

The Oak Ridge Pioneers – Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 16, 2009)

In the last *Historically Speaking* the second attempt at bringing professional baseball to Oak Ridge in the form of the Oak Ridge Pioneers was introduced. Several Oak Ridgers worked hard to support this renewed effort in 1954 after the failed attempt in 1948 that was The Oak Ridge Bombers.

At the end of the last installment in this story, Frank J. "Sonny" Tuck, had been identified as the first person signed by the newly forming team. While he was a well-known pitcher from his high school days, Sonny explained to me that he only got to play a short time for the new team.

Sonny said when he injured his ankle, he was soon released from his contract as they had to pay him regardless of whether he played or not. He also told me that the uniforms they used during pre-season practice had "Boston" on the back with either dark blue or black numbers on the front. He wondered about what connection their might be between the Boston Red Sox and the Oak Ridge Pioneers.

I asked him how the name "Pioneers" came to be selected. He said he recalled some sort of naming contest that resulted in that name. I wonder - do any readers know more about how that name came to be selected? I can see the connection with Oak Ridge for the name "Bombers" but what is the connection with "Pioneers?"

Sonny also recalled a pitcher on the Morristown Red Sox team, Pedro Ramos. Pedro went on to become a long-standing big league professional player for the Washington Senators and the New York Yankees.\

Another story about the Pioneer uniforms comes from George Warne, owner of New York Dry Cleaners in 1954. George, along with his dad, had built a new dry cleaning facility next door to the Snow White Restaurant (now there is yet another potential *Historically Speaking* story!).

George told me that when the Pioneers got into financial trouble, they offered shares to the public. I learned from The Oak Ridger coverage that on June 24, 1954, the shares sold for \$10 each. George recalled that he contributed to the team, but did not recall the amount. He, being the adventurous partner in the business with his dad, agreed to wash the uniforms for the team in exchange for free passes for his family to the games.

As this was all happening the team was in financial trouble and the league was failing as several teams left the league to play in other more prominent leagues. Those "free passes" never materialized.

However, George did say he recalled being left with 25 freshly washed uniforms when the team folded. He said they stayed around the dry cleaning facility for quite a while and finally the person who donated the uniforms, whom George recalls as the owner of a television station located in the building next to the cleaners that housed The Oak Ridger for many years, came by wanting his uniforms back.

George recalled a bit of discussion regarding who would pay the washing bill. He finally relented and gave the uniforms back to the person who donated them. George told me he was still waiting on those "free passes!" He also recalled the words his dad used to warn him against such trades, stating that getting paid for their work was an important part of running a successful business.

The season opener was played on April 24, 1954, against the Maryville-Alcoa Twins and the Pioneers lost six to one. Even though the team lost, the game was hyped well before hand with a parade, huge coverage in the Oak Ridger and the Atomic Energy Commission's Oak Ridge Operations manager, Sam Sapirie performing the traditional "throwing out of the first ball rites."

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According to The Oak Ridger coverage on April 23, 1954, "Preceding his official starting of the season, there will be a band concert, introductions, a flag raising ceremony (if the flagpole is finished on time), and a unique introduction of the team's board of directors as well as the introduction of the team."

The news article went on to promote the newly renovated Ridgeview Park that was previously known as Gamble Valley Park. It was this renovation that eventually led to the financial troubles of the Pioneer club.

The cost of \$13,000 was paid down to an \$8,000 debt that could not be paid and caused the club president, Ross Charles, to tender his resignation at a stockholders meeting on June 28, 1954, by stating; "Possibly, I have over-estimated my capabilities. Possibly, I am the wrong man for this job and someone else might be able to accomplish more."

"If this is the case, we, as stockholders, must take advantage of this possibility. Therefore, with a sincere and whole-hearted thanks to the nine gentlemen of my board, I submit my resignation effective immediately, and respectfully urge that the first action of this stockholders meeting be on this resignation."

This proposal for his resignation was turned down unanimously by the stockholders. They also voted unanimously to make every possible effort to retain the Pioneers.

Another Oak Ridge standout baseball player was B. B. Hopkins. He signed with the Morristown Red Sox of the Mountain States League, but had to quit before the season began because of conflicting school schedule. He was attending the University of Tennessee and practice teaching in Morristown at the time. B. B. was a former college All-American and had been named twice to the All-Southeastern conference team as a third baseman.

B. B. had earlier been offered a tryout with the New York Giants during his senior year at Oak Ridge High School, but he decided to complete his education and forego the fancy bonus signing offer from the Giants. During the summers while attending the University of Tennessee, B. B. played semi-pro ball in Wisconsin.

While at Oak Ridge High School, B. B. played three sports. He was a tailback on the football team, a forward on the basket ball team and third baseman on the baseball team. He will be the subject of a future *Historically Speaking* column.

Another thing Sonny Tuck told me that he thought was a contributing factor making it hard for baseball to succeed in Oak Ridge was the superb fast pitch softball teams sponsored by the three Atomic Energy Commission sites, Y-12, X-10 and K-25. He cited the excellent quality of those teams and the successful support they enjoyed from family and co-workers as strong competition for fledgling professional baseball teams.

I have heard many people tell of the emphasis placed on fast pitch softball by the plants during the same years that professional baseball was trying to make a go of it in Oak Ridge. Stories are told about good softball players being hired primarily for their softball skills. Of course, they had to be able to perform on the job as well, but were granted interviews as a result of recommendations from fellow softball players.

Jack Bailey also gave some insight into why these professional baseball teams failed in Oak Ridge. He says, "In general, in commenting on the two failed efforts of minor league baseball in Oak Ridge, I think it

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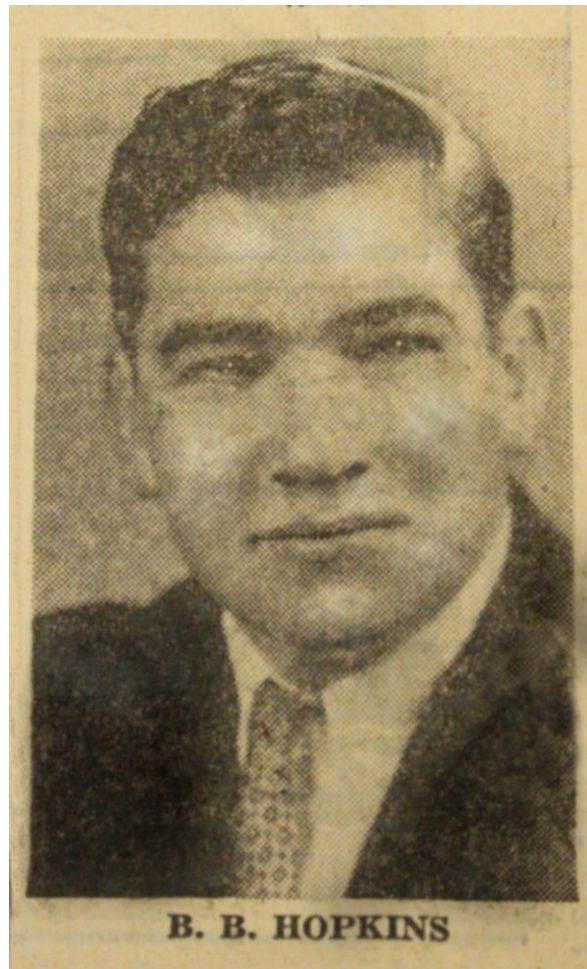
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can fairly be said that minor league attendance peaked around the country in 1948 and continued to decline for many years after that. Oak Ridge certainly suffered.

“The advent of television in the early 1950’s gave people a reason to stay home rather than going out to the local ball park. Oak Ridge supported plant league teams and Oak Ridge High School sports. Many minor league clubs back then were “on their own” to raise money, find players and promote their team.

“Oak Ridge didn’t have a working arrangement with any major league team and both the 1948 and 1954 teams were severely undercapitalized. The owners were not prepared to suffer financial losses as they tried to grow their business. Thus, they failed.”

As we wrap up this segment of baseball history in Oak Ridge, I have just learned from Larry Gipson of yet another Oak Ridge “Bomber” team. AND there are at least two players on that team who are still here in Oak Ridge. More to come!



B. B. Hopkins signed with Mountain States League but had to drop out because of school responsibilities