

# THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

## Play Ball, Part I

Spring 2006

From 1898-1946, black men were barred from playing in organized professional baseball leagues by an unwritten rule, resulting in a uniquely American spectacle called Negro League baseball. Black teams took to the road to play in farm towns and cities like Champaign, as reported in the following article.

**Courier, Urbana, IL, August 28, 1934**

### Chicago Giants Trip Champaign All Stars, 6-4

*Champaign's Commercial hardball league mustered its best talent for a feature engagement with the American Giants Monday afternoon at Dixie park, but its best was not enough to overpower the crack colored nine from Chicago....The All-Stars paraded the cream of the league against the Giant batters. Names of local black players appear as part of this "cream of the league."*

Newspaper accounts vary, but we know that Champaign County's hardball league became known as the Eastern Illinois League in the 1930s. Shelby Himes and Jack Waldron of Urbana and Dock Leedy of Ogden were commissioners. Play was expanded to include towns such as Thomasboro, Ogden, Flatville, Royal, Philo, Sidney, Homer, St. Joe, Broadlands, Longview, Ivesdale, Seymour, Fisher, Rantoul, Buckley, Loda, and Champaign. Each year towns applied to play together with their season ending in a fierce competition for League victory in August.

In 1936, there were so many extra applicants for membership in the Eastern Illinois League, Commissioners Himes, Waldron, and Leedy decided to form another league – the Corn Belt League. Leroy Barnes Red Sox were newcomers to the Corn Belt League in 1940, however players for the Red Sox were not new to the game, having played in Champaign's hardball league with teams like the Colored Elks and the Colored Giants.

**Courier, Urbana, IL, April 11, 1940**

*Barnes already has the Champaign Red Sox lined up for their first campaign in the Cornbelt. Five pitchers, any of whom can play infield or outfield position, form the largest mound corps in the circuit. They are Sharper Hope, "Smiling Jim" Webb, Raymond Thomas, James Nelson, and Alphonso Connell, all righthanders. Rubavent Utley will catch; Henry Ross will be at first; Vernon Lewis, who hit a homer in the Sox' Wednesday workout, will play second and Cleo "Snapper" Johnson and Elsa Utley will play short and third respectively. Outfielders are Charles Hursey, William Baker and Carl Abernathy. Henry Woods, Robert Taylor and Elick Randall are utility men.*

Additional names listed in an April 5, 1940 News-Gazette article by Pat Harmon include: Leroy and Clyde Pickens, Lamont Powell, William Thornhill, Arnold Yarber, James Hagmon, John Wyatt, and Curtiss Cooper. Missing from this list is Thurmon Fonville who appears in the picture. Rubavent Utley's name was listed as Rufousset Utley in the article.

PICTURE: LeRoy Barnes Red Sox – Champaign, Ill.  
Champions of Corn Belt League, 1940. Winners of Tournament Playoff

Top Row: Mgr. LeRoy Barnes, E. Utley (s.s.), S. Johnson (3b), Baker (c.f.), R. Taylor (ut.), U. Utley (c.)  
Center Row: J. Nelson (p), A. Randall (r.f.), R. Thomas (p), L. Powell (p)  
Front Row: T. Fonville (s.p.), Abernathy (l.f.), V. Lewis (c.) captain, Ross (1b), H. Woods (2b)



**Courier, Urbana, IL, August 5, 1940**  
**Red Sox Top Royal, 7 – 6, Win Pennant**

*The Cornbelt league season is history – the Champaign Red Sox clinched the pennant Sunday, beating Royal 7 – 6. To clinch the Cornbelt flag, the Red Sox were pushed all the way by Royal and scored their winning runs in the ninth frame. Elsa Utley, the colored boys' hard hitting short-stop, got four for four, including a homer and a double. Thurman Fonville, Jr., pitched for the Sox.*

**Red Sox players:** Hursey, r.f., Abernathy, l.f., Johnson, 3b, Yarber, 1b, Lewis, c, Fonville, p, E. Utley, s.s., Baker, c.f., Woods, 2b, Randle, r.f., Hope, c.f., Thomas, 1b. Elsa Utley tied for the 1940 batting championship of the Cornbelt league with an average of .550 according to the final figures released by the league statistician.



**Elsa "L.C." Utley, 1918-1998**

Anyone who knew Elsa Utley, knew that he was an avid sports enthusiast. He was a gifted player with an outstanding batting average. In 1940, he tied with Glenn Custer of Ludlow for the 1940 batting championship of the Cornbelt League with an average of .550. The previous record was .527.

He and Custer had the most hits at 33 and Utley came in second to Custer's 27 runs with 22. Both Johnson and Lewis followed Utley as next in line for the Red Sox with most hits (Johnson 23, Lewis 22) and most runs (Johnson 23, Lewis 21) that year.

Like so many others, Utley was drafted and shipped out on October 5, 1942. In an oral interview with a reporter from the News-Gazette, Utley talked about organizing a baseball team while in Texas and again in Italy. After his return, he managed the American Legion team in Decatur in 1947 and was a member of the Champaign Eagles from 1949 until 1959. During his baseball career he also played with the Jolly Boys and managed the Commercial Blue's Girls team in 1951.



**Vernon C. Lewis, 1916-1970**

Vern Lewis loved baseball and had started playing at an early age. He quit high school and ran away to Chicago to try to join the Chicago American Giants. (We don't know, but he may have seen or played against the Giants in 1934.) Vern's father had no real interest in sports and wanted his son to get a real job. He refused to sign the approval so

Vern had to return home. We see Vern pictured as the Captain and Catcher of LeRoy Barnes' Red Sox in 1940 when they won the Cornbelt League title.

Vern had five other brothers who probably played ball as well, but it was Vern who had the passion and excelled. Their sister, Mae, was a good baseball player too. She was left handed and could hit a ball as far as any guy! Like Elsa Utley, Vern's baseball days were interrupted by WWII and when he returned home, he married and began his career as a plasterer. Vern didn't talk much about playing ball with his own boys, but their mother, Muriel, told them their dad could really run. His nickname was "Zip" because he was so fast. She said he was a heck of a short stop as well.

Although Vern's passion turned to his work, he never lost his love for baseball. He would come home from work and listen to the ball games on different radios - he might be listening to different games on several radios at the same time and he could tell you what every player was doing. When TV came out, he would bring several TVs together and even a radio, if necessary, to make sure he didn't miss anything. His wife said all that noise could drive you crazy!

Vern, Jr., never saw his father play ball – other than to throw the ball around with the boys. They did, however, spend many a Sunday afternoon at Douglass Park watching the Eagles play. He remembers walking to the park, getting something to eat at the concession stand, and just having fun.

**John C. Johnson, Sr., 1916-1983**

Cleo Johnson, "Snapper," as he was most often called by family and friends, enjoyed baseball as recreation and as a way of life. He played third base for LeRoy Barnes Red Sox when they won the Cornbelt League title, but you will find his name on the roster of numerous teams through the years. He served in the Navy during WWII and when he returned home, attended the University of Illinois where he majored in Recreation and Physical Education.

Bud, his son, remembers that Snapper, also referred to on the ball field as "Clam Hands," had the ability to catch a hard hit baseball with his bare hands as easily as most could catch it with a glove. He said his father displayed a noticeable sense of pride in displaying his withered hands to anyone who questioned why all the knuckles on his fingers were broken or crippled.

Snapper played both as an infielder and outfielder. As his children were aging and themselves becoming actively involved in sports, Snapper promised his wife that he would retire and hang up his cleats for good. The truth is, when the fellows would come by the house encouraging him to play "just one more game," he would invariably ask Bud or Kenneth to sneak in the house to get his glove and baseball cleats that were hidden in the closet. The boys' reward for pulling such a caper was that they would be allowed to travel with the team, trekking to one of the small farm towns for the day and land one of the best jobs available – the batboys. Snapper continued to stay involved in baseball as an umpire. He was especially interested in youth sports and recreation. During the 1950s, he served as Assistant Director of the Douglass Recreation Center and taught Physical Education in the Champaign public schools.

Snapper served as a Little League Coach and official for over 30 years from the 50s to the 80s. His sons and grandsons often recall that he was the "toughest coach they ever played for."

**The Champaign Colts were newly organized in 1940;  
E I League Champions in 1941**

E. I. Glover, owner, H. Fletcher, Mgr. Players: Hines, Nelson, Hursey, Fonville, McNaire, G. Hursey, F. Wesley, J. Baucom, J. McKinley, Massie

**Courier, Urbana, IL, August 10, 1941**

*Eddie Glover's Champaign Colts went into the Eastern Illinois league tournament today with the role of favorite tucked away in their hip pockets and the rest of the field out to "get" the league champion, as is always the case in these spirited battles for post-season tournament heroes.*

**Courier, Urbana, IL, August 18, 1941**

*Rain wiped out three of the four games scheduled Sunday which were supposed to decide the Eastern Illinois baseball tournament champion. The only game played was the morning affair at Thomasboro in which the hosts upset the league champions, the Champaign Colts, by an 8-6 count. They did not win the Tournament that year.*



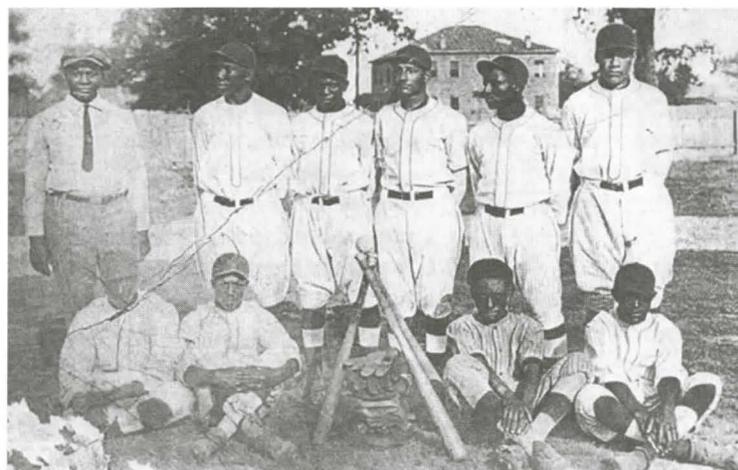
**Courier, Urbana, IL, July 12, 1942**

*Manager Eddie Glover, center, discusses strategy with one of his batteries as the Champaign Colts prepare for the Buckley game at the Urbana softball park. At the left is Ray Thomas and at the right is Catcher Rubavent Utley, brother of the E. I. League's leading hitter, Elsa. Other players at Buckley: Burch (l.f.), Gagliano (3b), Fonville (p), Thomas (r.f.), Hursey (c.f.), Williams (1b), Pickens (s.s.), Davis (2b) Note: The pitcher and catcher together are known as the "battery."*

*Buckley's Dutch Masters employed four pitchers, but could not halt the Champaign Colts who walked off with a 19-2 decision, earning the nod on 20 hits and several Buckley errors. Ray Thomas set the batting pace for the Colts with four for six and Fonville who pitched all the way for the locals. Williams, Pickens, and Davis each had three hits apiece.*

Again, players for the Red Sox and Colts weren't new to the game. Courier articles from the 20s and 30s, cover teams such as the Colored Elks, the Colored Reds, and the Colored Giants. You will find many names we have come to recognize as players with the Red Sox and the Colts.

**Is this team from the 20s or 30s?  
Please help us identify the team and players.**



**Courier, Urbana, IL, August 23, 1928 - Elks Slug Way  
to Commercial League Title 7 to 0**

*The Colored Elks and their dangerous war clubs rest at the top of the Commercial league standings after a season of hectic, eventful baseball. The Elks took the championship in an impressive fashion at West Side park yesterday afternoon, downing Montrose Hull's Legionnaires, 7 to 0 in the game that decided the 1928 race.*

**Colored Elks:** Scoby, 3b, Allen, 1b, Pickens, s.s., Drake, c, Larry, c.f., Foree, l.f., Hopkins, 2b, Dixon, r.f., Head, p.

**Courier, Urbana, IL, August 12, 1934**

*The Giants finished up a great week in the Commercial League Saturday afternoon at the West End Park by dropping the Lorch nine after a hard battle, 5 to 4. It was the second win of the week for the league leaders and put them two and a half games ahead of the second place Mooremen.*

**Colored Giants:** Lewis, Scoby, Hopkins, Burke, Baxter, Hope, Pyle, Head and Webb

The *Through the Years* newsletter is a semi-annual publication of the African American Network of the Early American Museum. Our Doris K. Hoskins Collection and other material at the Urbana Archive provided the foundation for our work. Co-Editors: Cheryl Kennedy and Alicia Lowery. If you live in Champaign County and would like to be on our mailing list, please call 217-586-2612 or email [ckennedy@ccfpd.org](mailto:ckennedy@ccfpd.org). We thank the National Council of Negro Women for their help with family connections.



Visit our website at: [www.earlyamericanmuseum.org](http://www.earlyamericanmuseum.org)

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**The Early American Museum hosts a Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit.  
Visit "Between Fences" May 19<sup>th</sup> – July 4<sup>th</sup>  
at the Early American Museum in Mahomet.**

Baseball, a game that is played between the fences, has a rich tradition in East Central Illinois. In conjunction with the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit, "Between Fences", the Early American Museum in Mahomet is telling the story of the community building that has taken place in and around the baseball field.

This year, the Early American Museum explores black baseball in Champaign County. Pictures and stories from early teams will be featured in the African American History Newsletters. A special event with the Kiwanis First String League on June 18 will generate interest and enthusiasm for the sport played between the fences and the look at a rich history of community.

The Early American Museum is looking beyond the fences to an exhibit next summer that features a broader look at baseball in central Illinois. The museum will combine information on the black baseball leagues with stories from other communities including a look at the Cornbelt and Eastern Illinois Leagues. The baseball exhibit will be featured at the museum in 2007, but the staff is currently seeking pictures, stories and oral histories from men and women who played between the fences or preferred a spectator's role. Contact the Early American Museum at 586-2612 or e-mail [ckennedy@ccfpd.org](mailto:ckennedy@ccfpd.org).

**Early American Museum Events**

**May 19 *Between Fences* Exhibit Opening, Early American Museum 7 p.m.**

The exhibit explores the importance of the fence and boundaries, both real and imagined, in the development of the United States. No admission charge.

**June 10 *Fences of Race*, Canaan Academy School Gymnasium 2 p.m.**

ISU Professor Kim Pereira, author of *August Wilson* and the *African American Odyssey*, will discuss August Wilson's play "Fences" and students will perform select scenes from the play. No admission charge.

**June 18 *Play Ball with First String*, Douglass Park 3 p.m.**

Generations of children and adults have gathered around baseball fences for America's favorite sport. Celebrate the rich history of baseball and its connections to the African American community at this special event featuring the Kiwanis First String League. For full schedule, visit [www.earlyamericanmuseum.org](http://www.earlyamericanmuseum.org)