

John Wesley Donaldson, a Great Mound Artist

Peter W. Gorton

The decade of the 1920s brought new ideas and new heroes to Minnesota. The First World War redefined the United States as it became a world power. Prohibition of alcohol challenged the moral values of the populace; radio carried information and conveyed a sense of connection from ocean to ocean. Racial lines were blurred with the introduction of the new “jazz” music, originally American and originally black, while at the same time Ku Klux Klan sympathizers flourished. Spectator sports appealed to the masses. More people had more money than ever before, spending it on consumer goods—radios, refrigerators, and cars. Others freed up time for vacations and disposed of their disposable income. Business boomed and investors brought a bull market to Wall Street.

The age of the million-dollar drawing card dawned. Babe Ruth rose as the greatest national sporting icon, revolutionizing baseball with his home runs and his uppercutting swing. The Babe had risen from poverty in his boyhood in Baltimore to star status. Henry Ford, renowned for producing the affordable Model T, became so well known that some people urged him to seek the presidency in 1924. Minnesota’s own Charles Lindbergh, Jr., became an aviation celebrity and an international hero.¹

Lindbergh was a symbol of the Roaring Twenties. When Lucky Lindy flew his single-engine airplane across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927, Minnesotans cheered with delight. They adored the Little Falls man for his daring feat. The nation honored him with a ticker-tape parade down the avenues of New York City. Lindbergh had redefined how Minnesotans, and Americans, would view themselves throughout the world. He was truly Minnesota’s pride and joy, and Little Falls meant to do him proud by hosting a Lindbergh Homecoming Festival in August.

Fifty thousand people came to the central Minnesota town for the all-day event that featured band concerts, a street dance, and a magnificent parade consisting of nearly more bands than floats. The parade included a float

depicting the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower with a replica of the *Spirit of St. Louis* tethered between the virtual New York and Paris. The bands came from all over Minnesota—Brainerd, Glenwood, Royalton, Sauk Centre, and many other towns accompanied by numerous drum corps, including ones from Red Wing, Chisholm, and Hibbing. More than five hundred school-aged children marched in the parade waving “Welcome Home Lindy” flags honoring their hero.²

A baseball game was also part of the All-American festivities for the All-American Lindbergh. The game featured a semiprofessional team from the tiny town of Bertha and the barnstorming, bearded House of David ballclub from Benton Harbor, Michigan. Both squads had stellar records, and both could appeal to the crowds because of their ballplaying skills and distinctive styles. Bertha had played twenty-one games thus far and won nineteen, including a victory over the House of David in late June. The House of David had dominated small-town midwestern teams on a regular basis for several years.³

It is not known if aviator Lindbergh attended the game, but six thousand others paid fifty cents each for general admission and an extra two bits for each grandstand seat to witness the matchup. The Little Falls mayor, Austin L. Grimes, threw out the ceremonial first pitch, then watched a talented black pitcher named John Donaldson take the mound that afternoon. Some fans knew just how great a mound artist Donaldson had always been. No one except Donaldson, though, knew what it was like to be a baseball star who played in obscurity nearly all his career—pitching in towns such as Browerville, Akeley, Lismore, Good Thunder, Fulda, or Clarkfield. He had mowed down batters from teams like the Joliet Prison All Stars, the Hibbing Colts, the St. Paul Patocks, and the New York Mills Millers.

Some folks called him “Cannonball” Donaldson; others referred to him as “the famous colored twirler” or the “coal tar colored heaver.” Whites sometimes called him a “colored boy” or “southpaw black boy”—others called him worse things. Whatever name they used, they learned that he could really pitch, leading the Bertha team to the championship of semiprofessional baseball in Minnesota in 1924.

Bertha’s ballclub had two other black players that day. One was a catcher by the name of Sylvester “Hooks” Foreman. He had been in the big-time Negro Leagues with the Indianapolis ABC’s and the Kansas City Monarchs. The management had hired another black pitcher especially for the Lindbergh Festival game; his name was Lefty Wilson. That was not his real name; he had changed his name from Dave Brown several years before when he fled from a New York murder scene.⁴

The House of David, a religious community, had eleven players with long unshorn locks of hair, gloves and bats blessed through their distinctive ceremonial practices, and fundamental baseball skills. They were odd but they were very good at baseball.

The day proved to be a great one both for Lindbergh and for Bertha's team. Donaldson started the game and shut out the House of David for two innings, and then Lefty Wilson took over the pitching duties for the final seven innings of a 1 to 0 ball game. Donaldson and Wilson combined to throw a six-hit shutout of the hard-hitting House of David nine.⁵

Donaldson's star did not shine as brightly as Lindbergh's that day. Lindbergh was, after all, the lone son of a well-known Minnesota congressman and politician, Charles Lindbergh, Sr. Lindy became a spokesman for the aviation industry and remained an international celebrity until the end of his days. Donaldson, in contrast, continued to pitch for Bertha, then moved on to teams in Minneota, Madison, Lismore, Melrose, Arlington, and St. Cloud before starting his own touring team in Fairmont for the 1932 season. Both men had links to Minnesota and kept those ties for the remainder of each man's lifetime. Minnesotans remembered Lindbergh; they largely forgot about what Donaldson had done in the state.

John Wesley Donaldson originally came from Missouri. He was born in the town of Glasgow on February 20, 1892. As a child he expressed the wish to "be a globe-trotter" and to "learn all about the world." He earned free tickets to the theater by working at odd jobs for the traveling entertainers. Later in life, his ball-playing exploits fulfilled his curiosity about travel and seeing the world.⁶

Young Donaldson showed a remarkable talent for playing baseball, starting with the kid's game called "one old cat." Donaldson was "always called upon to pitch for he could throw the ball the farthest." He became the pitcher for the Evans grade school team and, by sixth grade, led his teammates to a regional championship. Unfortunately, his mother was "strictly against his participating in the national game" and strongly opposed playing baseball on Sundays because she was a very religious woman. She believed that Sundays should contain no work, just church and prayer. They agreed John could play only on weekdays.

Soon after, Evans school played for a championship, and the game was to be on a Sunday with John Donaldson pitching. He went to the diamond without his mother knowing of it. When she got wind of what was going on, she hurried to the ballpark with the "intention of whipping John and sending him home." Arriving at the game at a "critical moment," and hearing the crowd cheering her son, she relented and became his most loyal fan.

Donaldson was a dedicated student, graduating from Evans high school with high honors in a mixed class of “both white and colored pupils.” According to historian James Riley, Donaldson attended George Smith College in nearby Sedalia for a year before focusing on baseball as a way of life. The game provided a way to see the country, just like the traveling entertainers he had seen in Glasgow.⁷

Donaldson’s professional career began in 1911 when he pitched for the Tennessee Rats barnstorming ball club. He pitched forty-four games that season, losing only three. Donaldson “became the talk of the fans in every place he played,” and he was the main “drawing card” and “money maker” for the Rats. It was said that he “received absolutely nothing” for his pitching and “was forced to sleep in opera houses, [or] barns” and seldom got a room in a hotel, “unless circumstances called for respectable treatment.” He made his first appearance in Minnesota in September of that year, but it is not known if he had to sleep in a hotel or in a barn.⁸

Sometime in the 1911 season, a sharp baseball entrepreneur named J. L. Wilkinson discovered Donaldson’s all-around baseball abilities and signed him for the All Nations traveling ballclub for 1912. That season he gained a reputation—he pitched at Deerwood in early August, winning 20–0, but was noted for striking out the first twelve batters he faced.⁹

This was where the real John Donaldson started to become the legendary hurler. Within two years, the story would be told of a game in which the hard-throwing colored left-hander would be “jeered and otherwise abused” by prejudiced local-yokel fans. He would accept “the abuse with a gracious smile” and then prove himself as a man and a pitcher “by striking out the first twenty-one men up to bat” and by winning the game in a shutout performance. Twelve batters in reality had grown to be twenty-one in myth, and the black pitcher established himself as a phenom who pitched no-hitters and shutouts in amazing numbers in the hinterlands of the Upper Midwest.¹⁰

The All Nations team, based in Des Moines, Iowa, was owned by J. L. Wilkinson, a white man who was nonetheless accepted by black players and known later for his Kansas City Monarchs Negro League team in the 1920s. The team was composed of players of several different nationalities, having a “Scotchman, an Indian, an American, a Jap[anese], a Mexican, a Turk, an African, a Greek, and a Chinaman.” Contemporary sources indicated that Wilkinson had patterned the All Nations team after the model of the earlier Hopkins Brothers touring ballclub and that he also controlled the Boston Bloomer Girls baseball club.¹¹

The All Nations team played about twenty-five games in Minnesota in 1912, and Donaldson took his turn on the mound, alternating with the great Cuban black hurler Jose Mendez and two other pitchers, Thomas Means and Art Dunbar. Mendez was the mainstay of the Cuban Stars (1909–12) team that toured in the United States and of the Almendares team of the winter Cuban League. Mendez was the right-handed ace and Donaldson was his left-handed counterpart; together they were two of the best black pitchers from 1910 to 1920. With such a talented pitching staff, the All Nations won ninety-two games, losing only twenty-two, with two ties in 116 total games.¹²

Donaldson dominated the amateur and semiprofessional teams he threw against for eight seasons from 1911 through 1917 when he was one of the best pitchers in black baseball. His won-loss record for his first two years with the All Nations was eighty wins and five losses, for a winning percentage of .941. His legendary prowess grew. He faced a ballclub in Marshall and struck out the first eleven men. He “gave the greatest exhibition of pitching ever seen here,” wrote a local newsman, “striking out the entire team, nine men, and then starting over again and striking out two more” for the total of eleven. He later struck out seven batters in a row in the same game. Fantastic reports of Donaldson’s exploits preceded the arrival of the All Nations in every Midwest town. John was said to have mowed down thirty-five Sioux Falls batters in an eighteen-inning game and to have struck out twenty-six hapless opponents in another ballgame.¹³

The All Nations club traveled in its own private Pullman railway car (nicknamed “Loretta” in 1912, then a new one called “Jeanette” in 1913) and had its own cook who journeyed with the team. Thus the players did not have to worry about being refused overnight lodging or meal service along the way. Riding the rails from town to town, contest to contest, payday to payday was a way of life for the team.¹⁴

Wilkinson’s All Nations ballclub brought technological advancements to the rural towns of Minnesota. In 1914 he introduced an arrangement of electric arc lights called the Swaine system. When draped around the diamond, they provided 50,000-candlepower of light that was said to make the field “light as day.” The attraction of literally lighting up the darkness drew fans from around the area like moths to a beacon lamp.¹⁵

Towns all over the Land of 10,000 Lakes anticipated the arrival of Donaldson and the All Nations as a social event. Wilkinson promoted his 1913 squad as “a bunch of professional players, made up of Americans, Cubans, Indians, Japanese, Negroes, French, Hawaiians and Mexicans,” minus the Turk from the



John Donaldson traveled throughout Minnesota with the All Nations from 1912 to 1917 and 1920 to 1923.

year before. The team at one time even carried a wrestler named “Cyclone” Ben Reeves, a champion 175-pound wrestler from Iowa. He was known to grapple any man who dared to think he could beat him.¹⁶

In 1912 the All Nations had barnstormed with a person called “Carrie Nation,” a woman (or a man impersonating a woman) who played first base. Wilkinson borrowed the name of the saloon-smashing, anti-alcohol crusader as a means to showcase a female as part of the All Nations team. The All Nations consistently drew crowds of five hundred spectators throughout their railway travels in Minnesota.¹⁷ Anywhere and by any means that the team could draw a crowd, it would.

John Donaldson spent all or part of seven seasons traveling throughout the United States and Canada with the All Nations, presumably because he could make good money at it. Black baseball in that period had a few great teams but no well-organized Negro League. There were a few dominant teams in Chicago (Rube Foster’s club), St. Louis, and New York, while other teams arose and then faded away. Wilkinson moved his base of operations to Kansas City from Des Moines in 1916, and his All Nations became a part of the Western League of black teams. Kansas City was a convenient base for

Donaldson, just one hundred miles from his Glasgow hometown, and he flourished there. The 1916 season was a highlight of Donaldson's entire career, when the All Nations had the best record in the Western League and the league named him as the left-handed pitcher on the West All-Star Team. As one of the best colored pitchers that year, he was chosen to play Florida resort baseball with the Poinciana club that winter. Baseball historian John Holway rated Donaldson as the best pitcher in black baseball in 1916, listing him as the George Stovey Award winner for that year.¹⁸

In 1917 the All Nations ballclub dissolved when players were drafted into the military, and Donaldson was among those who served a tour of duty in World War I. It was also the year that he married Eleanor Watson. In 1918 he returned from Europe to pitch for two all-black teams in New York—the Brooklyn Royal Giants and the New York Lincoln Giants—and with the Indianapolis ABC's before being signed by the Detroit Stars in 1919.¹⁹

Donaldson found a place within the newly established Negro National League (NNL) when it commenced in 1920. The Negro League, the brainchild of Rube Foster, was the first successful national organized baseball league comprised of all-black teams. Again, J. L. Wilkinson was his benefactor, signing him for his Kansas City Monarchs. The other founding clubs in the West included Foster's Chicago American Giants, the Chicago Giants, Cuban Stars, Dayton Marcos, Detroit Stars, Indianapolis ABC's, and St. Louis Giants.

Donaldson spent the seasons from 1920 through 1923 with the Monarchs. Wilkinson built the team around players he knew, including the great Mendez and Donaldson. Having encountered serious arm troubles, Donaldson became the regular centerfielder but was still able to fill in on the mound. Good with the bat, he was the leadoff hitter initially and then was moved down in the batting order year by year as he got older; still he had "exceptional speed from the batter's box to first base."²⁰

The veteran Donaldson became teammates with outfielder Hurley McNair (1888–1948) and catcher Sylvester "Hooks" Foreman, forming a bond that would last throughout his career. McNair was a speedster who led the West in doubles and triples for several seasons and hit for high average. Foreman was breaking in as a back-up catcher. One of the highlights of this period was a 1922 exhibition game between the Monarchs and a Babe Ruth team of barnstorming players in which Donaldson garnered two hits in four at-bats in a Monarchs victory.²¹

Donaldson's Minnesota story resumed when, prior to the 1922 season, he signed an independent semipro contract with the Browerville, Minnesota,

ballclub. The Browerville organization sent transportation to receive Donaldson a few days before the start of the season, but he failed to appear, choosing instead to stay with the Monarchs. In June 1922 Donaldson returned to the All Nations, traveling with yet another installment of the barnstorming stars.²²

After the 1923 season, Donaldson left the Monarchs to play in Minnesota. The veteran lefty signed a contract with the Bertha ballclub for \$325 per month, a contract painstakingly arranged by the board of directors and lucrative enough to lure him to central Minnesota. The man who became the guiding force behind the team was manager Ernie Fisher, keeper of the local pool hall, and his name became synonymous with the team. The club became known as the Bertha Fishermen, and Ernie was the “Fisher” in Fishermen.²³

It would seem unlikely that a big-name black pitcher would play in Bertha, a farming community of only six hundred white people known chiefly as the “The Butter Center of Todd County.” It seemed even more unlikely that the team would be a success, but Fisher had the moxie effectively to advertise Donaldson as one of the best drawing cards in the region and the ingenuity to make the enterprise fly. Why not cash in on the Donaldson fame? The left-hander’s name had been known around central Minnesota since the time that he had first pitched in Little Falls, Bertha, Melrose, and Deerwood in 1912 and in other places in subsequent years. Tiny Bertha became a place where Donaldson proved his worth not only as a ballplayer but also as a man.²⁴

There were several reasons why John Donaldson agreed to play in Bertha. Probably most importantly, his wife, Eleanor, had her father living in the Twin Cities and the Donaldsons could often get together with family. Furthermore, John was well acquainted with Minnesota from his touring days in the state with the All Nations. Certainly his guaranteed contract provided a stable work environment, something that had been lacking throughout his career. And so the Bertha experiment began. John and Eleanor left their home in Kansas City on April 27, 1924. They stayed in Minneapolis at first, and he traveled by rail to Bertha for the weekend games. General manager Ernie Fisher eagerly anticipated Donaldson’s arrival. He hoped to bring baseball notoriety to the small community, and he wanted this business venture to turn a profit.²⁵

The Bertha Fishermen played a fully independent semipro schedule, choosing not to be a member of the nearby Central Minnesota League—one that had barred all colored players.²⁶ This league included other area teams, such as Long Prairie, St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids, Sartell, Crosby-Ironton, Clear Lake-Clearwater-Becker, and Cold Spring. When various leagues drew the



Posters, such as this one advertising a game at Moorhead in 1925, brought fans out to see Donaldson pitch. It noted that Bertha had the “fastest” team in Minnesota and the “greatest colored” pitcher.

color line, black players who wished to make some money playing ball in Minnesota had to go to smaller and smaller towns. Hence Bertha could hire a black player like Donaldson while Long Prairie, just seven miles distant, could not and would not hire a black man in the 1920s because its team belonged to the league. This decision went against the precedent in that town; Long Prairie had hired George “Rat” Johnson as a catcher in 1908–09. However, other teams that had not yet drawn the color line would be willing to play against Bertha’s independent ballclub.

There were certain fundamentals for the Bertha management. They scheduled games wherever they could draw the most gate admissions. The team would usually split game receipts with their opponents, the winner receiving

60 percent and the loser 40 percent. Admission to games was generally fifty cents for an adult to watch the ball game, with grandstand seats extra. Other fans paid to park their automobiles just beyond the outfield to view the action.²⁷ Most small-town ballparks lacked an outfield fence to mark home-run clouts, and the cars provided a boundary. If the ball was hit into the parked cars that surrounded the outfield, the batter was automatically limited to a ground-rule double.

Fisher understood that his Fishermen could only make money if they drew big crowds and fielded a winning team, and Donaldson filled both bills. Some newsmen from neighboring towns attempted to discredit Bertha's team by calling attention to Donaldson as a "ringer," while other towns depended on "home talent." Jealous writers publicized the outrageous salary Bertha paid to the interloper. The *Wadena Pioneer Journal* conveyed its message this way: "See Donaldson, Bertha's negro twirler. The boy Bertha is paying \$325.00 to do the twirling. He's either a wonder or a lemon." But fans wanted to see the "wonder" pitcher so often mentioned in the papers: "That it pays to advertise and that every knock is a boost was plainly shown by the 1,000 fans that attended the Bertha-Wadena game at Wadena" on May 11, 1924.²⁸

Manager Fisher cared less about the insults thrown at Donaldson than the size of the crowd he drew. He scheduled games solely with teams capable of



Fans parked their cars in foul territory of Bertha's treeless ballpark, about 1925.

properly advertising the contests and generating large gate receipts. It took only several weeks for John Donaldson to convince Fisher that he was worth every penny paid to him.

On May 30, 1924, he proved his value as a drawing card. The Minnesota-Dakota Indians arrived in Bertha with a squad of Native American talent from the plains. This traveling team featured a few former minor leaguers, but all were of Native American descent. Ernie Fisher hired the Staples Area Band to provide entertainment before and after the game and between innings in the hope of stirring up a crowd. It worked—a total of nearly a thousand watched, and John Donaldson excelled.

The *Long Prairie Leader* described Donaldson and the matchup in crude racial terminology:

Donaldson pitched a no-hit, no-run game and every Bertha player got at least one hit and one run. Just 29 men faced Donaldson and Bertha errors permitted one to reach first and one got as far as second on two consecutive errors. Several times a Brave was a good waiter and would have three balls and not a strike, but the next three would be strikes whether he wished it or not, and when the game ended Donaldson had 20 Redskin scalps dangling from his strike-out belt. . . . During the middle of the game there appeared Busby's All-Star Colored Minstrels, consisting of 18 Plantation raised Jazz Hounds, several of whom were friends of Donaldson's. The troupe had been playing at Staples and when they heard that Donaldson was in Bertha they came unsolicited, paid their 35 cents admission and rendered free music consisting of "Big Olio Vaudeville Oddities." The Staples 24 piece band had been hired by the baseball association and if there are any who think they did not get 35 cents worth let them call on V. E. Bartlett and get a free pass to the next performance.²⁹

It took some courage for John Donaldson to make Bertha his home base for baseball in the 1920s, for racial tensions had been running high. Conditions had deteriorated after a dreadful lynching of three black circus workers in Duluth in 1920 and because of ongoing agitation of the Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota. The Klan had ten active chapters in Minneapolis and vigorously promoted its "white supremacist" ideologies. News reports of a cross-burning incident at Staples, just fifteen miles from Bertha, at a spot between the baseball park and the cemetery went simmering through the minds of the region's Catholics, recent immigrants, and blacks. Reports of Klan meetings in Bemidji and in Deer River, north of Bertha, were widely disseminated.³⁰

Despite the racial climate and the fears, it appears that John Donaldson was able to build upon an earlier legacy of touring black players and teams. The good will and competition fostered by the St. Paul Colored Gophers and Minneapolis Keystones from 1907 to 1911 continued as various all-black

Twin Cities' teams toured small-town Minnesota. The skill of George "Rat" Johnson as a catcher had been readily apparent in nearby Long Prairie in 1909, and the talent of Donaldson was plain to see in 1924. It was generally accorded in the 1920s that Donaldson gained the respect of the local people whom he encountered in Bertha and elsewhere. He was regarded not only as a great ballplayer but also as an upstanding citizen. A black ballplayer like Donaldson could get along in Minnesota if he conducted himself with professionalism wherever he went and did not participate in drinking, smoking, or cursing. However, a black ballplayer could hope to transcend race by awing the white crowds with talent. A fan pointed out that a local ballgame was "attractive, for it had the great and mighty John Donaldson in it," a pitcher who "mowed down" the local batters "fair, square and decisive." He insisted that the moundsman was the "big attraction" and that two-thirds of the "large crowd of people" turned out because they "wanted to see Donaldson, the great." The big crowds were not there to see the other players, "they wanted to see Donaldson, the master of base ball."³¹

Donaldson's skills drew such big crowds to Bertha that by the summer of 1924 Fisher had to expand the bleachers at the local park to hold them all. The black newspapers in the Twin Cities were hearing of, and began reporting on, the successes of Donaldson. The *Northwestern Bulletin* called him the best-known colored baseball player in the world.³²

The *Park Rapids Enterprise* described its local encounter with Donaldson and his Bertha teammates on July 6, 1924:

Bertha has the reputation of being the fastest ball team in this part of the state. From the exhibition they put up here it seems that they have a pretty fair team and one star Donaldson, the famous colored man, at one time with the All-Nations team. He coaches, runs the team, stars in the pitcher's box, plays to the grandstand and tries to run the umpires. Sometimes he gets away with it all.³³

Donaldson's showmanship was never more evident than in an August game at Battle Lake when he and the Fishermen found themselves without a catcher at game time because R. W. Bottemiller was getting married that day. A stranger in town, Kenneth "Zonie" Personius, shouted from the crowd, "I'll go in and catch the game."

"Are you a catcher?" asked Donaldson.

"Maybe not," said Zonie, "but I grab 'em and hold 'em."

Zonie was told to grab a catcher's mitt, and after he caught just one warm-up pitch from Donaldson, the great pitcher allowed, "All right, you'll do, get into that suit."

Thus on that August afternoon, amateur Kenneth Personius helped perpetuate the legends concerning John Donaldson. The Bertha team won the game 1 to 0, with Donaldson notching nineteen strikeouts.³⁴

After Donaldson joined the team, financial solvency followed. A public report on the finances of the ballclub for the last four games of 1924 revealed the impact of having an outstanding black pitcher on Bertha's side. Those games versus Gary (at Detroit Lakes), Pelican Rapids (at Fergus Falls), and Browerville were all wins for the Bertha club. Donaldson averaged eleven strikeouts, and the Bertha club outscored its opponents 19 to 8. Since the winning team earned 60 percent of the gate receipts, Bertha got a total of \$1,420.97 for just four games. The cash covered the expenses, the largest of which was Donaldson's salary. The numbers tell the story. Donaldson received \$1,478 for the season while the rest of the Fishermen shared \$1,460. Not only was his salary more than that of his teammates put together, he also was paid more than the total earned by all the visiting teams that year (a sum of \$1,104). After all the expenses were met, the organization realized a profit of \$205.99, putting it on the plus side of the ledger.³⁵

Hiring a black pitcher was definitely worth it, for the Bertha Fishermen claimed the Central Minnesota and Northwest Minnesota State championships. The ballclub finished with an overpowering record of twenty-one wins, five losses, and one tie. Donaldson won all twenty-one games, losing only three, which gave him a winning percentage of .875. In his twenty-five appearances he struck out 325 batters, averaging 13.5 strikeouts per game. His 325 strikeouts came in just 211 innings pitched. Even if most of these opponents were small-town players, the numbers remain impressive. Donaldson also led the team in hitting, sporting a .439 batting average. Financially, the team made money, and it extended Donaldson a contract for the following season—with a raise in salary to four hundred dollars per month.³⁶

Bertha's baseball fans loved John Donaldson. In 1925 he helped coach the local high school baseball team, arriving in town in late April prior to the opening of the season. His knowledge of baseball was apparently more important than the color of his skin, and he helped teach youngsters the basics of the game. His social status as a star pitcher permitted him access to a position of responsibility that another black man probably would not have been offered.³⁷

The eve of another tremendously successful season was at hand, inspiring a fan to write this poem in homage to the 1925 Bertha nine:



The Bertha Fishermen in 1924: (front row, left to right) August Thias, "Getty" Geithman, Red Westergren, W. K. Bottemiller; (standing, left to right) Gust Kassube, George Johnson, Elwyn Anderson, John Donaldson, Milton Abbott, Oscar Wagner



The Bertha Fishermen in 1927: (left to right) Carl Gregerson, Al Theis, August Thias, George Johnson, John Donaldson, manager Ernie Fisher, Earl Plummer, unknown, Sylvester "Hooks" Foreman, Ole Wald, Pete Briere

Our dear old Mr. Donaldson
 Is back again, I see
 For he must think it's lots of fun
 To pitch for us, by Gee.
 How good it is to see him back,
 Among our happy boys,
 And he can show you how to whack
 That ball, with happy joy.
 Our team, they say, he's going to call
 "The best team in the state,"
 Because they truly can play ball
 As good as leaguers great.
 You see we have the strongest team,
 Of any town nearby,
 And we will show them how it seems,
 To cheer as we pass by.³⁸

The much-anticipated second season for Donaldson¹ and Bertha began with the Fishermen winning eleven of their first twelve games. In these early games Donaldson had performances marked by eleven, thirteen, fifteen, and sixteen strikeouts. The club drew two thousand fans in St. Cloud, where Donaldson won by striking out fifteen men. Perhaps he sent a message of dominance to a team that played in a league that prohibited all black players.³⁹ This was a sign of things to come. The year would find John Donaldson pitching in more matchups, to larger audiences, and to additional all-star aggregations trying to knock him off.

Newspaper reports from 1925 praised the veteran left-hander: "His control was perfect, and he kept his strike-out ball in reserve for the final batter, five of his six strike-outs being delivered as the means of retiring the side."⁴⁰

"Donaldson was simply invincible and cut the Millers down like grass falling before the mower. Of the first nine men up Donaldson helped retire eight, five by the strike-out route and three by tossing the ball to first base."⁴¹

"Donaldson may not be the whole Bertha baseball team, but he does appear like the tail that wags the dog."⁴²

A Paynesville fan who attended the Bertha–House of David game June 30 wrote, "We think lots of Mr. Donaldson here in Paynesville, not only for his good baseball, but for his clean-cut sportsmanship, both on and off the diamond, and I think he has won the favor of the people wherever he has appeared."⁴³

The value of a John Donaldson pitching performance to the Bertha team was never more apparent than in a Fourth of July weekend series with St. Cloud. The Fourth was traditionally a big day for baseball throughout the state as crowds gathered for patriotic parades and for holiday hoopla. Donaldson was scheduled to hurl the Saturday game, and another of Bertha's pitchers, Len Schroeder, was to start on Sunday. Saturday's crowd to see Donaldson was an impressive 2,850. So many were packed into the grandstands that "it was with great difficulty that everyone could get a view of the diamond." The receipts for Donaldson's game totaled \$1,200. The Sunday event brought a thousand fans and a gate of only \$400. Donaldson proved himself to manager Ernie Fisher time after time. The Bertha team finished the season with a record of twenty-four wins and ten losses. John Donaldson had twenty-three wins and five losses and a batting average of .387. He threw a one-hitter and a two-hitter and had a pair of eighteen-strikeout games.⁴⁴

Immediately after the close of Bertha's regular season in 1925, Donaldson agreed to play with at least three other small-town teams in southwestern Minnesota—at Minneota, Madison, and Lismore. Minneota hired him on two separate occasions. John had ties to Minneota through his younger brother James, who played for the club that season. James Donaldson was an outfielder, shortstop, and pitcher who gained a loyal following in the tiny town just north of Marshall prior to falling ill and returning to their parental home in Missouri.⁴⁵

Tragically, James's condition grew serious in late August, and John was called to his mother's home in Glasgow, where James subsequently passed away from what the doctors described as brain fever. As a tribute to his departed brother, John Donaldson returned to Minnesota to pitch for Minneota against the undefeated Lismore Gophers in early September. He pitched where his now fallen brother had graced the mound earlier in the season. On that Sunday, Lismore ultimately won the game 3 to 1, due to fielding errors by Minneota. Donaldson completed the game with fourteen Gopher strikeouts to his credit.⁴⁶

In addition Donaldson played for the local nine in Madison. Pitted against archrival Clarkfield, Donaldson and the Madison team lost in eleven innings despite Donaldson's nineteen strikeouts. Poor fielding by the inexperienced Madison club caused the game to swing in favor of Clarkfield, 6–2.⁴⁷

John was then hired by the Lismore ballclub for its game against the all-black, traveling Tennessee Rats (his former team) in September 1925. The Lismore Gophers, usually composed of all-local talent, including the town butcher, printer, barber, drayman, banker, and billiard-man and a couple of

local farmers, now had the edge. The *Murray County Herald* described Donaldson in superlatives: "Donaldson – the invincible John – not only the greatest colored player that ever lived but also one of the best pitchers of all time is to pitch for Lismore." Once again, the inexperience of the local team brought defeat, but the game was close because of Donaldson's thirteen-strikeout performance, and Lismore fell to the barnstorming Rats by the score of 2 to 1.⁴⁸

The chance to have Donaldson for more than just one game led the Lismore team's management to offer him an excellent contract for the upcoming 1926 season.⁴⁹ A newspaperman chronicled Bertha's loss of Donaldson under the headline: "Bertha's Big Smoke Signed up with Lismore Club."

John Donaldson, America's premier colored baseball pitcher, who worked for Bertha the past two seasons, has been lost to that village this year and has signed up with the Lismore, Minn., club. This is the greatest setback to the Bertha baseball team that could happen for the "big smoke" was the greatest drawing card that club could obtain. Through Donaldson's prominence Bertha gained wide publicity and cashed in heavily on the black boy's name. Unless Bertha is exceedingly fortunate in its selection of its next headliner it faces a loss from which it will never be fully able to recuperate.⁵⁰

The offer of \$450.00 per month lured Donaldson away from his Bertha home base and granted him an increase of \$50.00 per month over his previous year's salary. Lismore's contract included the use of a furnished house for John and Eleanor. The increase in salary and extra fringe benefits enticed Donaldson to make the move.⁵¹

Apparently no hard feelings arose between Donaldson and the Bertha ballclub as local newspapers printed reports of Donaldson returning to visit friends in Bertha.⁵² He left the city on good terms and often visited there while traveling with other clubs.

The 1926 Lismore Gophers had attracted the biggest name in independent baseball to throw for them. John pitched the entire year with less-talented players than he had previously known at Bertha; the Gophers had a less-than-stellar record of twenty wins and twenty-four losses with one tie. The biggest difference between the 1926 season and the previous ones was Lismore's maintenance of a more prolonged schedule, which overworked its ace hurler. Donaldson appeared in all but six games for the Gophers. He still managed to carry a walloping .448 batting average. In a stretch from July 14 to August 15, he pitched ten games, having a pair of three-hit contests and strikeout totals of fourteen, fifteen, seventeen, and eighteen.⁵³ The thirty-four-year-old Donaldson dominated at times, but the overall result was less than magical.

when I heard a fellow discussing the Armour game. . . . So you see the world is small. Here I am in Michigan and the first crack out of the box I hear about John Donaldson.”⁵⁷

The two biggest dates in 1927 happened within a three-day span in August. In two games more than eleven thousand people would see the Bertha team play. The first was the Northern Minnesota Fair in Bemidji, where five thousand fans took in the contest that pitted Bertha against an all-black team, the Gilkerson Union Giants from Chicago. Bertha won the game 5–3 behind a fourteen-strikeout performance from Donaldson.⁵⁸ The other event was the great day of the Lindbergh Festival in Little Falls.

One week after the Lindbergh event, the Bertha Fishermen traveled to Fargo-Moorhead to battle the rebuilt and more powerful Twins, beefed up with the addition of the Southern Minnesota League All Stars. As was often the case, opposing teams hired out-of-town talent for contests against Donaldson, as one sportswriter stated, “Reports from Fargo are that they have scoured the entire state and northwest for players to beat Donaldson’s crew.” As the 1927 season progressed, the normal hometown teams grew tired of losing to Bertha. Consequently, they bolstered their lineups in hopes of limiting the dominance of a supreme black hurler.⁵⁹ Donaldson ended up holding Fargo-Moorhead to no earned runs or hits in their game on September 5, while the all-stars from the Southern Minnesota League nipped Donaldson 4 to 3 giving him only his second loss in twenty-five tries.

The 1927 Bertha team finished the season with a record of twenty-eight wins and only four defeats. Bertha played teams from all over the state including New York Mills, Pelican Rapids, Battle Lake, St. Paul, Belle Plaine, Hutchinson, and Alexandria. Other games were held in the neutral cities of Breckenridge, Melrose, Sauk Centre, Bemidji, Little Falls, and Long Prairie. Donaldson ended with a final record of twenty-two wins and four losses and a batting average of .440.⁶⁰

Then it happened to Bertha again; it lost Donaldson to a higher bidder, as a news story headlined it: “Donaldson Returns His Contract.”

John W. Donaldson, for three years Bertha’s premier mound ace, has returned his contract to the Bertha management with the request to have same cancelled. He has offers from several other places which will bring him much more money than Bertha can afford to pay, hence the resignation which the Bertha Baseball Committee had to accept reluctantly.⁶¹

Donaldson began the 1928 season pitching for the Scobey, Montana, ball-club, a team that featured the play of Swede Risberg, banished from baseball

for his role in the Black Sox Scandal of 1919. Scobey had made a serious effort to entice the lefty away from Bertha in 1927. In order to cash in on the pitcher's name recognition, the Scobey ballclub toured Minnesota as John Donaldson's All Stars, a title that promised a larger gate. The team opened in Melrose, where Donaldson defeated the local club 3 to 0 before a crowd of 1,600.⁶²

The All Stars next went to Little Falls where Donaldson lost. They were then scheduled to play Melrose at Breckenridge. Donaldson, after being offered a contract by Melrose, changed teams and played for Melrose. He continued there until his release from the club in late August, compiling a record of nine and six while Melrose finished the season with seventeen wins, fourteen losses, and one tie.⁶³

After being released from Melrose, Donaldson offered his services to the Arlington nine. The town long held a reputation as a hotbed of small-town Minnesota baseball enthusiasm and talent. Arlington had hired a black pitcher earlier in its history when it signed George H. Wilson in 1903, and the town was looking to Donaldson in a match against Melrose on the Melrose diamond in early September. He lost to his former team by a score of 6-2, striking out only one batter.⁶⁴

In the 1928 season, Donaldson influenced the course of black baseball in Minnesota by personally recommending a battery to Little Falls for its semi-professional team. According to a contemporary account:

E. V. Wetzel, manager of the Little Falls Independent baseball team was notified late yesterday by John Donaldson that the colored battery from Chicago will sign a contract with the local organization. A letter will follow the wire message, giving the names of the players and other details. They probably will be signed up within a week.⁶⁵

The black players that journeyed to Little Falls were Webster McDonald and John Van. McDonald went on to become a pitching star for the Little Falls organization for the next four seasons, compiling an astounding record of seventy wins, nine losses, and one tie and creating a baseball powerhouse in the Morrison County city. Van played catcher for Little Falls for only one season and was replaced at catcher by Sylvester "Hooks" Foreman for the 1929 season. Some sources indicate that John Van had to leave town after he allegedly winked at a white woman in the bleachers after a game.⁶⁶

The 1929 season proved to be a marvelous chapter in the annals of Minnesota semiprofessional baseball history. The year witnessed a great expansion of semipro teams in the center of the state modeled after Bertha's success, as various teams hired players from the Twin Cities to come up by train or

auto, play on the weekends, and then return to their jobs in the metropolitan area. This competition for the dollars of the baseball-watching public, along with Donaldson's departure from Bertha and, finally, the onset of the Great Depression, led to the dissolution of the Bertha semipro franchise. The Twin Cities players took their earnings back to their homes, spending little in Bertha.

Donaldson, in his declining years, took his glove and his bat and went on the road, joining the barnstorming Colored House of David team for the 1929 season. These black players claimed to be from Havana, Cuba, but were from all over, and that season they traveled throughout the Midwest and into Canada. The team used the famous "House of David" title on their jerseys but had no association with the Benton Harbor, Michigan, sect. The playing tour took him to only a smattering of games in Minnesota that year.⁶⁷

Donaldson returned full time to Minnesota in 1930, taking up residence in St. Cloud. The St. Cloud Saints, a semipro team, arranged for Donaldson, now thirty-eight years old and an aging veteran of Minnesota baseball, to become affiliated with the ballclub. A local writer maintained that "Although Donaldson . . . is well along in years, he has taken an auspicious start. . . . The St. Cloud management is under no permanent obligation to the colored artist and he comes here with the understanding that he must deliver the goods in each game he starts." Donaldson accepted the contract in order to continue his career. With the advent of the Depression, black players were eager to play wherever they could get a contract. Certain of his ability, John took the mound on St. Cloud's terms.⁶⁸

Donaldson started out eleven and two with the pair of losses coming against the archrival Little Falls club, which again employed McDonald and Foreman as battery-mates. Donaldson proved himself again in St. Cloud and pitched the entire year with the team. His season ended with a disappointing performance, however, when he pitched seven innings in an 8-1 loss to the American Association's St. Paul Saints.⁶⁹

The 1931 season found Donaldson once again playing for his former team, the Kansas City Monarchs. The depths of the Depression sent the Negro National League into disarray. Teams needed to travel and rely, even more than before, on barnstorming. The Monarchs scheduled games across the Midwest, taking on all comers, and the team's travels brought it to Minnesota. On July 19, 1931, Donaldson and the Monarchs stopped in Crookston. They proceeded to shut out the team of all-stars assembled by Crookston businessmen 6-0 with Donaldson playing centerfield. Local newspapers featured him in articles promoting the game and, with John Donaldson appearing, the crowds came in droves.⁷⁰

After spending the 1931 season on the road, Donaldson embarked upon an ambitious venture for the 1932 season. He knew of a ballpark south of Fairmont, on the shores of Silver Lake, called Hand's Park, having played several games at the park over the previous years. He approached the Hand family about wanting to start a new team, one that played an independent schedule with the home games to be played at the dilapidated grounds. Ernest Hand, Sr., was receptive to the idea, and Donaldson bought the old park and called Fairmont his home for at least part of the season.⁷¹

Donaldson's initial plans called for permanent lights for the diamond because night baseball might attract large crowds. He wanted to play as often as possible, night or day, regardless of the day of the week.

Donaldson then organized an all-black baseball team. One by one the players arrived in Fairmont in the spring of 1932. Donaldson had arranged accommodations for the players with Mr. Hand so they could stay in resort cottages located on the grounds of Hand's Park. Donaldson brought in friends from his wide-ranging past and recruited talented younger players to fill the lineup of his newly minted version of John Donaldson's All Stars. He landed Hooks Foreman to share the catching duties with a former Kansas City Monarch, Chappie Gray. To help with the pitching for his club, Donaldson



The *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* featured Donaldson and the All Stars at Hand's Park in an article on June 10, 1932; front row (left to right) Hurley McNair, George Jones, Chappie Gray, Charlie Hilton, ? Anderson; back row (left to right) John Donaldson, J. Moore Allen, ? Cunningham, Robert "Piggy" Hawkins, Bill Freeman, Joe "Jellyroll" Barker, Buzz Boldridge.

signed Bill Freeman, who had been working with semipro teams for the last few seasons throughout Minnesota.⁷² His best player was the veteran Hurley McNair, who had started his career with the Minneapolis Keystones in 1911 and who had led the Negro Leagues in several hitting categories in the 1920s while with the Kansas City Monarchs. The elder players—Donaldson, Gray, and McNair—became mentors for the younger players.

Harry J. Earle, a sportswriter at the Fairmont newspaper, the *Daily Sentinel*, supported Donaldson to the utmost, writing regularly about the new additions to the All Stars: “Manager Donaldson brought ‘Bill’ Freeman, husky pitcher, back with him Sunday night. Freeman is said to be quite a hitter and John says that’s what wins ball games. ‘I want hitters,’ said John ‘and I think I have acquired some in ‘Jellyroll’ Barker, ‘Piggy’ Hawkins, Hurley McNair, Charlie Hilton and Chappie Gray.’ That bunch should break a lot of pitchers’ hearts this summer.”⁷³

The team spent the month of May repairing the grandstands and working on the infield grass, including rebuilding the pitching mound. Eleanor Donaldson stayed with her husband and prepared the meals for the players. After the diamond was ready, the field opened with a game on May 22.⁷⁴

Donaldson’s team then played host to a full schedule of contests against teams from Minnesota and Iowa and a couple of barnstorming clubs. Donaldson had assisted in the revival of the sport in Bertha, Lismore, and Melrose and was willing to add Hand’s Park to the list of successful venues. But this time he managed his own team, his own ball park, and, most importantly, the gate receipts.⁷⁵

Why would black players play in Fairmont? Hard times had befallen all of black baseball in the Depression, and ballplayers simply needed someplace, oftentimes anyplace, to earn some money. The prospect of playing for John Donaldson, among the best-known and most-respected players of the day, was appealing to the brotherhood of black baseball.

Probably the highlight of the season came early in the All Stars’ run at Hand’s Park. On May 22, 1932, the All Stars returned baseball to the refurbished park with an 8–1 victory over Corwith, Iowa.⁷⁶ Donaldson pitched the full nine innings, striking out eleven of the Nighthawks, never being in any danger. Charlie Hilton, the club’s second baseman, went four for five with three doubles.

Donaldson’s club charged forty cents admission to home games at Hand’s Park. As the season progressed, the gate receipts increased gradually but eventually would not be enough to sustain the All Stars at their home field. Accordingly, Donaldson’s All Stars left Minnesota just after the Fourth of July

for a barnstorming tour to play teams from Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma.⁷⁷ They never returned for another season in Fairmont or in Minnesota.

Donaldson finished his playing days in the 1930s with the Kansas City Monarchs and became a coach; Satchel Paige was on the team. He spent his later life teaching baseball to children in the Chicago area. Ultimately, he finished his career in organized baseball as a scout for the integrated Chicago White Sox. He died in 1970, at age seventy-eight, and was buried in an unmarked grave at Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip, Illinois. Until 2004 his gravesite was forgotten and unrecognizable, but, due to the efforts of history sleuth Jeremy Krock, an engraved stone and a bronze likeness of Donaldson now grace the final resting place of the talented pitcher who knew no respite during his barnstorming baseball days.⁷⁸

Minnesota played an integral role in the baseball life of John Wesley Donaldson. He first arrived in the state in 1911 as a member of the barnstorming Tennessee Rats. An outstanding record with the tiny country town of Bertha followed, as well as stints with several other small Minnesota towns. He created much publicity and struck out fistfuls of hitters, garnering success wherever he went. In 1927, the year of Lindbergh's historic crossing of the Atlantic, he was the starting pitcher for the hero's hometown homecoming celebration game. His fame and reputation helped ultimately to pay his salary.

Donaldson's career stretched from 1911 to 1934. He deserves examination as a potential Hall of Fame ballplayer, but this gifted left-handed pitcher played in the wrong time period, beginning when there was a lull in the national black baseball scene corresponding to the time when he was in his prime. His peak performances came prior to the founding of the Negro League in 1920. Donaldson had a stellar reputation, but he spent too much of his time barnstorming in the 1910s and too much time in Bertha, Minnesota, in the 1920s to gain the recognition he might otherwise have received.

The 1920s was an era of the million-dollar drawing card. In his own way, John Donaldson used, and was used, for his famous name. He was a black pitcher who managed to make a living playing baseball in the Land of 10,000 Lakes. He must be remembered not only as the "greatest pitcher in the world" during his career, but as one of Minnesota's all-time, premier pitching talents.