

Ringers by the Van: The Ironton Tanks vs. the Portsmouth Smoke House, 1923

by Carl Becker

For thirty years or so after young men first appeared in western Pennsylvania in the 1890s playing for pay, the use of "ringers" -- men playing for money under assumed names -- was a staple in the professional and semi-professional game. Collegians, who had initiated intercollegiate competition in the 1870s, regarded football as their game and, ignoring the commercialization of intercollegiate football, saw the cash nexus as a stain on amateurism and held the professional game in contempt. They condemned the professional men for the use of ringers, for betting on their own games, and for allegedly fixing games.

The men hiding their identities as ringers came on to the field out of varying purposes. Because administrators in their institutions disapproved of professional football, collegiate and high school coaches used *noms de guerre* when playing for professional teams. Earle "Greasy" Neale, the head football coach at West Virginia Wesleyan, played, for instance, as "Foster" for the Canton Bulldogs in 1917. Collegians wishing to protect their status as amateurs also concealed their real identities. One of the many collegians exemplifying the practice in the period was Pete Calac, a halfback at Wesleyan, who was in the Bulldogs' lineup as "Anderson" that year.

Hired by the boosters in a community, on occasion an entire squad of collegians using local names played for a team; the boosters, gone rampant, hoped to secure an edge against men in other communities in wagering on a game. In 1921 ten Notre Dame men played for a semi-professional team in Carlinville, Illinois against nine regulars from the University of Illinois varsity pretending to be a team from Taylorville, Illinois. Supposedly, fans in each community wagered \$50,000 on the game. Ringers of these sorts entered the lore of American football in the period, investing the game with a tainted but picaresque mythology.

A wholesale use of ringers, a bizarre chapter in the practice, came in 1923 in a game between the Ironton Tanks, a semi-professional eleven in Ironton, Ohio, and the Smoke House, a squad in Portsmouth, Ohio. The teams played in the name of two communities in southern Ohio on the Ohio River. Ironton, a city of about 15,000, was the center of the regional pig-iron industry. Downriver about thirty miles, Portsmouth, its population around 30,000, was the scene of a substantial industry in shoe and steel manufacturing.

As a resident in Ironton remarked, the communities were "ancient and hereditary foes." They were rivals in growth, civic improvements, and athletics. Often roiling the rivalry were the newspapers of the cities -- the *Register*, the *Morning Irontonian*, and the *News* in Ironton and the *Times* and *Morning Sun* in Portsmouth.

Organized as a semi-professional team in the fall of 1919 by former football players at the high school, many veterans of military service and nearly all blue-collar workers, the Ironton Tanks, named after the innovative weapon of the Great War, played an abbreviated schedule, winning two games, losing one, and tying one against teams from neighboring communities.

The next year the Tanks began to assert the supremacy in the Ohio Valley that they would enjoy through much of the decade. Giving them leadership were two outstanding and colorful players. Charleton "Shorty" Davies, who had played behind the great Chic Harley at Ohio State, was a speedy and shifty halfback running from the single-wing. He also served as coach and captain of the team. William "Bill" Brooks, who had played on the freshman team at Ohio State in 1916, was a hulk of a tackle at 250 pounds, controlling the line of scrimmage. Also manager of the Tanks, he arranged their schedule. An emotional man, he cried when play did not go well for the Tanks. Twice in 1920 the Tanks met a newly-organized club from Portsmouth, the Smoke House.

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Sponsored by the Smoke House Company, which operated a tobacco shop in Portsmouth selling "Good Cigars in Perfect Condition," cigarettes, and candies and serving as a hangout for men playing pocket billiards, the Smoke House eleven was a successor to the Norfolk & Western squad (the Norfolk & Western railroad operated a large classification yard in the city) that had played in 1919. Many of the Smoke House men had been on the N. & W. eleven, and nearly all had played on the local high school team. The coach of the N. & W. club, Walter Dodge, continued in that position. Probably the best Smoke House player was Heckie DeVoss, a big running back.

In the first game between the clubs in 1920, Frank Merriwell-like, Shorty Davies, slightly injured and standing in street clothes on the sidelines during the first half, entered the fray in the second half and ran eighty yards with an intercepted pass to enable the Tanks to gain a tie, 6-6.

No untoward incidents or problems on or off the field attended the game, but the second meeting saw a minor controversy presaging trouble. Just before play was to start, the Tanks protested the appearance of several Smoke House men in uniform whose names were not on the team's eligibility list. Teams might add new men week-to-week, a practice known as "loading-up"; but if they had exchanged eligibility lists naming players who had been on the roster the previous week, they could not do so. Nonetheless, a team might surreptitiously "load-up" with ringers. A good crowd on hand, the Tanks agreed to play and proceeded to defeat the Smoke House 14-0. They finished the season with five wins, one loss, and a tie. The Smoke House had a very ordinary season, winning three games, losing four, and tying three.

The teams also played two games in 1921, both in a witches' brew of bubble and trouble. Touted to be a wide-open contest, the first game, played at Ironton, proved to be a slogging affair, the field a sea of mud, a scoreless tie the result. After the game, the Tanks bitterly complained about the officiating, arguing that the disproportionate yardage in penalties against them had taken the "fight out of them" and deprived them of opportunities to score. Portsmouth sports columnists ridiculed the Tanks and asserted that they "whining" was "small town stuff" typifying Tronton.

Quarreling among the teams, sportswriters, and the communities continued through negotiations for the second game. The Tanks insisted on selection of new officials because the crew in the first game had not been "credible." "Now," remarked a Portsmouth sports columnist, "the Tanks might stop their crying." Portsmouth people complained that the Tanks intended to use "outside" players – ringers -- and Irontonians recalled alleged instances of ringers playing for the Smoke House in 1920. The coming game was the talk of both communities. Fans rallied at bonfires, and bands prepared to play victory marches. A large crowd, more than 4,000, nearly a thousand coming from Ironton by rail and road, were on hand for the game at Portsmouth.

The game touched off a controversy that poisoned relations between the two communities for months. With the Tanks leading 14-0 and but four minutes to play, the Smoke House players walked off the field saying that the darkening field prevented continuance of play. The officials announced that the Tanks had won by forfeit 1-0 and that all bets were off. Protesting their decision, the Tanks insisted that the actual score by play should stand, and men from Ironton who had laid bets on the Tanks were ready and willing, though not able, to lynch the officiating crew. Fights broke among fans in the stands even before the Smoke House men walked off the field, and fighting continued in the streets near the field afterwards. One fight in a street left heads bloodied and bowed.

Worse yet for the Tanks, the manager of the Smoke House eleven, Harry Doerr, an officer of the Smoke House Company, refused to pay them their share of the gate, a healthy sum for the day, nearly \$1,000. He explained that the Tanks had contravened the contract for the game in using three ringers.

A war of words followed between the communities, calumnies becoming common language of the day. Doerr's refusal to pay the Tanks, said the *Register*, was the "cheapest, rankest, low-downed, crawfishiest, utterly despicable trick of the whole affair..." For the *Irontonian*, it was the "cheapest trick ever known in what can be called CIVILIZATION." Both newspapers condemned Portsmouth as "poor losers," as a community that could never stand defeat, as an "outcast city athletically." Joining in the attack on the Smoke House and Portsmouth was a reporter for the *Herald-Republican*, a newspaper in Waverly, a small town near Portsmouth: Doerr's action was a "cheap squeal from a cheap bunch of sports and only reflects the character of the city." The newspapers in Portsmouth responded in kind: the Tanks had "pulled off a regular White Sox stunt," they had "put over" a "wretchedly crooked deal," they would resort to "any kind of trick to win."

Passing off a rumor as truth, the *Times* reported that four men in Ironton had solicited the community for money to pay the ringers and then had shipped off \$5,000 to Portsmouth to bet on the Tanks. Though reluctantly admitting that they had used three ringers, two of them then playing for Marshall and Morris Harvey, nearby colleges in West Virginia, the Tanks retained an attorney and threatened to take legal action against the Smoke House. Doerr would not yield, saying that he would not give the Tanks one penny.

Finally, just as the season was coming to an end, the editor of the *Times*, Harry Taylor, called on Doerr to pay the Tanks their share of the gate, noting that the Smoke House men, though ethically beyond reproach, had continued playing after discovering that the Tanks were using the ringers. Doerr stepping aside, a temporary manager turned over a check to the Tanks for their full share of the gate.

The money sweetened a good season for the Tanks, their record at seven wins and two ties. For the Smoke House players, the payment was a sour note in a season seeing them win three games, lose three, and tie two, largely in a weak schedule. Perhaps their tie with the Tanks, a bittersweet achievement, marked the high point of their play.

At the resolution of their dispute, the Tanks and the Smoke House men spoke of amicability and continuing their competition in 1923. But after agreeing at the opening of the season to meet the Tanks, the Smoke House manager decided that the "bitter feelings" existing between the two teams precluded their appearance on the same field together. Perhaps his decision spared the Smoke House players two losses.

Their new coach, Dan Fries, a West Point man, could not transform the mediocre squad of 1921 into a strong team. Playing through another weak schedule, the Smoke House men won five games, lost three, and tied one. Attendance at their games, reflecting their schedule and play, was not good, numbering often less than a thousand. The Tanks, adding two or three good players to their roster, were a strong team. For the second straight year, they were undefeated, winning eight games, only a tie with a good team from Huntington, West Virginia, the Boosters, marring their record; and they defeated the Boosters before and after the tie.

Their crowds small in 1922 and their pleasure in ostracism also small, The Smoke House men agreed to meet the Tanks twice in 1923, expecting each game to yield a good gate. The Smoke House entered the season anticipating improved play. Now their coach was Sam Ackroyd, a former collegiate halfback. Candidates for the team constituted a "wealth of material," a "versatile crew" forming a "fast heavy line."

Probably the outstanding new man to make the roster was Jake Pfau, a halfback who had recently played for Portsmouth High. But the Tanks were not standing still. Among several new men joining them was Terry Snowday, who had been an outstanding back on a strong eleven at Centre College. They evinced, said one report, an "unbeatable spirit" and engaged in "rollicking practices." Moreover, recently a committee of ten businessmen had successfully conducted a community-wide campaign to raise funds for the purchase of new uniforms and equipment. The businessmen were beginning to exercise a proprietary direction of the Tanks, seeing in them a "standing advertisement" for the community.

The Tanks opened their season in good order, winning their first three games. After defeating a local team, the Fraternal Order of Eagles, in what was essentially a practice game, they handily defeated the Columbus Seagraves, supposedly a formidable team, 18-0. Then they met the Columbus West Side eleven, touted as the "cream" of Columbus, a "splendid array" of collegians who had played for Notre Dame, Ohio State, Ohio Wesleyan, and other universities. In a "bitterly contested" game, the Tanks won 7-6, their winning touchdown coming in the fourth quarter. Caterwauling started after the game. On returning to Columbus, the West Side players made complaints about the officiating that found their way into the *Ohio State Journal*. As the *Journal* reported it, the West Side incurred penalties of two hundred yards, the Tanks but thirty.

Ironton would have none of the story. Departing Ironton, said the *Irontonian*, the West Side boys had been good sports and had praised the Tanks for their sportsmanship and "good will" but once in Columbus had been unable to accept the taste of defeat and then had manufactured a falsehood. As a reporter for the *Register* saw the affair, the West Side players, peeved as they were at losing a game that they expected to take in a runaway victory, had attempted to keep the score out of the newspapers in Columbus and then had lied about the penalties. The Tanks, he argued, had drawn more yardage in penalties than had the West Side. For him, the Tanks' victory was almost a triumph of good over evil: the

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Tanks, indifferent to receiving payment for their play, played football for sheer pleasure, the West Side men for profit. Obviously smarting over their defeat, the West Side players would soon seek revenge against the Tanks.

Meanwhile, the Smoke House men were playing and winning. Showing "fighting spirit" and "pep" before a "banner crowd," they defeated an eleven from Washington Court House 13-0, two long drives resulting in touchdowns. Their next game against the Seagraves eleven that had lost to the Tanks 18-0 only a week earlier gave Smoke House fans a basis for comparing their team with the Tanks. As had Tanks' fans, Smoke House partisans read reports of a Seagraves eleven that had many collegiate players on its roster. The Smoke House men, though practicing hard every evening, could not mount an offensive attack but managed to squeeze out a win on a safety, 2-0.

Thus the Smoke House and Tanks were unbeaten as they prepared for their first game at Ironton. Believing that they had a "fast and strong" eleven and practicing diligently, the Smoke House players thought that all was in "apple pie order" for a victory over the Tanks. They brushed aside the comparative advantage that the Tanks could point to in scores against the Seagraves, insisting that they had met a Seagraves eleven that had improved considerably since its loss to the Tanks. They divined in Portsmouth high's recent win over Ironton high, a team that Davies coached, a sign of their coming victory over the Tanks.

But Davies was steeling the Tanks for revenge. He believed that his line, weighing on average about 185 pounds, could smother the smaller Smoke House line on offense and defense. Smoke House fans, though, shared their team's confidence, and more than five hundred journeyed to Ironton by bus, railroad cars, and automobiles to cheer for their men. But they fell silent in the large crowd -- at least 2,200 paying spectators -- as the Tanks flattened the Smoke House 40-0. According to the *Irontonian*, the Smoke House men played like a boy scout eleven, like school children against the Yale varsity. They could take some solace in their share of the gate, an equal share giving them over \$900. No disputes attended the game, on or off the field, during or after play.

More than a month later, the teams met for their second game, this time at Portsmouth. In the intervening weeks, each eleven played four games. The Smoke House men won three games and tied one against quite ordinary opponents. Their tie, scoreless, came against the Chillicothe Athletic Club, a team that they beat two weeks later just before meeting the Tanks again. They defeated a team from Lancaster 64-0. Playing stronger opponents, including the Boosters in two games, the Tanks won three games and lost one. The loss, their first in three years, came at the hands of the Boosters after they had defeated them two weeks earlier.

Going into the second game with the Tanks, obviously the Smoke House players wished to avenge their humiliating loss in the first contest or, at the very least, make a better showing. If they used the lineup of the first game, certainly theirs was not a bright prospect. Shored up by emotion and strenuous practices, neither of which could entirely cancel out the Tanks' physical advantages, they might avoid a trouncing. Of course, they might load-up or even accept the stigma of cancelling the game under some pretext -- but at the cost of a lost gate. What they did was at once deceitful, amusing, and daring -- all typical elements of semi-professional football in the 1920s.

Clearly the Smoke House men attached great importance to the impending contest. Early in the week before the game, Ackroyd called them together for a special meeting to discuss the "future" of the team. Discomfited by his warning that the team was deteriorating from the lack of practice but buoyed by his pep talk, all promised to attend all practices and then declared "We're going to beat the Tanks."

Following one of their "long and hard" practices, they announced their intention to go beyond merely beating the Tanks: "The Tanks are going to be squashed, emptied, shot-full of holes and flattened." The *Sun* and the *Times* seconded the players' optimistic pronouncements in roseate headlines over columns describing the Smoke House practices. Ackroyd, said the *Sun*, had created a powerful machine out of earlier chaos. The *Irontonian* agreed, asserting that he had put the best team on the field that "ever donned the navy blue and moleskins under the name of Portsmouth." Smoke House players, perhaps feeding on the sanguine talk around them, envisioned a win over the Tanks giving them claim to the mythical championship of the Ohio Valley.

Ackroyd did not place his faith in victory entirely in practices and rhetoric. By all accounts, even in the *Sun* and *Times*, he was loading-up for the Tanks. As the *Sun* reported on the day of the game, "it is conceded

that new faces may be seen in today's lineup." No reporter revealed who the new men might be. Read later in the light of what happened at Portsmouth, such reports hinted, perhaps, at Smoke House skulduggery.

The heady language of the day heightened interest in the traditional rivalry. A fervor, said one reporter, equaling that of a Yale-Harvard game, inflamed fans. As many as a thousand Irontonians intended to travel to Portsmouth, leaving the streets of their city deserted. Hundreds in automobiles planned to leave in the early morning hours on Sunday to avoid the rush on the Ohio River road. Others expected to catch traction and railroad cars for the thirty-mile trip. Fans reaching Portsmouth early enough could see the junior teams of the Portsmouth clash for the championship of the valley. At Portsmouth, Smoke House partisans muttered prayers on Sunday morning for their heroes.

The crowd, one estimate placing it at three thousand, another at four thousand, witnessed a curious spectacle, a strange episode in the sports history of the Ohio Valley. At 2:00 p.m. Ackroyd and, significantly, only a few of his men, cheered on by their fans, ran on to the field for warm-up drills. The Tanks also appeared soon but, to the consternation of their followers, without Davies, Brooks, and fullback Clarence "Concrete" Poole, who had gone to the Carnegie Tech-Notre Dame game at Pittsburgh on Saturday and had not yet arrived in Portsmouth. The Portsmouth sportsmen "waltzed up and down" the Ironton sidelines "hungry" for bets; but few Ironton fans, knowing that a local judge had warned everyone not to bet on the game under the pain of arrest, would accept wagers.

At 2:15, reported the *Irontonian* sarcastically, a huge truck, a van used for "moving household goods, bonded liquor, monkeys, and football players" drove up to the main gate, the driver demanding entrance. A lonely 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 van backed under the goal posts. Then over the lowered tail-gate, fifteen or sixteen football players attired in Smoke House jerseys tumbled on to the ground. Almost immediately the crowd was able to identify them as players of the Columbus West Side eleven, the team that the Tanks had defeated 7-6 in the game of penalties. For Ironton fans they were "cleverly and cunningly disguised as a wolf in a sheep's skin." As the Smoke House partisans cheered the West Side men, Irontonians felt a "sickening fear" and became queasier as they looked in vain for the missing Tanks.

Then, 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 went ahead 7-0 until the West Side scored in the third quarter to draw within a point, 7-6. Fans from Ashland, Huntington, Wheeling, New Boston, Columbus, Mud Sock, and, of course, Portsmouth, all communities wishing to see the famous Tanks fall, went wild with joy. But Davies soon turned shouts into silence, running seventy yards for a touchdown; later the Tanks crossed the goal line again, posting a final score of 21-6.

The Smoke House players on the sidelines, said a reporter for the *Register* had "symptoms of dying" as the Tanks drove through the West Side eleven. He pictured them, too, as envious schoolboys: "On the sidelines rested the Portsmouth aggregation like a grammar school team witnessing the clash of two college elevens." Some made spectacles of themselves. Dewey Adams, the "famous" halfback, was a "sick" man; Ackroyd cried like a baby; and Jimmy Taylor, the quarterback, polluted the air with language scarcely fit for the Sabbath. The Smoke House men suffered financial distress, too. From the paid admissions of little more than two thousand, the Tanks received \$800, the West Siders \$600, the Smoke House players nothing, not a "franc."

Reaction to the scene varied among sportswriters. Readers of the *Times* might have thought that nothing unusual transpired. In a bareboned column, the *Times* reporter simply stated that the West Side Athletic Club had "represented" Portsmouth and had lost 21-6 in a "quiet and orderly" game and that the Tanks could glory in a "double" victory, one over Portsmouth, one over Columbus. Perhaps chagrined, the *Sun*, which did not publish issues on Monday, said not one word about the game. Nor did any Columbus newspapers.

At Ironton, the response, of course, was different. The *Irontonian* was more amused than angry. Ironton, wrote its reporter, had to give Portsmouth credit for a "delightful surprise party." The Smoke House people had been charming hosts who had learned a lesson, namely that when planning a "surprise party for the Tanks, get the Canton Bulldogs." On the sports page of the *Register*, a reporter affected casualness in his description of the game, saying little about the Smoke House subterfuge. He did chide

the West Side men for insisting on playing fifteen minute quarters -- sometimes teams played 12 ½ minute quarters -- in the belief that they could wear down the "sandlotters" from Ironton. They deserved to leave the field of battle "chastened and humiliated."

Facetiously, one scribe reported that the crowd thought that the West Side men were really the Columbus Tigers because they were in a cage in the van; more seriously, he went on to say that the Ironton fans, forgetting the admonition against betting, began laying bets when they recognized who the caged men were.

On the editorial page of the same issue of the *Register*, the editor was more irritated than his reporters were. For him, the fault lay not only with the Smoke House team, but also with all of Portsmouth. He noted that the Smoke House fans had, in effect, paid over a \$1000 for the prospect of a victory and then had to slink away from the stands after the Tanks downed the Columbus team. Smoke House players, he wrote, should resent the implication of their inferiority in the fielding of a foreign team in their name.

Above all, Portsmouth had acted in a reprehensible way: "The pulling of such an unsportsmanlike stunt in 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."

The varying responses to the episode said much about the state of semi-professional football in the region and probably in the nation. It was a game awaiting some definition of standards. Anything seemed to go in the name of winning. Appropriately, almost at that moment, Amos Alonzo Stagg, the renowned collegiate coach who often took professional football to task, was scorning such shenanigans as the essence of the game.

At bedrock, the Smoke House men -- the manager, the coach, and the players -- had behaved irresponsibly. In their pretense of girding up for a great game, they had deceived the whole community, not just fans. Unfortunately, fans and sportswriters in Portsmouth -- and elsewhere -- often viewed loading-up as a harmless caper. They should have questioned the integrity of the Smoke House men -- and perhaps their own -- for their willingness to condone such conduct. But local pride was a powerful force not easily dislodged by ethical concerns.

Had the West Side won at Millbrook, surely the Tanks, their fans, and loyal sportswriters would have vented their anger against Portsmouth for many days. Probably they would have called for all athletic teams in the city to cease competition with Portsmouth teams -- a typical threat of the day when one team in a community had a great grievance with one in another community.

But with a victory and their share of the gate in hand, the Tanks made no real issue of the Smoke House deception. In fact, they had the best of worlds. They could complain, but mildly, about the trickery of Portsmouth or affect forbearance in not complaining and then rejoice in a triumph over scoundrels. In good conscience, they could not have railed against the Smoke House men. Through a good part of the season, they had on their roster one Jones, who played in a masked helmet to conceal his identity; he was, in fact, Ralph Alvis, who was then playing for West Virginia Wesleyan.

After defeating the Smoke House or the West Side, the Tanks closed out their season with two wins over strong elevens, one the Cincinnati Harrisons, the other the Boosters. With a record of ten wins and but one loss, they lay claim to the semi-professional championship of the Ohio Valley and could claim, said some observers, the championship of the state.

The Smoke House men played no more games after the West Side players "represented" them. Though their record of five wins, two losses, and a tie was the best in the history of their team, it meant little. Their victories came against quite ordinary elevens, their losses to the great rival up the river. And they had become parties to a humiliating debacle that hung over them like a dark cloud. Probably as a result, the Smoke House enlisted little support from the community in 1924 and began a descent that ended in dissolution in 1925.