

88 Years of Hockey in Seattle

From Metroplitans to Thunderbirds



The 1929-30 Seattle Eskimos were managed by Lloyd Turner (far left).

BY JEFF OBERMEYER

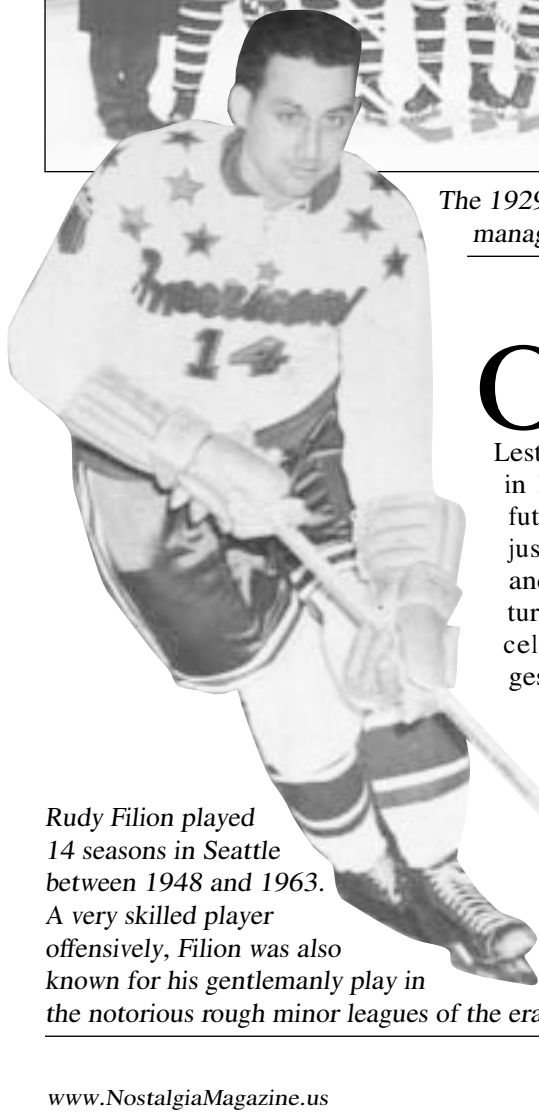
One evening in January, 1911, Joe Patrick sat down with his sons Lester and Frank at their home in Nelson, B.C. to discuss the future of the family. Joe had just sold his lumber business and was looking for a new venture. Lester and Frank, both excellent hockey players, suggested the family move to the west coast and start a professional hockey league – an incredibly bold idea at the time.



Lester Patrick, left, and Frank Patrick, pictured here from 1911, were the founders of the first professional hockey league on the Pacific Coast and were excellent hockey players in their own right.

Professional hockey was dominated by teams in Eastern Canada, and the small population of the Pacific Coast would make it hard to draw both fans and quality players. But Joe had faith in his sons, who had worked so hard for him in building his timber empire. The decision was made and a month later the family moved to Victoria, B.C. By the following January the first Pacific Coast Hockey Association (PCHA) season was underway with teams in Vancouver, Victoria, and New Westminster.

Photos courtesy Jeff Obermeyer



Rudy Filion played 14 seasons in Seattle between 1948 and 1963. A very skilled player offensively, Filion was also known for his gentlemanly play in the notorious rough minor leagues of the era.



The Seattle Eskimos and their opponents are ready to start a game in the Civic Arena, circa 1930.



The Seattle Arena was located on the corner of Fifth Avenue and University Street and was the home of the Seattle Metropolitans from 1915 through 1924. After that it was converted to a parking garage and eventually torn down in the 1960s.

Photo courtesy Dave Eskenazi Collection.

First Period – 1915 – 1924

In the summer of 1915, the Patricks decided to expand the league to four teams. The newest franchise was the Seattle Metropolitans, and work got underway in August on an indoor ice rink – The Seattle Arena.

Located at the corner of Fifth Avenue and University Street, the Seattle Arena could seat just over 4,000 fans for hockey and had an ice surface 200 feet long and 83 feet wide. It opened for business on November 12, 1915 with an ice skating exhibition, which included skating by the new manager of the Metropolitans, Pete Muldoon.

Born Linton Muldoon Tracy, Muldoon made a name for himself as a professional boxer and lacrosse player before trying his hand at hockey management. In addition to operating hockey clubs in Portland and Seattle, he would also spend a season coaching the Chicago Black Hawks in the NHL.

When he was fired from the Chicago job by owner Frederic McLaughlin in 1927, Muldoon told the owner that Chicago would never again finish a season in first place. “Muldoon’s Curse,” as it became known, was a legacy that would haunt Chicago fans and players until it

was broken in 1967, when the Black Hawks finally finished an NHL regular season in first place.

The Mets (as they were known) played their first game in the Seattle Arena on December 7, 1915, defeating Victoria by a score of 3-2. They would go on to finish the season with a respectable 9-9 record and routinely drew crowds of over 3,000 fans for home games. The next season the Mets were the top team in the PCHA, finishing with a 16-8 record. This earned them the right to play the Montreal Canadiens for the Stanley Cup, awarded annually to the top professional team in North America.

The Canadiens traveled west for a five game series against Seattle. After losing the first game, the Mets took three straight from Montreal and became the first American team to win the Stanley Cup.



Minor league hockey has always been a rough game, as can be seen here as Jack Tomsom of the Seattle Olympics (left) gets into a disagreement with an opposing player while the referee tries to separate them. Circa 1941.

The Mets would again face Montreal in Seattle for the Stanley Cup in 1919, but this time with a much different result. After the fifth game, a number of the Montreal players were struck down by the influenza epidemic which was sweeping the globe in the wake of World War I. Montreal was unable to ice a team, and the health department called off the series for fear of spreading the disease.

It would mark the first and only year that the Stanley Cup was not awarded from its inception in 1893 to the present day.

The Metropolitan would play for the Stanley Cup once more, when they were defeated in Ottawa in the spring of 1920. They continued to play in the PCHA through the 1923-24 season, but were forced to cease operations due to declining attendance. The Seattle Arena was con-

verted into a parking garage and with the loss of the only indoor ice rink in the city, there would be no more hockey in Seattle for the foreseeable future.

Second Period – 1928 – 1948

Things took a turn for the better with the construction of the Civic Arena in 1927. Located on what is today the corner of 4th Avenue North and Mercer Street, the Arena was designed as an all-purpose building capable of housing a wide range of events, including ice hockey (it would continue to host hockey games until 1995).

Pete Muldoon returned from Chicago and put together a group of investors to incorporate the Seattle Ice Skating and Hockey Association and establish a new team – the Seattle Eskimos. The new team would begin play in the fall of 1928 in the semi-professional Pacific Coast



Hockey League (PCHL) along with clubs from Vancouver, Victoria and Portland.

Not content to run his hockey operation in Seattle only, Muldoon had plans to put a new hockey club in Tacoma as well. On March 13, 1929, he traveled to Tacoma to look for a location to build a new ice arena. It was during this trip that Muldoon suffered a heart attack which killed him. At the age of 47, the father of Seattle hockey was dead.

The Eskimos continued on without their leader, and would play two more seasons before the demise of the PCHL in 1931.

Picking up where the professionals left off, the amateur Seattle City League took center stage for the next two seasons. The four-team league featured teams from Ballard and West Seattle, as well as sponsored teams such as Washington Athletic Club and Hullin's Terminal. While the quality of play was diminished, the amateurs still drew strong crowds to the Civic Arena, often playing Sunday night double headers.

The semi-professional game returned to Seattle from 1934 to 1941, with the arrival of the Sea Hawks. Playing in the North West Hockey League, the Sea Hawks won league championships in 1936 and 1938 under the leadership of former Metropolitan and future Hockey Hall of Famer Frank Foyston. They shared the Civic Arena with the City League, which still main-



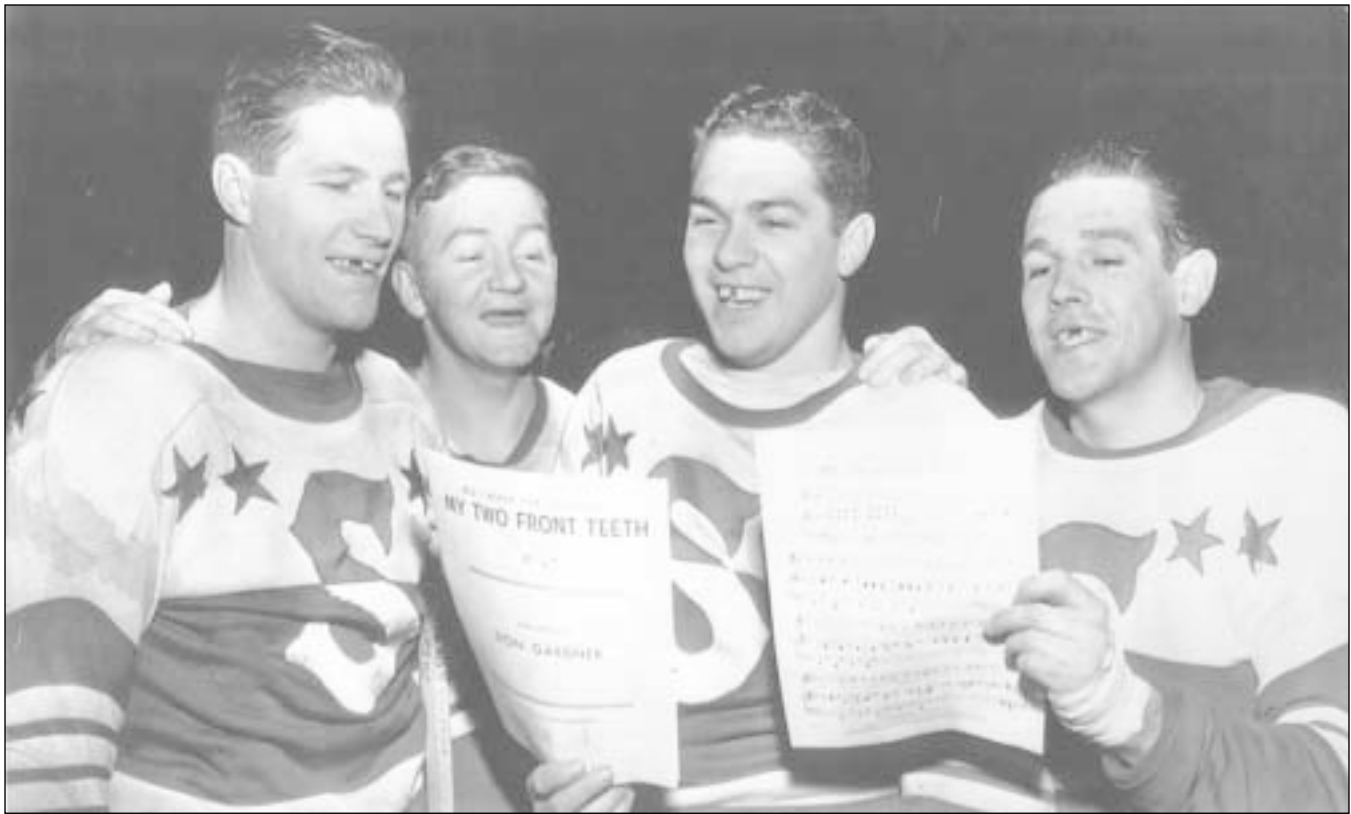
Guyle Fielder A Seattle Champion

Guyle Fielder had a 23-year professional hockey career. His most productive 15 seasons were spent in Seattle playing for the Bombers, Americans, and Totems between 1953 and 1969.

During his time in Seattle, Fielder led the Western Hockey League in assists twelve times, total points scored nine times, and was named the league's Most Valuable Player on six occasions. He is the WHL all-time leader in games played, assists, and points scored. He also led the Totems to three WHL championships.

Standing five feet nine inches tall and weighing 160 pounds, Fielder was a small player, even by the standards of the era. Playing at center, he was known throughout hockey for his tremendous stick-handling and passing skills. He did get a few opportunities in the National Hockey League with Chicago, Boston, and Detroit, but could never seem to find a home in the big leagues and he always came back to the WHL.

Playing professionally until the age of 42, he is the all-time minor league scoring leader and widely acknowledged as the greatest minor league hockey player ever.



Seattle Ironmen players (left to right) Stan Maxwell, Freckles Little, Jack Jackson, and Joe Bell sing "All I Want for Christmas is my Two Front Teeth" in 1951.

tained a strong following.

The start of World War II in 1941 put semi-pro hockey on hold as all able bodied men entered the service. The City League continued to operate, made up mostly of older players and some former professionals who worked in local war industries.

In the fall of 1944, a new amateur league was formed and it took the name of one of its predecessors – the Pacific Coast Hockey League. During the first year of the new league, the Seattle Ironmen would win the regular season title and earn the right to play the Boston Olympics of the Eastern Hockey League for the U.S. Amateur Hockey Association championship. After losing the first two games in Seattle, the Ironmen regrouped and defeated Boston in four straight games to take the amateur championship.

Third Period – 1948 to 1975

Hockey has always been a rough game, but the professional minor leagues from the late 1940s into the 1960s were especially violent. The players wore little protective gear, no helmets, and the goalies didn't even wear face protection.

Fights between players were common. To top it off,

there was no glass or fencing to separate the fans from the players, and sometimes fans and players got into physical altercations.

In one famous incident that took place in 1951, three players from the Tacoma Rockets climbed over the boards (still wearing their skates!) and chased a Seattle heckler from his seat. The case continued down the aisle and out into the lobby before the fan finally escaped the building and the players returned to the ice.

Prior to the start of the 1952-53 season, the PCHL changed its name to the Western Hockey League (WHL) and the Ironmen, under new ownership, changed their name to the Seattle Bombers. The name change didn't help the team in the standings, however, as the Seattle franchise suffered through five losing seasons in the first six years after attaining professional status.

The only bright spot was the play of a 22-year-old center named Guyle Fielder who first played in Seattle for the Bombers during the 1953-54 campaign. Little did anyone know how significant he would become in the future success of hockey in Seattle.

Poor play on the ice resulted in lagging attendance, and the Bombers withdrew from the WHL prior to the 1954-55 season in an effort to regroup financially. The team



Guyle Fielder, Gordie Sinclair, and Val Fonteyne of the Seattle Americans playing in the Civic Arena circa 1955.

was sold and returned to the league for the 1955-56 season with new ownership and a new name – the Seattle Americans.

The majority of the former Bomber players, including Guyle Fielder, returned to the club. While the product on the ice improved, the team still struggled at the gate until yet another ownership change took place prior to the 1958-59 season. The team again changed names, this time becoming the Seattle Totems.

The next ten seasons would be the true “Golden Age” of Seattle hockey. Led by their superstar Guyle Fielder, the Totems appeared in the WHO finals five times during that span and won the league championship in 1959, 1967, and 1968. During that same period, Fielder won four Most Valuable Player awards and led the league in scoring six times.

Success on the ice led to success at the gate, and the Totems drew very well in the early 1960s. In the fall of 1964, the team moved its home games from the Civic Arena to the Coliseum to take advantage of the larger

venue.

Located at the intersection of First Avenue North and Harrison Street, the Coliseum was built as part of the 1962 World’s Fair and could seat over 12,000 fans for hockey. This had an even greater impact on attendance, especially when the hated Portland Buckaroos came to town and over 10,000 fans would routinely pack the Coliseum.

Unfortunately, the Totems began to slowly slip after their 1968 championship. They made the playoffs during the next two seasons, but would never again appear in the league finals.

During the last six seasons, the club was in operation, the Totems had a losing record every year, including the disastrous 1971-72 seasons in which they set a league record in futility by winning only 12 times during the 72-game season.

The Totems would fold in the spring of 1975, and Seattle has not had professional hockey since. ☹

Jeff Obermeyer first became interested in the history of hockey in Seattle in 1991. Since that time he has compiled a large collection of memorabilia and reference materials dealing with hockey in the Northwest, including photos, equipment, and newspaper clippings. He has been interviewed on KFR Sports Radio, and recently recorded a series of radio spots called the “Seattle Hockey Moment” which are played during the broadcasts of the Seattle Thunderbirds. In addition, he has operated the Seattle Hockey Homepage website for the past three years. The site (222.seattlehockey.net) is devoted to the history of hockey in Seattle and includes photos, statistics, team histories, and player profiles. Jeff can be contacted via email at jeff@seattlehockey.net.