

Oak Ridge Bombers – some final thoughts

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 25, 2009)

When I started this series on the *Oak Ridge Bombers that lasted*, I never thought it would grow into the phenomenon that has developed. As I have said before, I have met some tremendously kind and gracious people. I have also been given substantial amounts of positive feedback for publishing the series.

Not a single day has gone by since I began publishing this series that I have not had some contact regarding the articles. Many people have expressed their appreciation in numerous ways and with obviously sincere gratitude for the recognition I have given the black Oak Ridge Bombers baseball team. Some have indicated they recall the culture of those days with many fond memories brought about by seemingly endless days at the ball park.

I am forever grateful for Bill Capshaw's kind e-mail expression of appreciation for the mention of his dad. Bill remains one of the adults in Oak Ridge for whom I am eternally grateful as he paid attention to my son and helped him gain perspective on his art that no one else had been able to do.

I even got a call from Archie Lee in California who played for five years on The Oak Ridge Bombers. He was delighted to see the Oak Ridge Bombers getting recognition and glad to see the photographs of the team published. He, like others, collected every article and sent it on to others who were aware of the team and its history.

Archie was also in the first integrated classes in Oak Ridge schools in 1955. Lawrence Graham and C. H. Shannon were also in those classes. Archie said he thought there were close to 100 black students that integrated Robertsville Junior High School and Oak Ridge High School in 1955.

Approximately 42 of those 100 students were Oak Ridge High School students. Archie is proud of the graduation rate of the blacks who were integrated into Oak Ridge High School. He is also rightfully proud to have been the very first black student named to the Oak Ridge High School chapter of the National Honor Society. Archie was also a member of the Student Council.

Lawrence Graham graduated in 1957, one of six black students graduating that year. He went on to earn a doctorate degree. Archie believes three black students graduated in 1956. He is proud to note that the black Oak Ridge students did well in the new environment in spite of the inherent difficulties of breaking new ground as integrated classes. As each student graduated they added to the early record of successful integration efforts.

Archie wonders aloud why Oak Ridge does not get more recognition for its early integration efforts. He says that Clinton and Little Rock, especially Little Rock, take credit for something for which he feels Oak Ridge should be recognized. That is being the VERY FIRST high school and junior high school in the South to be integrated.

I don't know the history well enough to argue the point, but I do know that Oak Ridge's integration was not without some perturbations. Waldo Cohn and his struggle to do what he knew was right regardless of the recall petition to remove him from City Council was an example of the Oak Ridge sentiment of 1955. I can't help but reflect on the positive impact of planting the city of Oak Ridge in the midst of Appalachia

Gene Moody, coach of the Oak Ridge High School baseball team during the late 1950's and early 1960's, indicates he believes Lawrence Graham may be the first black student playing on an integrated high school sports program in Tennessee and maybe even the entire South.

Oak Ridge Bombers – some final thoughts

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 25, 2009)

Archie Lee told me that Lawrence is shown in the 1957 Oak Ridge High School yearbook photos in uniform playing both basketball and baseball. Gene Moody also noted that Lawrence was an excellent athlete and played both basketball and baseball.

Why has this record setting event not been recognized by Oak Ridge history? If Lawrence Graham was the first black athlete to play in an integrated high school team, then that fact should be included in our recorded history.

We have been content to first allow Little Rock to gain nationwide recognition for integration and in the past few years Clinton and the Clinton 12 have been identified as pacesetters. However, Oak Ridge may well have preceded both where integration is concerned. We should take pride in that historic accomplishment.

One more story about Oak Ridge Bombers that is a bit unusual. One of the phone calls from readers of the series on the Oak Ridge Bombers came from June Haynes who asked if I knew there was an Oak Ridge Bomber football team! Well, actually their name was the Oak Ridge Atomic Bombers!

I did not know what to think. Here I had started out on this historical research journey intending to document the history of a fly-by-night professional baseball team in Oak Ridge. I knew that team did not last but a few weeks and then a second professional baseball team from a few years later that did no better. And along the way, I even learned of a modern day baseball team using the "bombers" name.

Now here I was faced with yet one more "bombers" team after being blindsided with the black baseball team, named the Oak Ridge Bombers, that actually lasted nearly 20 years. And this team was a football team at that.

June said she had an old program that she had kept since her college days that she wondered if I would like to see. She said it showed there was an Oak Ridge football team in 1945 that played her college football team. That sounded most unusual to me, so obviously, I had to see it.

I arranged to stop by her home and see what she was talking about. June showed me the program that promoted a football game to be played at Kingsport, TN. The Oak Ridge Atomic Bombers were set to play football against Milligan College on Saturday, November 10, 1945 at 8:00 PM at the J. Fred Johnson Stadium. The game was sponsored by the Kingsport Civitan Club.

Printed above the roster for the Oak Ridge team were the words, "Army Atomic Bombers." So, I contacted Bill Sergeant who was in the military here in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project and later. I wanted to see if he recalled anything about an Oak Ridge football team named the Oak Ridge Atomic Bombers.

Here is what Bill had to say, "Yes, they were a Military Police team. My boss, Major L.R. Block, was the coach. The Army MPs were under our command. We beat everybody, mostly army units from elsewhere. We wanted to challenge the UT Vols. (We would have been creamed). I recognized a few names on the roster."

So, there we have it, I hope. Not only did we have a professional baseball team that used the "bombers" name in the 1940's, a black baseball team that used that name for nearly 20 years and one modern day team that does so even today, we also had a football team known by the "bombers" name.

Oak Ridge Bombers – some final thoughts

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 25, 2009)

What fun I have had with this “bombers” name. Yet, amid all the humor, I have come upon some very sobering thoughts and found some people who are delighted to finally see recognition of community leadership second to none. The families and individuals I have met doing the research for this series of articles have blessed me with insights previously unknown and have shown me strength and character that reflects deeply held faith and trust in basic human kindness and grace. What a wonderful experience.

Thank you, Larry Gipson, for being my guide and friend through the past few weeks. I hope you agree we have treated the story of the *Oak Ridge Bombers that lasted* with the respect and honor you hoped to see.



Football game program kept all these years by June Haynes, a Milligan College graduate

Oak Ridge Bombers – some final thoughts

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 25, 2009)

Army Atomic Bombers				
No.	Name	Position	Weight	Home Town
*20	Dawson, N.	Back	180 lbs.	Oak Park, Ill.
*21	Millican, R.	Tackle	235 lbs.	Amarillo, Texas
*22	Hornyak, L. J.	Back	218 lbs.	Toledo, Ohio
23	Gormeley, J. F.	Tackle	210 lbs.	Jersey City, N. J.
*24	Stefanon, S.	Guard	210 lbs.	Ebensberg, Pa.
*25	Coller, A. P.	Guard	190 lbs.	DePere, Wis.
*26	Topazio, A. A.	Back	171 lbs.	Bristol, R. I.
27	Voss, D. J.	Back	185 lbs.	Ingram, Pa.
28	Holdren, G. R.	Tackle	165 lbs.	Philipsburg, Pa.
29	Vaughn, R. H.	End	184 lbs.	Ardmore, Okla.
30	Orr, M. P.	Tackle	290 lbs.	Anderson, S. C.
*31	McConnell, A. J.	Back	175 lbs.	Lansing, Mich.
32	Willard, F. E.	Back	165 lbs.	Cambridge, Mass.
*33	Richert, R.	Center	188 lbs.	Port Huron, Mich.
34	Tunt, M. E.	Back	174 lbs.	Martins Ferry, Ohio
35	Douglas, H. D.	End	200 lbs.	Syracuse, N. Y.
36	Moskop, A. J.	Tackle	205 lbs.	Dupo, Ill.
37	Williams, D. E.	Center	210 lbs.	Arlington, Mass.
*38	Seifert, C.	End	195 lbs.	Swampscott, Mass.
39	Bosworth, O. W.	Back	182 lbs.	Oscalosa, Iowa
40	Printup, W. O.	End	185 lbs.	Baltimore, Md.
41	Zarzecki, J. J.	Guard	170 lbs.	Detroit, Mich.
*42	Radke, F. H.	End	184 lbs.	Jordon, Minn.
43	Toal, R. L.	End	175 lbs.	St. Louis, Mo.
44	Jensen, W.	Guard	175 lbs.	Laramie, Wyo.
45	Williams, T. C.	Back	150 lbs.	Westfield, N. J.
46	Batten, A. W.	Guard	174 lbs.	New Castle, Pa.
47	Berry, J. J.	Tackle	184 lbs.	Jacksonville, Fla.
48	Lunn, D. L.	Guard	195 lbs.	Lakeland, Fla.
49	Psemenicki, E. J.	Tackle	210 lbs.	Jersey City, N. J.
50	Laskowski, F. J.	Tackle	195 lbs.	Mentor, Ohio
51	Finlon, F. P.	End	170 lbs.	Carbondale, Pa.
51	Vakakes, E. J.	Back	168 lbs.	Birmingham, Ala.
*52	West, R.	Tackle	180 lbs.	Roanoke, Va.

*Probable Starters

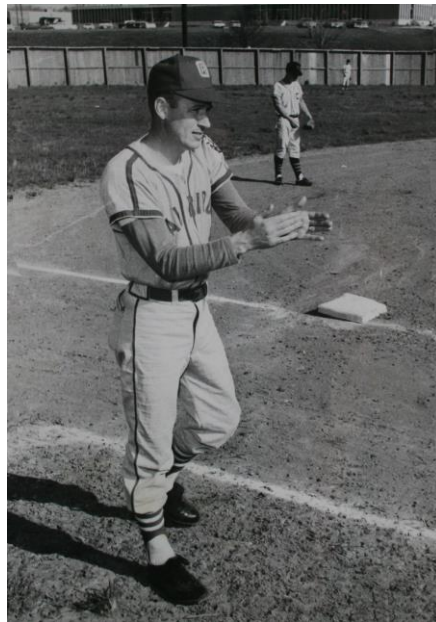
The listing of players on the Oak Ridge Atomic Bombers team – recognize any of the names?

Oak Ridge Bombers – some final thoughts

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 25, 2009)



Eugene Moody, today



Eugene Moody, Oak Ridge High School Baseball coach in 1963