

Schoolboy Rowe, and Dizzy Dean

By Jack Schnedler

Browsing through Jim Yeager's new book "Hard Times and Hardball" is rather like nibbling on peanuts and Cracker Jack at the old ballgame.

Before you know it, you've consumed the last bite of nostalgia in the 66 brief chapters. And you're digesting nuggets of Arkansas-themed baseball lore going back as far as the Gaslight Era of the 19th century.

Included is an account of what was likely the first baseball game played in Arkansas between teams from rival towns. It took place in Little Rock on July 4, 1868, with a gentleman "of high character" selected to be the umpire. The Little Rock team bested Pine Bluff in a 45-36 slugfest. Afterward, both sides graciously cheered each other, as well as the ump.

Back in the day, baseball could honestly claim to be "Our National Pastime." That primacy has been surpassed for some time by such diversions as professional football and online video games. The slide in popularity is hinted by the past tense in Yeager's subtitle: "A Collection of Stories About the Leagues, Teams, and Players From a Time When Baseball Was Arkansas' Game." (On the cover, "about," "from" and "was" are lower-cased.)

In that "time when," Jim Crow shadowed baseball here, as it did in much of what was then called (with unintended irony) the "Wonder State" and later the "Land of Opportunity." Black athletes

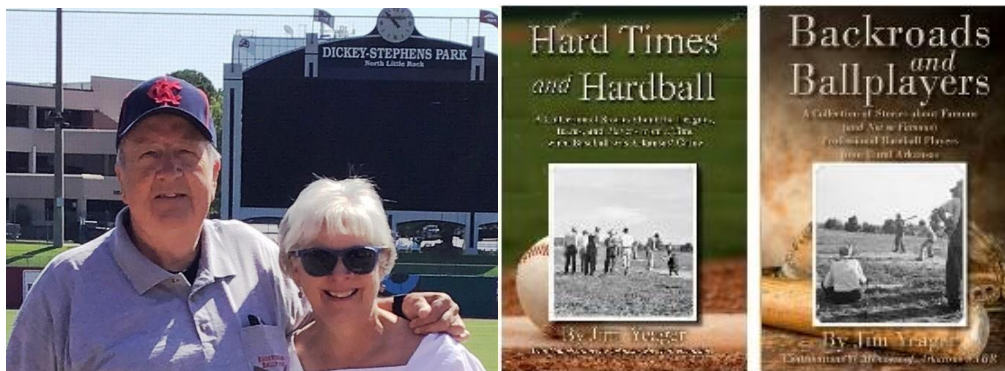
played baseball in Arkansas, but in leagues of their own that went unreported in white-owned newspapers.



Ray Winder and Stan Musial 1966

"Hard Times" does report that iconic Ray Winder Field served as home in the 1940s and '50s for several Black professional teams, including the Little Rock Black Travelers of the Negro Southern League. Toward the book's end, Black men who played for the Travelers starting in the 1960s are covered, among them such future big-league stars as Richie Allen and Ferguson Jenkins.

Yeager, a career teacher with bachelor's and master's degrees in history and education from the University of Central Arkansas, published his first book, "Backroads and Ballplayers," in 2018. For this new work, he asked other writers to contribute eight chapters.



Jim and Susan Yeager at Dickey Stephens Park

Explaining the "Hard Times" in the title, he writes: "Our Arkansas Ancestors endured two world wars, a devastating drought and a Great Depression. Baseball was an escape, and they loved the game."

With a typical light touch, he adds: "Most of our grandpas played. Many played better in their memories. Some told of playing some pro baseball, and some actually did. The stories of those days in Arkansas baseball are fading and somewhat muddled in the retelling. But they remain not only stories about a game, but also about our heritage."

By Yeager's count, 221 Arkansas-born players have appeared in major-league games as of last year. They include six Hall of Fame laureates: Travis Jackson, Arky Vaughn, Dizzy Dean, George Kell, Brooks Robinson and Lou Brock. Major leaguer Bill Dickey almost qualifies; when he was 3 years old, his family moved from Louisiana to Kensett in White County.

Kell, a premier American League third baseman in the decade after World War II, grew up in the Jackson County community of Swifton. His brother Everett "Skeeter" Kell played one season in the majors. They are touted on large signs at both ends of Swifton, along with fellow native Bobby Winkles, who played and managed in the major leagues.

FAVORITE SONS



Left to Right: Brooks Robinson, George Kell, Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame Historian Jim Rasco, Bill Dickey

Robinson was born in Little Rock. A peak of his home-state popularity came in November 1970, after he'd been honored as the most valuable player in the Baltimore Orioles' World Series victory.

The formal hometown welcome included "receptions, mayoral proclamations and a few speeches. But as might be expected of Brooks Robinson, several hours were spent at Lamar Porter Field signing hundreds of free autographs."

Robinson, who died at age 86 on Tuesday, was voted into baseball's Hall of Fame on his first year of eligibility in 1983. Kell, also 86 when he died in 2009, had a harder time winning admission. He was passed over 15 times before a veterans' committee selected him in 1983. By happy coincidence, they shared the stage for induction in Cooperstown, N.Y., on July 31 that year.

Arkansas baseball historian Jim Rasco described the day as "one of the most memorable events of my lifetime." Yeager writes, with a dash of melancholy, "In retrospect, the inductions marked the end of Arkansas baseball's golden era."

GOOD ENOUGH

Some native Arkansans achieved far less baseball success than the likes of Kell and Robinson. The chapter on William Franklin Bailey, born in 1888 in Fort Smith, is titled "Good Enough to Lose." He has "the uncelebrated distinction of 10 consecutive major-league seasons with a losing record, the longest in baseball history." He lost 76 games, twice as many as the 38 he won. One year, he lost 20 times.

Looking on the bright side, Yeager quotes a baseball historian in Bailey's defense: "You have to be a very good pitcher to lose 20 games in one season. Why would a manager keep putting you out there to pitch, time after time, if you didn't have a chance to win the game?"

MOSES YELLOW HORSE



Moses Yellow Horse

Yeager devotes an enthusiastic chapter to the 1920 Travelers, who won Little Rock's first Southern Association pennant, clinching the title 1-0 before a standing-room-only crowd at Kavanaugh Park. He observes wryly that the team photograph makes it clear the players "did not have the benefit of regular laundry services."

The next chapter is devoted to one of that team's top pitchers, a rarity in those decades of all-white rosters because he was a Pawnee Indian. His name was Moses Yellow Horse, one of two Pawnees on the roster along with first baseman Bill Wano.

Their arrival in Little Rock "was an absurd paradox in American baseball history," at a time when the new National Negro League "was the only venue for talented players of color for the next 27 years. Contrarily, Native Americans Wano and Yellow Horse were allowed to play on established professional teams."

On the other hand, "while their exploits on the field were cheered by enthusiastic fans in Little Rock, they were viewed more as curiosities than equals. Arkansas Gazette sports editor Henry Loesch could not constrain himself from using terms like 'warpath,' 'chief' and 'wild horse' in his reporting on the arrival of Wano and Yellow Horse."

Yellow Horse won 10 of the Travelers' last 25 victories before moving up to the Pittsburgh Pirates for two major-league seasons. Drinking problems soon ended his career. But when the Travelers held a reunion ceremony for the 1920 team in 1955, "the most enthusiastic fan response to the introduction of the returning players was reserved for the pitching hero of that pennant-winning team, Moses Yellow Horse."

GRAVE UNDERTAKING

The book ends aptly with "The Final Chapter," by guest writer Dr. Fred Worth, whose ongoing mission might strike some readers as macabre. As Yeager explains, Worth "has spent much of his life on a mission to visit the final resting places of our heroes."

His road-trip marathon began in 2004, when he learned that Hall of Fame shortstop Travis Jackson was buried in Waldo, about an hour from the doctor's home in Arkadelphia. That was the genesis of the passion he describes: "In 2021, my wife and I spent 67 days on the road, drove more than 17,000 miles, and visited 1,157 baseball-related graves."

When he wrote his essay for "Hard Times and Hardball," Worth's count stood at 9,246 graves visited in 4,120 cemeteries in 2,815 cities. Readers inclined to follow his footsteps can begin with Little Rock's Roselawn Memorial Park, site of 21 baseball-linked graves. From there, the odyssey can follow Worth's trail to 454 interments in 230 cemeteries in 155 Natural State cities.

MID EARP

Virtually all the sites are men's resting places. But the one woman among the multitude is Mildred "Mid" Kathryn Earp, who was born in 1925 in West Fork and buried there in 2017.



Mid Earp

Earp, according to guest writers Ronny Clay and Joe Miles, "faced life in determined fashion much like that of her more famous distant relatives Wyatt Earp and his brothers. She made her own distinctive mark on the mound for the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, playing for the Grand Rapids Chicks in 1946 through 1950."

Pitching in the women's league that was featured in the 1992 movie "A League of Their Own," Earp compiled a record of 54 wins and 38 losses. She threw a no-hitter in 1948, when she also worked all 18 innings of a 2-1 victory.

In the off-season, Earp applied her college degree in education to teach school in West Fork. After the women's league closed, she became a professional golfer. Following successful business ventures in California, she returned to West Fork in 1982 to help care for an ailing friend.

Waxing eloquent, the authors write: "May the roar of the crowd swell in acknowledging the triumphs of this first-class athlete and teacher from Arkansas. Mildred Earp did all she could to avoid the spotlight, but the spotlight is sure to shine on this accomplished woman forever."

Their ode sidles into hyperbole. But that is an excusable excess in a book overflowing with rose-tinted memories of the days when multitudes of Arkansans were devoted to "Our National Pastime."

Jack Schnedler, a retired Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Features editor, saw his first major-league game at age 5 in 1948 at old Sportsman's Park in St. Louis. In 1951, his father took him to the doubleheader where St. Louis Browns owner Bill Veeck sent 3-foot, 7-inch Eddie Gaedel up to bat. Gaedel walked on four pitches. Next day, the baseball commissioner banned dwarfs from the big leagues.