

The Oak Ridge Bombers - the team that lasted because of Community Leadership!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 18, 2009)

As is often the case when a *Historically Speaking* article is published, I get immediate feedback from someone (often more than one person) in Oak Ridge who knows details of the story that were not included or I had misunderstood. The story last week brought a phone call from retired Oak Ridge High School Baseball Coach, Eugene Moody, as well as a comment from record setting broad jumper, Dewey Ewing.

Gene was the Oak Ridge baseball coach at the Fulton game where the integration issue was addressed. I am not sure where I got the name I used...my mistake! He recalls the game in question and noted that the players may not have been aware of all interactions that took place resulting in the Oak Ridge being allowed to field a black player.

These type issues rarely are well understood by the victims of the situation as those who deal with the issues tend to protect the players from all the specific details, especially those that are personally hurtful. I believe Ronnie Graham was in such a situation and may well not have been privy to all the details of the adult interactions in which Gene Moody was personally engaged.

I appreciate Gene's approach to correcting the details I might have misunderstood. He provided me with specific and documented details that corrected my mistakes but was quick to add that the prejudice was very real and he did not doubt Ronnie's expressed feelings. We must remember the times in the 1960's and realize that we today cannot imagine what such prejudicial treatment was like.

Gene went on to tell me that he also had trouble trying to get the team fed at restaurants when they travelled to other cities. He noted that Chattanooga restaurants would often feed the team on the bus just to get the money for the meals when they would not allow him to bring the black players into the restaurants, so the whole team would eat their meal on the bus.

He said the other schools soon learned that Oak Ridge treated black players exactly the same as any other players and thought nothing of it. Gene felt that the other teams where Oak Ridge played came to accept the fact that Oak Ridge was an integrated school in fairly short order. His standard approach was not to play unless the opposing team agreed to allow the black players to participate.

The situation with Fulton was one of the more difficult ones he had to deal with. Even there it was NOT the players who objected to playing against an integrated team, it was the adults. The players seemed to understand and treated all players the same. The way Gene dealt with the opposing coach was to inquire if he worked at Oak Ridge...Gene knew most people did and he feels that comment might have resulted in the coach rethinking his opposition to playing a racial integrated team.

Gene spoke highly of the black athletes and I could tell he was dedicated to giving them the opportunities to play ball just like anyone else. He even told of personally going to Rufus "Shep" Shephard's house to pick him up for games when his uniform was not in acceptable shape to play and taking him to get the uniform cleaned before games. Gene obviously took a personal interest in all his players.

Gene is to be commended for the effort he made to cause the black players to be fully a part of the team. He was one of many Oak Ridger's who made the integration of Oak Ridge Schools as smooth as it was with little of the real difficulties that other schools in the South experienced during this trying time.

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Gene also noted that Lawrence Graham may well have been the first black baseball player to play on an integrated team in Tennessee or maybe even the entire South. Gene has records that show Lawrence was on the 1957 team. Remember that Oak Ridge High School integrated in 1955, Clinton High School in 1956 and Little Rock in 1957. So, Gene may well be right and Lawrence Graham may have been the first black in Tennessee or the South to play on an integrated baseball team.

Dewey Ewing's question had to do with the comment I included regarding Lawrence Graham's broad jump. Dewey finished 13th in the 1967 South East Conference Championship meet, with his personal best leap of 22', 3 & 1/2". He believes this leap became the longest of any previous Oak Ridger's jump. It was accomplished on May 12, 1967, at the University of Tennessee's Tom Black Track.

More importantly for the history of the Oak Ridge Bombers, Ronnie Graham and Larry Gipson both wanted to be sure that I fully understood why the Oak Ridge Bombers were so successful. They both agreed it was "Community Leadership." This is a key historical fact and the real basis for this story! This community leadership by Robert Lee and James Capshaw as well as others left a tremendous legacy.

Ronnie also compared his experience coaching with what he recalls from the days when he played on the Oak Ridge Bombers. Remember, this was a team that was composed of fine athletes who worked during the week and played ball all weekend every weekend. They were all top notch players. That experience has stayed with Ronnie and has influenced his thinking about coaching.

He says the reason the Oak Ridge Bombers excelled was because they were all playing at the top of their game and constantly being prodded by the challenge of their peers. That arrangement resulted in all the players increasing their skills and abilities as they pushed each other to greater heights. This is something tremendous to see and I am sure some readers who are coaches have on occasion experienced the thrill of seeing such excellent teams.

Ronnie proudly recalls one team of young players he coached that had mostly "A" players and by "keeping them digging" to improve, the team succeeded in pushing each other until they were finally beaten by the team that was second in the nation!

Another story from the Oak Ridge Bombers concerns Curtis Williams, a "lefty" known for his dynamic pitching ability. Curtis just died on July 18, 2009. He was 70 years old and had been a tremendous baseball pitcher.

Larry and Ronnie both laughed when they told of Curtis' habit of walking from Solway to see Sue, a girlfriend he left in Oak Ridge when he moved to Solway. This was a routine activity for Curtis.

Curtis played for a time with the Birmingham Black Barons, a minor league team. His unique left handed pitching style got him the chance to play professionally.

But this extraordinary story tells of a time when he was pitching for the Oak Ridge Bombers. Rufus "Shep" Shephard had pitched a 14 inning game on Saturday in 92 degree heat. Curtis was pitching on Sunday.

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On this occasion, the opposing batter facing Curtis' pitching was crowding the plate. The catcher told the batter, "you might better back up a bit," but the batter replied rather testily, "You tend to your catching and let me worry about my batting."

Well, the very next pitch was high and inside striking the batter in the eye, actually knocking the eyeball out of the socket. Ronnie recalled that image vividly and said it made him sick when he saw the damage done to the batter's eye. He remembered that incident with more clarity than was comfortable for me to listen to him describe.

One of the most respected pitchers of them all was Ed "Fireball" Hardin. Fireball made quite a name for himself as a fast ball pitcher, called a "speedball hurler," in the Oak Ridger on August 24, 1949.

Ed Gebhart notes that "Ed attracted plenty of attention while hurling good ball against the Chattanooga Choo Choo's and slamming a home run over the distant left center field fence in Gamble Valley Stadium. The Cubs signed Hardings (misspelled...his name was Hardin) after that splendid performance and have been using him regularly for three weeks."

Gebhart went on to say that Hardin pitched five games for the Nashville team, winning three, two of which were shutouts. While playing for the Oak Ridge Bombers, Ed's high strikeout total for a single game was 19! He was contacted by the Cleveland Indians for a tryout in the spring of 1950.

In the last part of August, 1949, Ed Hardin completed his season with the Nashville Cubs and was scheduled to return to play a few games with the Oak Ridge Bombers, according to their manager, Sanders Thompson, who was quoted in the August 24, 1949, article in The Oak Ridger.

Also quoted in this article is the fact that a game was scheduled with Hazard. Could this be the game James Capshaw recalled where the Oak Ridge Bombers "whupped" the professional team that had shared their name before leaving Oak Ridge to go to Hazard, Kentucky? I'll bet it was exactly the same game and that Ed Hardin struck them out like he did every other team he pitched against.

Another noteworthy player with the Oak Ridge Bombers was Eugene Williams. Williams went on to play in the Minor and Major Leagues and had a fine career. He spent 11 years in the Negro League as a pitcher and third baseman. He played pitcher for the Oak Ridge Bombers from 1950 – 1953.

Ed Ripley, who has taken an intense interest in the history of the Negro Baseball League, recently learned that history is closer than he thought when he found out that one Y-12 employee is especially close to this special baseball league. Deborah Long's father, Eugene "Fireball" Williams, played for the Memphis Red Sox in the late 1950s.

"Fireball" Williams earned his nickname because of his fast overhand and sidearm deliveries that whizzed over the plate. Ripley has learned that Williams played alongside Satchel Paige on traveling teams and against Willie Mays when Mays was a member of the Birmingham Black Barons.

In 2003, Williams was inducted into the Negro League Legends Hall of Fame and is a member of the Oak Ridge Sports Hall of Fame, having been inducted in 1998 along with Fay Martin, Jill Prudden, and Dick Truitt.

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Deborah Long remembers being around baseball players throughout her childhood and said that after her father retired from the Negro Leagues, he recruited recreational teams from around Tennessee and other states to play in Oak Ridge.

Long is quoted in an article published in The Oak Ridger on February 24, 2009, as saying, "They'd come to my house where my mom would feed them, and my sister, Shirley, and I would serve them iced tea," Long said. "We did it for the tips they'd give us." Don't you know that was a grand event for Deborah to have these renowned baseball players coming into her home.

Both Ronnie Graham and "Shep" Shephard, played for the Oak Ridge Bombers near the end of their existence. They were both there when Curtis Williams knocked out that batter's eye. Shep gives credit to Eugene Williams for getting him started pitching. Shep said, "He taught me a lot." Williams was the catcher when Shep pitched.

The Cincinnati Stars came to Oak Ridge to play the Oak Ridge Bombers. What impressed Shep was that the team actually had a bus! They took note of Shep's strong pitching even while the Stars won the game with a score of 2-1. Their coach said to Shep, "Son, throwing the ball the way you do, you need to come with us." Shep was only 16 years old at the time and still in high school. And of course his mother would hear nothing of it. She told Shep he could not go on that bus!

While I have mentioned a few players who played for the Oak Ridge Bombers over the years, there are numerous more that have not been mentioned in this brief story about the "Bombers that lasted." Some of the players were also mentioned by readers who noted there were several players that I did not mention. Larry Gipson has expressed to me numerous times that he wanted me to be very sure to mention in this series that there are MANY more Oak Ridge Bomber players that are not mentioned.

James Capshaw was obviously a strong community leader, just as Ronnie and Larry said was important to the success of the Oak Ridge Bombers. Even today, he is admired by his family and friends. Such men as James and Robert Lee held key positions of respect and informal leadership in their community. Young men would strive to please them because they were leading by example and they were giving the young black men opportunities to excel. Don't you wish for such leaders today?

Robert Lee started a Junior League in 1954 and for years was busy going between fields coaching teams of youngsters. He obviously saw the need to help the young folks learn the game and feel the excitement of excelling at the sport. He wanted others to personally understand the joy of winning he had with the Oak Ridge Bombers. He was obviously a Community Leader.

There you have my version of the real Oak Ridge Bombers, the black team that lasted. I count it a privilege to have been afforded the opportunity to meet these people associated with the Capshaw and Lee/Caldwell families. Until this adventure, I only knew Bill Capshaw and I knew there was something very special about him. Now I understand.

Having met his family and the family and descendents of Robert Lee, I see that both families are filled with human greatness. Both families exhibit leadership qualities and are sincere in their quest for community leadership and family love and adoration of their heritage and their future.

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Not just baseball, but yes, skilled there and in other sports, however, the true natural skill these families depict is that of leadership – family, community and personal leadership. A trait that is key to successful accomplishment in any endeavor. When they speak of their ancestors who played with the Oak Ridge Bombers, it is evident. The pride is there, the joy of achievement is there, the self confidence because of who they are is there as well.

I am proud to have gotten to know each of them and especially am I thankful to Larry Gipson. For without his dedication and patience, I would never have learned the lessons of the Black Oak Ridge Bombers – the team that lasted!

Larry wanted me to be sure and remind readers that he has given me access to only a very small percentage of the people who were associated with the Oak Ridge Bombers. He was adamant that I include mention of Ed Hardin and that I point out that his name was misspelled as “Hardings” in the newspaper articles that mentioned him in 1949.

Larry is intent upon gaining recognition for the Oak Ridge Bombers, the team that lasted. He would appreciate any additional information on the Bombers be sent to him at P.O. Box 6940, Oak Ridge, TN 37830.

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The Oak Ridge Bombers featuring front row, left to right, Robert Lee, Clarence Epps, Charles E. Boyd, Leon Hardin, James Walker, Robert Gallaher, Charles Curd; back row, left to right, A. J. Hardin, Ronnie G. Graham, Marvin Burum, Homer Jackson, Miller Weaver and James Capshaw; Bat boy, Michael Hall –
Note the “M” on two shirts stands for 1st Methodist Church team



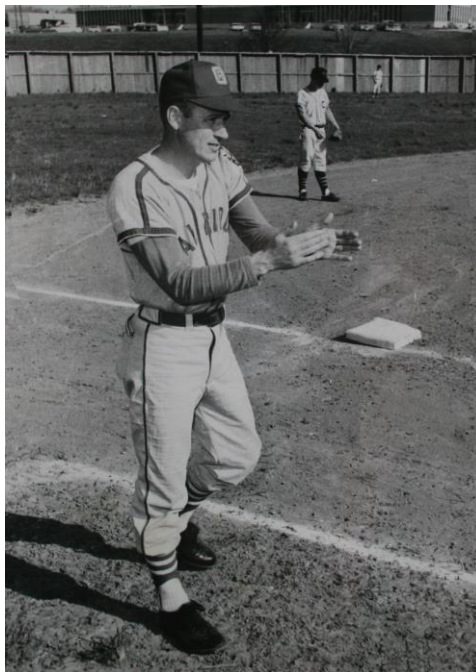
Marcus Caldwell, great grandson of Robert Lee, shown holding Miller Weaver's Oak Ridge Bomber uniform number 27

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Eugene Moody, today



Eugene Moody, Oak Ridge High School Baseball coach in 1963