

Batboy relives glory

After learning last spring of plans for a Kitty League reunion here this weekend, I asked Paducah native Jerry Hoover to pen recollections of his summer as a batboy in the final season of the Paducah Chiefs. A former chamber of commerce executive here, former city manager and former executive in the state auditor's office, he is now coordinator of operations at Heartland Worship Center.

— Karl Harrison, executive editor

By Jerry Hoover

Many books and articles have been written about the era following World War II through the 1950s into the early 1960s. Baseball has been a key topic of many of these writings, as people nostalgically love to relive the era of Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Stan Musial and many others.

What pure baseball fan can forget the World Series of 1954, when Vick Wertz of the Cleveland Indians hit that long, towering fly ball to deep center field, only to have a young star named Willie Mays make a catch that forever memorializes him as one of the all-time greats.

The era of Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris, Yogi Berra and Whitey Ford, and the persistent World Champions, the pinstriped New York Yankees, are forever emblazoned in our memory of that era of the 1950s and early '60s when they so dominated the major league baseball scene. Courtesy of my son, who lives in New York, I recently was afforded the thrill of going to the cathedral of baseball, Yankee Stadium, and visiting the outdoor museum dedicated to these Yankee greats.

The Brooklyn Dodgers and Jackie Robinson, the Chicago Cubs and Ernie Banks, the Pittsburgh Pirates and Bill Mazeroski, the Philadelphia Phillies and Richie Ashburn are only a few of the greats of an era when baseball, as a game, was its own draw to millions of people in major league baseball parks spread across 13 major cities in the National and American Leagues.

In this era with baseball, minus the Disney World-type atmospheres, cities, villages and hamlets all across America fielded baseball teams. They either had a semi-pro team, one of the famous Negro leagues preceding baseball's integration, or professional, major league-affiliated minor league baseball.

This was a time when minor league baseball consisted of six levels from Class D to Triple A. The region of western Kentucky, southern Illinois, and west Tennessee was no exception to this proliferation of what was called "America's favorite pastime — baseball."

Cities such as Paducah, Mayfield, Fulton, Hopkinsville, Madisonville and



selected and assigned to a team and also was assured some playing time so that kids did not feel a sense of rejection as experienced by me and my buddy, the late Charlie Hipkiss.

That moment of depression soon turned into a mountaintop experience when Charlie and I decided to visit beautiful Brooks Stadium, home of the Paducah Chiefs, after they had arrived from spring training and were engaging in a few nightly practices before the opening of the season.

As Charlie and I visited the ballpark and watched the practice, I began to think about who the batboys were going to be. I remembered that in all of the years past, the Paducah Sun-Democrat, in cooperation with the Chiefs, would run a batboy contest in the paper, with the two entries gaining the most signature support being selected as being batboys for that year.

I realized that nothing had been in the paper, as was the custom in years previous. Not known, even at the age of 11, for being overly bashful, I told Charlie we should go and inquire. We made our way to the business manager's office and found Ewing Hayden and asked about the batboy contest. Mr. Hayden said that there would be no contest this year, that they were simply going to pick a couple of boys to serve as batboys. Then words that I will never, ever forget came out of his mouth when he said, "Would you boys be interested?" In almost humorous style, we said, "For sure!"

Mr. Hayden then explained that we needed to go home, talk with our parents, and if they were willing to let us be batboys, they were to call him, and arrangements would be finalized. With the speed of light, Charlie and I made our way through the woods that separated 21st Street and Brooks Stadium as we headed

...in Kentucky, along with cities such as Jackson and Union City in Tennessee, and Mattoon, Ill., made up a geographical radius that supported minor league baseball in various leagues. It finally resulted in the formation of what became known as the Class D Kitty League, which was named after the geographical areas of Kentucky, Illinois and Tennessee.

The year 1955 brought the curtain down on this last vestige of low-level, minor league baseball. The summer of '55, with Paducah being one of its premier franchises, saw the folding of a number of franchises due to lack of support and attendance that resulted in the termination of the old Kitty League.

This decline in support came about as a result of many factors, including the development and expansion of Little League baseball, television, the development of the interstate highway system making travel easier, and other recreational attractions for families.

From Rejects To Royalty

1955 is a year of remembrance for me. This is not because it represented the end of an era of minor league baseball in Paducah, but because it represented the best memories I have of my very, very favorite summer. That special summer was made possible by my association with some wonderful role models who composed the 1955 Kitty League Champions, The Paducah Chiefs, a Class D farm club of the area's favored St. Louis Cardinals.

My memory of that summer starts with the fact that Little League baseball was beginning to flourish in our city. The current site of the Executive Inn, the old Barkley Park, was home to two outstanding Little League ball fields. There was an array of teams sponsored by local businesses and made up of players who were competitively chosen from a pool of tryouts.

Along with several of my running buddies, I tried out, hoping to make one of the teams. For most of my buddies, Little League baseball became the fulfillment of a dream, as they were chosen. However, for a couple of kids who for one reason or other did not measure up sufficiently in the one tryout to be selected, Little League baseball represented a moralizing low point as these two kids were not chosen and became the object of much teasing.

This is one reason I personally have been grateful that, through the years, an organization known as the Khoury League was established. That league is one that every player that signs up is

to the 607 block of Old Mayfield Road, where we lived across the street from each other. With great excitement, we explained to our parents this opportunity with a persistence that only a child can exude. Both sets of parents did agree and immediately called Mr. Hayden and, after getting clarifications, gave their final OK.

Mr. Hayden told us to report to the business office the next day and we would be sent to Campbell's Sporting Goods for a fitting of uniforms, as well as other orientations to our duties and responsibilities. I am quite sure that neither Charlie nor I slept much that night, as the hurt and sadness of rejection by the Little League managers was fading into nothingness as the thought of being batboys for the Paducah Chiefs, which to us at that time was like being batboys for the St. Louis Cardinals, was filling our heads with all kinds of excitement.

As instructed, the next day we reported and were sent to Campbell's Sporting Goods, which for many years was a landmark here in Paducah, and were fitted with uniforms that matched as nearly as possible to the players' uniforms, which were provided by the parent club, the St. Louis Cardinals. We were also given locker space in the dressing room, and given instruction as to what was expected of us. We then were introduced to Ray Wilson, who at 28 had the prettiest flock of gray hair that I'd ever seen.

Ray was the player-manager. At 28, he was the oldest player. Not unusual for that day, he played (second base) as well as managed the team. From there, we got to know all the players, who were young men from 18 to early 20s, with the exception of Dick Gentry, the shortstop, who was 27.

To 11-year-olds, these were men that you looked up to with awe and respect, much like professional baseball players at the higher levels. These were guys whose autographs were sought by fans and whom people wanted to be able to shake hands with and speak to. They were local celebrities, and here we were, a cotton-headed and red-headed pair, walking alongside these guys.

Brooks Stadium was one of the most



Paducah's Brooks Stadium

of Paducah Chiefs' last season



Jerry Hoover, now coordinator of operations at Heartland Worship Center in Paducah, spent the 1955 summer as a batboy for the Paducah Chiefs. He is the 11-year-old at the left end of the row in the Chiefs' team picture.

beautiful ballparks in America at that time. The field was of major league standards and manicured to perfection. The stadium had been built in 1948 but still had that sparkly, new feel to it. This was all because a leading businessman in Paducah by the name of J. Polk Brooks had a passion for America's pastime and was able to translate that into a profitable operation with his superb business skills.

Mr. Brooks was self-made as he started a transportation business to haul workers from western Kentucky to work in Detroit in the automobile factories that later became known as Brooks Bus Line. Mr. Brooks was one of Paducah's best-known and respected businessmen. He also was a man who showed kindness and attention to a little boy of 11 who never, ever forgot that.

I am so thankful that in my adult life, I was able to visit with Mr. Brooks, share a team picture with him, and tell him what the summer of 1955 meant to me and how much I appreciated what he had done for me personally. I can remember the warm smile on his face. To this day, I remind his family of how special the summer 1955 was for me and my buddy Charlie.

Brooks Stadium had restricted access, and only management, players, batboys and the press were allowed in the clubhouse, in the dugouts and on the field. A number of our friends, who now were Little Leaguers, came to the ballpark and persistently wanted to invade those domains. It fell to me, along with Charlie, to be the enforcer who said, "You may not come onto the field. No, you may not come into the clubhouse. No, you may not come into the dugout." Needless to say, having been teased extensively about our lack of ability as baseball players, we took great delight

ing from our bench on several calls.

I got caught up in that furor. As I took the balls to the umpire, which we did consistently throughout the game, on this occasion I showed my displeasure for his umpiring by slamming the balls down in his hands, causing him to immediately eject me from the game and the field.

I went into the clubhouse and remember manager Ray Wilson's wife, Ann, coming to check on me. I was more upset with the bad calls than I was the embarrassment of being ejected. Incidentally, this story can be confirmed by a local sports personality broadcaster, Bob Swisher, who used to call the games at Brooks Stadium for the Paducah Chiefs.

Under Wing Of Players

Also, coming from a family of modest means, we didn't take a lot of trips in those days. Going to Kevil to see my grandfather and grandmother was considered a trip for me. Because we had worked hard and enthusiastically, manager Wilson caught me one day as I came into the clubhouse and said, "Jerry, we are going on an overnight trip to Owensboro, and I want to take you along, so please have your mother to call me so I can make the arrangements."

I shared this with my parents, my mother talked to Ray, and he assured her that he would take care of me. I would stay in his room and be supervised at all times. I was in awe of this opportunity, because Owensboro seemed like a long way from home, and I had never stayed in a hotel. We stayed in the old Rudd Hotel in Owensboro, near the riverfront, and I remember one of the players, Thad Jennings from Memphis,

baseball, joined the team. The starting first baseman had been a player by the name of Bill Flowerday. Unfortunately for Bill, he was not well received by his teammates. He was considered a "hot dog," and the players constantly took every opportunity to tease him.

I remember the subtle teasing that he was going to be replaced by a black player. Sure enough, Flowerday was sent to the Cardinals' farm club in Johnson City, Tenn., as Al Smith was able to significantly outplay him, both in fielding and hitting.

I remember the two water jugs. They were simply big pickle jars filled with ice and water, as there was no water fountain in the dugout. This accommodated those players that didn't want to drink from the same jar as the African-American players. What I remember most that made a lasting impression was when we traveled to Fulton and following the game, we stopped at Smith's Cafe. All of the players got off and went inside except Al and Paul. I went inside and innocently asked why Paul and Al were not going to eat. Someone then explained to me that they were not allowed to come into the restaurant because they were black. I didn't understand this, as this was my first "in your face" example of segregation.

Paul later left the team, but Al remained for the rest of the season. He was from Chicago, and like mine, his father worked for the Illinois Central Railroad, and we had something in common. He was exceptionally nice to me, and at the end of the season, as a token of appreciation, gave me his first baseman's mitt, which I kept and used for the longest time.

to letting them know that we now enjoyed near-celebrity status.

Ours was the Cinderella story, where one day we are the rejects and the next day we are kings in the castle.

Tossed By The Umpire

I grew up in a family where I wasn't coached in baseball. Whatever I had learned, I learned on the sandlots. With the Chiefs as my mentors, all of a sudden I began to learn a lot of the skill involved in baseball. It wasn't long until this 11-year-old could shag professional-size fly balls in the outfield, could play hard catch with professional pitchers and could learn some of the elementary ricks of batting and fielding.

The training that summer was so sufficient, as the players really paid special attention to us that I was able to play organized baseball in 1956 under the coaching of the late Claud "Sonny" Haws' Hawks as we took a near last-minute scrub team to the championship game of the Khoury League that year, only to be beaten by one run by a team that had every player back from the previous year.

As with the Chiefs, Sonny took me aside, having been a near-professional catcher himself, and taught me that position. Most of all, he taught me the lesson of giving 100 percent, maintaining a positive attitude and always hustling when you have a task to do. The following year, I entered the Pony League, where I played regularly and made the All-Star team my second and final year in that league. Although my baseball playing never went much further because of other priorities, I always measured the fact that I really learned the game because some young men striving to make it in professional baseball took the time to pay attention and give me some instruction.

Some other favorite memories of that summer include being the only known player to be ejected from a game by an umpire. I was an enthusiastic, hustling player who wanted our team to win every game. On this particular night there was quite a bit of dissension com-

excursion boats like the Delta Queen that was docking there at the time.

I also remember that the umpire who had ejected me was also umpiring this series of games. He saw me in front of the hotel and said that he needed to talk to me later. Because he said this in the presence of Gary Grosnicke and pitcher Jennings, they soon took me aside and told me to ignore him and saw to it that that umpire never got a chance to confront me.

This also reminds me of a time at Union City, Tenn., I believe, when I was kneeling next to left fielder Bill Silverthorn, who was in the on-deck circle. I stood up and the fan behind us, with a foul mouth, really jumped my case. I remember Bill looking around, and with a firm voice, reprimanding the man and telling him that if he had any problem, he could take it up with him, but to leave me alone. These were only a few examples of the protectiveness that these guys showed me in that favorite of all summers.

The summer also turned out to be profitable from a money-making point of view. Unlike the players, of course, we received no compensation. But I was able to strike a deal, whereby I would shine the players' baseball shoes for compensation. I would go to the ballpark in the morning and shine the shoes, and then return in the afternoon, ready to dress and prepare for the game. At the end of the season on the very last night, as the players were paying me for that week, they also tipped me graciously and loaded me down with bats, ball gloves, and other baseball paraphernalia. I remember the emotion of that night as we knew that would be our last time together, as well as knowing this was the last season for the Paducah Chiefs in the Kitty League.

First Black Players

That summer also was a life-learning experience, as it was the first year for integration in the league. About midseason, two African Americans, Paul McGuire (reserve infielder) and Al Smith, who became the regular first

That Big Roof Guy

One lasting friendship of a local nature that came out from my experience involved a very tall, lanky kid from the St. John's community, who one day was warming up in the bullpen as I came out of the dressing room. I asked someone, "Who is that tall guy?" and they said, "He's a try-out."

His tryout as a lefthanded pitcher was successful, he joined the team, and shortly thereafter was sent to Johnson City, Tenn. His name was Adrian Roof, the eldest of the famous Roof boys of St. John's. Many people know about Phil and Gene as professional baseball players but don't realize that Adrian and another brother, righthanded pitcher Paul, also played professional ball, even though both suffered arm injuries and didn't go nearly as far as the younger brothers. St. John's was such a small school, Adrian played and managed the baseball team in his senior year of high school, just as another famous St. John's baseball son, Eddie Haas, had done the year before.

Adrian later married Barbara O'Daniel, who grew up across the street from me, and he and I have enjoyed a lifelong friendship that continues to this day.

The summer of '55 was my favorite because of these unique experiences. It obviously was special because what started out in gloom and doom ended up in sunshine and fun. Through the years, I have been able to recall without hesitation, the names of each of their players' and their positions. I jokingly say today, "I can't remember what I did yesterday, but I can remember all of the 1955 Paducah Chiefs."

Through the years in the summertime, I would reflect on that experience and think about those guys, wishing somehow that I could make contact with any of them to tell them how special they made my summer that year. At one point I attempted to contact Ray Wilson in Dothan, Ala., because I knew that is where he had lived, but was unsuccessful. I understand he has passed away.

To my surprise, a few months ago, I was contacted about a Kitty League reunion, only to discover that some of the guys from '55 were still alive, and I had access to their addresses and phone numbers. I have had the opportunity to call three of them, two of whom are coming to the reunion.

It was fun to say to the voice on the other end of the line, "Do you remember a young, blond-headed, skinny 11-year-old who served on your 1955 Paducah Chiefs team as batboy?" With a little prodding and some discussion, they began to pull it together. I was able to say, "Thank you for making 1955 the summer that was."

