

This photograph was taken on the steps of St. Louis Hall on March 18, 1909, and captures the visiting Detroit Tigers and the team of St. Louis College (as St. Mary's University was known then). Melvin Gallia is visible in the back row, and the Detroit group includes three future Hall of Famers: manager Hugh Jennings, outfielder Ty Cobb, and outfielder Sam Crawford.



“FANNING THE MIGHTY TY COBB”: ST. LOUIS COLLEGE VS. THE DETROIT TIGERS

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A pitcher-batter confrontation played out in dramatic fashion, almost like a scene from a Hollywood script, in a baseball game on the campus of St. Mary's University 100 years ago.

When we recently discovered an eyewitness account of this long-ago game, we were reminded of the classic 1984 baseball movie *The Natural*. In that film, a young, unknown amateur pitcher (played by Robert Redford) first attracts national attention when an exhibition is arranged and he strikes out the major league's greatest hitter (called “The Whammer” in a role clearly modeled on Babe Ruth and played by Joe Don Baker).

Something very much like this movie scene actually happened on the St. Mary's campus a century ago, when a 17-year-old student from St. Louis College (as St. Mary's University was known then) faced the greatest hitter in major league baseball—and struck him out.

SPRING TRAINING IN 1909

The Detroit Tigers, champions of the American League in both 1907 and 1908, came to San Antonio for spring training in 1909. The Detroit team prepared for the

upcoming season with daily workouts and exhibition games with local teams. On March 18, 1909, the morning edition of the *San Antonio Daily Express* announced a game with the headline “Detroit vs. St. Louis College. Tigers to Face School Lads This Afternoon at West End.”

ONE OF BASEBALL'S ALL-TIME GREATS

The star player for Detroit was Ty Cobb, who still holds the major league record for the highest lifetime batting average.

Although modern baseball fans often name Babe Ruth as the greatest player of all time, baseball writers who saw both Ruth and Cobb play generally accorded that honor to Cobb. For example, when the Baseball Hall of Fame inducted the first group of players in 1936, Ty Cobb led the voting (with 222 votes out of 226 cast), with Honus Wagner and Babe Ruth tied for second (215 votes each).

This was no ordinary player who led the Tigers onto the college campus in the spring of 1909.

THE GAME ON MARCH 18, 1909

To face Ty Cobb and the rest of the Tigers, St. Louis College sent Melvin Allys Gallia to the mound. Gallia, an electrical engineering major from Woodsboro, Texas, not only pitched for the team, but also

proved to be their strongest hitter, batting in the #4 cleanup position. In the bottom of the first inning, Gallia stroked a double and took part in a double steal, as the students took an early 2-0 lead.

The newspaper account the next day described the young pitcher's memorable strikeout: “Gallia pitched good ball for St. Louis. He had the pleasure of fanning the mighty Ty Cobb and a couple of others just about as dangerous.”

The Detroit lineup eventually prevailed and won the game, as expected, but the *Daily Express* noted that “the Collegians arose to the occasion with a spirit that surprised even their most hearty rooters. The game was a credit to the school and the Tigers complimented them on their showing.”

MISINFORMATION

Tales of this legendary game have been told and re-told over the years, but misinformation has crept into those accounts.

Recent baseball historians mistakenly place the game in March 1910. Although the Detroit Tigers did train again in San Antonio during 1910, Cobb elected to work out by himself in Georgia. We knew that Cobb was not in the Alamo City during 1910, so we searched through the microfilm reels of the *San Antonio Daily Express* from 1909 and found the original

accounts of the game.

Similarly, historians and yarn-spinners alike tell us that Ty Cobb gained a measure of revenge on Gallia by hitting a long home run late in the game. The box score shows five doubles by the Tigers and one triple—but no home runs by either side. The newspaper story praises Gallia for pitching “good ball” and explicitly states that the “triple was the liveliest performance of his delivery.”

AFTER THE GAME

The Detroit Tigers won the American League pennant again in 1909. Ty Cobb himself achieved the rare feat called the Triple Crown, leading the American League in 1909 in batting average, runs batted in and home runs. Melvin Gallia went on to a major league career, pitching for three teams between 1912 and 1920.

March 18, 2009 will mark the 100th anniversary of the day when Gallia showed that he was a “natural” with the talent to strike out “the mighty Ty Cobb.”

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THE SAN ANTONIO DAILY EXPRESS: THURSDAY MORNING, MARCH 18, 1909.

DETROIT VS. ST. LOUIS COLLEGE.

Tigers to Face School Lads This Afternoon at West End.

School lads will be the adversaries of Detroit this afternoon when the Tigers take an outing to West End and beyond to meet St. Louis College baseball team in a game.

The affair will be in the nature of an outing for the champs, Manager Jennings believing that there is a chance of getting stale early without some side sport. The trip to the college is not short, and the start will be made shortly after dinner. The game is scheduled for 3:30 o'clock.

St. Louis College has arranged for a little feed in honor of its distinguished visitors, and the Detroitis will be detained at this after the game. It is the regular weekly holiday for St. Louis.

Courtesy Photo/BlackSoxFan.com