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# The Daily Courier

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## Direct Connection to Cooperstown

*Son of legendary executive heads off to Hall of Fame*

By DOUG COOK The Daily Courier

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Courier/Jo. L. Keener Richard Wilkinson of Prescott holds up memorabilia from his father's days in Negro League baseball.

PRESCOTT ◀ When one sits down for a chat in Richard Wilkinson's spacious living room tucked inside his well-kept apartment at Las Fuentes Resort Village, the memories of his famous father flood into this 88-year-old's sharp mind like the rapids of a raging river.

Richard's dad, J.L. Wilkinson, who founded the Negro National League's Kansas City Monarchs in 1920 and first introduced night baseball in 1930, has been deceased for 42 years but his contributions to America's pastime have stood the test of time.

This afternoon in Cooperstown, N.Y., J.L. Wilkinson will be enshrined into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

And his proud son, Richard, who bears a striking resemblance and persona to that of his father, will attend the enshrinement in person to read the inscription on J.L.'s bronze plaque stationed at the Hall of Fame. Richard Wilkinson's wife, one of his daughters and her husband, and three of his grandsons will join him at the ceremony.

"My dad was in baseball all his life," Richard Wilkinson said this past week. "When he was a young kid he started working in a sports store and played baseball. His whole life was spent developing baseball players. He just loved it."

Wilkinson, one of 17 Negro League pioneers and players elected to Cooperstown this year in a special ballot held in February, was the only white owner of a Negro League team. An honest, ethical, progressive American sports executive during the time of baseball's segregation era, Wilkinson developed the multi-racial All Nations baseball team in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1912, prior to moving the club to Kansas City and establishing the once-popular Monarchs.

"My dad never made an issue of race," Richard Wilkinson said. "He told the players when something like that would come out, some loud mouth in the crowd (with a slur), he told them, 'Go out and show them how good you can play baseball.' And the players admired him for that."

Wilkinson's Monarchs were a hybrid team composed of the best players off the All Nations squad, which traveled by train to games, and the 25th Infantry Wreckers, an all-black U.S. Army team. All Nations pitcher John Donaldson, whom Wilkinson considered among the top 5 all-time best Monarch players, and the Wreckers' Joe "Bullet" Rogan, a Hall of Famer, were the franchise's early stars.

Wilkinson said that when another future Hall of Fame pitcher, Satchel Paige, hurt his arm, he visited his father for advice. Paige played two seasons for a Bismarck, N.D., team that bought him time to heal before coming back to play for the Monarchs.

"They were good enough to play in Major League Baseball, but they were black, so that took that away," Dick Wilkinson said of the Monarch players. "He (my dad) could've gone in the minor leagues and managed, but he wanted to have something better because there were so many black players who could play Major League-type baseball. So that's when he put his club together."

Under Wilkinson's management the Monarchs qualified for four Negro League World Series. They won two Series crowns in 1924 and 1942, and claimed 10 league titles.

"He moved to Kansas City because they (All Nations) needed a bigger ballpark and just made it a little better," Dick Wilkinson said.

Despite his successes with the all-black Monarchs, perhaps Wilkinson's crowning contribution to sports was his introduction of night baseball to professional baseball fans. Wilkinson used portable lights affixed to several pickup trucks for his business. He staged the pro ranks' first evening baseball game in Kansas City, five years before Larry MacPhail illuminated Major League Baseball contests.

Trucks equipped with light stands lined the circumference of Muehlebach Stadium in Kansas City and a bus loaded down with a huge generator provided power for an operation that could be up and running in about five hours' preparation time.

"He started in 1920 with lanterns, and they couldn't put out enough light," Dick Wilkinson said. "Then he bought three new trucks and took them and engineered lights."

J.L. Wilkinson started his life in baseball as a player. He was a right-handed pitcher in his youth, but a fracture to his right wrist on a second-base slide cost him a shot at developing further in the game.

Rather than pursue a playing career, Wilkinson began managing teams, which soon became his passion.

"He had an ability for the business side," Wilkinson said.

Today, Richard Wilkinson lives in Prescott with his wife. Before the couple relocated here on a full-time basis a few years ago, they lived in the Phoenix area.

The Wilkinsons also once owned a summer home in Prescott. But about five or six years ago Wilkinson sold both of his houses and moved into Las Fuentes retirement community, where the couple currently resides.

Born Dec. 6, 1917, in Des Moines, Iowa, Wilkinson traveled around the Midwest with his father's teams during his early childhood and truly enjoyed the experience.

"He was the first one to share profits with the team, like they do now," Richard Wilkinson said of his compassionate, giving father. "If the club made good money, he paid them. That's why he had good ball teams. I never knew anybody that didn't like my dad, ballplayers or anyone else."

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