

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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CLARENCE E. HARRELL AND THE SANDLOT GAME: A FAMILY REMEMBERS

Clarence was one of my childhood heroes. My brother John always told us how fast Clarence could throw a baseball. -- James Baker, May 22, 2013

We used to play ball all the time. We come up by playing ball. -- Leon Harrell

During the half-century when sport in America was divided by race, African Americans created a baseball world of their own. -- Rob Ruck, Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh



He was outstanding, in his own moment a rock star.

On September 22, 2024, six family members came together to remember, with a mix of sadness and laughter, a local baseball hero who died, age 59, in 2013. Kathy and Anita counted themselves lucky to sit in and listen. Here is what we learned about Clarence Harrell, his love of baseball, and the community's enthusiasm for sandlot baseball back in the day.

Clarence was the sixth of seven children, four boys and three girls, from parents Alberta Harrell and R. D. Hicks. Three siblings got together for this memory session -- Linda C. and her husband Gerald Walker, JoAnn Farrington, and Leon Harrell and his wife Robin -- and they were joined by cousin Jimmy Staffney.

In 1972 Clarence, ace pitcher and much loved star of the Montevallo HS Bulldogs baseball team, was drafted by the Oakland Athletics in the MLB June Amateur Draft. Earlier that year he had been chosen MVP in the East-West All-Star game at Paterson field by twenty-five pro and college (*Alabama Journal*, May 27, 1972). His career in the pros was sadly brief.

He was born and raised in Wilton, a small town just south of Montevallo. Like kids all over central Alabama, he grew up playing sandlot baseball. But Clarence Harrell was something else. He was a phenomenon, a rock star.



The Birmingham A's in 1974. Clarence is top row, second from the left.

Brother-in-law Gerald said: "when Clarence took the mound to warm up, the other team would just forfeit." Cousin Jimmy said he had a wicked curve ball. Brother Leon said that he could throw the ball 80-90 miles per hour or faster. Sister Linda said that he got his throwing arm from their father, R. D. Hicks, who was so accurate he could hit a bird with a rock and knock it out of the tree.

By 1974, he was playing for the Birmingham A's right up the road. Sister JoAnn remembers him as "a good ball player, and I enjoyed going to see him play when he was in Birmingham." Unfortunately he injured his elbow, twice. "He loved it so well he threw his arm out," said Linda. The second injury took him out of the game. He pretty much walked away from professional ball at that point, but continued to play in the neighborhood. "He just loved it," she said.

Small towns all over Shelby County had Black sandlot baseball teams: Montevallo, Wilton, Brierfield (the women's team led by Frances Chappell was legendarily unbeatable), Saginaw, Alabaster, Centreville, Calera, Helena, Pelham, Wilsonville. These teams played each other in single match-up and tournament games. Teams from Wilton and Montevallo travelled as far away as Bessemer, Maplesville, and Hale County.

The Sandlot game was regulation play, with umpires, carefully measured out fields, and pro rules. It was played on makeshift sandlots, usually maintained by the community, but otherwise, as Gerald said, it was just like real major league baseball. Uniforms? Laughter from all. "Whatever you could afford."

Sandlot baseball had a huge following. "Back in the days, on Saturday and Sunday, that was about all we had to kinda look forward to," Gerald recalled. Linda adds: "Everybody would come out, I mean everybody. There'd be fried fish and everything." Sandlot baseball was the most popular form of fun, athleticism, and recreation in the African American community, especially during the era of racial separation.

Clarence was on his way to being one of the greats, but his family remembers him as more than a gifted athlete. He was a thinker, very intelligent and got good grades in school. He loved to read, and is known for reading the entire Bible and dictionary multiple times.

His other interest was singing. He sang in the church choir and had a voice like Eddie Kendricks of the R&B group, The Temptations. Clarence especially loved to sing his version of "Silent Night" during the Christmas holidays.

Our great thanks to the Harrell family for sharing their memories. Newspaper sources: Alabama Journal (Montgomery), 27 May 1972; Bob Barnes, "Clarence might put Wilton on map," Birmingham Post-Herald, June 19, 1974. Visit our website at themontevallolegacyproject.com for a fuller version of this story. Do you have stories to share? We would love to hear from you! Write us at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims.