

Life is A Ball Game-The Oak Ridge Bombers Baseball Team

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 5, 2022)

Katatra Vasquez, a good friend and author (*Atomic Hope Cultural Travel Activity Guide* and *Josie's Hope: A Secret City Revealed*), brings us an insightful look at a recent experience she had. It all started when another good friend, Jack Bailey, who has also written for Historically Speaking on sports history, offered to loan a very special baseball uniform to The Oak Ridge History Museum. Get ready to enjoy the result of that coincidental offering and Katatra's eager acceptance of the chance to learn something new.

There have been a series of four articles published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column about *The Oak Ridge Bombers-The Team that Lasted*. These articles gave a great glimpse into the history of this team. A team birthed out of absurd segregated practices during the 1940s World War II Manhattan Project.

Here are links to the Historically Speaking series on The Oak Ridge Bombers, The Team that Lasted:

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2009/8-4-09%20The%20Oak%20Ridge%20Bombers%20that%20lasted.pdf>

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2009/8-11-09%20The%20Oak%20Ridge%20Bombers%20that%20lasted%20part%202%20rev%20.pdf>

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2009/8-18-09%20The%20Oak%20Ridge%20Bombers%20-%20community%20leadership.pdf>

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2009/8-25-09%20Oak%20Ridge%20Bombers%20final%20thoughts.pdf>

This Historically Speaking article is intended to hopefully humanize the impactful story of the members of that great baseball team. It is funny to me how stories unfold of people who make history that do not really recognize they are making history. Or better yet, they do not know they are changing the trajectory of the overall human experience through their life experiences. I find it quite interesting that if you ask those said history makers if they knew they were making history most would humbly reply, "I was just living life."

As a newer member of the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association Board, during a spring meeting, it was mentioned that an Oak Ridge Baseball Collector, Jack Bailey, had an Oak Ridge Bombers Baseball uniform that he wanted to loan for display at the Oak Ridge History Museum. Knowing a little about the Oak Ridge Bombers' history, I raised my hand in excitement to volunteer to lead a program to unveil in my mind this super special historical artifact.

In full transparency, I must admit I did not know too much about the mechanics of the sport as I am a true baseball spectator, only. So, as you would expect, I was not entirely sure what I had gotten myself into volunteering to develop an open-to-the-public Oak Ridge Bombers baseball program.

As an annual summer family tradition, we take a trip to the Cincinnati Great American Ballpark to see the Dodgers versus the Reds baseball game. My husband, who is a California native and a true Dodgers fan, and me, an Ohio native who only finds it to be an act of true betrayal to root for anyone but my home team, the Reds, are both strong in our team loyalties. This trip for me is more about the rivalry of a house divided (I am still trying to figure out how my husband got our kids to be Dodgers fans). The musical 7th inning stretch, and the Skyline chili hot dog I treat myself to at the bottom of the 8th inning are highlights for me but never much about the actual game or the baseball players.

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However, much to my surprise this spectator would soon have a deeper appreciation for the game and its players. In my quest to plan an Oak Ridge Bombers program with the primary goal of unveiling vintage memorabilia, I thought to go beyond what I already knew about the team and actually talk with team members to hear about their experiences. My first interview was with Oak Ridge Bomber, Mr. Charles Boyd. I immediately knew I was in for a treat when I visited his welcoming home.

Before any words were spoken, seeing him in his chair with his Negro Leagues baseball hat placed carefully on his knee with the prominently displayed 1950s era black and white Oak Ridge Bombers framed photograph hung on the wall was all I needed to get swept away by his nostalgia.

After an hour or two of discussion, I was captivated by the stories he shared of what felt like a forgotten period in history. As I was leaving his home, his beautiful wife, Freeda Hopper, said "you know it would be great to get the team all together once again for a reunion." Mr. Boyd then began to name some of his teammates that he believed were still living. Surreptitiously he chuckled and recommended I give his teammate "Bookie" a call.

Mrs. Hopper then mentioned you know it is not too many of them still living. I left Mr. Boyd's home feeling overwhelmingly compelled to not just unveil a uniform but to honor the members of the Oak Ridge Bombers Baseball Team in a way that I did not think had ever been done before.

I found the Oak Ridge Bombers Baseball Team story to be one that should be told in appreciation for how influential they all were in our shared American History. Their story albeit based on the trauma of rejection due to the unwritten rules of not blurring the color lines in American Baseball is triumphant.

Unfortunately, some stories about Black History are often overshadowed by racist acts. The Oak Ridge Bombers story could be as well, but I implore you dear readers not to limit their story to the box of the downtrodden but see it through the lens of a hopeful victorious human experience.

I interviewed the five remaining local Oak Ridge Bombers; Charles Boyd, Marvin Burum, Larry Gipson, Rufus Shepherd, Ron Graham, and the descendants of the beloved team co-founders and managers Robert Lee and James Capshaw. Many of them did mention how they would face adversity at work supporting the Oak Ridge government mission and at school as two of the Bombers were among those individuals who were first to desegregate Oak Ridge High School.

On the other hand, within their stories are joyful memories of experiences playing for the love of the game and their community. James Capshaw who at the age of 16 left home in search of a better life came to work on the now known top-secret Manhattan Project, co-founded, and managed the Oak Ridge Bombers Baseball team with friend Robert Lee for over 20 years.

James Capshaw, revered by his community is on record stating the Oak Ridge Bombers were so good they "whooped" almost every team they played. There are also the stories of Bomber players Charles Boyd who remembered leaving work and going directly to the ball field to practice way into the night and Larry Gipson who reminisced over the notoriety and fame the team had in his beloved Scarboro community.

Mr. Rufus Shepherd recalled the team's comradery from rigorous training to the fun of his older teammates sneaking him into the parties on the infamous Scarboro Block. Marvin Burum's recollection of team road trips were quite amusing, specifically the time they traveled to the then predominantly racist Mississippi for a ballgame and after beating the socks off the Mississippi team in one-hundred-degree heat on the way home being pulled over by angry suspicious white police officers only to be caught with a trunk full of refreshing watermelon and thankfully let go.

There is no doubt that African Americans during the time of limited options enriched the game of baseball and unknowingly changed the course of history. Oak Ridge Bomber Eugene Williams went on to be a

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winning pitcher in the Negro League East-West All-Star game which was like the equivalent of the Major Baseball League All-Star Game.

Many of us may know of Jackie Robinson who broke the color barrier as the first African American to play for a Major League Baseball Team but Oak Ridge Bomber Ron Graham, unequivocally believes that there were a lot of talented black baseball players like Jackie Robinson that were just never given the opportunity. As they say iron sharpens iron and albeit unsung the well-known baseball greats like Hank Aaron, Satchel Page, and even Jackie Robinson's story all include playing a team of greats named the Oak Ridge Bombers.

Although the members of the "Team that Lasted" were just living life, I am forever grateful for the impact these legends behind the plate had on baseball and our American way of life. I appreciate how they took their love of the game to break racial barriers and had fun doing it.

I truly hope the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association's celebratory reunion program honored these legends in a way that displayed true appreciation for their works. Now, thanks go to the City of Oak Ridge for the special proclamation. We can all forever remember, November of 2022, as the month of acknowledgement for the contributions of the Oak Ridge Bombers baseball team.

There is a song by Sister Wynona Carr, entitled *Life is a Ball Game*. Within this poignant song's lyrics, she says life is a ball game, but you've got to play it fair. So may we all be inspired by the Oak Ridge Bombers to take life's unfair fastballs, swing at them with our all might, and hit some home runs in spite of the unfair pitches of life.

Oh yes, and not forgetting, as Bomber Marvin Burum claimed during the program, to "always be the best to ever play the game." Now Let's Play Ball!

Thank you, Katatra, for accepting the challenging opportunity to learn through personal research, for the historical exhibit and great community recognition event you created to honor these special people, and for your very special interpretation of your experience in this Historically Speaking column.

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Charles Boyd proudly displays his unique Negro League baseball cap



Jack Bailey with the Oak Ridge Bombers uniform that started the sequence of events leading to an event honoring the team and bringing attention to the remaining team members

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Ronnie Graham, Rufus Shepherd, Marvin Burum, Ron Capshaw (son of James Capshaw), Larry Gipson, and Charles Boyd



A large crowd attended the special community honor event at a public meeting of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association at the Wildcat Den room of the historic Midtown Community Center/The Oak Ridge History Museum