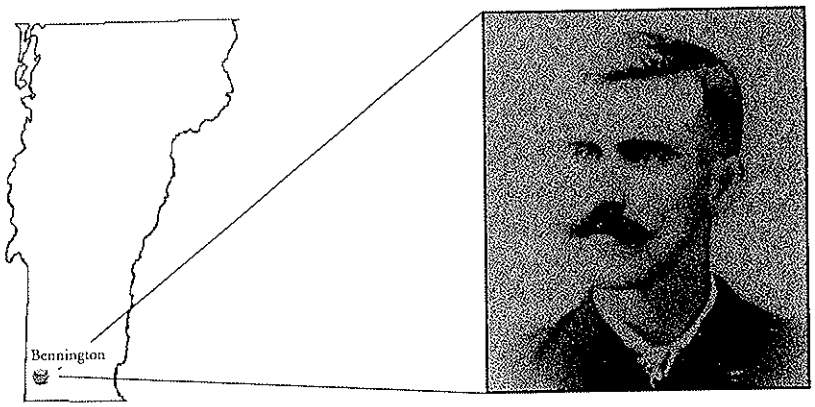


Tom Lynch

A Ball Near His Heart

David Nemec's *The Great Encyclopedia of 19th Century Major League Baseball* tells an absorbing story of Thomas J. Lynch.

Nemec's Tom Lynch was a major league ballplayer in the 1880s who went on to umpire in the big time in 1898, 1899, and 1902. He gained brief notoriety in 1890 when he was shot and almost killed in a drunken quarrel in Cohoes, New York. He recovered, however, and assumed prominence in baseball as President of the National League, serving as the N.L.'s chief executive from 1909 to 1913. Nemec then reports that Lynch survived another forty years before succumbing in 1955 at age ninety-four at his home in Cohoes.

The trouble is that Nemec's account combines the lives of two different Thomas J. Lynches. One was an itinerant ballplayer of the 1880s and '90s who enjoyed a brief major league career before returning to his New York home to work for the Cohoes Department of Public Works, dying just a few days short of his ninety-fifth birthday. The other was indeed a well-known umpire who later headed the National League and whose death in New Britain, Connecticut, in 1924 was attended by many of baseball's most significant personages. Nemec's conflation is easy to understand—for years the Hall of Fame's file on League President Thomas J. Lynch mistakenly included *The Sporting Life* item on the other Thomas J. Lynch's ill-fated encounter outside John Donovan's tavern in Cohoes.

Our Tom Lynch is not the dignitary. The Green Mountain Boy is the peripatetic early ballplayer, city laborer, and nonagenarian. Even his claim to status as a Vermonter is tenuous. This Thomas James Lynch was born in Bennington, Vermont, on April 3, 1860, the son of Bartholomew and Ann Reilly Lynch, both of County Cavan, Ireland. Shortly after his birth, however, the family moved to Cohoes, and there he grew up, and there he returned when his ballplaying days were over to live out his long life. Vermont, therefore, has only the most literal claim on him (*cf.* Carlton Fisk, among others).

Thomas J. Lynch, the ballplayer, was a rugged and versatile player, well-known for his hitting. *Total Baseball* lists him at 5'10 1/2" and 170 pounds, which was considered large in his time. Lynch played a number of positions on the diamond, including catcher early in his career and later first base and outfield. An item in *The Sporting Life* from 1886 describes him as "a good catcher and a particularly fine hitter." Box scores show him batting in the middle of the order, in the second through fifth spots. While playing for Wilmington in 1884, Lynch was acknowledged in *The Sporting Life* for one game in which he hit three home runs and another when he went five-for-five with two homers. Later in his career, his good batting eye was demonstrated when he reached safely more than ninety times by bases on balls in eighty-one games for Hartford in 1889.

Lynch was a professional ballplayer for at least ten years. On his marriage license in 1884, he listed his occupation as "base ballist." He played in the majors with the 1884 Wilmington [Delaware] Quicksteps of the

Union Association and the 1884-85 Philadelphia Quakers of the National League. In his twenty-nine major league games in 1884 (sixteen for Wilmington and thirteen for Philadelphia), Lynch batted a combined .292. When considering Lynch's average, it should be kept in mind that his era was a time of pitching dominance. Pitchers delivered the ball just fifty feet from home plate and generally held the upper hand. The present dimensions of 60' 6" from the pitching box to home plate were not established until 1893, whereupon batting averages skyrocketed.

Lynch's experience in Wilmington in 1884 yielded more than a sterling baseball performance—it also provided him with a wife. In the off-season, on November 3, the twenty-four-year-old Lynch married nineteen-year-old Mary Agnes "Minnie" Batterbury of Wilmington. The *Cohoes Daily Mirror* reported that Lynch and "his fair young bride" were surprised by his schoolmates, "who presented him with an elegant gold-headed cane" and his bride "with a handsome solid silver castor." The next summer, in August 1885, a daughter, Anne Margaret, was born in Wilmington.

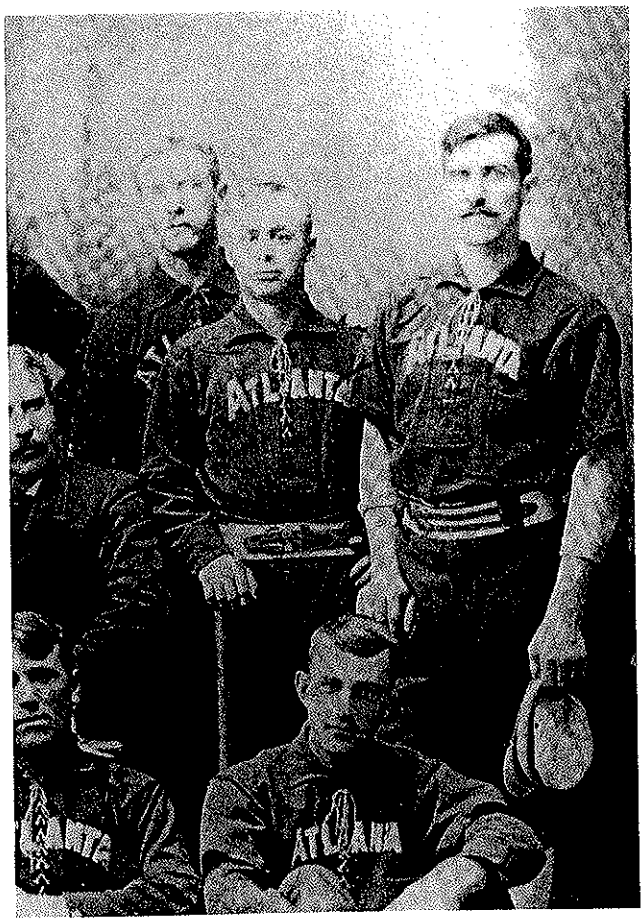
In the summer of 1885, Tom Lynch returned to Philadelphia but played in only thirteen games, batting a meager .189. He also spent time later that season with Newark of the Eastern League and Atlanta of the Southern League. In 1886 he went back to Atlanta for the entire season, playing in eighty-six games, coming to the plate 340 times, and batting .279, the tenth-highest average in the league. Then, in 1887, Lynch played the entire season in Syracuse of the International League, a prestigious circuit just a notch below the two major leagues of the time.

Lynch's experience in Syracuse included some trouble that may have foreshadowed his difficulties outside Donovan's Saloon a few years later. Lynch was suspended in September for "drunkenness," a "problem" that had occasioned a fine earlier in the season. *The Sporting Life* acknowledged that Lynch would be "badly missed at this stage of the fight as his hitting qualities are well-known and many games have been pulled out of the fire by Tom's good stick work." Evidently Lynch displayed proper remorse for his indiscretions with alcohol, as *The Sporting Life* reported a few days after the original story that "Tommy Lynch has reestablished himself in the good graces of the Syracuse management."

In the fall of 1887, after Lynch's season in Syracuse and just two years after the birth of his daughter, his marriage ended in tragedy. On November 28, his second child, George, born only six months earlier, died of consumption. On December 8, his wife, Mary Agnes, succumbed at age twenty-two from acute rheumatism. Lynch had lost a baby and his wife within two weeks of one another. Perhaps deciding that the life of a "base ballist" did not allow for the upbringing of a two-year-old daughter, Lynch left Anne Margaret in the care of his wife's family in Delaware. Though Lynch later remarried and fathered seven more children, he never had a relationship with the daughter of his first marriage. Many years after Lynch's baseball career was over, a meeting was proposed between Lynch and Anne Margaret. Feeling that she'd been abandoned by her father, she chose not to see him, and they lived their whole lives unreconciled.

Lynch continued his baseball career following the deaths of his baby and wife, playing as far south as Birmingham, Alabama, and as far north as Hamilton, Ontario. Then, in the off-season of 1890, Tom was shot and so seriously injured that *The Sporting Life* reported "Ball Player Fatally Wounded in Saloon Row." In Cohoes the incident became known as the "Doyle-Lynch Row" and garnered considerable attention in the *Cohoes Daily News*.

It seems that for some years there had been bad blood between Lynch and Bert Doyle, a local millworker. Doyle



Tom Lynch (far right) stands tall among his teammates on the Atlanta club of the Southern League in 1886. [National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, New York]

reported that Lynch had "been down on me" since an altercation three years earlier. In the early morning of October 27, 1890, after a night of drinking, Lynch and Doyle revived their quarrel. *The Sporting Life* reported that Lynch was "a muscular fellow and able to hold his own with most anybody" and Doyle was "his inferior in size and strength." After Doyle was struck by Lynch, he left Donovan's Saloon to get a weapon and later returned (to recover his hat, he told police). When Lynch saw him a second time, he said, "You want more, do you?" and knocked him down again. That was when Doyle shot him.

According to the *Cohoes Daily News*, the bullet struck Lynch so perilously close to his heart that the attending physician "dared not to probe for the ball." The coroner was called from Albany and at 9 a.m. the following morning Lynch's "ante-mortem statement" was taken. At the same time *The Sporting Life* was reporting that Lynch was "not expected to live forty-eight hours," the Cohoes newspaper was describing Lynch's "puzzling" condition:

> He apparently suffers no pain or inconvenience from the presence of a thirty-two calibre bullet in his body near the heart. He slept well last night and unless restrained by friends he would be out on the street. . . . No effort has been made to recover the ball. Unless some unforeseen complications arise, he will undoubtedly recover.

It is said that early ballplayers were a tough lot, and Lynch would seem to prove that. Indeed, Lynch did recover. In fact, a "Lynch" played ball for Troy (a neighboring city to Albany, just a few miles from Cohoes) in the Eastern League the following season. This Lynch didn't have much of a year, batting safely only thirty-two times in 157 at bats (.203). Perhaps he was limited by the after-effects of a near fatal shooting some months before.

At that point the trail grows cold. It's fair to surmise that Tom Lynch's injuries effectively ended his baseball career. We know that he lived out his long life in Cohoes, working for twenty-five years as a city laborer (according to his obituary in the *Troy Times-Record*). At some point in the 1890s he re-married and started another family. In the days before his death on March 28, 1955, Lynch was considered to be the oldest surviving major leaguer. His obituary in the *Troy Times-Record* acknowledged his long life and celebrated his baseball career that had him competing with the greatest players of the nineteenth century: "Pop" Anson, Hoss Radbourn, Only Nolan, Bill Purcell, and others.

Thomas James Lynch was not a league president in the majors, but rather a "base ballist" who lived much of his life "with a ball near his heart."

KARL LINDHOLM
RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY MARGARET CUSICK