They were the small-town boys who stunned Omaha’s best.

One hundred years ago, Cambridge 10, Omaha Commerce 0.

Seventy-five years ago, Gothenburg 27, Omaha Creighton Prep 21.

“The little guy can’t win often,” said The World-Herald in the wake of Gothenburg’s win, “but those victories will be remembered for many years.”

With each game celebrating a milestone anniversary, soak up a little history on this Thanksgiving. And it’s on a Thanksgiving Day in a southwest Nebraska county seat in 1920 that these tales begin.

The Cambridge-Commerce game was for the state championship. In those days, the forerunner to the NSAA named state football champions and often set up championship playoffs.

Cambridge was coached by town pharmacist Clint John, whose 1918 team lost the championship game to Lincoln High. Commerce coach Jim Drummond agreed to take 15 players from a school of 1,800 boys to a town that had 1,000 residents. Four times that many showed up for the colossal clash.

The game was scoreless for three quarters. Finally, Cambridge’s Ed Ellingson drop-kicked a field goal and made the extra point after Donald Rankin’s 2-yard run. Cambridge tallied 220 yards to 105 for Commerce and held a 20-8 advantage in first downs.

Cambridge subbed once, John recalled some 40 years later, and it was a 115-pound end “so he could say he had played in the game.”

How different it was in 1920. The Cambridge coach remembered that the school provided only pants.

“The boys bought their own shirts. There was no uniform color. Shoes were work shoes, already well worn, fitted with cleats by Milo Whiteman, the village cobbler. A few of the boys had light leather headguards and shin guards, which they purchased themselves.”

This game was replete with an Inflategate controversy.

The claim was that the Cambridge coach “blew up the ball so tight that Ike Mahoney, famous Commerce passer, could not dig his hands into the leather and throw it like a baseball.” In a 1960s Gregg McBride column, John recalled that Drummond got payback when their teams met in 1924 in Omaha for the state title — Commerce by then had become Technical High — by plowing and soaking Tech’s field to slow a Cambridge backfield that scored in the 880-yard relay at the national high school state meet. Tech won 16-0.

“Oh, Mr. (Gregg) McBride! What are you gonna to do now?”

Years later, football fans in Gothenburg quoted those immortal opening lines by World-Herald sportswriter Maurice Shadle from his game story about Gothenburg’s win over Creighton Prep.

McBride, the longtime World-Herald prep writer, had a hand in getting the teams together. Both had been looking for opponents. McBride moved the undefeated Swedes into the Top 10 in time for the Nov. 10 game at old Creighton Stadium. Prep had lost to Boys Town but was still No. 1.

Gothenburg led 20-7 after three quarters of the afternoon game. It had been switched from a night kickoff for cold weather that never arrived. Only about 2,000 were in the stadium to watch the fourth-quarter fireworks.

Prep took a 21-20 lead with seven minutes left on substitute halfback Jerry McGlynn’s 7-yard run and an 8-yard pass from sophomore Don Leahy — the future Omaha sports hall of famer — to Tom Hanrahan and Leahy’s two extra-point kicks.

Gothenburg regained the lead with 90 seconds left on All-Nebraska quarterback Jim Holmes’ 21-yard pass to Jim Cunning and their hookup for the extra-point pass. All conversions then were one point.

The ending was controversial.

Prep called a timeout — but it had none left. The referee, South High hall of fame coach Cornie Collin, moved in to assess the penalty when Prep snapped the ball between Collin’s legs. Leahy threw deep as the celebrating Swedes had quit playing but before the gun sounded. The receiver weaved through the Gothenburg team to the end zone.

Collin ruled — correctly, in Shadle’s estimation — that the game ended before the snap. The following Monday, it was established that the gun sounded 14 seconds after the timer said that play was over.

With the win, Gothenburg vaulted into a first-place tie with Boys Town in McBride’s ratings. The two teams at season’s end shared the mythical state championship.

“The little guy can’t win often, but those victories will be remembered for many years.”

It’s not time for them to totally fade away.

\* \* \*

will follow.