

Rex Nelson



On Aug. 10, 1971, L. Robert Davis met 15 other baseball researchers at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., to discuss their mutual interests. That meeting marked the beginning of the Society for American Baseball Research, commonly known as SABR. A decade after its founding, there were almost 1,500 members. There are now more than 6,000. Detroit Tigers announcer Ernie Harwell once said, "SABR is the Phi Beta Kappa of baseball, providing scholarship the sport has long needed."

Arkansas has never had a major league team, but the state boasts one of the most active SABR chapters and some of the country's best baseball historians. One of those is Jim Yeager of Russellville. I've met Yeager on this day at the Old Bank Sports Grill, which is in a masterful restoration of downtown Russellville buildings that once housed a bank and a pharmacy. We're joined by Hot Springs businessman Mike Dugan, who has done so much through the years to unearth the history of spring training in that city; Little Rock accountant Jim Rasco, who long has served as the historian of the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame; and history professor Tom DeBlack, who recently retired from his teaching gig at Arkansas Tech University.

Since we're talking about the past, it's fitting that I'm facing Sherry Trusty's mural that provides a timeline of Russellville history. Trusty spent three weeks painting the mural on one of the restaurant's walls. It includes everything from members of the Osage and Cherokee tribes to trains, Lake Dardanelle, Interstate 40 and Arkansas Nuclear One.

"I love history, baseball and Arkansas," Yeager says. "Now that I'm semi-retired, I have time to spend on a combination of those interests. I've been presenting a series I call Backroads and Ballplayers at SABR meetings for the past three years. I started with Dizzy and Paul 'Daffy' Dean since I've developed a friendship with 'Daffy' Dean's grandsons. Mike is the superintendent of the Two Rivers School District in Yell County, and Paul 'Bo' Dean is an assistant superintendent at Clarksville. Through them, I had the opportunity to meet their dad, Paul Dean Jr., who lives at Greenwood. He's an interesting guy and was a pretty good minor league pitcher in his own right.

"From there, I began to find more interesting stories of famous and not-so-famous Arkansans who played professional baseball. There are humorous anecdotes, sad failures and great accomplishments among these guys. Some are well known, but most are forgotten. I'm excited to have a chance to tell their stories. They deserve to be remembered."

Yeager recently finished a book with the title *Backyards and Ballplayers*. It will be released this fall and include more than 50 players who hailed from Arkansas. It starts with the story of Jay Hanna "Dizzy" Dean, who was born at Lucas in Logan County in January 1910. He was named after railroad magnate Jay Gould and an Ohio political figure named Mark Hanna. Father Ab Dean was a tenant farmer and sawmill worker. Paul was born in August 1913. Their mother, Alma Nelson Dean, died of tuberculosis in 1918. The boys were pretty much left to raise themselves since their father worked long hours.

"Travel down almost any back road in Arkansas, and you'll pass a relic of sports history," Yeager says. "The dilapidated backstops and the remains of long-neglected dugouts are a disappearing visual image of rural history. In the first half of the 20th century, baseball was the

chosen sport of farmers, coal miners, timber cutters and sharecroppers. No educational affiliation was required, and elementary school dropouts were welcome. If someone could buy a ball or even make one, and procure a bat or two, the game was on. The three acres or so needed to play were readily available as was the creek for after-game baths. These are Arkansas' fields of dreams. Stop the car, get out and walk around the forgotten ballfields. Sit in the dugout and look out at the field."

After graduating from what's now the University of Central Arkansas at Conway, Yeager began coaching high school basketball at Sacred Heart, a Catholic school at Morrilton. My father, who sold athletic goods across the state, called on Yeager in those days. Yeager was at Sacred Heart for seven years before being hired to coach the Golden Suns, the women's basketball team at Arkansas Tech.

"We were 4-18 my first year at Tech," he says. "We won the next four state women's college basketball conference titles in the Arkansas Women's Intercollegiate Sports Association. I was 107-32 at Tech. I resigned in 1982 because I wanted to enjoy my two sons' childhood." Yeager spent the next 28 years as a school guidance counselor before becoming an instructional technology consultant. Without the demands of being a college coach, he had time to study Arkansas history and the colorful characters who called this state home. His book features chapters on men with names like Dibrell Williams, Rube Robinson, Orville Armbrust, Smead Jolley, Rolland Stiles, "Hoss" Bowlin and Slick Surratt. Yeager says he now works about 70 days a year for the Two Rivers School District and a few more days for other districts and the state Department of Education. Like me, he loves driving the highways of Arkansas and hearing the stories of rural residents.

"Arkansas baseball is deeply rooted in the rural nature of the state's history," Yeager says. "It was a sport most often played in cow pastures with borrowed equipment."