership. It looked good on paper, but according to George Halas, no money ever changed hands. At this point, the last thing anyone wanted to do was discourage any important team from joining the association.

Other business involved appointing Dr. Young as chairman and Flanigan, Storck, and Cofall as members of a committee to draft a constitution and by-laws, the decision that all clubs were to furnish a list of all players used during the coming season to the association secretary by the first day of the new year, and an agreement that all teams would have "Member of American Professional Football Association" printed on their stationery.

A Mr. Marshall of the Brunswick-Balke Collender Company, Tire Division, presented a silver loving cup to be given to the team that was "awarded the championship by the association." The phrase is significant because it indicates the title was to be determined by a vote of the members instead of a mathematical won-lost formula. In other words, as had been done in the Ohio League, the championship would not necessarily go to the team with the best won-lost record if the members believed another team had shown itself to be stronger.

No time was spent discussing rules; pros used the same ones the colleges made up. A new one for 1920 allowed a team to kick an extra point from directly in front of the goal posts instead of straight out from where the touchdown was scored.

The meeting adjourned with the promise that the president would call another meeting in January.

The Major Problems Unaddressed

According to the official league minutes, none of the three major pro football problems -- salaries, jumping, and college players -- had been addressed directly, even though these were why they needed an organization in the first place. Actually, certain agreements were reached before the meeting was called to order. We know this because most of the newspaper stories about the meeting stressed actions not in the minutes -- that the association pledged never to use undergraduates and that contracts would be honored.

Nothing was said in print about a maximum on salaries.

If this provision was dropped, the teams were taking a step back from the August meeting. However, the assembled managers may have had no choice if they were to keep the Decatur Staleys in their ranks. The Staleys' men, under the leadership of young George Halas, apparently were paid as players and also as employees of the Staley Starch Company. The double-salary enabled Halas to hire excellent players -- although he always insisted that the clincher for most of them was that they'd be given practice time from their work at the starchworks -- but the Staley payroll most surely was above any earlier-set limit.

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Who's in This Anyway?

The ten teams represented at the September 17 meeting are considered charter members of the American Professional Football Association, and, by extension, of the National Football league. Massillon is usually counted on a technicality -- they were there, they just didn't play. Actually, unless the conference formed in August is assumed to be a different league altogether, the charter members were the Akron Pros, Canton Bulldogs, Cleveland Tigers, and Dayton Triangles. By stretching a point, the teams represented by letter -- probably the Rochester Jeffersons, Buffalo All-Americans, and Hammond Pros -- can qualify. The Decatur Staleys, Chicago Racine Cardinals, Muncie Flyers, and Rock Island Independents only became members on September 17, but the point is not worth arguing.

Three other teams -- the Detroit Heralds, Columbus Panhandles, and Chicago Tigers -- have traditionally been included as charter, meaning "first year," members. On October 2, Ralph Hay announced that he'd received a letter from the Heralds expressing their intention of joining the APFA, but no follow-up ever made the papers. Evidence that the Panhandles and Tigers joined during the season, as most historians assume, seems to be based on the fact that they played several games each against APFA members during the year.

It may seem strange that we cannot be absolutely certain what teams to include and what teams to exclude from the APFA in 1920, but the truth is the organization was almost never mentioned on the sports pages of any city involved from September of 1920 until it met again in 1921. There are no convenient final standings from which to get a list of members; the association didn't keep standings.

If the \$100 membership fee was waived for any new members as it apparently was for those at the September 17 meeting, joining the association called for nothing more than agreeing to honor rivals' contracts and to avoid hiring collegians. Every team in the country said it did both anyway. If saying it to an APFA member was the price of scheduling a game with Akron or Decatur or one of the others, it's possible twenty or thirty teams "joined."

More important than counting heads is the fact that, within a month's time during 1920, a few pro football pioneers managed to accomplish the raw organizational beginning of what would become one of the most successful and ubiquitous sports monoliths in the world -- the National Football League.

Now, all they had to do was go out and actually play a season and somehow keep from losing their shirts.