

HAPPY BIRTHDAY NFL?

by P.F.R.A. Research

On September 17 of this year the National Football League will celebrate its 61st (ed. note: 79th as of 1998) birthday, but some new information uncovered by a P.F.R.A. research team indicates the celebration may be a bit belated. By the time mid-September rolls around, the NFL might actually be closer to 61 years and one month old.

As most fans know, the NFL has for many years regarded a meeting in Ralph E. Hay's Hupmobile showroom in Canton, Ohio, as its initial organizational meeting. That get-together -- held on Friday evening, September 17, 1920 -- has been described by nearly every writer who ever penned a book on pro football, how Hay, Jim Thorpe, George Halas, Leo Lyons and eight or ten other pioneers sat around on the cars' running boards, drank beer from buckets hung over the fenders, and created in a few hours' time the first pro football league.

The minutes of that meeting have been reprinted many times, and a bronze copy hangs on the wall at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. (See the facsimile at end of this article.)

In summary, the following business was transacted:

1. A name -- American Professional Football Association -- was chosen.
2. Officers were elected.
3. A \$100 membership fee was set (but Halas is witness that no money changed hands).
4. A committee to draft a constitution was named.
5. The secretary was to receive a list of all players used during the season by Jan. 1, 1921. (This to stop players from jumping from team to team.)
6. Clubs were to advertise their APFA affiliation on their stationery.
7. The league champion was to receive a trophy.

And with that -- according to all accounts -- everyone went home and began playing football.

There had never been any reason to question that this marked the birth of the NFL. However, it was known that some sort of a preliminary meeting had been held earlier. The NFL's Official Record Manual says, "Meeting was held among interested teams in August." P.F.R.A. members Bob Braunawart, Bob Carroll, and Joe Horrigan became curious as to just what teams might have been "interested" and what they might have done about it. The researchers began checking through several 1920 Ohio newspapers in hopes of finding some mention. To their surprise, they found a great deal more than they expected.

When they examined the August 21, 1920, edition of the *Canton Evening Repository*, a startling headline caught their eyes: **'PRO' FOOTBALL MOGULS FORM NATIONAL BODY.**

The lead made no bones about it: "The American Professional Football Conference, an organization national in scope was formed here last night at a gathering of men connected with the promotion of the professional gridiron game, held in the offices of

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Ralph E. Hay, business manager of the Canton Bulldogs, professional champions. Hay was chosen secretary of the new body."

The researchers were staggered. If the *Repository* story was taken at face value, a league had been "formed" nearly a month before the accepted date! Moreover, a name had been chosen and an officer elected.

The story went on to describe other business that was conducted: "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. 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."

Further on, the story named the teams represented:

The Cleveland Indians, Canton Bulldogs, Dayton Triangles, Akron Indians, Buffalo, Hammond, Ind., and Rochester, N.Y. are charter members of the organization; Rochester and Buffalo were the only cities admitted which were not personally represented last night. They were applicants by letter.

After a few moment's euphoria, the researchers became cautious. As far as is known, no reporter was present at the meeting. A logical assumption would be that the *Repository* reporter got his information from Ralph E. Hay. Could the scribe have misunderstood? Could Hay have overstated what actually happened?

Obviously the thing to do was to check other papers for accounts of the meeting. The Canton *Daily New* also reported the August 20 meeting, again most likely from interviewing Hay. Its story agreed that the Canton manager had been named secretary of a new organization called the American Professional Football Conference and that teams had agreed to refrain from bidding for players. An added piece of information was that the owners had set a maximum salary figure for players.

On one count, the *Daily News* differed from the *Repository*. Hammond, it said, had also been represented by letter. That point seemed minor to the researchers; essentially the stories were the same. But the question still remained: did the other representatives (Akron, Cleveland, and Dayton) understand that they had formed a league?

The Akron *Beacon-Journal* (August 21, 1920) named the men present at the meeting: Hay and Thorpe for Canton, Carl Storck (mis-named "Ray Storch" in the story) of Dayton, Stan Cofall and Jim O'Donnell from Cleveland, and Frank Nied and Art Ranney of Akron. The story agreed that players would not be allowed to jump to higher bidders and added that no college player still in school would be "molested." However, the *Beacon-Journal* called what had been agreed upon a "working agreement and made no direct reference to any organization. The P.F.R.A. researchers felt that this report actually weakened the argument for an August formation of the league.

A story in the Massillon *Evening-Independent* (August 26, 1920) which stated that a "professional football conference" was "formed" did not particularly strengthen the case. The date of the story indicated that it was probably based on the Canton newspaper stories.

The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* (August 22, 1920) used the name "American professional football conference." but the timing again indicated a rewriting of the original Canton stories.

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At this point, the researchers could not say with any degree of certainty that the "league" was not a product of Ralph Hay's imagination. Without evidence that one of the other men at the meeting believed a formal organization, the August 20 gathering remained only an obscure footnote.

Some contradictory data began to show in the way the September 17 meeting was reported by the newspapers. Although the Canton *Daily News*, on the day of the meeting said: "At least seven cities will be represented. It is to be the second session of the American Professional Football conference," other papers indicated that the September meeting was the first.

Akron *Evening Times* (September 18): "An organization of professional football team ... was perfected at Canton last night."

Massillon *Evening Independent* (September 18): "An American Professional Football association was organized with Jim Thorpe"

Akron *Beacon-Journal* (September 18): "The American Professional Football association was organized last night ..."

Cleveland *Plain Dealer* (September 19): "... organized last week ... first meeting ..."

In an effort to find new evidence Horrigan and Carroll went to the Ohio Historical Center in Columbus. There newspapers from all over the state are on file. They found what they were looking for in the Dayton *Journal*. In the August 22, 1920, edition under the headline "TRIANGLES LISTED IN GRID LEAGUE" the *Journal* stated positively: "A football league ... was organized." Most importantly, items within the story indicated that it had been based on an interview with Carl Storck rather than Ralph Hay.

Moreover, Storck apparently was using a name for the league prior to the September 17 meeting because on the day of the meeting the *Journal* announced that Storck was leaving Dayton to "attend a meeting of the American Professional Football conference."

* * *

And there the trail ended. Although other newspapers have been checked with care, no other evidence of significance as yet come to light. Even in Ohio, pro football was not big news in 1920.

The research team feels that three theories are supportable:

First, the August 20 meeting was actually the birth of the league, but because of the wider scope of the September meeting (more teams represented, more business conducted, more publicity) some papers at the time mistakenly reported the second meeting as the first.

Second, the August meeting was only a preliminary meeting after all, but Ralph Hay and Carl Storck represented it as being more, either through misunderstanding or through enthusiasm.

Third, there were actually two organizations formed within a month's time in Canton -- a "conference" of four Ohio teams (Akron, Canton, Cleveland, and Dayton) following by a larger "association" of teams from throughout the midwest.

Perhaps the whole answer may lie in exactly how the participants defined "conference," "association," and "league."

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In the belief that -- at a minimum -- this information sheds new light on the formation of the National Football League, the P.F.R.A. has submitted all of its findings to the NFL.

NOTE: In 1987, the NFL revised its official chronology as printed in the annual *Record & Fact Book*. Among many changes, the new wording for 1920 included this: "An organizational meeting, at which the Akron Pros, Canton Bulldogs, Cleveland Indians, and Dayton Triangles were represented, was held at the Jordan and Hupmobile auto showroom in Canton, Ohio, August 20. This meeting resulted in the formation of the American Professional Football Conference."

Copy of the minutes from the September 17 meeting:

Frank Nied

A.F. Ranney

AKRON PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM

Office
21 N. Summit St.
Bell Main 1766

League Park
Carroll & Beaver Sts.
Akron, Ohio

E.W. Tobin, Coach
C. Copley, Captain

MINUTES OF MEETING - SEPTEMBER 17th - 1920

Meeting called to order at 8:15 P.M., by chairman, Mr. Hay. Teams represented were Canton Bulldogs, Cleveland Indians, Dayton Triangles, Akron Professionals, Massillon Tigers, Rochester, N.Y., Rock Island, Ill., Muncie, Ind., Staley A.C., Decatur, Ill., Racine Cardinals, Wisconsin, and Hammond, Ind.

Minutes of previous meeting were given in a resume by the Chairman.

OLD BUSINESS

Massillon withdrew from professional football for the season of 1920.

NEW BUSINESS

It was moved and seconded that a permanent organization be formed to be known as American Professional Football Association. Motion carried.

Moved and seconded that officers be now elected, consisting of President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. Carried.

Mr. Jim Thorpe was unanimously elected President, Mr. Stan Cofall, Vice President, and Mr. A.F. Ranney, Secretary and Treasurer.

Moved and Seconded that a fee of \$100.00 be charged for membership in the Association. Carried.

Moved and seconded that the President appoint a committee to work in conjunction with a lawyer to draft a constitution, by laws and rules for the Association. Carried.

Mr. Thorpe appointed A.A. Young of Hammond, Chairman, and Messrs. Cofall, Flannigan, and Storck associates.

Moved and seconded that all clubs mail to the Secretary by January 1, 1921, a list of all players used by them this season, the Secretary to furnish all clubs with duplicate copy of same, so that each club would have first choice in services for 1921 of his team of this season. Carried.

Moved and seconded that all members have printed upon their stationery, "Member of American Professional Football Association." Carried.

Mr. Marshall of the Brunswick-Dalke Collender Company, Tire Division, presented a silver loving cup to be given the team awarded the championship by the Association. Any team winning the cup three times should be adjudged the owner.

It was moved and seconded that a vote of thanks be extended by the secretary to Mr. Marshall.

The meeting was adjourned.

Next meeting to be called by the President sometime in January.

A. F. Ranney