

The Legacy of the Aces

by Lynne Belluscio

Elaine Booten gave me a call last week. “We’re cleaning out some stuff. Are you interested in some of Mac’s old baseball uniforms? The Aces?” “Oh my - - Yes indeed. Don’t throw them out! I’ll be there as soon as I can.” What a piece of LeRoy history! I posted some pictures on the facebook page “LeRoy Then and Now”, and folks started to send in stories. The Aces were an all-Black, team (actually their batboy was white) that played in the LeRoy Municipal Softball League after World War II. Lapp Insulator had a team, as well as the “Deserters” from Jell-O, and the Moose, and “The Bottlers” from LeRoy Bottling on Mill Street and the “Plows” from LeRoy Plow Works. Through the years there were other teams in the league. In fact, there was another black team, the Wildcats, but they never had a winning combination, and Mac Booten says they came from Rochester. The Aces had a powerful lineup: Roy Burrell, Riley Brown Sr., Ernest Burrell Jr., James Wallace, O.C. Leach, Jim Alexander, Ray Perry, “Chuck” Majors, Mac Booten. George Burrell was the manager. I’m still trying to find photographs and have stuck out. I remember there was a reunion of the Aces during one of the Oatka Festivals, and I’m still searching through Pennysavers to see if I can find a photo. If anyone has photos of these guys, get in touch with me.

There was no place for the teams to practice, so Ernest Woodward set aside a field on the west side of East Avenue, near the back entrance to his property. He and his wife Edith, would bring their lawn chairs over to watch the games. There were no bleachers and folks just stood and watched. The league games were played at the field behind the school. The scores were pretty impressive and so was the attendance. One game drew 500 - another 1000.



Mac Booten's Softball Shirts.

After the post in LeRoy Then and Now, I also heard from Terry Krautwurst who did some research in the local newspapers. He sent me a copy of a letter to the editor written in April 1949 by Pearl Majors, whose husband played for the Aces. The letter revealed a story about the 1948 season. They played eight games and won each one. The newspaper noted that the team managers voted to exempt the undefeated Aces from the first round of playoffs, but they had to play a final championship game:

“Manager George Burrell’s well balanced nine was unbeatable throughout the league season and continued to run roughshod over the best opposition the loop could provide in the playoff series. Ray Perry was on the mound, giving up eight hits and fanning four and walking one. Final fray, Chuck Major and Perry shared the twirling chores. Harold Alexander delivered the final blow of the evening when he homered with the sacks loaded. Jackson also had a four-bagger during the power hitting exhibition staged by the Aces. The managers are to meet at the K of C to decide on the championship trophy and to wind up the seasons business.” Traditionally, there was a trophy and a banquet at the end of the

season. Apparently that never happened. In April 1949, Pearl Major wrote the letter to the editor. She said that she waited several months before submitting the letter. There had been no dinner and no trophy. She wondered if it was because the team was “colored.” The money for the dinner and the trophy was taken from the admission taken at the gate - - and she pointed out that the biggest attendance was on the nights the Aces played. She also mentioned that all of the men on the team were veterans of World War II and seven of them had volunteered to serve - - not drafted. “All helped defend democracy. Now they have returned to their own small community, each a decent, respectable citizen, only to be cheated out of what they so justifiably deserve. We can’t let this trivial matter disrupt our faith, neither can we let it pass unnoticed, because it’s the small things that total the biggest damage. If we stopped to think that God created us all equal, therefore gives us equal consideration, there would be more better honest living and less evil conscious.” It’s understandable Mrs. Majors’ consternation, and in 1949, the Aces didn’t play in LeRoy but played in the Batavia league, but not with the success they had in LeRoy. They even-

tually returned to LeRoy. As Mac says, they just liked playing ball.

It should be noted that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball in 1947, and on July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman by executive order, abolished discrimination in the military “on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin.” But the Aces even if the league failed to acknowledge their winning year, continued to do what they enjoyed - to play ball with their friends and family. They weren’t going to let a few people decide what they could do. People in LeRoy loved watching the Aces play. Ruth Harvie said that when they played across the street, you couldn’t get down East Avenue. The Aces brought out the biggest crowds. The Aces left this community a wonderful legacy. That in spite of everything, it was more important to play the game than to get a trophy.

It may be seventy years too late for a dinner and a trophy, but I have contacted the Baseball Hall of Fame, and they will place the story of the Aces in their archives - a lasting tribute to a group of guys from LeRoy - veterans - who loved to play ball.