

# FROM THE ARCHIVES: The Perfect Season at BVU

By **DANA LARSEN**

*Pilot-Tribune Editor*

Buena Vista University celebrates its homecoming, but football is a long tradition at the school. This 1898 team (pictured) was perhaps the most dominant of all, completing a season without allowing any opponent to score, and was given the title, "Champions of Northwest Iowa." It appears that not many challengers wanted to tackle this squad; their three opponents included Storm Lake High School, a Fonda town team, and Morningside College.

In the early years, there was both a Storm Lake town team and a college team, and players seemed to move back and forth playing for both at will, with little attention to whether players were actually qualified to participate. There may have even been some professionals joining the BV squad from time to time.

Records are scarce, but the sport may have started there in 1893, when an Irish-born student, J.P. Mullen, got his hands on a rulebook for the fledgling sport and suggested organizing a team, which included the college president's son, J. Weber Linn, who

went on to be a well-known professor at the University of Chicago and delighted in telling stories of how he was "the worst player on the first team" of his alma mater.

The squad made its own crude uniforms and marked out a field on the campus believed to be located where Smith and Swope Halls now stand. For its first game, BV College challenged a team made up of workers from the railroad roundhouse at Cherokee.

The Cherokee squad arrived in a snowstorm, but BV's center was missing. A local businessman showed up with a strapping fellow he said would be willing to fill in if the students would show him how to play. The man, introduced as "Mr. Root," seemed to learn quickly and led BV to its only touchdown in the 6-0 victory. The next

day when players went to thank the businessman, they were told that their emergency center's name was not really Root, and that he had played four years for Princeton University.

The first big man on campus for BV football was speedy halfback Willis Edson, who played in the late 1890s, then joined the University of Iowa for its unbeaten seasons in 1999 and 2000. He played over 30 games at



his position and his teams were never beaten. He was a lifelong supporter of BV, and in 1920, Edson Hall was built in his honor.

One of the most storied of early players was John Beard, a 185-pound bundle of muscle who grew up working the Sioux City stockyards. One of the BVU trustees funded his way, making him likely the first scholarship athlete. Beard was best known for his temper. When his fury broke loose, the BV coach would "have the boys throw him down on the ground and hold him there until he was able to control himself."

In one game, an official called BV for an offsides penalty and threatened to eject Beard if he didn't stop breaking the rules. The college history records that Beard

"struck out like a bolt from Zeus" and left the official on the turf with blood spouting from his face. The player was charged with assault, but his coach filed a countersuit against the official for cursing at his player, and both cases were eventually dismissed. What became of the violently uncontrollable star? He entered the ministry.

Beard went on to preach the Gospel to the rough lumberjacks in camps through the northwestern frontier, and was sometimes known to settle his rowdy congregations down with his fists before delivering the sermon. He then enlisted as a chaplain in World War I in the Wild West Division and emerged a much-decorated hero. He also served in World War II, and later in life completed a 3,000-mile trek through the wild regions of Canada to bring the ministry to those in unsettled areas. He died at 68 in 1951.

Not every season was so memorable. In 1908 the college couldn't field a team, and in 1909 it opened with a loss to Morningside 114-4. The college newspaper refused to print the score, only terming the game, "the holocaust."

The first Homecoming at BVU was in 1913. The team lost the game, but the celebration was termed such a success that it was decided to make the event an annual one.

The team was still playing on a makeshift field on the grass in front of Old Main in 1917, and the boundary between field and fans was rather loose at best. In one game, a fan on the sidelines suddenly ran into the contest and caught a pass.

About this time, the team name emerged, as the college history tells it. A sportswriter for the Pilot-Tribune was fond of shortening the team name to "BV'ers" in his headlines, and that soon evolved into "Beavers."

Bradford Field was built in the mid-1920s and evolved into the current stadium.