

The Columbia Daily Tribune

Tribune Column

It's time John Donaldson got his due

By [Bill Clark](#)

[Friday, November 13, 2009](#)

Peter Gorton is a man on a mission, and he can use all the help he can get.

His mission? To convince the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., that John Wesley Donaldson should be enshrined there.

Next question: Who is John Donaldson?

John Donaldson was born on Feb. 10, 1891 (some say 1892) in Glasgow and grew into manhood there, throwing a baseball harder than anyone had ever seen in Central Missouri in the early 20th century.

His mother, Ida, was a lifelong resident of Glasgow and a devout Methodist who named her son for the founder of Methodism — John Wesley. His dad was a white Irish-American who left the family early in John's life.

Peter Gorton? He's a native of Staples, Minn., a baseball fan and a historian who asked to do a story about Donaldson, a pitcher for Bartha, Minn., to be included in a book about black players in Minnesota titled "Swinging for the Fences." It was edited by Steve Hoffbeck, Gorton's former high school social studies teacher.

Thus began this absolutely amazing mission to put Donaldson in Cooperstown.

Today, Pete operates the Donaldson Network, which consists of more than 400 researchers and a least one old columnist seeking more data to add to nearly 1,400 documented games in which Donaldson appeared as pitcher and/or position player.

Pete says "We've been able to document over 350 victories and account for nearly 100 more. We have logged more than 4,000 strikeouts. These numbers have been accumulated one game at a time."

Records for Negro League baseball are fragmented at best, and games in small towns were seldom recorded in the newspapers. So Gorton has an almost insurmountable task.

Donaldson followed his mother's directions regarding a Christian lifestyle his entire life, but he knew early that he had been called to pitch, not preach. He had spent three years as the ace of the pitching staff of Glasgow's Hannaca Blues team owned by local businessman Will Hannaca.

In 1911, he joined the Tennessee Rats, a team from Holden famous for its minstrel show as well as baseball ability. Within a year, he had been signed by the All Nations team owned by J.L. Wilkinson, and John was on his road to a career equal to that of Satchel Paige. He quickly be-

came the ace of the All Nations staff, and when the Negro League was organized in 1920, an original entry was the All Nations team, now called the Kansas City Monarchs.

He was Satchel Paige before there was a Satchel Paige. Satch came to the pro game in 1920. Like most of the black players 90 years ago and like Satch years later, John Donaldson followed the dollar — from the Monarchs to the Chicago Giants, but mostly back to barnstorm through the heartland. There were big bucks in small towns in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri. And he followed the dollar until 1938, retiring in Chicago. He died there on April 12, 1970.

He left an amazing record along the way, once throwing 30 consecutive hitless innings; fanning 30 in an 18-inning game he lost, 1-0; averaging 18 strikeouts a game in two seasons (1915-16) when he fanned more than 500 each year.

His greatness didn't find the spotlight that found many of the black players of his time. He matched the ability but not the pizzazz of later superstars such as Paige.

Gorton's efforts, which included a "John Donaldson Day" in Glasgow in 2005, failed to get Donaldson into Cooperstown.

In 2006, when the last of the great black players whose careers ended before baseball integration were selected for induction, Donaldson was considered but bypassed. So, too, was Buck O'Neil. A bad day for baseball.

The mission, however, continues, and this ink-stained wretch of a columnist is now a part of the Donaldson Network. I just had a chance to review an old film of Donaldson on the mound and have been in the microfiche files at the State Historical Society of Missouri seeing what we can add to the Donaldson portfolio.

If you have any Donaldson information, please call Ol' Clark and we'll see to it that you and Gorton continue the mission together.

Bill Clark's columns appear Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Reach him at 474-4510.