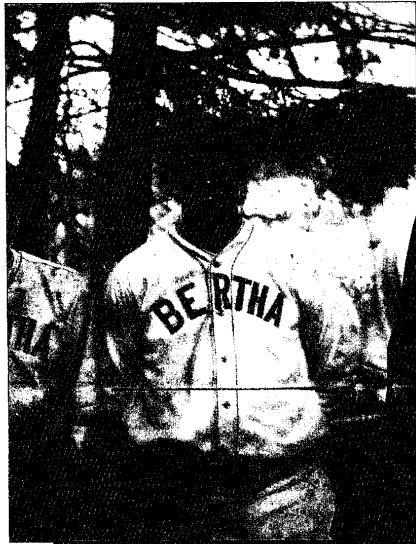


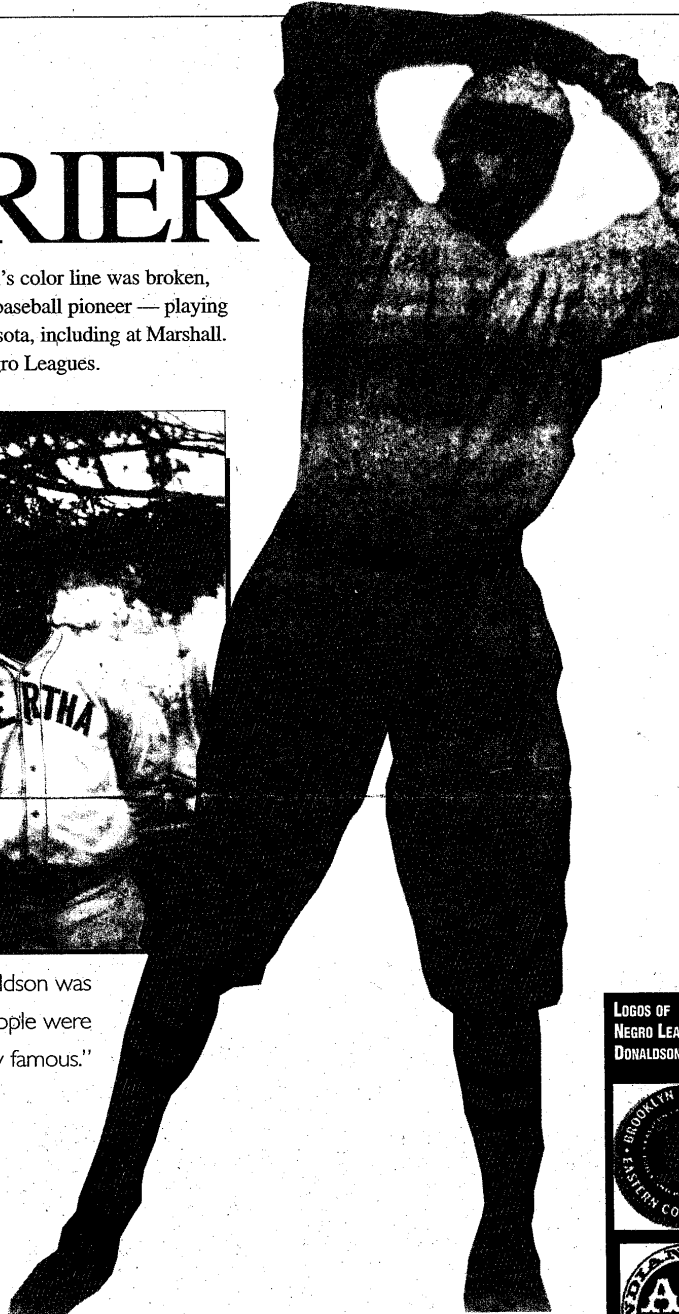
# Beyond a BARRIER

35 years before Major League Baseball's color line was broken, **John Wesley Donaldson** was a black baseball pioneer — playing among whites in games in rural Minnesota, including at Marshall. He eventually became a star in the Negro Leagues.



Photos provided by Peter Gorton  
**John Wesley Donaldson** played for the Bertha Fisherman in central Minnesota. He starred as both a pitcher and batter. After he played baseball, he was a scout for the Chicago White Sox.

"John Donaldson was famous before people were really famous."



**JOHN WESLEY DONALDSON**  
**PLAYED:** 1912-1934  
**POSITIONS:** PITCHER AND OUTFIELD  
**TEAMS:**  
 TENNESSEE RATS  
 ALL NATIONS TEAM  
 GILKESON'S UNION GIANTS  
 CHICAGO GIANTS  
 INDIANAPOLIS ABC'S  
 BROOKLYN ROYAL GIANTS  
 NEW YORK LINCOLN GIANTS  
 DETROIT STARS  
 KANSAS CITY MONARCHS  
 JOHN DONALDSON ALL-STARS  
 BERTHA FISHERMAN  
 LISMORE GOPHERS  
 MELROSE LEGION ALL-STARS  
 SAINT CLOUD SAINTS  
 MOOSE JAW (CANADA)

In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the Major League Baseball color barrier when he played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. More than 30 years earlier a man from Glasgow, Mo., was breaking color barriers in Minnesota.

John Wesley Donaldson was a black baseball player who electrified the Midwest beginning in 1912, traveling around the state of Minnesota and drawing thousands to see him play.

A few games in Marshall rank as career highlights for a player that in his day was as well-known in Minnesota as Babe Ruth, says researcher Peter Gorton.

Gorton, of Minneapolis, has been researching Donaldson for a number of years — tracking his career throughout Minnesota.

Gorton was first introduced to Donaldson when he was asked to research him for a book called "Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota."

really famous," said Gorton. "Babe Ruth was a household name and the reason he was a household name throughout the United States was because of the amount of newspaper coverage of every move the guy made."

At a young age Donaldson knew he wanted to travel, said Gorton.

"John Donaldson was fascinated by traveling circus shows and stage presentations," Gorton said. "In 1910 a traveling showcase came through town and he got water for the horses that were involved in the horse show and they let him into the show for free. There he met (the band leader) and one thing led to another and John decided he wanted to be a world traveler."

It wasn't long before Donaldson found an opportunity to travel thanks to a sport he loved.

Although he had the talent that would later let him travel around the Midwest, there was still one thing standing in his way.

"He came out of Glasgow as a phenomenal left-



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on Sundays. He would sneak out as a kid and go play for his team.

"One day she found out that he was out at the park playing so she went down there," Gorton added. "When she heard the crowd chanting his name she decided that he must be pretty good."

After his mother realized his potential, Donaldson found the opportunity he was looking for when he joined the traveling black baseball team the Tennessee Rats.

"He joined a team called the Tennessee Rats that were a traveling baseball team and orchestra side show," said Gorton.

Donaldson made his first trip to Minnesota with the Rats.

"He played in a place called Wells, Minnesota, and that was in late September in 1911," said Gorton. "He came to Wells and struck out 16 players on the Wells team. In late September the Wells team was probably

made up of ringers. Late in the season town teams disbanded because players went back to school and they usually amalgamated an all-star team."

While playing with the Rats, Gorton was discovered by a man who would have an impact on the rest of his career.

"He was noticed by J.L. Wilconson who later would become the owner and founder of the K.C. Monarchs (of the Negro Leagues)," said Gorton.

Wilconson had an idea of bringing players of all nationalities from different countries together for a traveling baseball show.

"He came up with this idea that he would have players from all countries come and play in rural Minnesota and the Upper Midwest," said Gorton. "The All Nations traveled all around Minnesota in trains."

On Aug. 24, 1913, the All Nations team played a game in Marshall that was talked about

throughout the state.

"This game was reported all around Minnesota because of how good it was," said Gorton. "He came into the game and struck out the first nine batters."

Donaldson made an impact early in the game, striking out players in quick order.

"Phremmer was the first batter for Marshall," said Gorton. "He came in and took three big swings and sat down. Donaldson then went onto give one of the greatest exhibition ever seen (in Marshall), striking out the team's nine men and starting over, striking out two more."

Throughout the early innings and later in the game, Donaldson was a one-man show.

"During the first four innings, Donaldson didn't need any field and only the catcher and himself would retire the locals," said Gorton. "No ball was even hit. He did it again in the sixth, seventh and eighth innings, striking

out seven men in a row. He had quiet a day that day. He ended up with 29 strikeouts in 16 innings. They ended the game in a 1-1 tie because of the 6 p.m. rule."

Although there was no clear winner in the game, it was still talked about for days around the state.

Gorton said based on his research, Marshall had one of the best records against the All Nations team in Minnesota.

One game prior to the 16-inning show by Donaldson, Marshall beat the All Nations 4-1 — against a different pitcher.

Gorton said Donaldson went onto play for a number of Negro League teams, including the legendary Kansas City Monarchs.

His fame in Minnesota would only grow throughout his career — including a few seasons in the small town of Bertha.

"Bertha signed Donaldson for \$325 a month which was a lot of money back then," said Gorton.

"The town had about 500 people associated with the city and surrounding areas."

While in Bertha, Gorton said Donaldson had his own apartment over the barbershop and was well respected throughout the town.

Donaldson's name drew people to Bertha to watch the black ballplayer strike out players left and right.

"The first game they played against a small town and brought 600 people in," said Gorton. "The next game they brought 1,000 fans. A game against St. Paul he brought in about 1,000 fans. Another traveling team he brought in 2,500 people."

Gorton said the number of fans just kept growing as his career continued.

"Bertha's record was 21-5

that season and Donaldson won all 21 games," said Gorton. "He averaged about 13 strikeouts a game."

Gorton said it's difficult to judge Donaldson's record against other great baseball players because he never had the opportunity to play in the major leagues.

While some might wonder how Donaldson felt about never having the chance to play Major League Baseball, Gorton believes Donaldson was happy with the opportunities he had.

More than 30 years before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier, Donaldson had the opportunity to do what he loved, travel — and play baseball.