

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Little League Baseball in Winchester

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February 21, 2016

In 1953 five African-American men got together and started Little League Baseball in Winchester. These visionaries included Coach Joe Gilliam, Walter Newell Sr., William Didlick, Emmett Menifee, and Harvey Robinson Sr. Their story deserves a place in Winchester history.

I was fortunate to learn about the organization of the league from James F. "Peewee" Robinson. Over the last several weeks, Peewee sat down with me for two interviews, shared his writings and photographs, gave me a tour of the neighborhood, and introduced me to the two surviving founders: his father, Harvey Robinson Sr., 95, and Emmett Menifee, 88. In telling the story of the Little League's beginnings, I am quoting information provided by Peewee Robinson.

Coach Gilliam is remembered as the organizer of the league that would provide black kids with an opportunity to play baseball. His leadership brought the other four men together to make it happen. Walter Newell served as the first president and William Didlick, vice-president.

That first summer, 1953, there were four Little League teams: the Reds, Dodgers, Indians and Tigers. The first group of team managers included Emmett Menifee, Harvey Robinson, Joe Emanuel, Walter Mack, Thomas Hackett and Eugene Gay. The umpires were Jim and J. B. Chenault.

Games were played at Harmon Field located on Meadow Street, just north of Winchester Cemetery. The field, much improved today, is still in use. Wives of the founders and coaches sold concessions to raise the money used to purchase T-shirts and caps. Local businesses helped out too: Helen's Grill, Chester's Cafe, Jackson's Barber Shop, Star Market, Johnson's Pool Hall, P. J. Washington's Bar, The Digest, Robinson's Grocery, Jones' Grocery and the American Legion.

In the summer of 1954, some white kids came out to Harmon Field and asked if they could play. Emmett Menifee said he told the boys they could if they got their parents' permission. The next day, nine boys came back with permission. This was before Clark County schools were integrated. Coach Gilliam told Peewee he thought Winchester's Little League Baseball was the first organized sport in Kentucky to be integrated. Among the first whites to play, Peewee remembers the Rosenthals, Henry Jr. and Vincent, Harry B. Sipple Jr., and J. B. Brassfield.

From these beginnings 63 years ago, Winchester Little League Baseball continues today. Signups for the 2016 season are under way now.

It seems fitting to conclude our story with biographical information about the five founders.

All descriptions of Joe W. Gilliam Sr. (1923-2012) include the word "legendary." Born in Ohio, Gilliam was an All-American quarterback at West Virginia State University. He came to Winchester's Oliver High to teach and coach basketball and football (1952-1955); he won a state championship in football in 1954. He left Winchester to begin a

career coaching football in the college ranks, first at Jackson State University then at Kentucky State University. In 1963, he became assistant coach at Tennessee State University where he started out building stonewall defenses and later became an offensive innovator. Over the next twenty years, he helped the Tigers to four undefeated seasons and seven Black College National Titles. Gilliam served as head coach at Tennessee State from 1989 to 1992, and won Ohio Valley coach of the year honors in 1990. He sent 80 players to the NFL and was remembered as a coach and father figure by two Hall of Famers: Ed “Too Tall” Jones and Richard Dent. Coach Gilliam never forgot his Winchester friends; he returned several years ago to speak at the annual (since 1904!) Labor Day Celebration and Parade. Nearly 1,000 people turned out in Nashville to pay their respects at Coach Gilliam’s funeral.

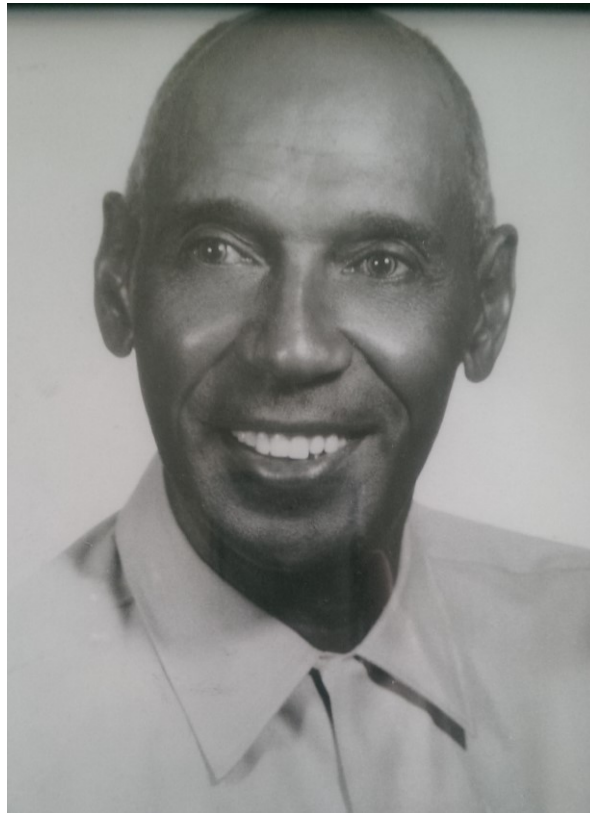


Coach Joe Gilliam (photo by Peewee Robinson)

Walter Newell Sr. (1911-1982) was a long-time employee of the Sphar family, owner of a cabinet shop at the corner of Broadway and Washington Street, and member of

the First Baptist Church on Highland Street. He passed away after a long illness leaving three sons, seven daughters, fifteen grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Winchester native William "Pie" Didlick (1907-1980) began his long working career at age nine driving a horse-drawn grocery wagon. He graduated from Oliver High in 1926 and from Kentucky State in 1931 with teaching degrees in history and biology. He taught for several years at Wayne County schools, then went to work for Southern Bell Telephone in Winchester in 1935, and in the 1950s began building and remodeling homes. Mr. Didlick owned a small farm on the west side of Seventh Street, where young men played baseball at Sportsman's Field on weekends. The adult league teams included the Poynterville Pirates and the Bucktown Bees. His wife Jennie had a Master's degree in education; she was a teacher and principal at Booker T. Washington School in Lexington.



William "Pie" Didlick (*Winchester Sun*)

Harvey Robinson Sr., Peewee's dad, is still living alone at age 95 in the house where he began raising a family more than 70 years ago. As a young man, he played baseball in the local league. A long-time Winchester businessman, Mr. Robinson ran a grocery store that stood on the northwest corner of Evans and Fifth Street; his house is next door on Fifth. He also ran a garbage hauling service for which Peewee recalls driving the truck.



95-year old Harvey Robinson Sr.

Emmett R. Menifee¹ served with the Marines in Korea. When he got out in 1952, he opened a liquor store on Main Street near the present post office and later took over Thomas Miller's cab stand across the street from Walter Newell's cabinet shop. His wife Virginia was a graduate of West Virginia State University and Eastern Kentucky University; she taught school at Oliver and George Rogers Clark before joining the counseling department at EKV.

Coach Menifee's Little League team, the Indians, were a dynasty from 1954 to 1962. During those years, the Indians won five city crowns, and the 1958 team went undefeated with a record of 21-0.

Peewee Robinson told me when he was a boy he played football for Mr. Menifee. Peewee was smaller and younger than the other kids. He had a uniform so they let him on the team, but he never got in a game. During the last game of the season, Coach Menifee said, "Warm up, Peewee, you're going in." Peewee said he ran up and down the sideline for a whole half but he still didn't get to play. "I thought Coach Menifee had done me wrong. Then the next year, when I was bigger and they let me play, those older boys nearly killed me. They probably would have if I had gotten in the game the year before."

¹ Emmett Menifee, age 87, passed away July 17, 2016.



Emmett Meniffee (left) and Pee wee Robinson

Pee wee had a host of other stories about the men and women of our black community. All will have to wait for another time except these two sports-related items. We are all aware that Elaine Farris was the first black school superintendent in Kentucky. What many may not know is that she coached track at GRC, and her girls' team won the state championship in 1991. Also, a Winchester native played on this year's Super Bowl championship team. David Bruton Jr., a seventh-year pro and star safety for the Denver Broncos, was injured and did not get to play in Super Bowl 50.

After writing about sports at Oliver High, I received a call from John Strode, whose wife Julia was Arthur Brooks' sister. He recalled many of Brooks' football accomplishments in high school and college. I asked why Brooks only got to play one season for the New York Titans. John said he suffered a career-ending injury. After football, Brooks made social work his profession.

Sources

Personal interviews, James "Pee wee" Robinson, January 5 and February 10, 2016, Emmett Meniffee and Harvey Robinson Sr., February 10, 2016, John Strode, January 27, 2016; James Robinson, "Winchester Little League Baseball" (2006), one page manuscript; Mike Organ, "Nearly 1,000 in attendance for legendary coach Joe Gilliam's funeral," *USA Today*, November 19, 2012; Samuel G. Freedman, "Remembering legendary Tennessee State assistant Joe Gilliam," *Sports Illustrated* online, January 11, 2013; *Winchester Sun*, December 1, 1982, February 25, 1995, January 26, 2004.