

Sports

Baseball game a feature of 1927 Lindbergh Homecoming

Submitted By
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the city then known as the "Butter Capitol of Todd County". During his first season with the Fishermen, Donaldson compiled an 18-3 record while ringing up 300 strikeouts.

Semi-professional baseball was a tremendous money-making venture in those days, provided you had a winning team. Donaldson's

crowd began gathering at 8 a.m. hoping for choice grandstand seats. Lindbergh was said to be arriving in the early afternoon. Radio reports signaled his departure from St. Paul in anticipation of a 2 p.m. arrival. With one eye on the ballgame and one on the horizon hoping to get a glimpse of Lindy's famed single-engine plane, the contest began at noon. Mayor of Little Falls Austin Grimes threw out the ceremonial first pitch then handed the ball over to Donaldson.

The House of David team consisted of members of a religious sect based in Benton Harbor, MI. The team was known nationally for their traveling sideshow and dominant baseball team. One of the requirements of the organization was that the men could not shave their beards nor cut their hair. Sporting extremely long beards and unshorn locks, the team showed a surprisingly adept knowledge of the game. The House of David team dominated town teams everywhere they went giving them national respect as a baseball powerhouse.

A tired Donaldson, who was now 35 years old, faced the Benton Harbor boys and pitched well for the first two innings, allowing one hit and striking out one. His lone strikeout came at the expense of none other than the famed "Bambino" Sharrock. After completing his two innings Donaldson handed the ball over to "Lefty" Wilson and then played the remainder of the game in center field.

William "Lefty" Wilson continued to hold down the Davids giving up just five hits and striking out 11 batters in eight innings of relief. The remainder of the game found both defenses turning stunning plays holding both heavy hitting offenses scoreless. The sixth inning started with Donaldson up first and he dropped a bunt down the third base line easily beating the hurried peg by the opposing third baseman. John took second when the throw sailed past first. Foreman then hit a towering fly into right field to sacrifice Donaldson to third. A timely line drive past third by first sacker Earl Plummer scored the go ahead run. "Lefty" also fanned "Babe Ruth" Sharrock two times, including once with the bases full in the eighth to retire the side and preserve the shutout.

The combination of Donaldson and Wilson left Sharrock 0/4 with three strikeouts.

Wilson's career started several years earlier when he was known as Dave Brown, a lanky left-hander with the Negro Leagues' Chicago American Giants. The Giants won the first three Negro League World Championships from 1920 to 1922 behind Brown's clutch pitching. His performances in the three championship seasons earned him the label "Greatest Black Pitcher" of the era.

He ran afoul of the authorities while pitching with New York, in 1925, and retreated to the Midwest where he was able to play baseball in relative obscurity under an assumed name.

The Bertha Fishermen held on to defeat The House of David on the occasion of the Lindbergh Homecoming, 1-0. The hopes of the fans were realized when Lindy appeared—soaring over the fairgrounds in his "Spirit of St. Louis" aircraft just before 2 p.m.

In 1927, the appearance of John Donaldson and "Lefty" Wilson pitching for the same team gave more than 6,000 appreciative baseball fans a glimpse of several Black ballplayers who contributed to Minnesota baseball history.

Footnote: In 1928, Little Falls began assembling its own semiprofessional baseball team. Modeling themselves after the success of tiny Bertha, the Little Falls management asked John Donaldson to personally recommend a pitcher and catcher. Donaldson endorsed a pitcher from Philadelphia named Webster McDonald and a receiver named Jon Van. In four seasons, from 1928 to 1931, McDonald pitched for Little Falls. He compiled an impressive record for the semi-pro franchise throwing 70 wins against only nine losses.



Photo courtesy of the Bertha Museum

John Donaldson, fourth from the left in back, and Sylvester Foreman, front left, played in the baseball game on Aug. 25, 1927 which was part of Charles Lindbergh's welcome home celebration.

The House of David traveling baseball team arrived in Little Falls the day before their contest with the semi-professional Bertha Fishermen. The teams were selected from dozens of applications from surrounding cities to play as a part of the massive Lindbergh Homecoming Celebration of Aug. 25, 1927.

The House of David, a religious faction, played in numerous cities throughout the Midwest. Its team was known nationally as one of the best barnstorming clubs in the country. The Davids carried a hard-hitting right fielder named Sharrock who was billed as the "Babe Ruth of semi-pro baseball," and on this day they would face a Bertha team loaded with two of the greatest, yet virtually unknown, pitchers of all time. The stage was set for the Homecoming of the "King of the Air" and baseball was a main attraction.

The teams had faced one another earlier in the season at the Bertha ballpark with the hometown team shutting out the collection of religious sect members 2 to 0. An African-American pitcher led the way for Bertha that day as he had done for most of the previous three seasons. John Wesley Donaldson, once considered the "Best Black Pitcher in the World," drew large crowds wherever he pitched. His personality and good living habits prolonged his wonderful career at a time in which the National Pastime discriminated against Negro ball players: Numerous baseball men had made references to his qualifications to pitch at the Major League level throughout his career. John McGraw, manager of the New York Giants, once said he would have given \$100,000 for Donaldson's services had he been white.

The Bertha baseball committee hired Donaldson in early 1924. They wanted to bring notoriety to

reputation as a ball player drew the fans to the ballpark. Donaldson had spent parts of many of the previous 12 seasons barnstorming as a member of the famed All-Nations ball club. The All-Nations was a team composed of players of different races and ethnicities who traveled from small town to small town and paycheck-to-paycheck.

Many cities throughout Minnesota hosted the All-Nations team including Akeley, Chisholm, Deerwood, Marshall, Kerkhoven, Melrose, Virginia, Hibbing, Good Thunder, Little Falls, Barnesville, Cass Lake and New Ulm, to name just a few. If Donaldson's team could be successful they would take home 60 percent of the total gate receipts. The formula worked again while Donaldson played for Bertha, and in 1924 they turned a large profit by winning baseball games.

The opportunity to participate in the Lindbergh Homecoming Celebration prompted the Bertha Fishermen to try to gain 60 percent of the total receipts of a game that that was guaranteed to attract a large crowd. That day Bertha had two other African American players with them. Sylvester "Hooks" Foreman, a catcher, and "Lefty" Wilson, another pitcher. Wilson, who had acquired a reputation of his own, had to be hired because Donaldson had pitched a 14-strikeout, complete-game win in Bemidji two days earlier at the Great Northern Fair before a crowd of 5,000. Foreman had been catching for Donaldson for the previous three seasons and was said to be quite a showman and an even better field general.

The Homecoming Committee hired local businessman Earl Wetzel as the promoter of the contest and Wetzel did well. An estimated 6,000 people came to the game, with thousands more watching from outside the fairgrounds

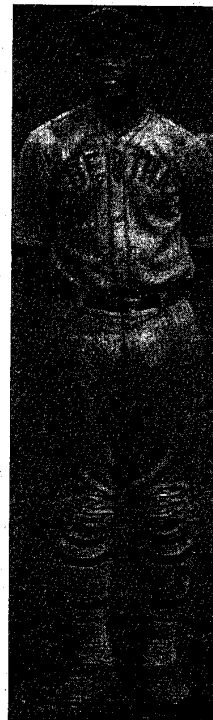


Photo courtesy of the Bertha Museum
William "Lefty" Wilson pitched the final seven innings of the baseball game that was part of Charles Lindbergh's 1927 homecoming in Little Falls.



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