

# A.J. Heinemann

*A Colorful Figure in Local Baseball Lore*

by

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A single pistol shot pierced the winter morning quiet of the old ball park at the corner of Tulane and South Carrollton Avenues in New Orleans on January 8, 1930. It was the self-inflicted shot that ended the life of one of the most colorful figures in minor league history, Alexander Julius Heinemann.

## *From Concessionaire to Club President*

Heinemann was born in New Orleans and attended college at Spring Hill in Mobile, Alabama. He returned to New Orleans as a young man and worked at Dwyer Brothers on Magazine Street. He left this job to sell peanuts, pop, candy, and popcorn at the old Sportsman's Park, home of the Pelicans.

When Athletic Park was built back of the White City Amusement Park, later the site of Heinemann Park (Pelican Stadium), Heinemann had saved enough money to buy the ballpark concession.



His advancement with the New Orleans Pelicans was rapid. He became secretary of the Pelicans in 1904 and a vice president in 1912. In 1914, when the ballpark was moved to Tulane and South Carrollton, absentee-owner Charles Somers named Heinemann the Pelicans president and named the ballpark Heinemann Park.

Heinemann bought heavily into the stock of the ball club. At the time of his death, his interest in the Pelicans was worth more than \$300,000.

## *A Record of Success*

The record of the New Orleans Pelicans during Heinemann's years as club president is unsurpassed. During Heinemann's tenure, the Pelicans won Southern Association pennants in 1915, 1918, 1923, 1926, and 1927. Johnny Dobbs managed the first two

pennant winners, Larry Gilbert was manager of the other three. During Heinemann's years Joe Jackson, Dazzy Vance, Hank DeBerry, Jim Bagby, Joe Martina, and Joe Sewell were among the New Orleans Pelicans who moved on to the major leagues.

In his relations with the owners of other ballclubs, Heinemann gained an enviable reputation as an honest businessman and a true sportsman. He was favorably known also for his just dealings with the public and with the managers and players he employed.

Heinemann was a strange personality. He like to bluster and shout orders and appear to be a miser, but when he heard a down-and-outer's hard luck tale he was the first to dig down and offer aid. He sent kids through college and gave large sums to many charities, but he always insisted that these kindly acts be kept secret. As Pelican president, he inaugurated a Kid's Day, allowing the youngsters to come to the ballpark free one day a week, and game admission was always free to clergymen. In minor league baseball circles he was known both for his ability and his eccentricities. One peculiarity cost the club big money. Heinemann stuck to his boast that "Heinemann Park is the only baseball park in America where soft drinks are sold for five cents."

### *An Eccentric Original*

Part of the fun of going to a game at Heinemann Park in the 1920's was razzing the man for whom the stadium was named – Heinemann himself. Much of the time he looked like a clown. His favorite outfit for a game was a shabby alpaca (a wool-like fur) jacket, a battered straw hat, and a grin curving around a fat cigar. Sometimes he added spats and a cane. The fans jeered as he paraded up one stadium aisle and down another. He would have been disappointed otherwise. Larry Gilbert, years later, told of the reason for Heinemann's performances. When the Pelicans were having a hard time of it, Heinemann would parade around the stands so that the fans would get on him, and not on Gilbert and his players.

He was also known for having painted signs all over his office at the ballpark expressing his philosophy. Some of these were:

#### **PASSES DON'T PAY YOUR SALARY**

If you're a good ballplayer your friends will be glad to pay to see you.

#### **MY DAILY PRAYER:**

Please keep my nose out of other people's business.

#### **AGREEMENT**

I hereby agree not to lend money. The Bank agrees not to run the ballclub.

The boy who painted these signs, Leo Pohlman, was educated by Heinemann. Leo worked at the ballpark for him. One day Heinemann called him into his office. "*Leo, I want you to paint a sign over that door: THIS WAY OUT.*"

"*I can save you a lot of words and time,*" replied the young painter, "*simply by painting EXIT.*"

"*I want THIS WAY OUT.*" insisted Heinemann.

Pohlman replied, “*Well, EXIT means the same thing.*”

“*Paint THIS WAY OUT like I told you,*” ordered Heinemann. “*And when you get through I’ll have another one for you: ‘A Full Stomach and a Bankroll Make a Man Temperamental.’*”

### ***The Bitter End***

Heinemann never married, but no one seemed to think of him a lonely, that is not until January of 1930. He had lost heavily in the 1929 stock market crash. He felt responsible because his protégé, Larry Gilbert, had suffered financially by following Heinemann’s investment advice. Heinemann also suffered from severe attacks of rheumatism, which affected him both mentally and physically.

In December of 1929, Heinemann visited Hebrew Rest Cemetery, then in Gentilly. He remarked to a friend, “*Maybe I’ll be there soon. Then I won’t have anything to worry about.*” No one paid much attention. His friends remembered Heinemann’s words shortly after New Year’s Day, 1930, when he shot himself to death in his office hall at Heinemann Park, at the age of 52.

Shortly after he was found, two of Heinemann’s close friends, both minor league managers, arrived at the ballpark – Jake Atz and Larry Gilbert. Here’s what they had to say.

Atz: “*He was one of the best guys that ever lived, but nobody ever understood him.*”

Gilbert: “*This is the greatest personal loss I have ever known.*”

### ***The Last Word***

Hundreds came to the funeral. There were the leading citizens of New Orleans and the Pelicans’ batboy to whom Heinemann had quietly been like a father. There were the kids who sold pop at the park, the players, and the fans who had loved his shenanigans. As he had predicted a month earlier, Heinemann’s final resting place was Hebrew Rest Cemetery in Gentilly.

His hand-written will indicated that financial losses had combined with ill health to bring about his suicide. The will also reimbursed Larry Gilbert for any money he had lost in the stock market. Several nieces and nephews contested Heinemann’s will on the grounds that he was insane when he wrote it. Doctors had found him quite sane, however, and the will was upheld.

A.J. Heinemann had the last word.

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