

The International League managed to remain the minor's most stable and long-standing circuit, with roots dating back to 1884, but western New York had been particularly hard hit by financially-sinking franchises. In 1955 Syracuse lost its International League club to Miami. Buffalo went the independent route, but was on extremely shaky ground.

Professional baseball in Rochester dated back to 1877, when a team represented the city in what was the first league established outside of the self-proclaimed "major leagues." Leagues and teams had a nomadic existence and it was not until 1885 that a Rochester team began an uninterrupted presence in what would become the International League. The city lost its team mid-way through both the 1897 and 1898 seasons, but Rochesterians saw to their return in both instances. In 1928 the franchise was again on unsound footing, but a potential shift was headed off by the purchase of the team by the St. Louis Cardinals, who, one year later, built Red Wing Stadium at a cost of \$400,000.

The Cardinal era started off in unparalleled style. The first four St. Louis-stocked squads in Rochester (renamed "Red Wings" in a fan contest) captured International League pennants. Subsequent regular season flags were also achieved in 1940, 1950 and 1953. Junior World Series (IL playoff champ versus American Association winner) crowns were won in 1930, 1931 and 1952. The early '50s were notable not only for the two pennants, but also the three Governors' Cup playoff championships (1953, 1955, 1956). (Fans could only dream of the Red Wing domination had the Cardinals only stocked one Triple-A team. From 1931-1954 St. Louis also owned and supplied players for the Columbus Red Birds of the American Association. Those squads won three pennants, five playoff championships and three Junior World Series.)

Baseball fans that flocked to Red Wing Stadium saw a number of future major league stars, including Jim "Ripper" Collins, Stan Musial, Johnny Mize, Red Schoendienst, "Pepper" Martin and Paul Derringer. Some never made it big at the major league level, but nonetheless left indelible memories (and numbers), among them George Puccinelli, "Specs" Toporcer, Ray Pepper, Don Richmond, Estel Crabtree, Dom Ryba, Russ Derry, Tony Jacobs and Tom Poholsky. In 29 seasons with the Cardinals, Rochester squads had finished in the bottom half of the eight-team circuit only eight times.

World War II weakened all of baseball, but the minor leagues survived, and then thrived in the immediate post-war years. Yet by 1957, Rochester and Montreal were the only IL teams owned by their major league affiliates. The Cardinals also owned Omaha (moved from Columbus in 1955) of the Triple-A American Association and Houston of the Double-A Texas League. Of the three, the Wings had drawn the fewest: 176,850 compared to 245,000 for Omaha and 300,000 for Houston. Furthermore, Rochester's attendance paled in comparison to the 443,536 that had passed through Red Wing Stadium turnstiles just seven seasons prior. The numbers made it an easy decision from the Cardinals' standpoint.

The initial announcement was tempered by word that the Cardinals were negotiating with unidentified Rochester groups for the sale of the franchise. But it was soon apparent that there would be no white knight coming forward to save the team. Carl S. Hallauer, a member of the team's local board of directors, stated "It is my thinking that no individual or small group in this community will put up enough money to take it over."

Community ownership was floated as the solution. It had been done before in the minors, in places like Buffalo, Columbus, Richmond and Indianapolis, but it still remained to be seen if the idea, still in its relative infancy, would provide a lasting solution. Cardinals' Assistant to the General Manager Vaughn "Bing" Devine confirmed an asking price of \$500,000, close to what St. Louis received for its Columbus franchise in 1955.

Rumors floated of other reasons for the Cardinals' departure. Red Wing management handed out over 52,000 free tickets the previous season and what was seen as generosity on the local level was not looked on as favorably in St. Louis. Others pointed to the fact that the Busch Brewery, which took over ownership of the Cardinals in 1953, could not, due to local ordinances, sell its product in Red Wing Stadium. It could, however, peddle brew in Omaha and Houston.

Whatever dark reasons could be placed on the Cardinals, the organization was more than willing to cooperate with local efforts to purchase the franchise. The Rochester-based directors of the club met with Red Wing General Manager (but St. Louis employee) George Sisler Jr.; however by mid-November no serious progress had been made.