



Brother Heinie Groh: The Bottle Bat Man and Fifty-Year Mason ©

by Dr. Ivan M. Tribe, KCT, KYCH, 33°

To the degree that Henry Knight Groh is remembered by baseball fans today, it is usually for his unusually shaped bat that resembled a milk bottle with a slender, elongated handle. However, Groh was much more than that, being one of the best fielding and hitting third basemen of his generation. In addition, "Heinie" (as most German-Americans named Henry were nicknamed in that era) was a fifty-two-year member of E. T. Carson Lodge No. 598 in his adopted hometown of Cincinnati. Henry Knight Groh was born in Rochester, New York, on September 18, 1889. As a youngster, Henry and his older brother Lewis both developed a serious interest in baseball, and both eventually played in the big time although Lew only got into two games with Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics in 1919. Rochester was a hot baseball town, being a stalwart in the International League from 1899 until 1962, albeit the city didn't really experience its best days until the team became the crown jewel in Branch Rickey's vast St. Louis Cardinal farm system from 1928.

When Heinie finished high school, he was about to enter the University of Rochester when fate intervened, and in 1908 he accepted an offer to play shortstop with Oshkosh in the Wisconsin-Illinois League. He later recalled that his parents thought he would be back home in less than a month, but the youth stayed for the rest of the season. While Groh did well in the field, he batted a lackluster .161.

Heinie Groh was bitten by the "baseball bug" and was determined to improve his skills with the bat. As he later told baseball historian Lawrence Ritter, "I kept

practicing and practicing at it, and the next year I hit about .285, and the year after that I made it to .300 [actually .297]."

For the 1911 season, he played first for Decatur in the "Three I" League until July when the New York Giants purchased his contract and assigned him to Buffalo, where he hit .333, and the Giants brought him up to the parent club in 1912.

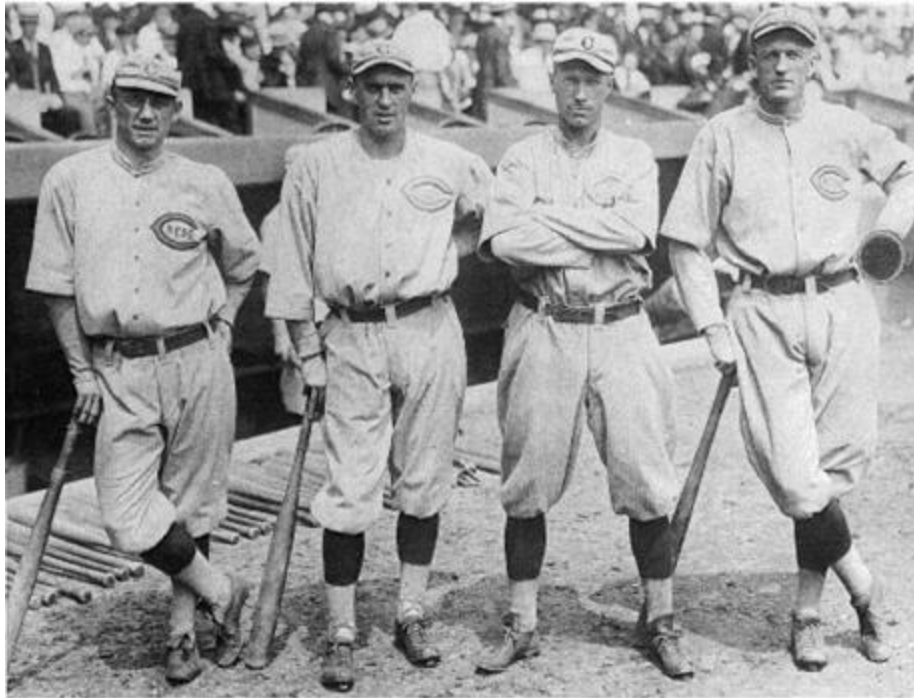


Heinie Groh with his "bottle bat."

Groh made his major league debut as a pinch hitter for the Giants on April 12, 1912. Umpire Bill Klem thought New York manager John McGraw was playing a joke on him by sending the pint-sized infielder into the game, but Heinie had the last laugh by hitting a single. Still, he didn't play much that year getting into only twenty-seven games and batting a respectable .271. In that first year he did get a custom bat made for him at McGraw's suggestion with a tick barrel for maximum contact with the ball, but with a thin handle that he could best grip with his small fingers and hands. Thus the bottle bat became Groh's trademark for the remainder of his career.

The next major event in the young infielder's career came in May 1913 when he was traded to the Cincinnati Reds. This provided him with the opportunity to play regularly, and in 117 appearances he became a fixture at second base and hit a .282. In fact, for the rest of his time with the Reds that would be his lowest average—except for an off-year in 1916 when he dropped to .265. In 1915 he was switched to third base and proved especially adept at fielding bunts in an era when the "hot corner" was just that. In 1916 Henry Knight Groh became a member of E. T. Carson Lodge, being initiated an Entered Apprentice on January 14 and passed to the degree of Fellowcraft on February 11. Spring training intervened at that point but not for long as he was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason on April 14, 1916. Heinie went on to receive his Fiftyyear Award in 1966. In mid-July 1916, the Reds and Giants engaged in one of the game's more unusual trades. Club President Garry Herrmann traded Cincinnati manager Buck Herzog and others to the Giants for fading, one-time pitching superstar, Christy Mathewson, and others. Matty then became the Reds' manager. Whether the latter would have become a

great manager had not World War I intervened is hard to say, but in 1917 and 1918, the Reds did post winning records for the first time in several years. Heinie led the league in hits in 1917, in doubles both of those years, and in runs scored in 1918. When Mathewson entered military service in August, Groh served as interim manager winning seven victories in the final ten games of that shortened season.



Reds' Infield, 1919: left to right: Heinie Groh, 3rd base; Larry Kopf, shortstop; Morrie Rath, 2nd base; Jake Daubert, 1st base. All but Rath were Masons.

In 1919 the Reds paced by team captain Groh and center fielder Brother Edd Roush, who had .310 and .321 seasons, respectively, struck pay dirt. The team brought home both the National League pennant and a World Series victory to Redland Field. The latter would forever be tainted by the Black Sox scandal that unraveled the next year. However, both Groh and Roush maintained to their dying day that the Reds would have won anyway.

Masonic membership on that team was high since other members of the squad included Jake Daubert at first base, Larry Kopf at short, catcher Ivy Wingo, pitcher Ray Fisher, and outfielders, Earle Neale, Rube Bressler, and Pat Duncan, in addition to Roush, Groh, and club President Garry Herrmann. As team captain, Henry K. Groh received the winning team's share of the World Series money \$117,157.35—from which each player received a full share of \$5,207.01.

The 1920 edition of the Reds slumped to third, and Heinie's average dropped to .298, although Roush surged to .339. This circumstance may have been a contributing factor in both of the team stars becoming holdouts in the spring of 1921. Groh signed on June 1, only after being promised that he would immediately be traded back to the Giants. Then Commissioner Landis voided the trade, but he finally approved it in December. As a result, the little third baseman played in only 97 games in his last year as a Red and hit only .231. Back with John McGraw's

team in the Polo Grounds, the 5-ft. 8-in. third baseman had only a mediocre season at the plate. But the Giants had a good year coming in seven games ahead of the Reds for league honors and trouncing the Yankees in the World Series. However, that Series provided Groh with some of the finest moments of his career. While the Reds had won in 1919, Heinie's own performance had been unspectacular. His play in this all New York classic was among the best ever. He made a total of nine hits, scored four runs, knocked in two, and had a .474 average (just ahead of Frank Frisch's .471). The story goes that he was so proud of his performance that he had the number 474 on his Ohio license plate for the remainder of his life.

Groh spent two more years as a regular at the "hot corner" for McGraw's Giants. Unlike his friend and Brother Edd Roush, who cared little for the belligerent and controversial Giant skipper; Heinie respected and got along with the man. He also continued as a solid performer in the Giant lineup hitting .290 and .281 in those years. Late in the 1924 season, he sustained a knee injury and had to be replaced in the World Series by young Fred Lindstrom, who had the misfortune of having a ground ball take a bad bounce over his head which paved the way for an unexpected Washington Senator world championship. Heinie had a pinch hit single in his only plate appearance.

Heinie Groh's knee injury continued to plague him, and he saw only limited action with the Giants in the next two years as Fred Lindstrom took over third base chores. McGraw released the veteran player in 1926.

Former major leaguers often continued for several years in the minors in that era. Signed by the Toledo Mud Hens, he held down third base for much of that season, batting .304 in 104 games. Heinie went back to his old hometown of Rochester, where he also hit above .300 and found himself back in the big time in the latter part of 1927 when the Pittsburgh Pirates called him up towards the end of the season. He made his last appearance in a big league uniform as a pinch hitter in the 1927 series.

Overall, the little GermanAmerican had a .292 lifetime batting average. Returning to the minors, he managed and played part-time for Charlotte in the South Atlantic League in 1928, for Hartford in the Eastern League in 1929, and finally for Canton in 1930. Playing on a part time basis, he continued to bat in excess of .300 each year. After managing in the minors and doing some scouting, Heinie Groh returned to Cincinnati, where he made his home in the off-season, and worked as a cashier at River Downs Race Track near the Queen City until he retired. He participated in old-timer events and was enshrined in the Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame in 1963. In 1966 he received his fifty-year pin from E. T. Carson Lodge, and he passed away on August 22, 1968. Numerous advocates still favor his enshrinement in Cooperstown.

1. Note: A prime source of information regarding Groh is the chapter in Lawrence S. Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times* (Vintage Books, 1985) and various books on the Cincinnati Reds, especially Greg Rhodes' and John Snyder's, *Redleg Journal*

(Road West Pub., 2000). For the data on his Masonic records, I thank George Braatz, P.G.M. and Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ohio. Thanks also to Sir Knight Norman Lincoln of the York Rite bodies in Eaton, Ohio. For assistance with photos and a variety of internet data including the SABR website bio of Groh by Sean Lahman, I appreciate the help of Brother Jake Bapst of Centerville Lodge No. 371 in Thurman, Ohio.

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Published 080514 Updated: August 12, 2014

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