

Eldora
Herald-Ledger

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UNITED WE STAND

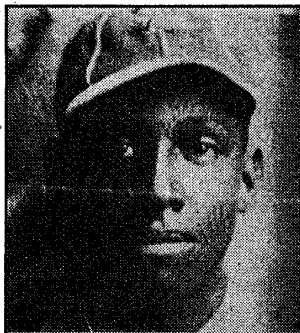


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HOME OF PINE LAKE STATE PARK

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A little bit of Eldora history was unearthed, and a lot more general sense of the period also came out with the efforts of a Twin Cities man who along with a friend put together a book on the early traveling teams of black players who frequented ball parks in Minnesota and central Iowa. The investigations uncovered just how serious baseball was in the first few years of the 20th Century for folks in Eldora. Part of the study centered on one particular pitcher, John Wesley Donaldson, renowned in the upper Mid-west and later as part of the Chicago White Sox organization.

Twin Cities author traces early fields of dreams to Eldora

Lost legend once took the mound in Eldora

Peter Gorton works for a law firm in Minneapolis and routinely looks out from the 26th floor onto the cityscape; but a big part of his interests are down on the ground, in the cornfields of southern Minnesota and central Iowa where 100 years ago he's found people playing baseball and making history the hard way. It's all in a book to which he contributed, written by a friend, and which now that it's complete, Gorton wants to let everyone involved know about — even if they played a very brief part in the story. In Eldora's case it was probably only a few summer afternoons around the turn of the 20th century, but Gorton's discovered Eldora because it added

a little footnote to his long investigation into the life of "The World's Greatest Negro Pitcher" — John Wesley Donaldson.

The story might seem only peripherally about this community, but once you start checking the old local newspapers from 1911, a fascinating picture reveals of an Eldora that took its baseball very, very seriously, seriously to the point there was a running soap opera accompanying the comings and goings of semi-pro players. Games were clearly a highlight of the summer season, vying with Chautauquas and traveling salvation shows for attention. And, yes, just as Gorton suspected, there was recognition in Eldora print

for one young pitcher who appeared here on August 13 and 14. "The Whirlwind" the local *Ledger* dubbed John Wesley Donaldson, the youngster's reputation having preceded him.

Young Donaldson, who the local press called "a wonder" was Gorton's contribution to the just released book "Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota." A "pure marvel on the mound," Donaldson came with a whisker of the Baseball Hall of Fame a couple of weeks ago, although Gorton admits he's disappointed that all the discovery he did on the life of an early baseball legend didn't quite get

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Twin Cities author happens on some Eldora baseball history

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Donaldson into the Hall, he's still convinced the man deserved the honor. Part of what kept Donaldson out of the final honorees this year was the fact he played so long ago and records, though startling, were incomplete. Some of that is indicated in the fact that the young player's name was only inferred at in the August 17 article in the *Ledger*.

The Hall of Fame selections came just a couple of weeks ago, and now Gorton is helping promote the new book that centers on the life of Negro baseball leagues that even predate the first quarter of the century sanctioned leagues that are only in recent years getting their full recognition. Part of the special Hall of Fame selections this year were an effort to find those players who had been overlooked all these years, but Gorton says that players like Donaldson, because they played in a sort of barnstorming circuit, are still not as widely remembered as they should be.

He says that in a day and age in which Donaldson became famous around the upper Midwest and into Chicago, one acquired one's fame on the mound the hard way. You got known by performing and performing with enough undeniable distinction that your reputation traveled down the country roads and from fence line to fence line.

Gorton says he found Donaldson's story and came looking for Eldora's part in it by way of checking hundreds of local newspapers throughout Minnesota and Iowa. He says all indications are Donaldson's prime years were 1911 to 1919, suggesting he was perhaps as young as 16 or 17 when he was in Eldora. He was a star pitcher for J.L. Wilkinson's All Nations Team, which featured a mix of payers of many ethnic backgrounds, and really was among the first clubs to bring inter-racial baseball to hundreds of American cities, big and small. Donaldson was, Gorton found, perhaps the Whole

Nations best-known barnstorming pitcher in the decade before Satchel Paige. Gorton says he found that Donaldson had dominated the same mound that Paige would a decade later.

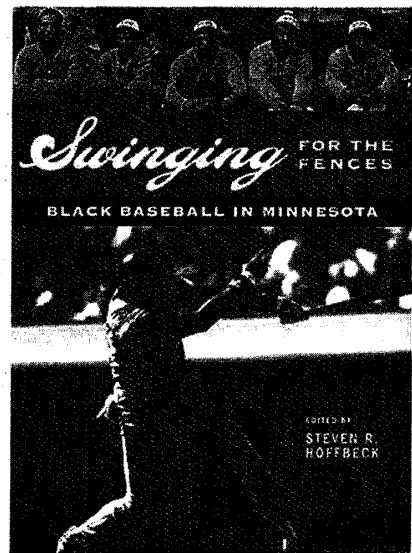
It was on August 13 of 1911 that he came to Eldora pitching for the traveling Tennessee Rats. The *Eldora Ledger* story suggests Donaldson won the first game of a double header, and then later returned in the second to shut out the Eldora team while pitching the last three innings, after the Rats had fallen behind under the starting pitcher. "...he appeared to be the whole team and the Eldora boys were unable to hit him at all," the news account said.

Gorton says that his friend Steve Hoffbeck a former high school history teacher enlisted him to search the career of the elusive old time pitcher Donaldson. His efforts took him beyond Minnesota where the first focus of the book lie. He came by the Eldora connection through the Iowa State Historical Society, and

even a cursory check of the Eldora papers at the time give some hint of just what a summer highlight was barnstorming baseball. Gorton says that to date he and a group of enthusiasts have documented over 250 victories and 4,000 strikeouts credited to Donaldson, and that is probably only scratching the surface, as so many records of the young man's appearances are less than complete.

Gorton, who's soliciting whatever's in the old Eldora press, says he feels its unfortunate that the Baseball Hall of Fame had to pass over Donaldson. Donaldson is, nonetheless, well remembered, he says. The one time hurler lived into his 80s in Chicago, and though he was long forgotten by the white establishment of which he would become a part in later years, he was always remembered in the black community there.

His impact on baseball didn't end with his time on the field. He became the first-ever black major league scout for the Chicago White Sox.



Eldora is a footnote in this new baseball saga.