

J. Thomas Hetrick. *Chris Von der Ahe and the St. Louis Browns*. Lanham
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Before there was George Steinbrenner, there was Christian Frederick Wilhelm Von der Ahe. Before Ted Turner, the peripatetic owner of the Atlanta Braves, donned the flannels for a one-game stint as field manager, there was Von der Ahe. In fact, the stereotypical “magnate” — running the club both on and off the

field, bellowing commands, chintzing on his players' salaries — can be traced to this German entrepreneur from the late nineteenth century. *Chris Von der Ahe and the St. Louis Browns*, J. Thomas Hetrick's account of this "strange baseball odyssey," has all the ingredients of a made-for-TV movie: melodrama, political intrigue, sex, and comedy, to name a few.

According to Hetrick, Von der Ahe "loved to portray himself as a one-time poor immigrant who braved a perilous sea voyage to come to America. Arriving in the United States alone and near penniless, [he] started out as a grocery clerk. Within the space of fifteen years he had become a store proprietor, saloon owner, real estate holder, landlord and baseball magnate." He knew little about the finer points of the game yet, as is often the case with men of his ilk, "fancied himself as an excellent judge of ballplayer abilities, although the facts say otherwise."

Believe it or not, the St. Louis Browns once were the class of baseball (back in the 1880s), and Von der Ahe was understandably proud. He spared no expense in presenting his product, gussying up his ballparks, serving as a generous host for the press, and striving always to improve the team and, by extension, his own image. Members of these fabled teams included future mogul and notorious tightwad first baseman/manager Charles Comiskey, who evidently learned a thing or two from his boss; third baseman Arlie Latham, one of baseball's early flakes, known as "The Freshest Man on Earth"; and outfielder Tip O'Neill.

Von der Ahe was infamous for exacting fines. On-field errors were costly not just in terms of the outcome of the games but for the out-of-pocket costs to the culprit. The suspicious owner hired detectives to spy on his players, hoping to catch them in sundry compromising positions so he could punish them. Some went so far as to accuse him of levying the fines as an attempt to recoup his extravagant expenses, which contributed to his downfall. Like the Steinbrenner of old, Von der Ahe never hesitated in meddling with the team, especially when it came to firing the manager, only to quickly rehire him. He was ridiculed by his players, fellow owners, and later, as his fortunes faded, the sporting press: "His trademark signature, 'Christ. Von der Ahe,' was also debased by [the *Sporting News*], which made veiled references to Von der Ahe's ego by comparing him to Jesus."

Despite the Browns' success, Von der Ahe's good fortunes did not last. Constantly trying to keep his charges from jumping to rival teams and leagues in the days before the reserve clause, it was difficult for Von der Ahe to maintain anything but the spiraling collapse the team would suffer for decades.

He was also involved in an inordinate number of lawsuits, from players for back wages and fines, from businesses for failure to pay bills, even from his own son. Hetrick devotes a section of the appendix to listing more than fifty actions involving the put-upon Von der Ahe.

Nor could the outrageous owner take solace in his personal life. Among his other failings, Von der Ahe was a notorious womanizer, and his marriages, as the saying goes, did not end well. His relationship with his son, who was also involved in the club's operations, was similarly strained.

While Hetrick is obviously extremely thorough in his research, some of his inclusions are questionable. He has a habit of quoting Von der Ahe phonetically: "You nefer vus cut out fer a baseman! Ven I vunt a rough and tumble acrobat to blay dot base I'll hire a band of moosick to blay effery time he dose falls." While used for accuracy and to show the reader how Von der Ahe's players and the press made fun of the German accent, this device could strike many readers as insulting and unnecessary (as well as undecipherable). Von der Ahe's facility with the English language was probably no worse than many other business leaders of the era who came from foreign lands.

Despite this flaw, Hetrick's eye for detail is indefatigable, his game accounts and rendering of the period and players most astute. *Chris Von der Ahe and the St. Louis Browns* is a most admirable study.