

## **The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted, part 2**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 11, 2009)**

The story of the Oak Ridge Bombers from the Black community came to me from Larry Gipson. He wanted to help me learn about the “real” Oak Ridge Bombers. I learned much about that unique piece of Oak Ridge history and met some wonderful people while doing the research.

While I am sure my research has only scratched the surface of this rich history in our midst, it has been a tremendous educational opportunity for me. The history of our black culture in Oak Ridge is as unique as the rest of our history and provides a rich tapestry for conveying the full story of Oak Ridge. I am most pleased to be able to contribute in a small way to telling that tremendous story.

Let's continue the story of the Oak Ridge Bombers that lasted! This article will focus on the players of the Oak Ridge Bombers and especially on the experience of one of its last players, Ronnie Graham.

But first a little bit of history regarding the whole situation with the Negro Baseball League. This situation will help put the Oak Ridge Bombers team into perspective and help to explain how it existed for as long as it did.

This history of the Negro Baseball League will also help explain why the black players felt such an attachment to the Oak Ridge Bombers at the time and why even today people who recall that team do so with such reverence. It is very much a part of the fabric of the Oak Ridge black community. The Oak Ridge Bombers and the people who made that team a reality are perceived even today as the community leaders of that era.

The team's history is legendary among those who experienced the phenomenon of a winning team of black players who were workers at Oak Ridge government plants. They were a group of natural athletes who played without practicing and who “whipped” almost every team they played, according to one of their leaders, James Capshaw. This was truly an amazing feat regardless of how it happened.

While unwritten, the understanding regarding the ban of black players from major league baseball succeeded in keeping them out of the game for many years. That is primarily what caused the formation of the Negro Baseball League. Blacks were not welcome in the majors, so they formed their own league with significant success up until the mid 1960's when things seemed to change rather drastically regarding baseball and the black players.

The Negro Baseball League was possibly the most successful all black business venture of the time. The excitement created in the black communities across the nation had to influence the formation of such teams as the Oak Ridge Bombers. A lady, who had read last week's article, stopped me and said, “thanks for writing about the ‘Bombers,’ you know going to ball games was our main social event during those days.” I believe her remark speaks volumes for that era and how the black community functioned socially. And to a large degree so did the white community.

Now back to the history of the team. James Capshaw told me that his younger brother William Capshaw, who also played on the Oak Ridge Bombers team, was an excellent hitter who hit more homeruns than James. This was an interesting expression of humbleness from a man respected by all for his excellent hitting record, but he wanted to be sure the truth of it all was recorded. William hit more homeruns.

This William Capshaw is our own Bill Capshaw's father. You will recall that Bill is a noted local artist who produces excellent pottery, teaches art and plays African-style drums, among many other talents.

## **The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted, part 2**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 11, 2009)**

I must tell you that Bill Capshaw personally gave my oldest son, Mike Smith, a great deal of excellent guidance during a very pivotal stage in his life. Mike took an art class at the Oak Ridge Art Center when he was just a young boy and his instructor was Bill Capshaw.

I believe Bill had more influence on Mike than any other instructor and built his self confidence tremendously. Mike went on to study art in college and his portraits have "eyes that live" according to another local artist, Eiko Travaglini.

Another former Oak Ridge Bombers player I was pleased to get to know is Ronnie Graham. Ronnie played for the team near the end of the long run in 1962 and 1963. He and Rufus E. Shephard, Jr., or "Shep" as he is known to all, played at the same time. They played for two teams, the 1<sup>st</sup> Methodist Church team, coached by Robert Bailey and Ben Bailey, during the week at night, and the Oak Ridge Bombers during the weekends. This was while both of them were in high school!

Ronnie's story and insights into the practical aspects of prejudice induced injustice will stay with me forever. I count the time spent with Ronnie as one of my most special interviews. He opened his heart and let me see his soul. He was candid, frank and yet kind in his recollections of personal insult and unspeakably harsh emotional treatment. He also told me some of the humorous aspects of his baseball career.

Ronnie told me about many of the promotional events that would accompany the games of the Oak Ridge Bombers. These ranged from clowns to horse races. The horse race was one where a runner and a horse raced around the bases. Ronnie said the baseball players could beat the horse because the horse had trouble turning the sharp corners at each base.

Another humorous aspect of the Bombers that Shep told me was that Jimmy Lewis' daddy was the mascot for the Bombers. Shep recalled some of the funny saying that he would yell out, such as: "Shep, we don't need no water, we gonna pick 'em dry!" and, "Ain't nobody walkin' but the mailman!" Shep was the pitcher and such encouraging chatter was common and continuous. It was also part of the fun of the show, according to Shep and Larry.

Ronnie also shared a personal story with me from his days at Oak Ridge High School. He was playing the outfield on the Oak Ridge High School varsity team. They were playing in 1963 in Bill Meyer Stadium in Knoxville. He was so excited to be playing in that huge stadium.

He had a habit of picking a small handful of grass and pitching it upward to see the direction of the wind when he went to his position in the outfield. On this particular day, as they announced the team players, each of them running out on the field when their name was announced, Ronnie heard his name called and ran to his position.

Upon arriving there, he did his usual ritual of pulling a small handful of grass and throwing it in the air to detect the wind direction. When he completed that ritual, he noticed a large gathering of people at home plate. He did not know at first what was going on, but was soon very much aware that the discussion was about him. That could not be a good sign.

There was a large problem and it was Ronnie. The TSSAA (Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association) was questioning the right of Oak Ridge High School to field a black player. It seemed there was required a special letter indicating the school would not hold the TSSAA responsible for any injury

## **The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted, part 2**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 11, 2009)**

incur by a black player. Such a letter was not on file for Ronnie. Without that letter they would not let Ronnie play.

So, Ronnie was called off the field and placed in the dugout. He did not fully understand the problem, but the remarks of the man representing the TSSAA about him were such that Ronnie felt the prejudice and oppressive attitude of the man. He called Ronnie names that I cannot print here.

Ronnie's team mates attempted to comfort him. One of the first players to reach Ronnie was Len Hart who told him he was sorry to see him treated so and that he was sure it would be worked out. Ronnie remembers Len fondly even today for that kindness.

Tears were flowing down Ronnie's face as he struggled to comprehend what was happening to him. The Oak Ridge High School coach, Steve Beacon, assured Ronnie that he would get to play. He was already on the phone getting the required letter written and delivered from Oak Ridge to Knoxville.

The interesting thing about this whole episode is that Ronnie did indeed get to play and he actually won the game with his double and his stolen base to get him to third base and finally his scoring run that won the game. Don't you know there were some frustrated people there that day when Ronnie, a black player from Oak Ridge, was the pivotal player who won the game beating Fulton High School.

It is still painful for Ronnie to remember the emotions a young high school age boy experienced when he was the target of prejudice in such a public forum. He still recalls the support of his team mates and speaks highly of his coach. This event happened in 1963, some eight years after Oak Ridge High School had integrated.

I find it incredible to think how long it took for integration to be realized and I find it even more incredible to appreciate the bigotry and thoughtless pain inflicted on young black people by otherwise normal white people. Prejudice is ugly. That is especially so when it is viewed in hindsight.

But we only have to search our past to find prejudice has been very much a part of that history. Oak Ridge was somewhat more progressive than our neighbors, but even in Oak Ridge, some black families can cite specific difficulties that remained for many years. Sad but true.

Ronnie also shared with me the story of his brother, Lawrence Graham...now Dr. Lawrence Graham. Lawrence would have set a high school broad jump record for Oak Ridge if he had not been listed as an "unassigned participant" rather than an Oak Ridge student in a competition. That was how blacks were treated then. Sad, I know, but things such as that happened routinely, unfortunately.

My mind had a tough time getting around the facts that Ronnie shared with me. I know such things actually happened. I am just incredulous that one human being can be so cruel to another. It should not be. We are better than that. I have to believe that Oak Ridgers have helped erase such prejudice from our region.

There is more to tell about the Oak Ridge Bombers and we will continue to recall some of the more prominent players in our next installment. Such greats as Ed "Fireball" Hardin and Negro League Legend and Hall of Fame member Eugene Williams who also played major league baseball will be featured.

## **The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted, part 2**

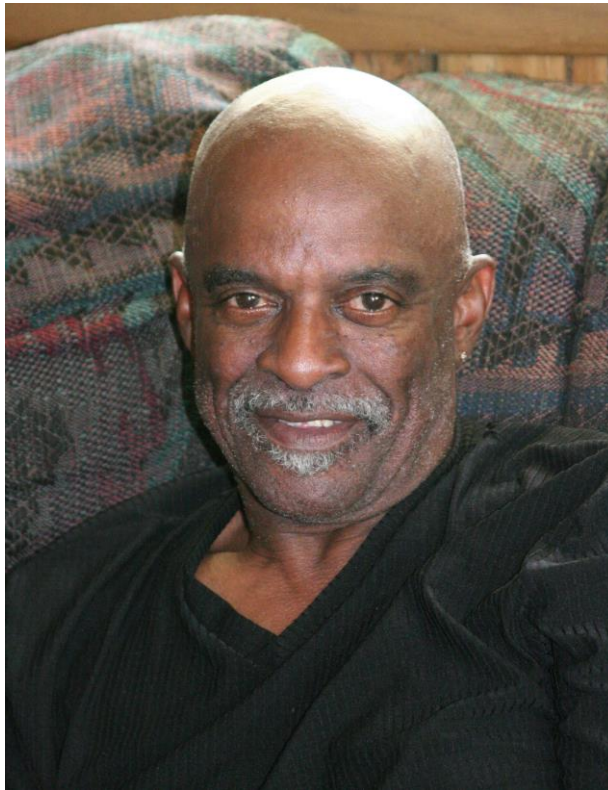
**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 11, 2009)**

We will also look more closely at Shep and share a most unusual story about Curtis Williams. Larry Gipson expressed dismay that we could not include all the players, but he said if we listed all the names of players it would fill the paper!

I was asked by Parker Hardy if Sachel Paige ever pitched in Oak Ridge...I said, "no, but the team he played for was here once." It is also said that Stan Musial pitched here in 1948 or 1949. Robert Lee told this to his great grandson, Marcus Caldwell. Such are the stories attached to the history of baseball in Oak Ridge, both the Oak Ridge Bombers that lasted and other teams.

Larry Gipson is very much interested in capturing all the information about this historic Oak Ridge baseball team. If anyone has additional information about the Oak Ridge Bombers, please contact Larry at P.O. Box 6940, Oak Ridge, TN 37830.

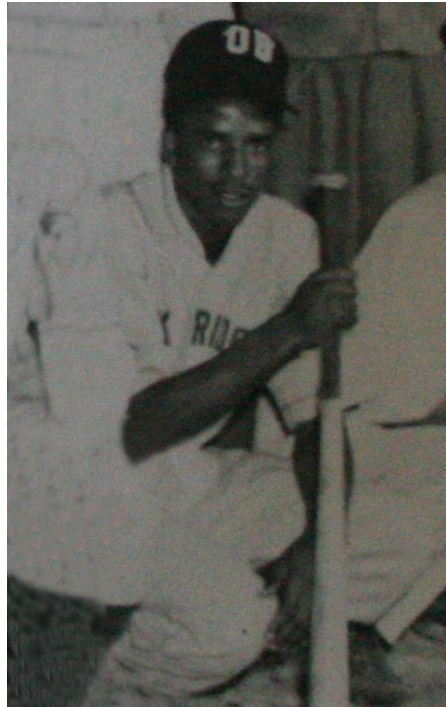
Next we will look at the stories of some additional members of the Oak Ridge Bombers team that lasted.



Ronnie Graham, Oak Ridge Bomber's player and winner of ballgame when he had to have a special letter to just play baseball

## **The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted, part 2**

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 11, 2009)



William Capshaw, Sr., an excellent homerun hitter!



Rufus E. Shepherd, "Shep" tells of his memories playing ball for both the 1<sup>st</sup> Methodist Church and the Oak Ridge Bombers

## The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted, part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 11, 2009)



"Shep" (Rufus E. Shephard, JR.) when he played for the Oak Ridge Bombers