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Baseball book re-unites teacher, student

Baseball - the all-American summer sport - has many exciting stories associated with the hometown team all the way up to our beloved Minnesota Twins.

Who could not identify with watching a baseball game during the sultry days of summer in Minnesota - the slap of leather on leather as players practice throws ... the clink of the ball hitting the metal bat ... the windup ... the outfielders sprinting towards a pop fly ... the cloud of dust billowing while awaiting the umpire's verdict on an exciting slide into home base.

A love baseball and history have melded for former Staples' residents in a new book from Minnesota Historical Society Press entitled "Swinging the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota History". The book was researched and written by Steven Hoffbeck, a former high school social studies teacher and junior high baseball coach in Staples and Peter Gorton, a former Staples resident and graduate.

Black baseball in Minnesota? There's quite a connection, with a young player named John Wesley Donaldson, who formerly played on the mound for the Minnesota state champs, the Bertha Fisherman.

To write this chapter of the book, another connection story unfolded as Hoffbeck was re-united with his former student, Peter Gorton, a 1988 graduate of Staples High School. Gorton was a teacher's assistant for Hoffbeck in 1987, the Minnesota Twins World Series Championship year. "My students and I had great fun keeping track of those World Series games," said Hoffbeck.

"While waiting for class to begin, I convinced Hoffbeck to play the Twins fight song every day during the playoffs and World Series," said Gorton. "He knew I was a baseball fan." Gorton graduated in 1988, and then from St. Cloud

State a few years later with a degree in television broadcasting. While he was working in Florida covering Jeb Bush's first term as governor, Gorton received a letter from Hoffbeck who included a photo of Bobby Marshall, first baseman for the 1909 St. Paul Colored Gophers.

A few months later, Gorton accepted a promotion which brought him back to the Twin Cities and the pair set up a reunion, meeting for the first time in 11 years. At that meeting, Hoffbeck convinced Gorton to do some researching for him for the next book project. Hoffbeck is a History Department professor at Moorhead State University.

"He volunteered," said Hoffbeck. "I gave him the era of the 1920s because he was willing to work hard to research the story of John Donaldson. Keep in mind, this was when others had backed off from that assignment saying it was too difficult to find such data."

"Well, Pete dug into the research in old newspapers from all of Minnesota at the Minnesota Historical Society and worked like a bulldog," said Hoffbeck. "With his resourcefulness, tenacity and determination, he became the leading expert on the career of Donaldson, writing a chapter." Gorton also captured the elusive story of Lefty Wilson, who also pitched in small town Minnesota in the late 1920s. "He did a masterful job," said Hoffbeck.

"With the guidance of Steve, I was also able to concoct the story needed to fill the era of the 1920s in the book. I

have been researching John Donaldson pretty much now, for the past five years. It turned out not too many people knew the story - until now," Gorton said.

The book helps explore a time of unrest within the nation; about persistent themes in the black experience. While researching a famous lynching in Duluth, Hoffbeck came across the picture of the 1909 St. Paul Colored Gophers, the champions of black baseball. His curiosity gained him no information beyond the photograph, prompting him to launch an almost campaign interest in black baseball history.

"It was begging to be told," he said. "Little did I know how difficult it would be." But with recruits and pursuing help, the research team was launched.

Hoffbeck grew up on a farm in Morgan and was eight years old when he saw his first black man, Earl Batty, a catcher for the Twins in the Metropolitan Stadium. He became an avid baseball fan, listening to games on the radio while raking hay or milking cows with his dad.

"That background kept him on track while trying to retell the elusive stories of summer baseball in Minnesota's past, the humiliation of racial discrimination and the perseverance of strong-willed men playing a child's game," said the editor at the Minnesota Historical Society suggested that Hoffbeck do the book, not just on a few players, but on the entire history of black baseball within the state. Hoffbeck was hesitant until

he eventually gathered a team of historians, writers, baseball people and one former student to research and write the book with him overseeing the entire project.

"Baseball was more than just a game to these black players. It as a way to assert their mahood in a society that tended to emasculate them," said Hoffbeck. "The book actually is an epic story about manhood, brotherhood and fatherhood, a lost part of Minnesota's history." His last book, "The Haymakers" earned a Minnesota Book Award in 2001.

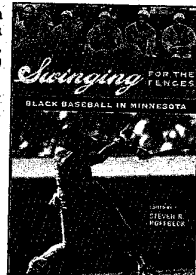
Presently, Gorton is working on a potential Baseball Hall of Fame nomination for Donaldson. "He's turned out to be quite a national figure and true historical figure," said Gorton.

Gorton is currently the Presentation Services Coordinator for Gaegre & Benson, a law firm in downtown Minneapolis. He and his wife, Kelly, live in northeast Minneapolis.

"The Gortons have helped facilitate and lead book events in the Twin Cities. And when I needed help with getting to and from media appearances with MN Public TV's "Almanac" show and appearances on the noon shows on WCCO-TV and KARE-11, Pete gave up his time to be a media assistant for me," said Hoffbeck. "Peter is one of the most loyal individuals I have ever known - willing to help his old, former high school teacher learn the ropes in the media."

Also, notes Hoffbeck, the book includes a photograph of Jerry Reiwer, long-time Staples coach and his brother from Bagley, as part of baseball's history in Minnesota.

Hoffbeck and Gorton will re-unite Aug. 27 in Staples appearing at the book event during Railroad Days and the Staples All School Reunion and will be available for book signing.



Hoffbeck and Gorton researched this book and will be at the All School Reunion Saturday.