

## **Black Diamonds in Negro League Baseball**

**By Jo S. Kittinger**



### **Memories**

They say memories fade as you get older, but memories of baseball have a way of holding tight, like a fastball buried in a catcher's glove. Three players from the Negro Leagues--William Greason, Willie Lee and Jessie Mitchell--were happy to share some of their baseball memories with me when I interviewed them recently (April 2007). Only a small portion of my interviews were able to be included in a Just For Kids page feature article, "Black Diamonds," in the Birmingham News, April 12, 2007. I decided to include the entire interview on my web page, so these wonderful memories will not be lost to history.

### **History**

In the days black baseball players weren't allowed to play on white major league teams, black players formed their own teams and leagues. The first black professional baseball team, the Babylon Black Panthers, was formed in 1885 in New York. They soon changed their name to the Cuban Giants to attract more white fans. It wasn't until 1920 that the Negro Major Leagues were firmly established. The color barrier was broken in 1947 when Jackie Robinson signed to play with the white Montreal Royals team. But full integration did not happen overnight. The final Negro League World Series was held in 1951, but many Negro League teams continued to play throughout the 1950's.

The Birmingham Black Barons were a successful team, starting with the Southern Negro League in 1920 and finishing with the Negro American League in 1960. The Birmingham Black Barons competed in three Negro League World Series, being defeated each time by the Homestead Grays.

**William Greason**, a pitcher, played with the Nashville Black Vols (1947), the Ashville Blues (1948), the Birmingham Black Barons (1948-1951). He went on to play for the major league St. Louis Cardinals farm teams.

### **Q. What is your favorite baseball memory?**

**A.** In 1948, we were tied in the championship game. I pitched against the Kansas City Monarchs to win and that put us in the world series. In that closing inning I struck out a couple of their best hitters. I was pretty good. But I never boasted or pushed myself out there. . . You are a human—you have been given a gift by God and you should use it for His glory. . . .

### **Q. How much were baseball players paid when you were with the Black Barons?**

**A.** Starting pay was \$500 a month, plus \$2 a day for eating out. I could buy breakfast for about 50 cents and supper for about \$1.15. Candy bars were 5 or 10 cents.

**Q. What do you think about today's top salaries for baseball players?**

A. I think it's good for players to get as much as they can, but I don't think it's right for one player to make so much. One player can't make a team. You can't win without nine players on the field.

**Q. What was the hardest thing about those times?**

A. Discrimination was rampant. We couldn't eat in restaurants, couldn't stay in hotels. We had our own bus—that was a blessing for us. But we didn't worry about segregation; we knew where we could play and where we couldn't. We were just interested in playing ball and wanted to establish a little dignity among our people.

**Q. Did you have baseball heroes when you were a boy?**

A. No, I never thought about playing ball. I wanted to be a doctor. But God gave me this gift and I used it to the best of my abilities.

**Q. As a member of the Alabama Negro League Association, what are your goals?**

A. We're trying to get a building and put some of our memorabilia in it. We don't want everything to get lost.

**Q. What advice do you have for young players?**

A. You have to be determined. Develop your skills. Don't be dismayed if you don't make it first time and remember that there will be ups and downs. Don't be dismayed if you don't make it the first time. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose—you have to accept them both.

**Miscellaneous Information:**

We lived across the street from Dr. Martin Luther King in Atlanta for a while. Then we had to move. We were poor.

After baseball: I worked for Pizitz (department store) for about 15 years as a truck driver and warehouse supervisor. Then I entered the ministry. I went to bible school and Samford's school of divinity. I've been in the ministry 40 years now. I've had a great life and I thank God for it.

**Jessie Michell**, led the Negro American League in batting in 1957 with a .338 average. He played with the Birmingham Black Barons (1954-58) and Kansas City Monarchs (1960).

**Q. How did you get started playing ball?**

A. ACIPCO had a black team and a white team for their company. They had some of the best players you ever saw. Both teams used to practice in the yard. But the black team was hitting the ball so hard that they were breaking windows in the ACIPCO hospital. So, they moved the black team to Sloss to practice. The white team stayed in the yard at ACIPCO.

The whole neighborhood went to the ACIPCO games-- standing room only. I started playing for them when I was still in school.

A lot of the companies had baseball teams—Stockholm had a team, Dickie Clay, the Bessemer pipe shop.

**Q. Did you have any heroes as a child?**

A. Oh yea. That's why I played ball. ACIPCO had some great players. Audie Wilson, Jimmie Chamblee. Ed Steele, my cousin, played with the Barons and in Mexico.

**Q. What are some of your favorite memories from the Negro league games?**

A. When I was with Kansas City we went to a tournament in Canada, it was winner take all. We were losing, then two players hit home runs and the next man walked. Then I hit it out of the field and we won 8-5. The people came out of the stands and put me on their shoulders. I also remember the first home run I hit in Rickwood Field, over the left fence.

**Q. What was it like traveling with the team in those days?**

A. We couldn't stay in white hotels. Sometimes we stayed in funeral homes. We slept on cots. At restaurants we'd have to go around to the back, or we'd send in our lightest skinned player. He'd buy the food and bring it back out to the bus for us.

One time we went to a restaurant in Mississippi—we started to go to the back door and a white man came out and said, "Wait, you can come in the front door. One white customer inside challenged him saying, "You're gonna let them come in the front?" The owner said, "These players are gonna spend more money in here in one day than you'll spend in here in a year." He told the customer to get outta there. We went on in and ate. That was nice.

In Memphis we had ladies come in and cook for us. That was good. In Louisville, we got paid about \$150-\$200 a month plus \$2 a day for eating out. Sometimes you didn't get that.

**Q. Do you have any funny memories?**

A. Oh yes. Palmer Hubbard was running after a fly ball. He was saying, "I got it, I got it." But his cap fell off and the ball hit him on the top of the head. Instead of going after the ball, I was stopped dead laughing. I'd never seen a ball hit a man on the top of the head.

**Q. What advice can you give players?**

A. Keep yourself in good condition. Understand and mind people. You have to learn to take advice. The main thing about hitting is you have to come into contact with the ball. Hit what you see. I hit the ball where it was pitched. For pitchers, you don't have to throw it hard to get it past a batter. A good pitcher can spot the ball and keep the batter off balance.

**On Discrimination/Hatred:**

In Illinois we were playing an all-white team. When we got there they were teasing us about how small we were. "Little Joe" said "I want that ball." He struck out 18-19 of

those guys. We shut them out. We spanked them real good. They cut out the lights at the field, wouldn't let us take a shower or anything.

We ran into a lot of discrimination. I didn't really understand what all that was about. But that's what made me and the other guys play so hard. After playing us they knew we were just as good as they are.

Once we had gone to Mississippi for a game. One of the players had a nice convertible and we'd gone out for a ride. Two white ladies on the corner started admiring our car. A white guy came up and threatened to set the car on fire. We called off the game that night, packed up and left Mississippi.

Another time, in Macon, GA, I caught a ball against the wall. I went back to the dugout and a white lady but a black cat on top of the dugout and said, "Here's your brother."

(1955: On the Baltimore Orioles farm team.) There were some guys with prejudice there. I just did my job. I had good speed, I could run and I could hit.

**Miscellaneous:** The Louisville Clippers sold him and Charlie Pride to the Birmingham Barons. They gave him \$300 as part of the deal.

(Played on teams with Charlie Pride.) I still talk with Charlie Pride all the time.

**Willie Lee**, outfielder and pitcher, played with the Birmingham Black Barons (1956-57) and the Kansas City Monarchs (1958-59). He went on to sign with the Detroit Tigers and play on their farm teams.

**Q. Who were your heroes when you were a boy?**

**A.** Willie Mays. I had a Willie Mays shirt. I wore that shirt everyday. My mom got onto me about wearing that shirt to bed.

**Q. Tell me about your childhood.**

**A.** I stayed out at Rickwood Field. I'd walk to the ball park from Sandy Bottom. When I couldn't get in, I jumped the fence. The right field stands were the only place black people could sit during the white Barons games. Sometimes players would give me cracked bats. We'd get balls that players hit into the stands during practice. Before I got with the team I used to see Ernie Banks and other black players, like Willie Mays. That was a thrill to me.

We buried my dad on my 4<sup>th</sup> birthday. We had it rough after my father died. We didn't eat too well. My brothers and sisters all had little jobs. My mom worked. I got a job at Morrison's cafeteria. I also worked at Rochester's Drug Store and a bowling alley. I had a popsicle wagon I'd push around. I'd have my glove with me and I'd stop and toss the ball with a friend.

The Ensley theatre was upstairs. That's when you had to drink out of a dipper—not the water fountain.

We were more family oriented then. People would look out for each other, we were more caring. (Before I signed with my first team) I had to go home and ask my mom if I could go on the road. I had been in Hillman hospital. I had a football injury and it didn't heal well.

**Q. How did you get started?**

A. I hung out by Kelly Ingram park, near the hotel where all the players stayed. I was trying to jump off the sand lot and into the Negro Leagues. I went up to Memphis, but was turned down, so I came back to Birmingham. Satchel Paige was at Birmingham, so I jumped on with them.

**Q. What were some highlights of your career?**

A. My first home run at Rickwood field—I hit it over the scoreboard against the Barons. I was with the Kansas City Monarchs then. . . The first game I ever pitched, I pitched a one-hitter against the Memphis Red Sox in Mount Bayou, Mississippi. After the game everyone hollered, “Mr. Lee, stay with us, don't leave!” I felt good.

**Q. What is your favorite memory?**

A. Playing at Rickwood with the rest of the guys and meeting people from different states.

**Q. What's something you tell children when you speak at schools?**

A. I like to tell them about the three ladies who played with the Negro leagues: Mamie Johnson, Connie Morgan and Toni Stone. They were all with the Indianapolis Clowns. Hank Aaron also played for the Clowns.

**Q. What advice do you give kids who want to play ball?**

A. Put your heart in it. Stay out of trouble.

**On Discrimination:** I never had trouble with people in general—color doesn't matter. Once I was the only black player on a team. I'd hear racial slurs but I just mixed in. It doesn't matter what color you are.

**Miscellaneous:**

The barrier had been broken by Jackie Robinson, but they still weren't bringing them up (many black players) into the major leagues.

During Spring Training with the Detroit Tigers (Cincinnati farm team), we had squad games. I was going up for a fly foul ball against the right field fence. I didn't look down and I stepped on a hose that had been left out. I stretched a ligament in my knee. That was the beginning of my injuries. I was playing even when I was still on crutches. They were giving prize money for the 1<sup>st</sup> hitter, 1<sup>st</sup> homerun, 1<sup>st</sup> triple, etc. I got the first home run and won \$100.

I got a shoulder injury in my 2<sup>nd</sup> season with the Detroit Tigers.

Baseball has been good to me. I have no regrets. I played ball for 17 years for various teams until my knees gave out.

I want to thank anyone who had a role in me playing ball. Most of all I thank the Lord.

## **Negro League Quiz**

1. What famous Country and Western singer played baseball in the Negro Leagues?
  - A. Cowboy Troy
  - B. Big Al Downing
  - C. Aaron Neville
  - D. Charlie Pride**
2. In recognition of his lifetime accomplishments, which Negro League player received a Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom?
  - A. Satchel Paige
  - B. Josh Gibson
  - C. Jackie Robinson**
  - D. Cool Papa Bell
3. Which of the following was NOT a Negro League team?
  - A. Atlanta Black Crackers
  - B. Kansas City Skippers**
  - C. Hilldale Daisies
  - D. New York Cubans
4. Who broke the color barrier to become the first African American in modern baseball to play in the major leagues in 1947.
  - A. Jackie Robinson**
  - B. Satchel Paige
  - D. Moses Fleetwood Walker
  - C. Willie Mays
5. Which Negro league player went on to become the first African American coach in Major League baseball as well as a top baseball scout?
  - A. Rube Foster
  - B. Ray Dandridge
  - C. Bullet Rogan
  - D. Judy Johnson**

Answers: 1D, 2C, 3B, 4A, 5D

**Learn More:**

**Negro Baseball Leagues**

[www.blackbaseball.com](http://www.blackbaseball.com)

**Negro Leagues Baseball Museum**

[www.coe.ksu.edu/nlbemuseum/](http://www.coe.ksu.edu/nlbemuseum/)

**Negro League Baseball**

[www.negroleaguebaseball.com](http://www.negroleaguebaseball.com)

**Black Famous Baseball Firsts**

[www.baseball-almanac.com/firsts/first8.shtml](http://www.baseball-almanac.com/firsts/first8.shtml)