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History, Mystery & Literary Notes

Patch Produces Coal Baron Ball Team Centerfielder

They have been married an impressive 61 years. John Burns was born in Palmer, but grew up in their Buffington home in the middle of a family of 16 children, eight boys and eight girls. One day he spotted Rose in her yard in nearby Lambert. He stopped the car. They married 6 months later. Today, John is the eldest of his living siblings at 86 years old.

I asked what they ate as children. "Coffee soup and bread," he laughed. "We spent most of our time playing ball."

John and his brothers, Glenn and Regis, all played for Pirate farm teams in the late 1940's. Bill Scott of Hopwood told me about John because we have been trying to identify the 1948 Coal Baron ball team photograph that has been in my *Yesteryear at the Uniontown Speedway* book since 1996. John played for the Coal Barons in 1949, so these men still remain a mystery.

At 19 years old, John signed on with the Greenville, Alabama Pirate Farm Team. "We were paid \$150. per month. We ate minced ham and grabbed watermelons along the road. It's not enough to live on." His bothers played on Pirate teams in Texas and New Mexico.

"The three of us still living all played baseball," John reminisced. "Regis was the home-run guy. He would run past the fence and people handed him tips through the gaps as he ran into home plate."

"One time when he played against us," Glenn laughed. "I set it up so Regis could get an inside the park home run and get the tip money."

"It started when Major league scouts came to Uniontown at Baily Park. Niagara Falls was playing the Coal Barons. The manager signed Glenn right away. I had signed with the Pirates already."

Glenn was 17 years old to John's 19. Regis was younger than them, at 15 yrs old when he went to the southwest to play ball. Chicken John, named for his love of fried chicken, had a .365 batting average, so they moved him to Uniontown's Coal Baron ball team in 1949. He played there for three months before being sent to York.

"In 1950, I played against Willie Mays. He was on the Giants Farm Team in Trenton, NJ. I broke my hand that year and was sent home."

Robena Mine was happy to see him return. "We will give you a job in the mines if you play on our baseball team," he was told. "We had a good team. I played for them three years." It was on his way home from one of these games that he spotted Rose in her white shorts.

They married in 1952. "After Robena, I played for Buffington, Keister, then Continental."

"The coal ash at the Keister field got the kids so dirty. It would be all over their faces, head to toe," Rose quipped. "I collected the money at the gate in Robena and took in thousands," she said shaking her head up and down.

In 1966, John was buried to the waist, face down, in a mine roof fall. "Jim Nagy of Connellsville pulled me out. He saved my life. Frank McKuka, our boss, did not make out as well. We lost him that day." They showed me the articles about John and his brush with death, along with ball team clips.

Today, John has a do nut for breakfast each morning. "He is a great husband," Rose said. "He sets

and colors my hair, puts it up in curlers. He does the dishes, washes the clothes. He helps me.”

“I roomed with Trader Jack McKeon in spring training. He became a World Series winning, major league manager. We are still go to Pirate games together.

When I played, the manager made more money than the players. I was born 50 years too soon or you would be talking to a millionaire a few times over. I was a line drive hitter and I could steal bases. Glen was a long ball hitter. I liked it. Good and plenty, you know?”

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