

# MINI-BIO: RALPH HAY

By Bob Carroll

Ralph E. Hay was the moving force behind the creation of the National Football League. Hay was the owner of a Canton, OH, automobile agency, when he acquired the Canton Bulldogs in 1918. The Bulldogs, featuring Jim Thorpe, had claimed the unofficial "U.S. Professional Football Championship" in both 1916 and 1917. The team did not operate in 1918 because of World War I. In 1919, even though it was undefeated and again claimed the pro title, the Bulldogs did not draw well enough to justify the salaries paid. Hay lost money.

He believed pro teams must organize to keep player salaries under control, to stop players from jumping from team to team, and to end the common practice of hiring collegiate players for Sunday games. On August, 1920, he met at Canton with the managers of pro teams from Akron, Cleveland, and Dayton to form the American Professional Football Conference. Hay, as secretary, was the only officer elected. Over the next few weeks, he wrote to every important pro team in the Midwest, inviting their managers to meet in Canton on September 17.

Representatives from ten teams showed up. Because Hay's office was too small, the meeting was held in his automobile showroom with some men sitting on car running boards. The resulting organization operated for two years as the American Professional Football Association until its name was changed to the National Football League in 1922. Hay was asked to take the presidency in the first year but suggested Thorpe, whose name was more famous.

Although Thorpe left the Bulldogs after a disappointing 1920 season, Hay continued to build a strong team, signing three future Hall of Famers in tackle Wilbur Henry, tackle Roy "Link" Lyman, and end Guy Chamberlin. With Chamberlin as coach, the Bulldogs were undefeated in 1922, winning the league championship, but Hay continued to lose money. Before the 1923 season, he sold the team to a group of local businessmen.

Hay, who was born January 12, 1891, in Canton, married Esther Becker who had previously served as his secretary. They had one daughter. He died on Canton on July 29, 1944.

Bibliography: Canton Repository, July 31, 1944; Bob Carroll, et. al., "Bulldogs on Sunday," The Coffin Corner, Vol. VIII, No. 5 (1986); David S. Neft and Richard Cohen, The Sports Encyclopedia: Pro Football (Connecticut, 1987); Pro Football Hall of Fame file; P.F.R.A. Research, "Happy Birthday NFL?" The Coffin Corner, Vol. II, No. 8 (1980).