

Baseball on the Backroads

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During the first half of the 20th century, baseball stole the hearts of Arkansans just as football does today. Most Arkansas towns prior to World War II had their own teams, with names such as the Newport Pearl Diggers, the Ozark Bears, the El Dorado Oilers. The stories of these baseball players have lain dormant for years, but a new book has just been published which draws attention to dozens of small-town Arkansans who deserve a place in our published sports history.

Jim Yeager, a Russellville resident and retired educator and coach, is the lead author of *Backroads and Ballplayers*, a volume that chronicles the baseball careers of Arkansas "farmers, coal miners, timber cutters, and even sharecroppers." Assisting Yeager with the book were various members of the Robinson-Kell Chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research. Baseball has never particularly appealed to me, but even I found this book interesting and fun.

Not all of these rural players are unknown, the best examples being the Dean brothers, who were born in Logan County but grew up in Yell County. Jay Hanna "Dizzy" Dean and his brother Paul Dee "Daffy" Dean were popular with both the press and the public--and their places in baseball history are secure. But, I had never heard of Charles "Boss" Schmidt, among many others.

Born in London, Ark., in 1880, Schmidt worked as a coal miner at Spadra and other coal belt towns. Fellow miners bestowed the nickname of "Boss" on Schmidt due to his physical strength and toughness. A catcher, Schmidt was Arkansas' first major league baseball star. In 1906, he joined the Detroit Tigers.

Yeager describes Schmidt as "more courageous than adroit," explaining that "armed with the tools of the day, a rudimentary mask, thin chest protector, and a mitt that resembled a throw pillow ... Schmidt often defended the position rather than manning it. With no shin protectors and oft-broken fingers, he was constantly injured but seldom unavailable to play." Schmidt played in 477 major league games.

Boss Schmidt earned a footnote in baseball history in 1907 when he confronted the antagonistic and abusive Ty Cobb, who had just slapped a groundskeeper and began choking the man's wife. Schmidt intervened and pounded Cobb with blows to the head. Two weeks later Schmidt and Cobb had a second public fistfight, with Cobb receiving a bloody nose and two black eyes.

Schmidt's younger brother, Walter Joseph Schmidt, was a better catcher and batter than his sibling, but he was not as colorful. After beginning his career as a catcher for the Helena Hellions, the younger Schmidt ultimately settled in with the Pittsburgh Pirates, ultimately playing in 766 big league games.

Havana in Yell County was the birthplace of pitcher Johnny Sain. His father, John Franklin Sain Sr., was a highly regarded semipro pitcher. Another future major league pitcher, Elton Walkup, lived just down the road, and he often played catch with young Sain. Yell County seems to have been the seedbed of Arkansas baseball. Yeager commented on this phenomenon,

noting that in 1920, Sain was one of "five future big league pitchers ... living in a 10-square-mile area on the backroads of Yell County, Arkansas."

Sain's greatest hour might have been on April 15, 1947, when he threw the first pitch to Jackie Robinson, the first black player in the major leagues. While many Southern-born players were antagonistic toward Robinson, Sain was civil and later complimented the black rookie, predicting that Robinson would have a long and successful career. Robinson, who did not hit well that day, was asked if the pressure of the circumstances had affected his hitting, replying: "What affected my hitting was Johnny Sain's curve ball."

Small-town Arkansas produced a large number of outstanding black baseball players. Caleb Hardwick authored the chapter on the "spectacular Spearman family" of Clark County. "For more than 35 years," Hardwick wrote, "eight members from two generations of the Spearman clan represented Arkansas on countless all-black baseball teams across the country and abroad." Clark County seems to have produced black baseball players much like Yell County birthed white ones.

Brothers Charles, Codie, Willie, Hayse, Henry, and Clyde--as well as Charles' sons Fred and Charles Jr.--played in cities ranging from Los Angeles to Brooklyn, from Cuba to Montana. It is difficult to image Butte, Mont., having a powerful black baseball team, but their Colored Giants were so good that they were admitted as the only black team to the Montana State League.

A medical doctor named Earl T. Williams is the subject of one of the most interesting chapters in *Backroads and Ballplayers*. Moving to Greenbrier in northern Faulkner County about 1908 to establish his medical practice, Dr. Williams soon became active in the baseball scene. He coached the local Greenbrier team, and over time he began to systematically drill his players on proper technique. In 1938, Williams established the Greenbrier Baseball School, boasting in a newspaper advertisement that he had developed 30 professional baseball players from rural Faulkner County in the past 15 years.

The school was a success from the beginning. Two of the successful early graduates of the Greenbrier Baseball School, Gene Bearden and William Thrace Ramsey, reached the major leagues and dozens more became successful minor league players.

Doc Williams was also responsible for recognizing the baseball talents of a young female player, Sue Kidd of Choctaw in Van Buren County. Kidd was only 15 years old in 1949 when she signed to pitch for the Springfield Sallies, a part of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. She soon joined the South Bend Blue Sox, where she was an outstanding player before the team folded after the 1954 season. She then obtained a college degree and had a successful career as a teacher and coach.

Backroads and Ballplayers, which contains 306 pages and is softbound, is available for \$14.99 from Amazon.com. Signed copies can be ordered at www.backroadsballplayers.com.

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