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11-2017

Researching Early Canadian Baseball: "Boomer" Harding & the Chatham Coloured All-Stars

Heidi LM Jacobs
University of Windsor

Dave Johnston
University of Windsor

Miriam Wright
University of Windsor

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Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Heidi LM; Johnston, Dave; and Wright, Miriam. (2017). Researching Early Canadian Baseball: "Boomer" Harding & the Chatham Coloured All-Stars.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/leddylibrarypres/11>

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Presentation: Canadian Baseball History Conference, November 2017
Miriam Wright, Heidi LM Jacobs, Dave Johnston, University of Windsor

Miriam Wright

Intro: Thanks to the organizers, and to you for coming. I'd like to introduce my co-presenters – we're all from the University of Windsor -- Heidi Jacobs and Dave Johnston are both with the University's Leddy Library, and I'm with the Department of History. We are happy to be here to give you a follow-up on our public history and website project on the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, the first African-Canadian team to win an Ontario Baseball Amateur Association championship in 1934. For those of you who were here last year, you may remember that one of the students, Cal Murgu, attended on our behalf and introduced you to what we were planning. I'm happy to say the website is now live, and we have a number of outreach activities related to it in the works. On one level, the story is about a baseball team and a championship season, but it is also about families and a community, and the way that baseball was tied to a broader search for respect, identity, and social justice. And because the story has many layers, we have used different approaches and methodologies to explore it. Today, we wanted to share with you how we have approached this research and the different ways we have mobilized it. I will look at oral histories, and what they can tell us about the bigger picture and significance of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. Heidi will talk about finding the story in newspaper and primary sources, and Dave will tie it together and talk about how we are mobilizing it on the website and in the community.

To begin, just a brief refresher on the team itself, and how the project came to be:

The Chatham Coloured All-Stars began as a group of friends, playing at Stirling Park in Chatham's east end. At that time, the racial divisions in society greatly affected the economic, political and social experiences of African-Canadians, and this included sports. Black people weren't always welcomed in organized play, and this was the case for these young men who formed their own team in 1932 and began barnstorming around southern Ontario. In 1933, a local convenor for the OBAA noticed the team,

got them into the city league. And the very next year, the Chatham Coloured All-Stars won the provincial OBAA championship in the B-1 division, beating Penetanguishene Shipbuilders. The team continued to play until 1939 – reached championships a couple of more times, then disbanded.

Jump ahead many decades, to the spring of 2015, when Blake and Pat Harding, son and daughter-in-law of the late Wilfred Boomer Harding, one of the All-Stars players, approached us about digitizing a scrapbook collection they had on Boomer's sports career. That summer, we started working on a website, but also started talking about a much larger project, as we realized it was a much richer, and more important story than we had first realized. To do that, we partnered with the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame and got an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant. We worked on it, with a whole team of students and others who contributed their energy and enthusiasm, and this past June, we launched the site.

Oral Histories:

Oral histories were a key part of this project because we felt it was important to get the personal stories and memories that we wouldn't find in newspapers or documents. None of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars were still alive, but we knew family members – sons, daughters, and friends were still in the community. With the help of the Harding family, and the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society, we connected with family members, and we ended up doing seventeen interviews. We had History graduate students working with us, and Heidi and I did a few ourselves. Those interviews are all up on the website – the full audio, as well as transcripts that are indexed and searchable. The people we interviewed varied a lot in age – some were in their 90s and were old enough to remember seeing the All-Stars play, but most were younger, and remember the players much later in life. We do have one interview with one of the players – Wilfred Boomer Harding – that a university student, Dan Kelly, did with him in the late 1970s. Dan found the tape, and gave it to us and we posted it on the site.

Our goal with the interviews was first to get a sense of the players and their lives and families, to fill out the story of the men in the team picture. But we were also interested in the larger questions

about sports, race, and baseball in the African-Canadian community. We learned as much about the people we interviewed and their lives as we did the All-Star players. We were particularly mindful of the way that sports are often closely connected to the search for respect, identity, and the fight for social justice in historically-marginalized communities. And finally, we wanted to know what the Chatham Coloured All-Stars story meant to the people we interviewed— what did it mean, in the 1930s, and what does it mean today? I think the interviews reveal a lot, and today, I just wanted to highlight a few themes, specifically about the role of baseball in the lives of African-Canadians in southern Ontario in the 1930s through the 1960s or so.

In the interviews, we get a strong sense of baseball being an integral part of families, and the African-Canadian community, whether it was at Stirling Park in Chatham's east end, or North Buxton, or Windsor's Mercer Street neighbourhood. John Olbey, a younger brother of All-Star player Cliff Olbey, remembers spending a lot of time hanging out at the park, chasing balls along the fence for the All-Stars when they played, and joining some junior teams, the Pythagorans, and the Panthers. Baseball was something you could play, even if you didn't have money, and hardly anybody did. [QUOTE ON SLIDE:He said : "You could get out with a raggedy glove and one glove and when you come in from the field the glove went down on the ground and the fielder from the other team picked it up....It was good because there wasn't much money floating around and it got the guys together."] Pauline Williams and Cleata Morris, both of North Buxton, were relatives of Hyle and Stanton Robbins, and they talked about the whole Robbins family playing ball, including the sisters: [QUOTE ON SLIDE: "The girls always played ball with the boys... Even my mother, she would be out there too, and she was a left hander, so she would be up there fighting too.] In fact, we heard a lot about women's teams, in both Buxton, and in Chatham.

Father-son relationships often revolved around baseball. We interviewed the two sons of Earl Flat Chase, who was one of the clear stars of that team. They both grew up playing baseball, and spent a

lot of time, it seems, with their dad: “He always advised me when I started playing about how to be a good sport, and taught me how to pitch, and how to throw, and taught me the game.” Blake Harding talks about his dad Boomer Harding officiating at his own games. And of course, Fergie Jenkins, Jr. recalled his dad, Fergie Sr., who joined the All-Stars in 1935, supporting him, getting whatever equipment he needed. [QUOTE ON SLIDE: “Baseball was one of his loves...When I signed my early contract to play with the Phillies, he had a subscription, for one of the Miami papers, and he would get clippings....Win or lose, he wanted the article sent to Chatham. My dad had seven scrapbooks.”] Even his mother, who wasn’t necessarily a sports fan, used to listen to his games on her transistor radio. She had gone blind as a young woman, so could never see her son play, but would sit in the stands in Chicago listening to the game on the radio while her son played on the field.

And even those we interviewed who didn’t play baseball themselves remembered the sense of community and excitement about ball games – the ball park was the place to be. Andrea Levisy, daughter of All-Stars player Andy Harding who was active in sports herself growing up, said: [QUOTE ON SLIDE: “we would go to the park and the stands would be loaded. I would be playing around in the dirt and stuff while the grown-ups were always cheering them on. But I know that was a big exciting time for everybody.”] Dorothy Wright Wallace, who grew up in Chatham’s east end in the 1940s and 1950s, and knew many of the All-Stars players, talked about the ball park being the centre of the community. “Everybody came out,” she said. “Because you didn't know who was going to hit what where...That ball would come out of Stirling's Park and you just prayed that somebody wasn't driving down the street or walking down the street because they could hit. And they were strong -- they just had the game.” Baseball, and church she said, that’s what they had.

We interviewed several people who were old enough to remember when the Chatham Coloured All-Stars won the Ontario championship, and they reflected both on the excitement of the win, but also what it meant to Black people in the community, to receive that kind of recognition. John Olbey,

younger brother of Cliff Olbey, said :[QUOTE ON SLIDE: “When they won the series and they came into town they were riding on the sides of the cars and everything and the whole town was jammed at King and Fifth Street to meet them. And they just hollered and cheered them because nothing like that had ever happened in Chatham before and they had all kinds of white fans, coloured fans... They were all Ontario winners and everybody jumped on the bandwagon.”] So, he saw it as a moment, perhaps only brief, when people came together for a baseball team. He went on to say he thought it was important because [QUOTE ON SLIDE: “There’s lots of ball teams that flourished around here but there was no coloured team and when it was formed, it became a unit that was well known. And I know they all had pride in their accomplishments. I think it left a legacy that lasted for quite a while anyway, until the boys were gone.”] It was a visible achievement and brought positive attention to people who were normally marginalized within the wider society. Pauline Williams and Cleata Morris remembered that it was also a win for Buxton, as several of the players came from that community: Cleata said: “The inhabitants of the village, they were always so excited.. “We won!” Pauline added: It was a happy time -- a big, big, big thing. Buxton won.” Cleata added,[QUOTE ON SLIDE: “I’m so thankful that we had men of that calibre who went out -- I’m thinking of that last game, in times of adversity and so forth, yet they triumphed.”] And I think it’s important that we not underestimate that impact, what it meant to be recognized in a time when Black people were meant to be invisible.

And the last point I wanted to make is the way that these ball players and what they did has lived on in the memories of their descendants. In a way they were larger than life characters who inspired and motivated a generation. Over 60 years since Flat Chase last stepped up to the plate, people still talk about his ability to dazzle a crowd with his batting. Blake Harding recalls his dad Boomer’s skills as a catcher and coach, “He could call a game really well, as far as assisting a pitcher and helping a pitcher know the weaknesses of a batter.” John Olbey said the All-Stars players were strongly etched in his memory, adding that Don Washington, the catcher from Detroit was “the solid heart of the team.”

And Dorothy Wright Wallace told us that her brother Eddie, who had a career in sports himself (head coach in hockey in the NCAA), told her before she did her interview that she should make sure that she mentions what he called the “awesome” glove and ball handling-skills of King Terrell, the team’s left-handed third baseman. She said of her brother: [QUOTE ON SLIDE: “he’s seen a lot of people play ball. But he says you never ever saw a third baseman like that. And even to this day he’s never, ever seen a third baseman play the way that King Terrell did.”] So, the team, so many decades later, lives on. We will never see them play, but the mark they left in a community is very clear, and we think these oral histories will help convey a small sense of that.

---I’ll turn it over to Heidi

Heidi LM Jacobs

I would like to talk about how we re-created the 1934 season through newspapers. It seems an obvious source of material but it also raises some questions in terms of research and scholarly methodologies.

One of our challenges with this project was that we lacked a lot of information that one might assume would be easy to find for a baseball team. The best source of information we had was the *Chatham Daily News* and thankfully they had a very active sports columnist, Jack Calder, who documented the season in great detail. I’ll talk about Jack Calder later but I would like to talk about the challenges of researching a team with virtually no overt archival record.

Unlike another 1934 Championship team down the 401 and across the river, we didn’t have a roster, a schedule, statistics, or even a list of games played. Miriam talked about Dan Kelly’s paper and he had done a solid listing of CDN articles. I used that as a basis for my newspaper work but quickly realized that there were some gaps. The only way to fully recreate the whole season was to do what Dan Kelly did in the 1970s: go through the Chatham Daily News page by page from spring to fall. I

documented a lot of this work on Instagram last winter and spring so I'll use some of those images in my presentation.

I printed off a calendar for the 1934 baseball season and used ads, blurbs, hints in the paper to recreate the season as best I could. I counted games against standings: if the Stars were 5 wins and 2 losses and I only had references to 6 games, I knew I'd missed something. As modern baseball fans, we're used to having more stats than many of us can process. But with the All-Stars, I had a very incomplete picture and did my best to recreate the team and establish just what kind of team they were.

I remain grateful to Mark Malone of the Chatham Daily News for trusting me with reels of 1934 microfilm. I'm not sure if you've all used microfilm: if you know how grateful I am to my colleague Art Rhyno for digitizing the reels for me. Art, a passionate supporter of digitizing Ontario newspapers, has found outsourcing microfilm digitization expensive and time consuming, and often of questionable quality. So he created this system in the library—you may notice the elastic bands, some duct tape, a recycling bin, and, perhaps most remarkable—a rotisserie from a bbq.

While we celebrate technology in the making of this project, I also want to underscore that while we all used lots of new technologies on this project, we also still used a lot of really old-school historical research methods and did a lot of dogged sleuthing: the project team did a lot with duct tape and bbq rotisseries as well as pens, paper, and sticky notes. I would also like to shatter the myth that digitization work is automatization of labour: one of the things that needs to be said about digitization work is when you look at the final product, it works as effortlessly as it does because of the long hours of work done by people like Art and Dave and a number of library staff members.

Our digitized Chatham Daily News is technically searchable using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology but, as I caution my students, OCR is still far from perfect. Even when it's really good, say 90%, it still means it's not accurately reading 10 out of every hundred characters.

Our OCR was far from 90% and while it did help me find some articles, about 80% of the articles we included on our site were found by traditional page by page reading and skimming. For this work, I was grateful for my iPad for its ability to expand and enlarge difficult to read text.

We also used paper print outs and a page by page approach as a way of tagging our newspaper articles from the 1934 season. All of the articles we put on our website were tagged so that a researcher could click on a name like “King Terrell” and find all the articles that mentioned him. You might assume this could be automated too but we ended up doing this by hand, again for reasons of accuracy. We are grateful to a few library staff members who went through each article and tagged the players mentioned in a painstaking process and then added them to the digital files.

The “page by page” approach is incredibly time consuming but, as I’ve described above, you get more reliable and accurate results. Additionally, as a researcher, going page by page, I was able see things I wouldn’t have seen in OCR searching. Things like advertisements, world events, and the literal space that local sports occupied in the life of the Chatham community in 1934. I also got caught up in the rhythms of the season and developed a solid sense of the narrative of the team. When the team hit a midseason slump, I found myself worried about the rest of the season—something that, as a Detroit Tigers fan, I’m accustomed to doing. I also started to develop affection for certain players and cheer when I was able to record numerous homeruns in my stats sheets. When I double checked that Earl Chase’s batting average was indeed .488, I told everyone who would listen. In short, I became a fan of this team, cheering them on 83 years later.

As a researcher, reading through the season page by page let me see how the Chatham Coloured All-Stars moved from small stories on the side columns to headlines on the top middle of the sports page. I also saw that local sports headlines were often more prominent than MLB headlines. I also noticed how seldom the CCAS made the front pages, even with their barrier-breaking victory. And when they did make the front page after their victory, I noted that more words were dedicated to the white

men who hosted the celebration of the team than the Black men on the team itself. As a baseball researcher with not a lot to work with, these clues are deeply revealing about the history and context we were seeking to uncover.

Newspapers also allowed me to collect season and player stats and we've added those to our player profiles and baseball cards. Collecting stats and recreating the season was filled with many questions I had to consider: what do you do without any pitching stats? Does one include exhibition games? What does one do with the number of "other" games in the Win, Loss, Other column? Did one count player stats for games played out of the City League? After weighing my many options, I decided the best scenario would be to document the team and the players as best I could from the perspective of what Chatham fans would have seen in person and in the newspapers. Fans would have seen all manner of games and probably wouldn't have distinguished between a City League game and an exhibition game against Taylor's Detroit Stars. If Flat Chase batted in 8 HRs in exhibition games, that's part of the legend I wanted to describe and articulate. I was once asked "how accurate are your stats?" I admit they are not perfect by modern standards but they very accurately reflect the historical record we have available.

Reading about the All-Stars day by day also introduced me to the journalist Jack Calder. After he left the Chatham Daily News, Calder worked as a sports reporter for the Canadian Press wire service. When war broke out, he joined the Royal Air Force, serving as a navigator. He died in 1944 when his aircraft was hit, and he was buried in Germany. Calder's coverage of the All-Stars is some of the most elegant, eloquent, and impassioned sports writing I have ever read. His support of this team was remarkably modern in its approach to this barrier breaking team and its accomplishments. In a few years, I would love to be presenting a paper on Jack Calder here but until then, I will leave you with my favourite Jack Calder line.

I will now turn it over to Dave who will talk about what the site we built looks like.

References:

All references are to the *Breaking the Colour Barrier* website

<http://cdigs.uwindsor.ca/BreakingColourBarrier/>

Interviews can be accessed here: <http://cdigs.uwindsor.ca/BreakingColourBarrier/exhibits/show/oral-history/oral-histories>