

In a time of segregation, the Eastern Shore had its own black baseball league

By **BYRON MCGOURNIE**
Staff Writer

In the early 20th century, the Eastern Shore, like most of America, had baseball teams, both amateur and professional, popping up all over. There were town-based teams and barnstormers that traveled from town to town looking for an opponent.

The teams were of various degrees of talent and were members of countless different leagues with shifting territories and affiliation. One thing remained constant — blacks were not allowed on a white team. In a segregated country, the pastime reflected its home. There were white teams and there were black teams. Rarely did they take the field against each other.

The following is an excerpt of a story written by Dana Carr, published in *The Record-ObsERVER*, Feb. 24, 1990:

After years of being shunned by white teams on the Eastern Shore, a new idea turned black baseball players into local heroes in a league of their own.

The Eastern Shore Negro Baseball League was established in 1932 by J.O. Chapman, but blacks already had been playing on segregated baseball teams for decades, according to 80-year-old Leon Taylor.

"There was a baseball team in every hamlet, but there was no such thing as whites playing blacks, you wouldn't think of it," said Taylor, who managed the original Centreville Black Sox, which entered the league in 1932.

And for Centreville as well as other Eastern Shore towns, baseball was the sport to play.

"That was all you had to do, there really was no football or basketball then," Taylor said.

Taylor said "you couldn't buy a glass of water" on Wednesday afternoons when storms closed and everyone watched the Shore Orioles, Baltimore's farm team, play where Shore Lumber is located today on Glendale Ave.

But back lots, cornfields or "any clean place you can play baseball," were the baseball diamonds for many black teams before the Negro league, Taylor said.

Taylor, who returned to Centreville with a teacher's degree from Bowie State University, began to manage the teenagers just as the league started.

"We had a very good team, but we put all the better players from Chestertown and Centreville on our team and the rest were scraps, so we played them first to build up our confidence," Taylor said. Chapman traveled around the other towns getting other players. "We didn't call it recruiting then, but that's what we did."

The league's eight teams were from Centreville, Vienna, Easton, St. Michaels, Denton, Blatts Neck (in Stevensville), Cambridge and Bellevue.

The first Eastern Shore Negro League baseball game was played Easter Monday of 1932.

"Easter Monday was a big holiday for black folks," said Taylor, recalling big crowds, lemonade stands and home-made ice cream of that day.

Randolph Hollis, a then 18-year-old pitcher for the Black Sox, said all their games drew big crowds.

"That was a big time around here, a black baseball league," said Hollis, a retired Acme employee.

Players were considered local heroes in the black community, he said.

"In those days there wasn't much money, but there were a lot of black businesses in town, and if you were a ball player they would give you \$2 if you got on first or second base, and if you won a game, they would give you a party," Hollis said.

Win or lose, most games ended with a party. "After the game was over everyone would flock down there to Theodore James' to dance," Hollis said.

"That was the only place for us to flock," quipped former manager Arthur Carter, 83.

"But the comical thing was that the boys would be dancing with their spillo shoes still on," laughed Hollis.

The teams played on Sundays and holidays until Labor Day. Before the league it was illegal to play ball on Sundays, Carter said.

"We could play on Sundays but not until after church,"

Hollis said.

By then the teams played either on a lot where the American Legion Post 21 is located today or a baseball field where Kennard Annex has since been built.

The teams needed new uniforms during the Depression years, and the Centreville Black Sox didn't have any money.

"Those suits cost \$15, and we didn't have that kind of money then," Taylor said. A local man donated Shore Orioles baseball uniforms to the Black Sox.

Carter began playing baseball the same year baseball legend and Sufferville native Jimmie Fox started in the major leagues. But many of the local players could have made all kinds of money, Carter said.

Carter said the white teams wouldn't play the Negro League, except on one occasion.

"One time we had an all-white team from Chester, Pa. come down. It was on the Fourth of July. They came into town and asked where the Black Sox headquarters were," Carter laughed.

"The sheriff told them they didn't want to play us, and they knew we were black, but they played us anyway."

"They ate crabs, chicken, beer; they had so much fun we had to drive them away," Carter laughed.

"We won the game though," Hollis said.

Hollis remembered another game in which he made the winning save.

"We had Cambridge 4-3, in the last half of the ninth inning, and this boy Cornish cracked the ball in centerfield and, to this day, how I ever caught the ball I'll never know," Hollis said. "All the players ran out and picked me up and carried me off the field."

In 2007, little remains as evidence of the existence of the league. The baseball fields have disappeared under the plow or developed, and written records are very hard to find. The Eastern Shore Negro League exists primarily in the memory of an ever-dwindling list of players still living.

Like their white counterparts, the Negro leagues were organized by skill and geography. Many of the game's best

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players made their careers in these leagues. Leroy Robert "Satchel" Paige, who in 1930 played for the Baltimore Black Sox, was known as one of the best pitchers to ever take the mound. He played in both the Negro leagues and Major League Baseball, playing his final game in 1965. In 1971, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. He was the first Negro leagues player to have that honor.

Also in the Baseball Hall of Fame is Hank Aaron, who start-

ed his career in the Negro leagues before taking an offer from the Milwaukee Braves in 1954. Aaron went on to break Babe Ruth's career home run record, hitting his 756th and final in 1976. The record still stands today but will likely not for much longer.

Aaron was the last Negro League player to hold a regular position in Major League Baseball.

Note: Hank Aaron's major league home run record stood until just recently, when Barry Bonds, son of former major league Doby Bonds, hit number 756.

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