

Huron Plainsman February 2006

Huron hosts HOF-worthy hurler

BY CURT NETTINGA

A pitcher that once hurled a 5-2, seven-hit win over a team made up of local Huron ballplayers is being considered for induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

But don't be surprised if you don't recognize the name. John Wesley Donaldson.

Not ringing a bell, huh?

That is really not surprising because of the fact that Donaldson shut down the "locals" on June 11, 1916, at a place called Athletic Park.

According to a recount of the game in the June 12 Huronite, a good crowd turned out to watch the best game of the season despite a threat of continuing wet weather.

The field was so wet that after the end of the first inning, the game was moved to a "grassy region" near the regular playing field because the dirt diamond was too muddy for play to continue.

Donaldson is being considered for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and the ballot will be finalized on Monday in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Until recently, Donaldson's career was an unknown. Then Peter Gorton, an attorney who lives in Minneapolis, entered the picture.

Gorton was contacted by his social studies teacher who was in the process of researching a book on the history of black baseball players in Minnesota and challenged Gorton to take a crack at researching a pitcher named John Donaldson.

While researching in a Minnesota town near where he grew up, Gorton found a poster that featured Donaldson, who had lived in the town in the 1920s. Also on the page was a picture of some boys playing basketball that had been taken twenty years earlier than his research trip.

To his surprise, Gorton found himself in that picture. Feeling a strong connection, Gorton undertook the research in earnest.

According to Donaldson's Hall of Fame profile, he played from 1911-1934, primarily with the J.L. Wilkinson All Nations team of Kansas City. It was during the prime of his career, from 1911 to 1917, that Donaldson and the All Nations crew took on the Huron team.

In a preview for the upcoming game, the All Nations

baseball team was the fastest independent baseball team in the United States. The team membership included "Africans, Chinese, Japanese, South Americans and representatives of several other nationalities, each of whom is a ballplayer of the highest rank."

John Donaldson was the premier pitcher for the barnstorming team of multi-ethnic players. The 5-foot-11-inch Black pitcher weighed only 190 pounds, but was a power pitcher with a sharp breaking curveball. While he played with several different ball teams in his career, he hit his stride as the true barnstorming pitcher.

In the early 1900's, the only way for minorities to play baseball was to join a traveling or barnstorming team that would go from town to town and play against whatever team could be put together.

His "charisma and excellence was a countermeasure to the deep-seated prejudices of the era and his stellar character helped break down racial stereotypes."

As testament to his ability and the respect he garnered from teammates and competitors, Donaldson was voted first-team lefthanded pitcher in a 1952 poll conducted by the Pittsburgh Courier of the best black baseball players of all time.

After I contacted Gorton regarding the 1916 game, he returned e-mail, thanking me for getting him the proof that he needed to add to Donaldson's career statistics. Gorton also mentioned a 1922 game that Donaldson pitched in Huron on August 6.

Although Donaldson was past the pinnacle of his career, he still shutout the Huron team, giving up six hits and recording three strikeouts in a 14-0 win.

"With the box score evidence from the 1916 and 1922 wins, Donaldson's totals will rise to 266 wins and at least 4017 strikeouts."

Donaldson carried a winning percentage of over 74 percent, is credited with 22 one-hitters, six no-hitters and a perfect. He also had a 26 strikeout game, 26 games with 20 or more strikeouts and a total of 166 double-digit strikeout games.

Donaldson's talent and skills led N.Y. Giants Hall of Fame manager John McGraw to say, "I think he is the greatest I ever have seen and I would give \$50,000 for him if it weren't for the color line in baseball."