

# TRAPPED IN THE HOT BOX

To convey all the struggles, pangs of inner pain, and disgust tempered by wonderful moments that stayed with them for as long as their memories would allow, Negro League baseball players had their own language. They spoke of heartbreak and happiness and described the mythology that was as real as the times in which they played. They communicated with a clever application of black baseball slang to white baseball lingo, forming a bond that was their own and was passed down to younger players. Through time, their talk became as distinctive as the players themselves, and to play ball with them, you had to speak the language.

This coded speech was coated in pride and created a bond that connected players. It was spoken only by the black ballplayer, learned on the field and on the bus, handed down as one of the secrets of survival. To the young boy playing on an Alabama coal miner's sandlot or a wire

mill's factory team, hidden by trees and time in villages that could scarcely be found on a map then or now, understanding this language was the currency needed to escape.

A catcher was never called the catcher. Instead, some long-ago baseball man decided that the field was analogous to a pig. He reasoned that the man behind home plate had to squat in the dirt for a living and destroy his fingers and knees to harness the horsehide, wearing only a flimsy chest protector, a rusty mask, and an archaic glove that made a sound like a drunk's head hitting the barroom floor when the ball came to rest. The position seemed to be the field's rear end, so the catcher came to be called the "pigtail."

The catcher's glove, for some uncertain reason, was known as a "pud," perhaps to mimic the sound of the ball colliding within it, or to borrow from the boxing term for a fighter. The nicknames were always the subject of jokes among catchers, who accepted humor but also reveled in becoming skilled technicians.

If a pigtail could get the ball, universally called the "pill," out of his pud in a hurry, spring to his feet, crack his arm like a whip, and drill a runner trying to steal second base, it could be said that he had an "awful" arm. The term came from "awful good," the description of exceptional skill. A player might be an "awful" hitter, which really meant he was better than you. Of Willie Mays, one could say, "Mays had an awful arm," and everyone knew what it meant.

Profanity had a comfortable seat on the bus, as did the lures of the road, where a trip was called a "jump," a naked white girl a "light," and a naked black girl a "shade." And were a player to brag about bagging a light or a shade, or even having a light and a shade at once, he would most certainly be called a "peppery" player, for this achievement would definitely make him brag. A peppery pigtail would talk a lot behind the plate while punching his pud with his throwing hand, just waiting to "shoot" you out.

After a player with an "awful" arm shot the ball across to a fielder, it would be "waiting on him," meaning the fielder would be ready to tag the runner out because he would have already received a terrific throw, often from an outfielder. In the spring of 1948, many black

ballplayers felt they would be thrown out by white baseball long before they had the chance to show what they could do. White folks' ball was an unlikely destination for most black players, who were not sure how, why, or whether they would ever be allowed to pass from their dying league to one that never wanted them at all.

The term "white folks' ball" was coined by Piper Davis, who in 1948 was beginning his first season as the player-manager for the Birmingham Black Barons. Piper crafted phrases before he knew what he was doing. It was a quirky part of his personality. His own nickname, Piper, came from his hometown, a coal-mining village that the cartographers never knew existed, about forty miles southwest of Birmingham. Piper already understood how difficult it was to get out of a delicate jam, because he had been born in one. There was a term for that in black baseball too: "the hot box." Since the moment Piper found out that he was "awful" in his own right, baseball had been his escape, and he had already run a long way. To know Piper, a distinct mind and baseball practitioner, you had to know his roots.

When Lorenzo "Piper" Davis was growing up, Highway 59 was a dirt road wiggling past Fairfield and Bessemer. A traveler on the highway had to break left to find Piper, the town where Lorenzo grew up. The Talladega Forest surrounded the road, the thickness of the trees reminding the traveler of his remote location. The elms stood guard around the fertile mountain where coal miners lived and died by one belief: once you went in, you never came out.

The miners called the little villages that had sprung up around the mountain "camps." They provided low-cost housing for workers in the form of two-room plywood shacks coated in bland white paint with a potbellied stove in the kitchen; the homes were illuminated at night by candles and lanterns. There were a schoolhouse and a church, and life revolved around the mines and the horrible working hours and conditions. Below Bessemer, where the ore turned into rich coal veins deep inside the man-eating mountain, a path connected the camps into a constellation. It led through places called Dogwood, Blocton,

Marvel, and Kolina, and at the tail end came Piper. Like the pigtail on a baseball field, Piper was a gritty, dirty place where fear was part of the family. Here, young Lorenzo learned that he did not want to live his father's life. "My daddy was a coal miner his whole life, forty-some-odd years," he said. "He worked five days a week, but during the Depression he would work seven days. He'd get home, sleep, and go right back to work."

Lorenzo did his walking in bare feet and later cardboard shoes. The proud owner of one pair of overalls, he was too sheltered and naive to understand that he lived in poverty. What he did comprehend was that his father did not wish this life upon his son. The old man wasn't a baseball player, but he had the spirit of one. Like a minor leaguer on the back of a bus, he liked to play his guitar at Saturday night fish fries. His wife ruled the house and made him surrender his guitar to go with her to church on Sunday mornings. He never asked Lorenzo to give up his homemade bats and balls because he knew how much his son loved to play, no bother if it was with the sons of the white miners.

Lorenzo was the only child of John Wesley Davis and Georgia Cox. Born July 3, 1917, he resolved early on to become more than a coal miner. Growing up at the foot of the mountain, he soon realized there was only one way in and out. There was an escape from this way of life, one that possessed a language he did not yet speak. At night he would lie in bed and tune in the family radio to the minor league baseball games that were played at Rickwood Field in Birmingham. The local team was called the Birmingham Barons; they were in the Southern Association of what he would later call white folks' ball. Lorenzo learned all the teams in the league: the Chattanooga Lookouts, Memphis Chickasaws, New Orleans Pelicans, Little Rock Travelers, Atlanta Crackers, Nashville Volunteers, and Mobile Bears. His storyteller was the radio man for the Barons, Bull Connor, who in years to come would become the most powerful lawman in Birmingham. Lorenzo learned that professional baseball was a place for white boys only. He fell asleep, but he was brave enough to dream.

Piper, like every other coal-mining camp, had its own baseball team. Here Lorenzo got his first lesson in the game's Darwinian ways.

He would never be a pitcher because the boy with the best arm in Piper, Nat Pollard, was throwing bullets. Years spent chucking lumps of coal had strengthened Nat's arm to the point where it matched his surly disposition.

There were two teams in town: the First Nine (an adult team) and the Second Nine (a youth team). Lorenzo played for the Second Nine. When he wasn't playing for them, he was the batboy for the First Nine. Ever since he had started swatting rocks with a stick when he was a child, he believed he could hit a baseball, so by the time he was fourteen he was itching to play for the First Nine. His frame was growing, and his lanky arms and legs had yet to fill out, but he already realized baseball was the way out of coal mining. He never gave a second thought to the idea that he was nobody. No white scout would ever come to Piper, a town they didn't know existed, to see a player they didn't know existed. So Lorenzo came to them.

Baseball was serious business for coal miners, true recreation played with hard-nosed vigor and vulgarity. Baseball gave the miners the will to live. When their dreary jobs were done for the week, they could release their tension with bats and balls. For the average miner, the game was his way to forget about the mountain. For the better-than-average ballplayer, baseball allowed him to make a few more dollars from the First Nine, and he might also get a slightly better camp job than a less talented ballplayer. For the most gifted ballplayers, those who were good enough to dream, it might mean a chance to play in the Negro Leagues.

The Birmingham Black Barons had been based in Birmingham since 1920 and played at Rickwood Field on Sundays in the summer when the white Barons were out of town. They barnstormed anywhere for a ball game and often played coal-mining teams. These games were also scouting expeditions. Lorenzo knew the Black Barons took players from the company teams. Here he learned the next rule of baseball: somebody will always try to steal your best player.

Lorenzo had three role models to emulate. One was pitcher Harry Salmon, who had toiled in the coal mines from the time he was eight, long before child welfare laws. One of the original Black Barons, Salmon pitched successfully for the team until 1932. In 1926, he

pitched against Leroy "Satchel" Paige, a lanky smartass from Mobile, and beat him, 2–1. When Paige came to the Black Barons in 1927, Salmon "showed him some things." Salmon's best days were nearly done. Paige's were ahead of him. Lorenzo knew exactly who Paige was. "The only hero I looked up to," he said, "was Satchel Paige."

Another role model, the strongest boy to ever come out of the Birmingham coal mines, was a slugger named Mule Suttles, who got his nickname because he was as strong as the miner's sidekick, the mule. He played for the coal-mining teams before joining the Black Barons in 1923, and stayed only three years before spending his prime in St. Louis, establishing a pattern. The Black Barons rarely kept their best players, and consequently, they rarely won in the 1920s and 1930s, when they were routinely worked over by pitchers Smokey Joe Williams and Bullet Joe Rogan of the famous, influential, and wealthy Kansas City Monarchs. Northern players hated Birmingham discrimination, which was more extreme than discrimination in the northern states. Lorenzo saw Suttles barnstorming through Alabama in the late 1930s. "Suttles was soft but strong, could no longer hit a good drop ball, but Lord have mercy if you threw it where he could reach it." Like Harry Salmon and Mule Suttles, Lorenzo hoped to become the mountain's offspring.

The Tennessee Coal and Iron Company (TCI), the region's most powerful natural resource company, owned Piper and sponsored the teams. The baseball team was the only place a black man's talent would be respected. When the First Nine's first baseman was injured, the manager looked for Lorenzo, who was shagging foul balls and lining up the bats. For decades, he remembered the manager's words, which began his baseball career: "Put in that little boy." Lorenzo was pleased. "I've played First Nine ever since," he said later in his career.

Lorenzo wasn't just playing. He was plotting escape. The camp's school went no further than the ninth grade, at which point it was assumed that schoolboys were old enough to descend into the mountain. Professor Osborn, Lorenzo's teacher, saw that he was smarter than a coal miner. Now he had two tickets out of camp.

The answer was to attend Interurban Heights, commonly called Fairfield High, which was located in Fairfield, about thirty miles away. Lorenzo left Piper in 1933 at age sixteen. His mother, Georgia, might not have agreed to it, but she had four brothers in Fairfield who worked in the steel mill. Better yet, it was a steel mill with a baseball team. Lorenzo's father, John, didn't hold his son back. He looked on approvingly as Lorenzo escaped the destiny the mountain said he was born for. He would always be a coal miner's son, but he would never become a full-time coal miner.

Lorenzo was a born athlete and soon learned his abilities offered the opportunity to attain prestige and an income his father had never dreamed of. Fairfield High had a basketball team. The kids couldn't remember his name, but they knew he could play basketball. The story became one of his favorites. He was on the bench with his team losing. The kids began chanting, "We want Piper! We want Piper!" Lorenzo got in, won the game, and nobody ever called him Lorenzo again. In the crowd that night, he noticed a pretty young thing named Laura. Piper never forgot her name, and she never forgot to come to his games. Soon, they were sweethearts.

Fairfield High also had a baseball team, and every now and then Piper would play the pigtail. His body was better suited for an infielder, but he was savvy enough to realize that if he could play many positions, he would give himself more than one way to stick. That was the lesson of being a coal miner's son: the more ways you can dig yourself out of that mountain, the better your odds.

Piper played shortstop and second base, first base and third base, grazed in the outfield, put on the pud and played the pigtail. During these years, he played with a center fielder who was, the locals believed, as gifted a player as had ever come along. The boy could run, and when he pursued the ball in the outfield, his hat had a strange tendency to fly off his head. There was an awkwardness to the way he played, perhaps because his body jerked instinctively according to his reactions. He didn't look like a natural, yet he did everything effortlessly. They said he was as quick as a cat, and so the nickname "Cat"

fused to him like grime on a miner. His real name was Willie Mays. No one thought to call him Senior until years later, but Cat Mays was only a footnote next to Piper Davis at the time. Piper became a star, and his reputation spread into Birmingham. He became the most famous athlete from Fairfield High until its three-sport star Willie Howard Mays.

Fairfield High was an industrial school, which prided itself in preparing young black adults for service occupations. Piper wanted no part of this, and he developed the fierce resistance that during his baseball career would be his best friend and his worst enemy. He was already thinking about playing baseball in the Negro Leagues. After he finished twelfth grade, he wrote to the Philadelphia Stars asking for a tryout. The team wrote him back and told him he could pay his way to work out with the team in Mississippi, but made no promises. Piper's father said no, proving that protective baseball parents have always existed, and Piper learned another valuable lesson: never play for free.

Basketball offered another possibility. He received a partial basketball scholarship to Alabama State College. The money helped, but it wasn't enough. His father took out a loan to pay the remainder of Piper's tuition, but money was always tight and coming up with it became more difficult when the coal miners went on strike. When the next tuition payment came due, Piper knew his father would have to borrow more money on top of the wages he was already losing. He couldn't stand the thought of asking his father to descend into the mines any longer than he had to, so he dropped out of college and went home to Piper. Insistent upon making his own money, he asked his father to get him a job in the mines. For a very brief period, Piper Davis had to give the mountain the satisfaction.

Jeremiah Nelson, a pitcher Piper played with on the camp team, was also a coal miner's son. When Piper came to work with his father, he heard Jeremiah was working in the same shaft. Piper knew at least one person could understand how much he would rather be playing baseball. He felt scared and out of place. On his first day of work, his

father led him into a shaft and told him to stay in his sight. "I could stand with a three-foot shovel on the top of my head and I couldn't touch the top," Piper said. "But on the other end I was on my knees shoveling coal over here to my daddy, so my daddy could load it in the car."

Jeremiah Nelson was loading a car down the line, shoveling the coal from his mule's pack into his electric car. The primitive vehicles were run by one man on top of the line who made the steel cars move by sparking two wires together. The cars moved at only one speed, fast, and they were deadly if a man was caught in their path. Jeremiah Nelson made the mistake of stepping on the empty line, his only light provided by the lamp on his hard hat. A speeding cart knocked him on his back and severed him at the waist.

When Piper heard about the accident, he told his father he didn't want to go back to the mine. He would find another way to escape. John Davis didn't argue with his son. He always sensed his boy was born for more than this. Piper went home and took his bath. Then he went to the pay office to quit. The man told him he couldn't pay him without a reason for why he was resigning. "Just put in there, 'Afraid of mines,'" Piper said. The clerk replied, "That's a good enough reason."

One day in the mines was one too many. Out of money for college tuition, out of escape routes from the mining camp, Piper had gotten lucky and he knew it. Just as his father had to climb up the hill to come home from camp, Piper had to walk down into the valley to leave. He was not afraid to leave the mountain to play baseball for a living. It was a fair trade to him: leave one mountain to climb another.

The coal-mining camps and steel mills in Birmingham had gained a national reputation for being as fertile a ground for baseball players as they were for coal. The Birmingham Black Barons were born of coal miners. No state produced more Negro League ballplayers than Alabama.

One of those player-managers was Charlie Mason, who some called a black Babe Ruth. He had enormous feet that hinted at the physicality

he had shown in the 1920s with the Bacharach Giants, then a top-level Negro League team from Atlantic City. Those were grand days and they had given Mason two nicknames: "Suitcase" and "Corporal." There were stories about how he got both, but nobody was as tall or as wide as Charlie Mason so nobody got the story.

When Mason brought his barnstorming team up the mountain to play the First Nine, aware that the mining camps always produced talented ballplayers to sign, he had his first look at Piper and knew a good ballplayer when he dug one out of the earth. He offered Piper a chance to join his travel ball team. He didn't tell him that barnstorming was such a difficult life that it often destroyed young kids who followed the money. They discovered that racism in other parts of the country was just as cruel as in the South, and because white people paid to watch black barnstorming teams, they felt they had the right to hurl as many insults as they pleased.

Mason's rookies weren't used to playing every day. Some struggled with homesickness. Still others had never left the small enclaves they were born in and became terrified of other parts of the country. Everything was unpredictable, from housing conditions to where the next meal would come from. But as far as Negro baseball went, travel ball was the minor leagues.

Teams like Charlie Mason's traveling kids formed the backbone of the Negro baseball economy. Travel team managers like Mason, many of whom had top-level Negro League playing experience, would sign unknown commodities from unknown places. They would eventually sell their most talented players to the top-level travel teams that had loose affiliations with the Negro League teams. Black baseball lacked the organizational structure of white baseball, but like white baseball, it did have its own feeder system of scouting and player development.

Piper couldn't afford not to go with Mason, even though he didn't have any cash. But he knew where his mother saved the family's money, so he pulled ten dollars out of the envelope Georgia hid in the pantry. When she came home, she found him packing her nice suitcase. Piper said he was leaving home to play baseball with Charlie Mason and his team called the Omaha Tigers. Georgia didn't know how

far away Omaha was. He told her it was about nine hundred miles. It must have felt like the length of the universe. Georgia still called Piper her baby and told him to wait. She went to the pantry and pulled out another hidden envelope, one that Piper didn't know about. She hid her sorrow and feared to see him go, but put her son's future above her motherly needs and gave him another ten dollars.

"You always keep your train fare back home," she said.

"I sure will," Piper said.

Charlie Mason was an infielder's delight—the target you could not miss. Piper was eighteen when he joined Mason's team in the summer of 1936, and the bouncy bus ride out of Piper, past Birmingham, and out of Alabama took him across state lines for the first time in his life. The team trained in Memphis—everyone ran but Mason—and each ballplayer had to make the team every day to stay. Baseball wasn't coal mining, but Negro League barnstorming had its own perils. If you didn't make the team, you were left for dead.

Piper could play the infield, play in the outfield, or even play the pigtail if needed, he told Mason, but he would need to borrow a pud. Mason didn't need an eighteen-year-old kid telling him how to scout. It didn't work that way in the Negro Leagues, whether on a barnstorming team or the greatest team in the land, the Kansas City Monarchs. The kid ballplayer had no rights. If he was mentored, it was not because they thought the kid was a joy to be around. It was because they thought he could play and would help them make money.

Piper's pay would be \$91 a month if he made the team. He knew he wasn't good enough to take the starting catcher's job away, but he thought he was better than the shortstop Mason was playing. Mason sent him to the outfield and immediately recognized that he could catch the ball. In the meantime, the starting shortstop, gifted though he may have been, spent his salary in the saloons. "Looks like I'm going to have to bring you to the infield, because this boy is in bad shape," Piper remembered Mason telling him. The shortstop got so drunk that he came down with alcohol poisoning. The team left Memphis

for Omaha with the kid curled up in the back of the bus, groaning and vomiting. When they arrived, Mason called a doctor and sent the shortstop to the hospital. Four days later, he died, and Piper Davis played his first ball game as a rookie-level professional Negro League ballplayer.

He quickly learned that baseball was a difficult life. Finding a black-only hotel was a tricky proposition, so the team usually slept on the bus. One night, Mason made a deal to house his players in a place that actually had mattresses on the cots. He didn't tell them that the beds were in an empty jailhouse. In other towns, they slept in housing built for Negro Pullman porters. Piper collapsed into bed and didn't ask any questions. Things were segregated back home too, but at least it was obvious. Southern racism was overt. Northern racism was not. Outside of the Deep South, Piper was learning that all bets were off.

And he suspected Charlie Mason wasn't honest with the gate money. He looked around at the lifestyle. The team bus was a coal mine on wheels. "Too much traveling and not enough money," Piper explained. "Besides, they didn't finish paying us what little we were supposed to get. We just traveled, traveled. Started in Omaha, played on up to North Dakota, then went across almost to Spokane, then we came on back down through Idaho, Kansas, and places like that. Played white teams along the way, played black teams, barnstorming with local clubs."

When the summer was over, coming home never looked so good. Piper saw the mountain, and he knew his daddy was in there somewhere. He went to live in Fairfield with his mother's family because he knew he could get work and play on a company baseball team. He was officially a ringer now, and after the horrid summer through Indian country, he was pleased to be home. Tennessee Coal and Iron was always hiring for one project or another, so Piper got a job with a construction crew building a tin mill in Fairfield, which in time would house a company team where two men named Mays shared the field.

It was Piper's first taste of the Industrial League baseball that Birmingham was known for. The Industrial League was intense, organized, and competitive. The teams were feeding grounds for the big Negro League franchises. Industrial League baseball was a place where

a black man could be respected for his work. TCI had a team, as did companies called Schloss Furnace, Westfield Sheetmill, Perfection Mattress, and Ensley. But the biggest rivals in the Industrial League's manufacturing division were Stockham, a steel mill, and ACIPCO (the American Cast Iron Pipe Company), the New York Yankees of the Industrial League.

Steelworkers were better paid than coal miners and thought to be more skilled. They were one notch above the lowly miners in black society. Ballplayers crawled over one another to get a job with ACIPCO, which would be comparatively easier than coal mining and would allow them to play ball on nights and weekends. The best players frequently wound up playing for the Birmingham Black Barons, but sometimes they stayed with ACIPCO instead. There was no travel and much stability, security, and celebrity. But there was cash under the table and nobody thought twice about playing elsewhere under an assumed name. There was also a limit as to how far a player could go. Piper was more ambitious than that, long before he went to his first shift as a construction worker. When the tin mill was completed and TCI cut the employees, one of Piper's local teammates from the Omaha club told him that a mixed team from Yakima, Washington, was recruiting ballplayers. Following the money, he again packed his mother's suitcase.

The Yakima Browns were a sad place for Willie Foster to end his pitching career. He had been one of the greatest left-handed pitchers in Negro League history, and to the young kids on the Yakima bus he would have been a household name for his years of service with such glamorous teams as the Chicago American Giants, Homestead Grays, and Kansas City Monarchs. In 1925 he had pitched for the Black Barons as a prelude to his greatest days with the American Giants when he won twenty-six consecutive games in 1926, and in the Negro National League playoffs he pitched both games of a double-header, beating the Kansas City Monarchs and their dominant ace, Bullet Joe Rogan, in each to win the championship.

Young Buck O'Neil came across Foster and never forgot how imposing he was. Toward the end of his life, Buck wrote scouting reports on a select few black ballplayers whom he felt were among the

best he had ever seen. He did so simply for posterity. In the terse and technical terms of a scout wiring a Western Union telegram, Buck described how great Foster had been, abbreviating “FB” for fastball and “CB” for curveball. At the end of his report, he named the left-handed pitcher Foster reminded him of, which alone should stand testament to how good Piper Davis’s second manager had once been: “Willie Foster—LHP—6-3, 205—Front Line Starter—Hard sinking FB and over the top CB—Both pitches strike out pitches—Spotted all his pitches well—Koufax reminded me of Foster.”

At age nineteen, Piper Davis reminded Willie Foster of how he liked to see baseball played. Piper was young and strong and could play multiple positions. His body stood up to the rigors. As a young man, he was already developing a baseball mind. That’s when he began creating words to match the game’s idiosyncratic language, a practice he carried on throughout his life. He emulated Foster. In turn, Foster took the time to talk with him. He taught him that the Negro League was a man’s league, a place where childhood ended and boys who played scared did not last. In time, Willie told him, it would be his turn to hand down what he was taught. That’s the way black ballplayers did it, Willie preached. If they didn’t take care of one another, nobody else would.

Among the lessons was that black baseball was different from white folks’ ball. Nine innings of Negro League baseball looked nothing like nine innings of big league ball. Black baseball was in a constant state of movement. It was a game of strong arms and swift legs and great natural athletes. Once you got a great athlete who could hit, Willie explained, you had yourself a memorable ballplayer.

Instead of living the celebrity life of a well-paid major league ace pitcher, Willie Foster was leading a bunch of teenagers around the country to play pass-the-hat games, hoping each time his arm would hold up. He didn’t throw hard anymore, but his curveball was nobody’s business, and if he threw a fastball behind someone’s ear, he meant to. Willie Foster didn’t miss, but he couldn’t control his era.

Willie’s team met up with the House of David in Michigan, the traveling Jewish team famous for its players’ long beards, and began

playing town by town back to Indian country. For a week or two, the Browns played the House of David until the teams split off in different directions. It was the start of another long summer. In Montana, the games were rained out for an entire week, an incredibly difficult ordeal for players who fed themselves based on receiving a percentage of gate money. Piper and the other players couldn't collect their seventy-five cents' daily meal money. Out of options, the team ate on credit at a hotel. When the Yakima Browns couldn't pay their room bills, the hotel took their bags.

The players got sneaky. They smuggled their luggage out the window and loaded the bus. When a woman who ran a boarding house a few miles away caught them red-handed, she hopped on board the bus and led them to her town. The Browns got enough good weather to play a game and pay her back. Willie Foster, star of years gone by, surely tossed a few curveballs to make sure his boys could eat, but when the money stopped coming, he went home to Mississippi. The greatest black left-handed pitcher of the 1920s didn't need anybody to tell him what to do next. He went back to college, finished his education, and became the dean of men and baseball coach at Alcorn State University, where he remained until his death in 1960.

When the bus reached St. Louis, Piper followed Foster's lead and jumped the team. "This is far enough for me," he said. The 1937 Yakima Browns disbanded. Piper went home. Georgia had been wise to make sure he always kept his train fare back. When he came back to Fairfield, the first thing he did was find Laura. They were married in 1938, had two children, and remained together for the rest of his life.

The second thing he did was get a job at ACIPCO. At nineteen, Piper was underage for the steel mill, but lying about basic information never stopped anyone from playing baseball in Birmingham. Piper used his father's name. He began playing for the pipe shop company team in 1939, and for the next four years he was never on the road. This was a welcome change after two barnstorming summers. Piper thought this was better than travel ball. The pipe shop's ballplayers were local celebrities, and ACIPCO spoiled them because they believed it was the ultimate source of corporate propaganda. A winning baseball team

created company pride, which of course led to higher productivity, the lifeblood of a town that called itself the Pittsburgh of the South and drew its name from the iron capital of Great Britain.

Black players got everything the white players did, and this alone was a unique privilege in times of segregation and depression. It was so good that some men never wanted to set foot in the Negro Leagues. Cat Mays, who probably never played in the Negro Leagues except for weekend cups of coffee with the Black Barons in the 1930s under an assumed name, spent his career in the Industrial League, chasing fly balls when Willie Mays was born in 1931.

"They'd buy you everything—balls, bats, uniforms," Piper said. "They give you a trip and pay all your traveling; didn't have to worry. It was a better deal than signing with a traveling club. That's why I stayed."

The Negro League code persisted in the Industrial League. It was a base runner's God-given right to slide spikes-up, aiming for the knees. The second basemen and shortstops learned to jump higher. The inner half of home plate belonged to pitchers, and if the batter crowded the neighborhood, he would be evicted with a fastball aimed precisely at his head. If the runner hit safely, he would try to take the next base every single time, so the outfielders learned to get rid of the ball in a hurry, and to throw strongly and accurately to the correct bag. Black baseball was built around pressuring the other team into a mistake and, when one occurred, maximizing its destructive capability with sheer athletic skill and speed, like wolves tearing apart meat.

"I can name a whole lotta top ballplayers who played in the majors and up in Triple-A, in, as we say, 'white folks' ball,'" Piper said. "Yes sir, a lotta them came outta here. A lotta them came out of Birmingham every year and played in the Negro League. Most of them were born a few miles away from here."

Most of Birmingham's best Industrial League players got a taste of Negro League home cooking, because the companies were willing to share their ballplayers up until April 15, the start of the Industrial League season. That meant the Black Barons could steal a ballplayer for a weekend, pay him fifty dollars under the table, and play him for a few days. Most Industrial League stars ate at the Black Baron supper

table and had it both ways—a taste of Negro League baseball against some of the big teams that came in, and a comparatively safe and easy job back home paired with Industrial League ball games.

In 1942, ACIPCO had its best team. Piper played second base alongside shortstop Artie Wilson. Together, Piper and Wilson made for an “awful” double-play combination. Herman Bell was the pig-tail, light with the bat and quick with his arm. Ed Steele was the star outfielder, a classic right fielder who could hit the long ball and make throws that would be waiting on you. The ACIPCO nine went 49–1 and won the company’s tenth Industrial League championship, receiving national recognition in the *Chicago Defender*. Wilson hit .476, Steele batted .472, and Piper hit .390 and led his club with 14 home runs. Nat Pollard grew into a dominating pitcher who went 20–1, struck out 173 batters, and pitched 12 shutouts.

Piper joined the Black Barons in 1942, and Wilson, Steele, Bell, and Pollard soon followed. They would play together on the 1948 team and become like older brothers to young Willie Mays. They watched as Jackie Robinson entered the major leagues in 1947, and though he never had shared the Birmingham experience, they hoped his escape would help facilitate their own. They respected Robinson, but there was a difference: Jackie had never worked in a mill or a mountain.

But by the end of the 1947 season, Birmingham’s sons felt as though they were trapped in a coal mine. Robinson’s entry did not easily open the door to the major leagues. In some ways, it had made moving forward more difficult. White folks’ ball wasn’t waiting on Negro League players. To complicate matters, black crowds in many cities were flocking to major league games, meaning attendance was dropping at the Negro League games—a certain death knell for players who were earning their keep based on gate receipts. In the pages of the *Birmingham World*, the city’s black newspaper, the exploits of Robinson, Roy Campanella, and Don Newcombe hundreds of miles away were gaining more coverage than the local Black Barons. They had been stars for years, and now they were suddenly becoming extinct.

The stories of how white folks’ ball treated black ballplayers circulated through the Negro Leagues. Frustrated black players felt they

weren't given a fair chance. They believed they were being held to impossible standards. The Black Barons believed white scouts wouldn't dare journey to segregated Rickwood Field to scout a player their team would never let them sign in the first place. Bull Connor, who had once lulled Piper to sleep, now saw to it that rigid segregation was enforced inside Rickwood Field. The Black Barons came to believe that southern blacks were held in higher disdain than their northern counterparts, and even worse, they had reason to suspect that northern Negro League teams disparaged the Black Barons as nothing but uncouth coal miners and steelworkers who couldn't play and would only cause trouble. All around Birmingham, black baseball's proud, unifying tradition seemed to be decomposing.

Piper's experiences told him something was wrong. In 1945, when Branch Rickey had dispatched scouts throughout the Negro Leagues searching for a player to break the color line, the black press mentioned Piper as a legitimate candidate. The Dodger scout assigned to the South, Wid Matthews, grew up in Raleigh, Illinois, the son of a tobacco worker. There were signs throughout his career that he didn't care for black players. Matthews most likely dismissed Piper with the tag of "too old," a polite baseball term accepted by Dodger scout Clyde Sukeforth in assessing Davis.

Piper was just twenty-eight years old when he was deemed to be past his prime, only two years older than Jackie Robinson and the same age Robinson was when he came to Brooklyn in 1947. Yet Piper was deemed to be ancient, an excuse used to justify a reason for exclusion, although he had similar qualifications to Robinson, Rickey's foregone conclusion. Rickey, after all, had heard of UCLA's Jackie Robinson. He had never heard of Birmingham's Piper Davis.

Like Robinson, Piper was college-educated, albeit for only one year. He was one of the few Negro League stars, along with Robinson, Larry Doby, Joe Black, and Monte Irvin, to have collegiate experience. Like Robinson, Doby, Black, and Irvin, Piper was a multisport athlete. Like Robinson, he showed leadership abilities. Like Robinson, Piper was a married man who did not drink or smoke. He refused to swear and actively avoided nightlife and trouble. Piper was so boring

on the road that he roomed with his suitcase. No one in Negro baseball questioned Piper Davis's character.

And like Robinson, Piper had a ferocious temper and was not afraid to show it. But where Robinson's temper served him, Piper's helped deny him. The scouts heard stories of fights early in his career, and, years later, other black players believed the white scouts held it against him. The qualities that endeared him to black players made Piper less desirable to white scouts. His greatest asset was passion, the characteristic that white folks' ball used to reject him. It was hard to discern if Piper Davis, a dark-skinned black man tinted the color of milk chocolate, a shade darker than Robinson, was simply too black for white folks' ball. Even though Piper was considered one of the best in the Negro Leagues, Dodger scout Wid Matthews believed Piper had character flaws and decided that he couldn't play. That snub followed him and made it easier for other teams to reject him, since many scouts ran in packs, trusting others so they would never be wrong themselves. In hindsight, perhaps the Dodger scout's branding of Piper with a reputation less than what he had already proven on the field demonstrates only their inadequate information gathering and talent evaluation of black players and Rickey's insistence that no man be better than his.

Piper absorbed the painful rejection and wondered how he would climb out of the mountain again. He rarely spoke about the time in 1947 when the St. Louis Browns had taken a thirty-day option on him and dispatched a scout to follow him in what Piper believed to be nothing more than a perfunctory task. The option permitted the Browns a thirty-day exclusive window to sign Piper if they wanted him. To join the worst team in white folks' ball, the Browns offered \$500 to go to Triple-A, a \$300 pay cut from what Black Barons owner Tom Hayes was paying. The money was an insult to both Piper and Hayes. It would not be the last time a major league team tried to lowball Tom Hayes and take his property away from him without fair compensation.

In 1948, Piper wondered whether he was on his daddy's path all over again, caught in a world he could not escape. So, as he had done then, he would use the language to help devise a new route. White folks' ball

wasn't hiring but a few, and Piper and the remaining players sensed they were trapped in a "hot box."

One of the few terms shared by Negro and white folks' ball, the hot box was in its literal sense a rundown play, commonly called a "pickle," in which a base runner was trapped between two infielders who chased him back and forth until he was tagged out. Black baseball was full of fast runners, but seldom had a player been seen who could race his way out of the hot box.

The hot box was also the Civil War all over again, with masters and slaves, generals and soldiers. It was fought on letterhead and with typewriters, between scouts and team owners, front office people of both races, between promoters and players. It was a war of attrition for the sake of gaining a beneficial position when it was over. Piper was wise enough to realize that the end of the Negro Leagues was near. Jackie Robinson had fought one battle in 1947, but integration was not over. A guerrilla war was raging below the surface of major league baseball. It was North versus South, Yankees versus Giants, light-skinned blacks versus dark-skinned blacks, and the Kansas City Monarchs, its white owner, and his black "Board of Strategy" muscling their way over the Birmingham Black Barons, those coal-mining rubes from the South. The Birmingham Black Barons of 1948 felt trapped with nobody in white folks' ball waiting on them. The Kansas City Monarchs weren't either. They had their own players to help, the color of the uniform mattered more to the Monarchs than the color of the skin, and a black Monarch was superior to a Black Baron.

But during the 1948 season, when the Black Barons battled the Monarchs for the Negro American League pennant one last time, the Birmingham boys learned that the hot box had a hole in it. Maybe they couldn't squeeze through it, but someone else could.

Everything was cyclical in Birmingham, where families and generations were bound together like the carts that sawed poor Jeremiah Nelson in half. Cat Mays's boy would prove it was possible. Hope, more than coal, iron, or steel, was Birmingham's most precious commodity.

Sixty years later, Black Baron outfielder Jimmy Zapp got excited describing what it meant to see a ballplayer escape the hot box.

Zapp's health had battered him in recent years, but describing Mays was medicine. "Every ballplayer who get in don't get out of the hot box," Zapp said. "But Mays would run and run and run and run and run. His hat would be flyin' off his head. They'd never get him. I swear, no matter how hard they tried. Just couldn't nab him." It took a player who couldn't be trapped to escape the hot box, but Willie Mays did not do this alone. He needed the help of the 1948 Birmingham Black Barons, and most of all the coal miner's son, Piper Davis, the iron ore of Willie Mays's baseball existence.