
Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

Vol 5, No 2

SANDLOT BASEBALL: THE HEARTBEAT OF BLACK COMMUNITIES

"Baseball was life and I was good at it." -- Spoken by James Earl Jones' character in The Sandlot.

"The sandlots weren't just fields; they were places where Black athletic excellence flourished long before the world paid attention."--Anonymous

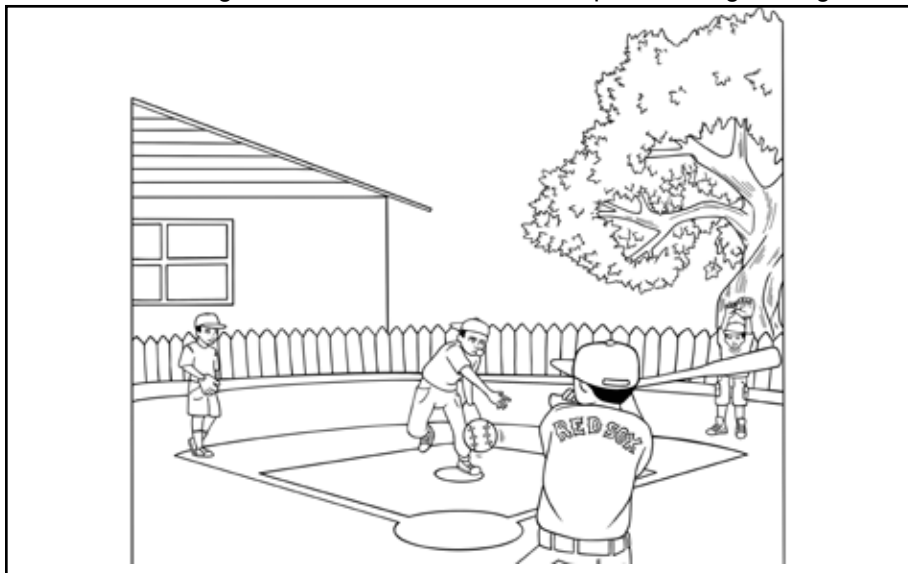
"We used to play ball all the time. We come up by playing ball." -- Leon Harrell, brother of Montevallo's standout pitcher Clarence E. Harrell.

"Everybody would come out, I mean everybody. There'd be fried fish and everything." Clarence Harrell's sister, Linda.

In Montevallo, Alabama, sandlot baseball was more than a game, it was a living force in Black community life. A vivid picture of this tradition emerges from an account of the Newbern Tigers, a Black sandlot team in nearby Hale County with a history that goes back for over a century. One afternoon, a newcomer to the area followed a local he met at the Piggly Wiggly "down a red dirt road, past a grove of cedars and oaks, to a clearing, where he saw a crowd of four or five hundred listening to music, eating freshly fried catfish and barbecued whole pig, and washing it all down with a robust supply of cold canned beer. At the center of the action was a baseball diamond set off by a sagging chicken-wire backstop and sections of chain-link fence. "It was only what it had to be, and nothing more than that." (From Warren St. John, "Sandlot Baseball: Diamonds in the Rough" in *Garden & Gun*, Ap/May, 2014.)

Native son Elvin B. Thompson recalls sandlot baseball games as *"the heartbeat of Black communities in Montevallo."* These games were about more than sport. They fostered togetherness. *"Families and neighbors gathered to share laughter, food, a little bit of spirited competition. The crack of the bat, the cheers from the crowd, and the sense of belonging made these games unforgettable. . . Something as simple as a love for baseball can knit a community together and leave a legacy far beyond the diamond"* (Foreword to *Untold Stories of Black Montevallo*, vol. 3).

The legacy of Black sandlot baseball lives on in the memories of players who brought pride and excitement to the community during the heyday of Black sandlot play. The batter wearing Red Sox in this drawing calls to mind two local players who rose from the sandlots to play professionally--Raymond "Lefty" Haggins and Clifford "Duby" Dubose, both of whom played for the Memphis Red Sox as well as the Birmingham Black Barons, Alabama's premier Negro League team.



"The Sandlot" from *Little Franklin's Town*, drawing by Arabella Cortes

This tribute drawing appears in *Little Franklin's Town*, a coloring book offering a child's-eye view of Montevallo's Black history. Arabella Cortes, a talented University of Montevallo art student, created the drawings, inspired by the stories and photographs in *The Untold Stories of Black Montevallo*. All three volumes are available at MLP events and at Parnell Memorial Library, with a suggested donation of five dollars.

For more detailed documentation, see enhanced version of this story in themontevallolegacyproject.com. Do you have sandlot stories to share? Other family stories? We would love to hear from you. Write us at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims.