

# **The Oak Ridge Bombers – the team that lasted**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 4, 2009)**

I have found that, for me, writing about the history of anything in Oak Ridge is always subject to being limited in depth of understanding and missing key elements even when taking information from primary sources. The history of early baseball teams is no exception.

What I thought was just a simple thing of identifying the professional baseball team of early Oak Ridge turned out to be two teams. What I thought was the only use of the name "Bombers" turned out to be just plain wrong. I have since learned that a team that was evidently formed before the professional team was also known by that same name – Oak Ridge Bombers. At least that was the case in 1948 at the same time as the professional team by that name was formed!

This other Oak Ridge Bomber team was a most unusual team of black baseball players who were outstanding players but were not allowed to play with the regular baseball teams, the white teams. The August 10, 1944 issue of the Oak Ridge Journal cites four games being scheduled on Sunday, August 13, 1944, in a "new colored League." The names of the teams are noted as: Roane-Anderson; Stone and Webster; J. A. Jones; Ford, Bacon and Davis; Keith Williams and Carbide and Carbon.

They were said to be playing on the "colored ball diamond near the Roane-Anderson colored hutments" and the "K-25 area diamond." Mention is made of the possibility of night games scheduled on Wednesday evenings and played at the Sawmill Road diamond, the first lighted field in Oak Ridge history.

The September 7, 1944 issue of The Oak Ridge Journal again mentions the colored baseball teams as playing at 2:30 PM on Sunday at the Hutment Area diamond. None of these announcements mention any name other than the contractor organizations.

Don't you have to wonder about the name, "Oak Ridge Bombers?" I do. 1944 was well before the atomic bomb was a known fact and that name is not mentioned as part of the "new colored league." I have tried to determine when the name was first used, but am still uncertain. I know it was in place by May 13, 1948 as the name for the black team and also the professional team had chosen that same name.

I have been told that Robert Lee started a black baseball team in Oak Ridge as early as 1944 and I know that by May 13, 1948, this black team had uniforms that displayed the name Oak Ridge Bombers. This is proven by a newspaper photo taken by Ed Westcott in the Oak Ridge Journal published on May 13, 1948.

While I have failed so far in determining the exact date when the all black team named "The Oak Ridge Bombers" began as an independent team, by searching the history of baseball in Oak Ridge, I have found something far more meaningful. I have found a history that is on the verge of being forgotten.

I have found an elderly gentleman who is revered by his peers, his family and his friends. I have found a deep seated yearning for understanding and appreciation for a time long gone, but still fresh in the memory of those who experienced it. I have found the original Oak Ridge Bombers! What a joy this discovery has been for me.

This story is the result of one man's determination to see this story told and a group of long-time friends and family who know the meaning of frustration, yet also still know a deep and abiding love and appreciation for one another. Larry Gipson is the key resource who led me to this story. He deserves not only my thanks, which I surely give, but also the thanks of all who appreciate the full history of Oak Ridge, especially the history of the black community.

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The family and friends I came to know as a result of Larry's kind introductions, also share memories of a baseball team that represented so much more than mere sport. It represented victory when oppression was rampant. It represented freedom from insult. It represented opportunity for the gifted. It gave a group of special people a place to fit. Even today, this special baseball team still holds a very special place in the hearts of many who played on the team or family members and descendants of players.

The Oak Ridge Bombers I am talking about now is one that had its beginnings in the late 1940's and lasted to the middle 1960's – close to 20 years! In learning this history, I met some very special people.

These special people shared with me from the depths of their memory and also from the hurt of their souls at the enormous prejudice they have endured. Yet they are a happy people and were so even in the midst of the oppression they have experienced. Oppression I cannot imagine, but can only accept as sad historical fact.

Larry Gipson made it possible for me to get a glimpse into a world that I cannot even imagine existing. He opened doors for me and paved the way for entrance into people's lives that hold sacred the trust of one another and share memories that few outsiders to their family ever know much less appreciate.

I am thankful for that opportunity. Even though the experiences they shared with me were foreign to my personal experience and much more traumatic than I can understand, never having experienced prejudice such as they lived with for much of their lives, still I am glad they shared their stories with me.

Now comes the hard part. How to write about this profound truth I have been shown and do it justice. It is so much more important to me than just documenting another *Historically Speaking* story. I hold the trust given me sacred and desire to convey the story with the same depth of emotion and sincerity of purpose that was shown me in the homes of those who have lived it.

Let me start by telling you of the elderly gentleman, James Capshaw. James came to Oak Ridge in 1946 and went to work at K-25. James tells laughingly of his early days there. He says repeatedly that he "pushed up his age" to get to keep his job.

It seems his supervisor found out that he was a bit young to be working, but he was such a strong and healthy young man that his strength was very useful on the job. His supervisor said to him that he was going to overlook the age thing since he was needed badly and besides, he was plenty strong for his age.

So, James agreed to "move his age up" and to this day, he celebrates a birth date other than his actual date of birth. His family laughs about it and he does too, but the memory is strong and tells of his intense dedication. He kept his job by "moving his age up" as needed to meet the criteria required. James knew how to manage even at that early age.

He came to Oak Ridge without his family at a very young age all the way from Huntsville, Alabama and made a go of it in spite of prejudicial situations and a sometimes oppressive environment. He had a natural ability to "get along" and to read a situation such that he succeeded where others might have failed to see the future and might have resented the present treatment.

James quickly became a leader among his peers even at a very young age. He also had a natural ability to play baseball. This would serve him well over the years.

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Another man who is held in extremely high esteem is Robert Lee. He was the manager of a semi-pro baseball team of young black men who routinely traveled each weekend to surrounding cities and even states to play other teams of young black men. This was the beginning of the Oak Ridge Bombers baseball team that lasted.

I have learned much from Marcus Caldwell, Robert Lee's great grandson, who attended Hiawasse College on a baseball scholarship. Marcus has some of the original uniforms, one is number 27 and was worn by Miller Weaver in a photograph of the team. He is standing beside James Capshaw, the manager.

Robert Lee started the Oak Ridge Bombers (the one that lasted). I don't know the exact date. Marcus told me of listening to stories of how this all came about. A man by the name of Ray Stuckey had a major role in getting Robert Lee to form the Oak Ridge Bombers. Robert Lee managed the team and played catcher.

When James Capshaw came along in 1946, the team had already been formed by Robert Lee and was playing regularly. The reason Stuckey wanted a black baseball team was because he was convinced they could play with the best of them and because of the segregation at the time, the white teams would not include the blacks. It was just the way things were at the time, so he did something about it!

A side note: The white Oak Ridge Bombers professional team that only lasted a few months in Oak Ridge before moving to Hazard, KY, were played by the Oak Ridge Bombers black team after moving to Hazard. The black bombers beat them according to James Capshaw. No record of this game has been found, but James insists it happened.

Robert Lee is also Oak Ridge's own Nikki Caldwell's great grandfather! Nikki's grandmother is Bobbie (Lee) Caldwell and her mother is Jean Caldwell. As you know, Nikki's has made Oak Ridge proud at the University of Tennessee as a player and coach and now is the head coach at the University of California at Los Angeles! Wouldn't Robert Lee be proud of his great grandchildren!

Now back to Robert Lee and the Oak Ridge Bombers. The black baseball players in Oak Ridge were excluded from playing in other leagues, could not be considered for professional teams, were not welcome in plant teams in Oak Ridge, yet they wanted to play baseball. So, they joined with other black men in similar circumstances in other cities and states who were natural athletes but were not allowed to play on the "normal" or white teams.

James just as quickly proved his athletic ability by playing just about any position where he was needed. These teams did not practice – they did not need it. The games they played on the weekends were all they had time for and were all they needed. Practice was a luxury they could not afford and did not need. Of course, they often played four or more games from Friday night until late Sunday evening.

During the week, all of the Oak Ridge Bombers team members worked at jobs, many in the government plants of Oak Ridge. But come Friday afternoon, off they went, stuffing as many as would fit into shared automobiles and then rushing onto the playing field with little or no warm up to play a game of baseball before it got too late on Friday night.

It was then up at dawn and playing all day on Saturday and Sunday afternoon, often playing two or more double headers back to back. They were all natural athletes and lived for the weekends when they could

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get in their natural element and enjoy the success of winning games right and left. James keeps recalling it as “we ‘whupped’ them everywhere we went.”

The Oak Ridge Bombers even went to James Capshaw's home town of Huntsville, Alabama. They “whupped” them there as well. James said the comment made there was “this is no sandlot team!” The team must have all been exceptional athletes as winning was just a natural part of the process for them.

In addition to being the team's manager, Robert Lee was also one of the catchers. If needed, he would both manage the team and play catcher. James Capshaw also managed and played. He played first base and shortstop, however, Ronnie Graham noted that James could actually play all the positions equally well.

Ronnie Graham played on the Oak Ridge Bombers near the end of their existence, in 1964. The bombers had had a very good run by then, but times were changing again. The team survived nearly 20 years! The start date was in 1944.

I am not sure why the team broke up but it might have something to do with the growing acceptance of black players in the minor leagues and major leagues in the 1960's. While Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier on April 15, 1947, by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, it would take several years for integration to be widely accepted in professional baseball.

It was over 80 years earlier in 1883 and 1884, when Moses Fleetwood Walker and his brother Welday Walker played major league professional baseball for the Toledo Blue Stockings who, in 1884, joined the American Association, a Major League. But he was released from the team after the 1884 season.

Black players were banned from professional major league baseball until Jackie Robinson. There was a “gentleman's agreement” that prevented black players from playing in the major leagues. Cap Anson, arguably the first superstar of baseball, personally contributed to this ban. He refused to come on the field if the opposing team had a black person on their roster.

Next we will examine the Negro Baseball League, say more about William Capshaw and learn about Ronnie Graham's interesting story of his baseball experiences in Oak Ridge.

If you have additional information about the Oak Ridge Bombers, please contact Larry Gipson at P.O. Box 6940, Oak Ridge, TN, 37830.

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Photo by Ed Westcott published in The Oak Ridge Journal on May 13, 1948. First known photo of The Oak Ridge Bombers, an all black team who travelled to weekend games and who were excellent natural players. Players are: Back row, left to right: Hilton, James Capshaw, Weatherspoon, Taylor, Johnson, Cranberry and the last person is unidentified. Front row, left to right, Elizia, D. W. Sykes, Robert Lee, Oscar Wright, Holman, William Capshaw, Sr. and Lyons.



James Capshaw today, he was the playing manager for the Oak Ridge Bombers and is still laughing today about “whupping” all those other teams in years gone by