

The Oak Ridge Pioneers

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 2, 2009)

We have examined the first Oak Ridge professional baseball team, the Oak Ridge Bombers of 1948. Now, again compliments of Jack Bailey, Jr., we can look at the second attempt by Oak Ridge to field a professional baseball team, The Oak Ridge Pioneers of 1954. They were formed as a part of the newly reclassified Mountain States League that had been upgraded from a class "D" league to a class "C."

The Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce had a large role to play in bringing this second attempt at professional baseball to Oak Ridge. A corporation of Oak Ridge citizens known as Oak Ridge Baseball Inc. was formed after an initial push by the chamber to again bring professional baseball to the city.

But first, let me thank those readers who have helped with questions I asked in previous columns. "Mac" McCurdy wrote to inform me he had found a reference for USED. He said the City Behind the Fence, Johnson and Jackson, 1981, pp72-73, spelled out USED as standing for United States Engineer Department.

Again, I am aware of the Special Engineer Detachment, but not the USED. So, I searched the term and found a report on the siege and reduction of Fort Pulaski, GA. in 1862, during the Civil War, addressed to the United States Engineer Department of the Army Corps of Engineers. Just may be the same.

I also received a very informative call from Bill Tewes who pointed me to a reference in the Special Engineer Detachment's 1945 Yearbook that included in the "Sports Category" a reference to a football team named the "Atomic bombers" and also to a basketball team named the "Cardinals." The yearbook also listed baseball, touch football, softball and soccer as sports played by the SED. I find it interesting to note that soccer was listed in 1945.

Bill also gave some insight into the idea as to why the notion that "Oak Ridgers expected everything for free." You will recall this was a comment made by the sports writer, Ted Yakimchick, when the Oak Ridge Bombers were unable to attract adequate crowds to turn a profit.

Bill says this idea about Oak Ridgers expecting things to be provided free came about as a result of prices being raised for Oak Ridgers by Knoxville businesses. He also pointed out that the "free items" were perceived by the government as a cost of doing business in Oak Ridge.

He also noted that the Gate Opening parade on March 19, 1949, included at least one float that was built and manned by dormitory residents who were about to see their rent increase. He mentioned the initial lack of support for opening of the city and the first vote against it. However, Bill supported it.

He gave one last personal experience as proof of the change being brought about in Oak Ridge during 1949. It seems Bill's wife gave birth to twins on the exact date of the gate opening ceremony. The cost of delivering "one or more babies" had been \$60, but when Bill's wife delivered, he had to pay \$100! That was a significant increase in cost.

The last comment Bill made to me was to explain why he thought Oak Ridgers' support for the Oak Ridge Bombers might have been less than enthusiastic. He said, most of the Oak Ridgers were a younger group who took advantage of the many Oak Ridge activities and tended to entertain themselves by engaging in sports personally.

So, Oak Ridgers were active in many sports, not spectators. He also noted that many of them had their own favorite professional baseball teams such as the New York Yankees and their farm club the Newark

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Bears that they followed and that Class "D" baseball was just not very attractive. I think Bill's insight may be on target.

As early as 1948, a fine new baseball park was being planned to be built in Gamble Valley. The Oak Ridge Bombers did not want to play there, they preferred Oakwood Park's more central location. This new park was the first opportunity Oak Ridgers were given to name a public facility, according to Ted Yakimchick's column on May 20, 1948. This park was not used for professional baseball in 1948 as the Bombers left Oak Ridge because of a lack of adequate fan support.

Seating capacity at this new park would be about the same as Oakwood's 1,200. However, it is interesting to note that when the Oak Ridge Pioneers were formed in 1954 that construction and renovation was going on at the Ridgeview Park in Gamble Valley. This would prove to be a factor in their eventual failure as a professional team in Oak Ridge.

This renovation was being completed by Al Cappiello's construction crew. They were placing a roof on the grandstand. They had also installed box seats, a press box and a radio booth. The overall seating capacity was expanded to 2,300. They were planning for large crowds that never materialized. However, 24 of the 30 box seats were sold before the season opener.

An interesting note is that by 1954, the Oakwood Baseball Park where the Oak Ridge Bombers played in 1948, was no longer being used. This park is now known as the Carl Yearwood Park.

The first player signed by the Oak Ridge Pioneers was Frank J. "Sonny" Tuck, older brother to our own Tom Tuck. He was called a "mainstay of Oak Ridge High School Wildcat baseball pitchers." At six foot two inches tall, Sonny was said to have a "fastball with a mean hop on it."

The Oak Ridge Pioneers' manager, Bert Niehoff was said to have had high hopes for this young nineteen year old former high school star pitcher. But those hopes were not to be fulfilled. The league failed soon after being formed. It lasted from April to July 1954.

Sonny signed early in April 1954. The upgraded Mountain States League had its first game on April 24, 1954. Prior to that game, the Oak Ridge Pioneers played an intra-squad practice game on April 13, 1954. This was the first opportunity the team had to see how they played. The sports writer noted the pitching looked good, but the batting was said to need some additional practice. Several other exhibition or preseason games were played as well.

Manager Niehoff was hospitalized with a fractured vertebrae as a result of tripping when he was moving the batting cage. Ed Gibson and Charley Bradford were acting managers in his absence. Ross Charles was the club president and the board of directors were, Herb Adcox, Roscoe Stephens, Gene Bruner, Van Hicks, Don J. McKay, Bill Simpson, Al Snasdall, Harry Weaver and Al Thornall.

Another injury that hurt the team was when Sonny injured his ankle. As a result of this injury, he never appeared in a Mountain States League game. He pitched in some pre-season games and recalls one where the opposing pitcher was Philbuerto Qui, who beat him 5 runs to none for the Pioneers. Sonny laughed when he told the story and he still remembered clearly the name of the winning pitcher.

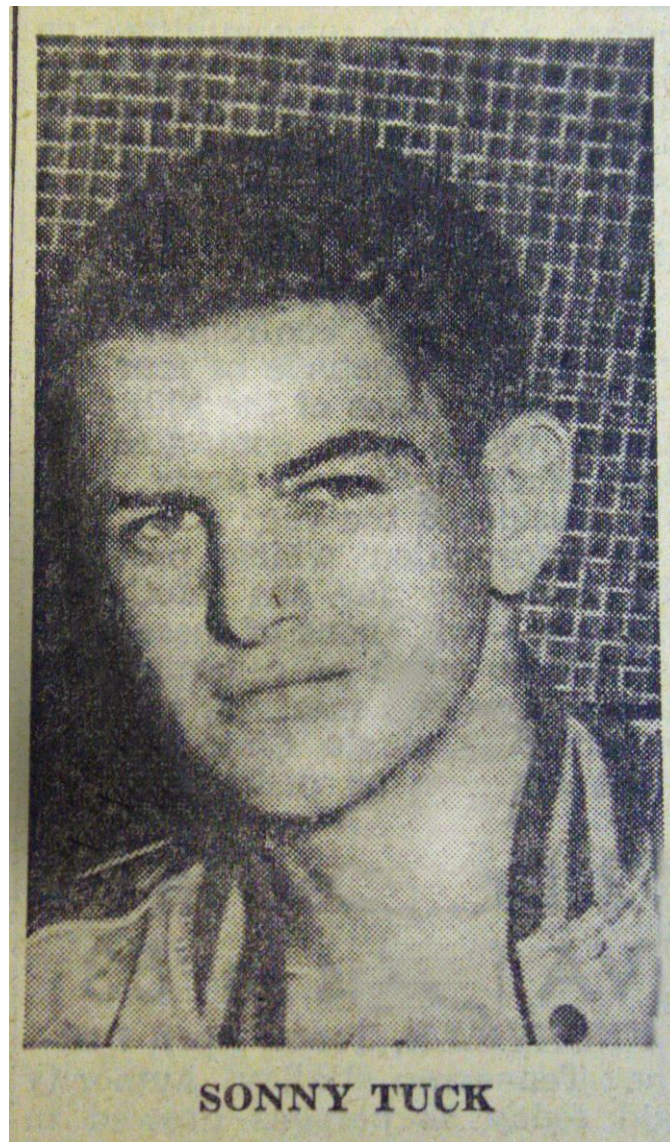
Sonny also told me about some of the details included in his contract with the Pioneers. It stipulated that Sonny could not bowl for fear of hurting his arm. There were other such stipulations. Sonny is in the

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hospital right now having knee replacement surgery. He promised to send me a copy of that multipage contract. I am sure Jack Bailey will want that for his collection and I will share the details with readers of *Historically Speaking*.

Next we will continue to learn more about Sonny's experience with the Oak Ridge Pioneers and will also see how B. B. Hopkins was almost a member of the Mountain Cities League.



Frank J. "Sonny" Tuck, first player to sign a contract with The Oak Ridge Pioneers and older brother to Tom Tuck