

“Swinging for the Fences” includes former alumni, coaches

A teacher and student have re-connected through their enthusiasm for baseball.

Both former residents of Staples, they have paired up to promote the book written through their efforts, “Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota”, researched and edited by Steven Hoffbeck with a chapter on John Wesley Donaldson, researched by Peter Gorton, a 1988 graduate of Staples. The book was published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

The collaborators will turn promoters as well during Railroad Days and the All School Reunion in Staples.

Hoffbeck is a former social studies teacher in Staples and Gorton was a student and his teacher’s assistant.

On Friday Aug. 26 and on Saturday morning, they will be available at the All School Reunion registration area. There will be a history presentation/talk at Centennial Auditorium from 12:30 to 2 p.m. on Saturday.

Hoffbeck is a history professor at Moorhead State University. Gorton is currently the Presentation Services Coordinator for Gaegre & Benson, a law firm in Minneapolis.

“I’m so pleased to be able to visit Staples and my old friends and my former high school students,” said Hoffbeck. In his eight years of teaching at Staples High School, from 1980-1988, Hoffbeck taught social studies classes to over 1,000 students.

“We had so many talented and downright nice students at Staples in the 1980s and it is a treat to be able to see what these former students are doing some 20 years after graduation,” he said.

Hoffbeck was a junior high baseball coach in Staples from 1980 to 1985 as part of Jerry Reiwer’s coaching staff. Reiwer supervised

the methods of teaching the young players the fundamentals of the game, while Hoffbeck provided the on-the-field guidance for the seventh and eighth grade baseball teams, supervising practices at Pine Grove Park.

“Jerry Reiwer and Coach Tom Wolhowe are featured in the baseball book in a short chapter that deals with a stop-over by a black team in the 1950s in Bagley,” said Hoffbeck. Reiwer and Wolhowe were players on the town team.

“Both of these retired Staples teachers shared insights and memories with me in a chapter which records historic details of a barnstorming black team,” said Hoffbeck. The team was from Baltimore, the Elite Giants who played Bagley in 1959. “This would be one of the last of the all-black touring teams to visit the state of Minnesota,” he said.

Gorton will present images of John Donaldson, a black pitcher who played in Bertha in the 1920s, accompanied by his comments on the legacy of this legendary black pitcher who was a celebrity in his day. Donaldson was at his prime as a pitcher from 1912 to 1918, sadly, said Hoffbeck, just prior to the creation of the Negro Leagues in 1920. Through Gorton’s work, Donaldson will receive some consideration for inclusion in Baseball’s Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, in the upcoming year as a committee examines the records of various black players.

Hoffbeck will present images of black players in Minnesota ranging from Earl Batty with the Minnesota Twins in the 1960 and a member of the Twins Hall of Fame - to Willie Mays to Kirby Puckett, the black man from Chicago who came to epitomize the Twins in the 1980s and 1990s - even more so than Kent Hrbek, who was actually born in Minnesota.

Since the publication of “Swinging for the

Fences” in February, 2005, book tour highlights included a presentation at the Mill City Museum of the Minnesota Historical Society in May and a book signing event held at the HHH Metrodome on June 28. The Metrodome event was included as part of African-American Heritage Night, sponsored by the Minnesota Twins, the Negro Leagues Museum in Kansas City and the Minneapolis Spokesman-Recorder (Minnesota’s premier black newspaper. Much of the book’s research lead Hoffbeck and Gorton to black only newspapers for smidgits of information.

Gorton and Hoffbeck were also asked to provide information about the uniforms of the St. Paul Colored Gophers, the champions of black baseball in 1909 for use in a Throwback Jersey game held at the Royals’ stadium in Kansas City on July 10, 2005. As a result, both received gratis jerseys as appreciation for their efforts which helped with the research of the design for the historic uniforms.

Hoffbeck’s first book, “The Haymakers” A Chronicle of Five Farm Families” was published in 2000. Gorton attended one of his book events in St. Paul and while they talked, volunteered to help research and write portions of the book, “Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota”.



Steve Hoffbeck