

Baseball: The Best Game Ever

Seems like we've been playing baseball for a mighty long time. At least as long as we've been free. Baseball's the best game there ever was. -- Kadir Nelson

The best game ever: that's what baseball was for Montevallo's two inductees into the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City. Raymond "Lefty" Haggins and Clifford "Duby" DuBose, former Birmingham Black Barons, are not exactly an untold story. In 2014 the city named two ballfields at Stephens Park in their honor. But their almost forgotten achievements need to be retold. What they did on and off the field in the last century was a source of great pride to Black folks throughout the region. Their legacy could inspire a new generation. This sketch draws from published interviews as well as memories of two descendants, Faye Haggins and Cliff DuBose, Jr.

Raymond "Lefty" Haggins (1929-2020)
Born Sept 5, 1929 in Coleanor
(Bibb County)

Teams: House of David, Memphis Red Sox, Birmingham Black Barons

Career: 1949-1958

Honors: Congressional Certificate of Recognition for contribution to Negro Leagues Baseball (1995), Letter of Commendation from President Clinton (1995), Key to the City of Birmingham.



Raymond "Lefty" Haggins

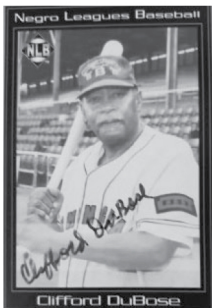
Clifford ("Pop," "Duby") DuBose (1937-2013)

Born July 16, 1937 in Montevallo

Teams: Memphis Red Sox, Birmingham Black Barons

Career: 1957-1959

Honors: Miles College Honors, Key to the City of Birmingham



Clifford "Duby" DuBose

A theme in the story of both men is belief in themselves. Haggins's daughter, Faye, tells us that when her father told people he would play professionally they would say something like, yeah, right, but he always believed he would make it and he did. When he graduated from high school, he walked across the stage to receive his diploma and when he reached the other side, he took off his cap and gown and gave them back, picked up his luggage and left for Spring Training.

Both came from close-knit mining families. From his father Haggins gained a lifelong love of reading, and from his mother an appreciation of the value of education, honesty and respect for all persons. A Montevallo native, DuBose grew up one of ten children. He spoke often of his mother's "kind-heart and caring ways." Some will still remember her as a lunchroom cook at Almont Elementary until the closing of the school in 1970. She also took in wash and ironing -- and was her son's biggest fan.

"Lefty" Haggins grew up in Bibb County but moved to Jefferson County to take advantage of the greater baseball

opportunities. His passion for the game emerged early. His daughter Faye remembers his mother saying she couldn't keep a mop or broom in the house because young Ray would cut off the wooden handles and get out in her flower bed and swing at the bees. To play ball he and other kids in the neighborhood used whatever materials were at hand -- tin cans, rocks, other homemade balls. In high school, he played sandlot ball on Saturdays. One time, after a game-changing hit, "the fans tossed money onto the field for him" as he rounded the bases. "What a thrill! He had enough cash to take his girlfriend to the movies that night." (Baseball in *Living Color*, #121)

Haggins would go on to barnstorm with the House of David (Minneapolis), playing all over the Midwest and Ontario. After a stint in the army, he went into spring training with the Black Barons but, due to a set lineup, went north to play with the Memphis Red Sox.

Asked in 1995 if he had enjoyed his career he answered, "I loved it. Loved it." (His wife Eunice: "He loves baseball. That's all he talked about, really.") The game gave him a chance to travel and to play in most of the major league parks. At one point he roomed with country singer-to-be Charlie Pride. The story is told that the owner of the Birmingham Barons traded him for ... a bus! Why? Because on the team bus he was always picking on his guitar and keeping the guys awake.

His finest memory? "Hitting a home run in Yankee Stadium," he chuckles. (You can listen to this interview online in the *Birmingham Black Barons Oral History Collection*, BPLONLINE).

"Duby" DuBose shared Haggins' passion for the game. He too had to be inventive. Games took place in the street in front of Almont Elementary, where he went to grade school. The first step was always "hunting down an old tennis ball and a worn-out walking stick." He went on to play ball at Prentice High School. He debuted professionally in 1958 at 3rd base with the Black Barons. Later that year he was traded to the Memphis Red Sox. He was given a tryout with the Brooklyn Dodgers but due to an injury returned home. He continued to play in the Industrial Leagues of Birmingham after his professional retirement. As for a game highlight, "I hit two game winning home runs for the Stockham Championship, a local semi-pro team." (Source: *NLBM eMuseum*.)

What did baseball mean to DuBose? Cliff Jr. says "it meant the world to him. He loved the game." His heroes were Hank Aaron and Jackie Robinson because they broke the color barrier. Seeing men of color in the majors inspired him. After retirement from professional baseball, he devoted much of his time to helping young baseball players follow their passion. He coached sandlot baseball in Montevallo for 15 years, and was proud, that last year, to throw out the first pitch of the season. If he could talk to kids today, he would tell them, "Work hard. Love your craft. Be true to the game."

Submitted by Kathy King & Anitka Stewart Sims. Contact us at Moyaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of errors of fact or interpretation.