

# Brooks a memorable home for Chiefs

By Jason Yates  
The Paducah Sun

Members of the Kitty League's Paducah Chiefs in the early '50s viewed their job in different lights.

Some were attempting to improve their trade, hoping for a shot at the big leagues. Some were content playing professional ball. Others were wide-eyed pre-teens, soaking in experiences they easily rattle off some 50 years later.

Forty-eight years after the league folded, all involved fondly recalled stories at the



**WILLIAMS**

his career almost closed before it started when his mother read the contract and developed reservations.

Kitty League reunion at Brooks Stadium Friday.

Gene Puckett signed with the St. Louis Cardinals, the Chiefs' parent club, as a 17-year-old pitching prospect out of Arkansas and was assigned to Paducah in 1952.

Puckett had designs on a Major League career, but

"There was a clause in the contract that basically read 'This player is the property of the St. Louis Cardinals to be traded or sold at the discretion of the parent club,'" said Puckett, who went 4-1 in five starts in his first season with the Chiefs. "My mother read that and said that sounded like slavery and she wasn't going to sign that."

His father convinced her to resign her worries, and Puckett would spend a couple seasons with the Chiefs until signing with the

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Double-A Houston Buffaloes in 1955 for \$350 a month.

"I have the contract framed," Puckett said.

His career was flourishing in its infancy when a rotator cuff problem in '55 derailed Puckett's possible ascension to the big leagues. In today's era, the then-21-year-old Puckett could have easily bounced back. In 1955, it was essentially the kiss of death to his promise.

"Back then, you were done because they didn't know what to do about it," said Puckett, who said he was sent to the chiropractor and given cortisone shots. "I think I was on the way up, but I developed that problem and no one knew what to do."

After a few more stops, Puckett, now 68, returned to Paducah and married his girlfriend from his Chiefs' days, Sue. Puckett has lived here ever since.

Galen Williams, a member of the 1952 Chiefs and briefly in 1953 before being called to military service, had no designs on a big league career. He was just happy making money playing the game he loved.

"To me, it was the big leagues," said the 70-year-old Williams. "I couldn't have enjoyed (St. Louis') Sportsman's Stadium as much as I did my year in Paducah.

"Most felt the way I did. They were just happy to play pro ball."

As a cotton farmer from Arkansas, the \$175 a month Paducah paid Williams he considered a king's ransom.

"I didn't know how I was supposed to spend all that money," he said. "I could have lived off the meal money and saved the \$175."

When Williams stepped onto Brooks Stadium's infield, the memories came flowing back.

"I could just imagine seeing all my buddies," said Williams, who played center field, shortstop, second base and catcher during his Paducah tenure.

While traveling by bus to such Kitty League stops as Fulton, Hopkinsville, Madisonville, Owensboro and Union City, Tenn., Williams recalls the camaraderie shared by teammates, especially when the late Jim Greer went to entertaining with his guitar.

"We had so much fun on that little old bus, we were there before we knew it," he said.

And some stops were more adventurous than others. When a starting pitcher received an early hook in Fulton, personal hygiene was usually in as much doubt as a victory.

"(Fulton) had a little clubhouse that didn't have much hot water," he said. "When the pitcher would get knocked out, everybody on the bench would holler 'don't use all the hot water.'"

The grown ups were not the

Kitty League  
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only Chief beneficiaries. Dick Throgmorton, now a 62-year-old assistant coach on Lone Oak's football team, served as bat boy from 1950-1952. After being bedridden as a 9-year-old by rheumatic fever, Throgmorton decided he wanted to become Paducah's bat boy. At age 10, he approached Chiefs owner J. Polk Brooks about the position.

"I'll never forget him telling me I was too little," said Throgmorton, who objected to Brooks' assessment. "Then he told me, 'If you can carry a bag from the dressing room to home plate without hitting the ground, you can have the job.'"

After players loaded an Army duffel bag full of bats, Throgmorton packed his challenge to home plate with nary a misstep.

"I was too pumped (to let the bag hit the ground)," he said. "It was the greatest thrill I have ever had."

Throgmorton remembers various St. Louis Cardinals being sent to Paducah for a week or so to cure an ailment or work on an adjustment.

He even had an opportunity to meet Cardinal legend and baseball Hall of Famer Stan "The Man" Musial once, and when the discussion shifted to the Paducah Chiefs, Musial was mindful and complimentary.

"He said (Paducah's) minor league stadium was the greatest ever built," Throgmorton said.

As the old timers relived the good times with a home run hitting contest (albeit with a tape fence barely beyond the infield constituting the boundary) and batting practice, it was apparent the Kitty League has been long gone but never forgotten.