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Hoosier History: PINE VILLAGE FOOTBALL

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Not many people know it, but Pine Village in rural Warren County on the western edge of Indiana was once a national power in the sport of professional football. Here is its story:



1900 group picture. Taken in front of Warren Co. Courthouse. (Source: Hubert B. Shackleton.)

In 1898, Clinton Beckett, the principal of the small Pine Village school who was also the high school teacher, introduced the sport to the Villagers. Two teams were formed: the high school team and the "town" team made up of the high school team and men into their twenties. Jacob Shackleton served as manager of the team, according to accounts in the *Attica Daily Ledger*. Football became the Village's dominant sport of interest for the next 20 years.

Before Jake Shackleton became manager of the team, he was a farmer who had an interest in batteries, and in the early 1890s he set up a telephone system between his

close-by relatives and himself. This convenience was soon extended to his neighbors. (The depot along the C.E.&I. railroad a mile or so from his house became known as Chatterton.) While farming and managing the team, he was exploring the possibilities of setting up a telephone exchange at Pine Village. He needed \$1,000, a substantial amount of money for the time, for the exchange. He needed another \$1,000 for the team. In 1903 when he approached his brother, Ben, for a loan of \$2,000, he was told, "Get rid of the team and I'll lend you the \$1,000 for the exchange." He sold the team to Claire Rhode.

Even though Rhode became the new manager, Jake was an ardent supporter of the team. His son, Roy, playing on the Purdue football team, was considered one of its star players. Jake hired a player, Eli Fenters, as foreman of the line men. who hired other players to set up poles and string telephone lines from Pine Village out through the countryside. This helped with expenses for those who lived outside the area.

Under different editors and publishers, *The Pine Village News* and later the *Warren Sentinel-News* served the community with a local paper for the first several decades of the century. Unfortunately, only 10 or so issues have been preserved, and many of the team's opponents' newspapers, also brittle from age, have not been preserved. When the small town papers from that time period are available on microfilm, researchers can find little information about the small town independent football teams. References to a game played would be found only in the newspaper's personal items. Day, place, and score might be all the information given. However, readers showed interest in the college teams.

Coverage of high school and independent football focused more on the drinking and rowdyism of the spectators and the dangers of the game and injuries to the players. Editors pointed out that the bodies of young teenagers were in no condition to withstand the rough playing of the sport. Many said it should be banned in high school. Skimpy uniforms with little padding offered no protection. Parents, especially mothers, were concerned about injuries, and for several years newspapers at the end of the football season would list high school players throughout the country who had died as a result of football injuries. Many small town school authorities ruled out football as a school sport, and it was soon replaced by basketball. Pine Village high school football was discontinued in 1912.

Often referred to in later years as manager of a renegade team, Rhode scheduled games on a catch-as-catch-can basis. A number of teams refused to play Pine Village, legend says, because of the size of the players and their rough playing. Newspaper accounts confirmed that they often outweighed their opponents.

By 1914 the town team made up of local players and a few men from surrounding towns who loved to play the game had established quite a reputation, but little was known of them in the cities of Indiana. By the end of the 1914 season this lack of recognition would change. The Mickey Athletic Club of Indianapolis, knowing little of the team and nothing of the location of the town, accepted a challenge for a game. Pine Village beat them 111 to 0. Rensselaer, always a football town and homing in on the 1914 Independent State Championship, accepted a challenge by P.V. to play a game December 3 on neutral ground at Morocco. Pine Village won by a score of 12 to 0 and claimed the Independent State Championship. Their reputation started to spread across Indiana.

From the time Claire Rhode had taken over as manager in 1903, Pine Village claimed victory in 103 games in 11 years. In a five year stretch they were never scored on, according to many newspaper accounts written during these years. Claire Rhode had a dream for the team. On October 15, 1915, the team went pro. Rhode hired Ed Davis, all-conference tackle and Indiana University wrestling champion and 1915 I. U. wrestling coach, to take over as coach of the P.V. team.



Game against Clarks Hill. (Source: Jim Foster)

The first game in the pros was against the Marion Club of Indianapolis, played at Pine Village. All the players for Pine Village were the usual local players. Their opponents were college graduates: Matt Winters, Indiana University; Charles "Chunk" Helvie, manager of the team; Al Feeney, Notre Dame; Gordon Thomas, DePauw. Pine Village won the game 19-0.

Arrangements were made to play the Wabash Athletic Association. Rhode hired on Joe Pliska, halfback star of Notre Dame, player with Knute Rockne and Gus Dorais in the famous 1913 game when Notre Dame beat Army with their forward pass "trick" play. Also hired were Matt Winters and Bill Williams, Indiana University. Players for Wabash were Erehart, former captain of Indiana University football team, Bergman of Notre Dame, and McMurry of Dartmouth College. Wabash A.A. was laying claim to the independent championship of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan, and in 13 years had met only two defeats. The game was no drawing card. The *Wabash Plain Dealer* wrote of Pineville, "a little burg close to Lafayette -- a team heretofore unheard of." The betting was 5-1 that P.V. would not score. Pine Village won 7-0 and claimed the Independent Championship of Indiana.

The next game was against Sheridan. "Doe" Elliott, a Wabash College football star, had organized all the Wabash ex-collegiate football players he could into the Sheridan team. Pine Village won 13 to 0. As the season progressed Rhode picked up whenever he could outstanding players, many from former opponents' teams. Pine Village played Westville, a team of coal miners and the undisputed champions of all of Illinois, and defeated them 64-0.

Of all the games P. V. ever played, the Thanksgiving game against the Purdue All-Stars is the most mentioned. This is the game Jim Thorpe played in. Pine Village won 29-0. The total points scored for the 8 games played during the 1915 season: Pine Village, 271; opponents, 0.

Rhode started the year 1916 scouting for ex-college players who would keep P.V. on the football map. He wanted the players who were rated all-American, all-conference, or all-western. Through the season he hired the best: 7 all-American, 9 all-Western, and 3 all-Indiana players. The team had no schedule set at the start of the season. Rhode would throw down the gauntlet and whichever team was willing to pick up the challenge became that week's opponent. Sometimes a scheduled team would back out, and he would have to scurry around challenging another.

The accommodations at Pine Village were so few that League Park in the Wabash River bottoms became the site for several of the games. The Monon, Wabash, and the Big Four railroads made the town easily accessible for fans. Also the population of Lafayette hopefully made for larger gate receipts, although the response, if the weather was bad, was sometimes disappointing. Two games were played at Washington Park in Indianapolis.

While two years before, the major papers had not even heard of Pine Village, their games became so newsworthy that the city newspapers began giving them extensive coverage. Motion pictures were taken of several games and shown in Lafayette, Wabash, and Hammond theaters.

When Pine Village defeated the Decatur (Ill.) Indians 12-7, it was the first time an opponent had scored in 7 years. The following Sunday the Cincinnati Celts beat them, 9-6, the first time P. V. was beaten in 13 years. A return engagement with the Celts on Thanksgiving Day at Washington Park, Indianapolis, evened the score with a Pine Village victory, 23-3. On November 26, 1916, they defeated the Pittsburgh Pitcairns, the eastern champions.

Pine Village played 13 games for the season, scoring 259 points to their opponents 35. They lost two, tied two, and claimed the Indiana State Championship and the World Championship. The players were some of America's foremost university stars representing, in the main, Purdue, Indiana, Notre Dame, Wabash, and DePauw. The players were the "who's who" of football stars. It was said that the first line resembled Walter Camp's all-American teams.



A snapshot. Jim Hooker holding football. Lloyd Hammel, back row, far right. (Source: Ruth Hammel)

By 1917 Indiana professional teams of any merit were located in Hammond, Pine Village, Wabash and Fort Wayne. When they were approached in an attempt to form a pro-football league, Fort Wayne would go along only if all the games were played at Fort Wayne. This proposal was turned down. The other three teams did form the Indiana Football League and arranged to play each other twice, once on each other's gridiron. Once the league games were

in place, the teams were free to do any other scheduling they wanted. 1917 was another great year for the team with outstanding university players.

World War I and the start of the United States' involvement in the war changed the course of Indiana pro football. Uncle Sam started the draft and needed college-educated leaders. Purdue University in particular with its engineers and ROTC program had many of the qualified. Also, for the state to be enjoying fall weekends of football games -- if enough athletes could be found -- appeared unseemly. No pro games were scheduled during 1918.

After the Armistice Rhode tried to re-organize, and he did manage to get a team together and a schedule in place. His Pine Village team had played against many of the country's great professional teams, but that was not to be again. The world was changing. Herman Jones, a

teacher in the high school, tried to get a team going in 1922, and a few games were played with the surrounding small towns who also were putting together small town teams. In 1927 Claire Rhode tried one more time to get a team together, and he did manage to schedule a few games with small teams in the area. But many of the outstanding old Pine Village players were getting too old to play, and it was time to focus on making a living.

The newspapers printed during the professional years offered a plethora of material for substantiating the records of the Pine Village football team. This collection of articles proves beyond doubt that the Pine Village football team was one of the best professional teams in the nation before the forming of the National Football League.