



Hard times and baseball

by Rex Nelson

It was the summer of 2018 when I sat down with Jim Yeager of Russellville to discuss his book "Backroads and Ballplayers," a delightful collection of stories about professional baseball players from Arkansas.

"I love history, baseball and Arkansas," Yeager told me at the time. "Now that I'm semi-retired, I have time to spend on a combination of those interests. I presented a series of talks I called Backroads and Ballplayers at meetings of the Arkansas chapter of SABR (the Society for American Baseball Research). I started with Dizzy and Paul 'Daffy' Dean since I had developed a friendship with 'Daffy' Dean's grandsons. Through them I had the opportunity to meet their dad, Paul Dean Jr. in Greenwood.

"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. They deserve to be remembered."

Yeager has become Arkansas' most prolific baseball historian. He's out with a new book, "Hard Times and Hardball: A Collection of Stories about the Leagues, Teams and Players from a Time When Baseball was Arkansas' Game." It's 420 pages of fascinating stories about baseball players, managers and others with Arkansas connections.

"Our Arkansas ancestors endured two world wars, a pandemic, a historic flood, a devastating drought and the Great Depression," Yeager says. "Baseball was an escape, and they loved the game. They attended their big-league baseball games on the radio. Although they had never seen Sportsman's Park in St. Louis, they imagined what it looked like. It was green and symmetrical, not unlike the converted pasture where they played on Sunday. Our ancestors had not seen Dizzy and Paul in person, but most knew someone who had.

"They sat on green benches on the courthouse lawn and talked about Stan Musial. In their playing days, they had tried to emulate his stance. He batted left-handed, hunched in an awkward

slouch with his bat pointed straight up. They had seen it on the radio. Most of our grandpas played. Many played better in their memories. ... 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."

Yeager says a majority of Arkansans in the 20th century were St. Louis Cardinals fans. Radio broadcasts of Cardinal games helped them relax after hard days.

"Baseball was Arkansas' game when our ancestors needed it most," he says. "It was an integral part of the lives of Arkansans who endured our state's most difficult years. Arkansas was basically a rural state for much of the 1900s, and baseball was part of the summer routine. Three acres, a ball and a bat were all it took to play, and every community had a town team.

"They told us about Musial's heroics and Enos Slaughter's mad dash from first base to score the winning run in the 1946 World Series. Some claimed to have met the great Lon Warneke when he was county judge in Garland County. They compared Bob Gibson to ol' Lon. Most declared Warneke was better. After all, they were there, listening on the radio when he pitched for the Cards."

By the end of the 2022 season, 221 Arkansas-born men had played major league baseball. Of those 221, 162 were born before World War II. Yeager is determined to capture their stories. 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. He was there for seven years before being hired to coach the Golden Suns, the women's basketball team at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville. His teams went 107-32 at Tech.

Yeager says he left coaching in 1982 so he could spend more time with his two sons.

Yeager spent the next 28 years as a school guidance counselor before becoming an instructional technology consultant. He became interested in this state's rich baseball heritage along the way. Madison McEntire, president of SABR's Robinson-Kell chapter, salutes Yeager for "highlighting and preserving the careers and legacies of lesser-known Arkansas players from long ago. Their struggles and accomplishments are largely forgotten by those outside their immediate families." For example, there's Otis Brannon, who hit .305 in more than 1,300 minor league games, including games against Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio. There's William "Square Jaw" Ramsey, who after 78 games for the 1945 Boston Braves played more than 800 games in the Pacific Coast League. There's Orville Armbrust, whose lone major league victory came against the Yankees in Babe Ruth's last game in pinstripes.

In thinking about the stories of this poor, rural state that my father and grandfathers told me, I'm drawn to the words of documentarian Ken Burns. He said of baseball: "It is played everywhere. In parks and playgrounds and prison yards. In back alleys and farmers' fields. By small children and old men. Raw amateurs and millionaire professionals. It is a leisurely game that demands blinding speed. The only game in which the defense has the ball.

"It follows the seasons, beginning each year with the fond expectancy of springtime, and ending with the hard facts of autumn. It is a haunted game, in which every player is measured against the ghosts of all who have gone before. Most of all, it is about time and timelessness. Speed and grace. Failure and loss. Imperishable hope. And coming home."

Senior Editor Rex Nelson's column appears regularly in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. He's also the author of the Southern Fried blog at rexnelsonssouthernfried.com.