

Vero Memories

1919 to 2019

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Poems:

TO VERO

By Mary E. Springer, born in Indiana and died in Broward County. Published in the St. Lucie County Tribune, April 22, 1919

In a little town I halted
 In the land of fruit and flowers,
 Nestling by the Indian River,
 There I spent some happy hours.

For the people made me welcome,
 Gave the glad and cordial hand;
 Bade me be at home among them
 In their fair and sunny land.

Days sped by, and yet I lingered,
 Saw the little hamlet grow.
 Passed one winter, then another,
 Far away from ice and snow.

Saw the people from the northlands
 Stop to look, as I had done---
 Saw them spend their money gladly
 For some holding near the town.

Saw the country bud and blossom
 As did Eden long ago,
 And the produce sown and garnered
 Made the banks to overflow.

Orchards bending with their burden
 Of the great round globes of gold,

Citrus fruit from the Indian River,
 Finest in the markets sold.

And my life was calm and restful,
 Gone was worry, fret and strife,
 Nervous fears allayed forever,
 In this sweetly simple life.

Yet this is no place for laggards,
 One and all must do their best.
 If we use our brain and brawn,
 Nature here will do the rest.

Want to know where it was I lingered,
 Found the rest my being south,
 Learned again the joy of living,
 And that worry brings you naught?

Little Vero---child of effort,
 Vigorous, strong and growing great,
 All the people one big household,
 They who run may read its fate.

Could not help but be a city;
 Could do naught but strength attain,
 While they make each stranger welcome,
 Bid one and all come back again.

Jackie Robinson made unforgettable debut amid segregated crowd in first Dodgertown game

WITHSTANDING THE TEST OF HISTORY

It was no April fool's joke when the Press Journal in 1948 declared March 31 "probably the biggest day in the history of Vero Beach in more ways than one."

To Ron Hudson, then 16, the first game the then-Brooklyn Dodgers played in Vero Beach was much bigger than baseball.

"Everyone was anxious to see Jackie Robinson, an African-American who had been able to play on a national baseball team (his rookie year of 1947)," said Hudson, whose principal at Gifford School, then a wooden building east of U.S 1 near 39th Street, let children out to attend the game.

Hudson's schoolmates and other blacks from Gifford walked down the railroad tracks west of U.S. 1 to what was called Ebbets Field No. 2. With no outfield fence, it faced northeast just west of what is now Piper Aircraft.

"They had a little place for us (in left field); we couldn't mix in," Hudson said of the segregated section. They made up about 1,000 of the estimated 5,100 to 6,000 people in attendance, according to press accounts.

"We were a little apprehensive to move from where we were; we were taught that," said Hudson. It wasn't until the late 1960s that Indian River County schools were racially integrated and separate facilities for black patrons at businesses were eliminated.

(Jackie Robinson, who broke baseball's color barrier playing first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, stands with rookie catcher Roy Campanella, right, who had just been brought up to the Dodgers from Montreal, at the Vero Beach training camp of the Dodgers on March 31, 1948. Robinson hit a home run in the first inning that day, the first Dodgers game played in Vero Beach, over the heads of a crowd of black people gathered in a fence-less left field on what was called Ebbets Field No. 2. The field was near what later became Piper Aircraft.)

PROVIDED BY HISTORIC DODGERTOWN

Jim Thompson, a 16-year-old Vero Beach High School student whose father became schools superintendent later in 1948 and built Gifford High School in 1952, had a different vantage point of that historic, warm, windy and cloudy day. Like Hudson, he didn't remember many specifics of that first game. "I can remember early in the morning of that day cars with black people started coming into town," said Thompson, who went on to become one of the most respected high school sports officials in the nation and umpired games at Dodgertown. He saw a huge crowd separated by where they stood, but together in what they were there to watch.

Hudson, who knows Thompson and worked as a teacher under his father before becoming a principal and assistant superintendent, understands Thompson's perspective.

"They never saw previously that many black people in that area," Hudson said. Ironically, the crowd in left field got the best view of the most memorable moment of the game. "Jackie Robinson sent the Negro portion of the banner crowd of 5,100 into ecstasy when he whacked his fourth homer of the exhibition campaign in the first inning," The New York Times reported in its story about the game between the Dodgers and their top minor league team, the Montreal Royals. "Dwain Sloat ... was the victim of Jackie's drive, which sailed over the heads of the Negro fans lined many deep from the left-field line to center field." That shot was etched in the memory of Jerry Haf field, a longtime Dodgers fan who in 1998 told Press Journal reporter Scott Samples what it looked like. "I can still see that Robinson homer right now going through the very tip-tops of those Australian pines," said Haffield, who was 26 in 1948. After the home run, umpires ruled future balls hit there would be doubles. Later that inning, Dodgers center fielder Pete Reiser hit a 400-foot shot to left field and ended up on second base. He got hurt trying to run to third, which forced the team to bring in Duke Snider, a future member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, then a 21-year-old backup.

The other significant historical note from the game was Roy Campanella, another black player and future Hall-of-Famer, made his Dodgers debut, replacing Gil Hodges as catcher.

Chuck Connors, at 6-foot-5, played first base for Montreal. His TV career as "The Rifleman" was longer than his big league career. Few people could tell you who won the game. For the record, the Dodgers, some of whom had flown in the night before from the Dominican Republic, beat the Royals for the 10th time in a row, 5-4, with Jack Banta pitching seven no-hit innings.

"We were so excited and just so happy," Hudson said. "Who won the game really didn't make a difference. We all just wanted to see Jackie Robinson." The only other thing Hudson remembers vividly about that day was a white boy holding a cage containing a black cat. The boy released the cat on the field when Robinson went out to play. The boy's friends giggled.

"I have a lot of respect for the Dodgers management at that time and some other people in the county who made sure things went as well as they did (at the game)," he said. A 60-page "souvenir score card" published for the Dodgers' two games in town that year included publicity pictures of 25 players or coaches, but none of Robinson. His picture was found only in an ad sponsored by 25 of his "fan friends," mostly black men. Other advertisements included those from Mr. and Mrs. J.J. Schumann (owners of the Press Journal), welcoming "the writers who will cover these games," and C.C. Bush, who admonished readers to "Watch the Dodgers Work Out and You Will See Manhood at its Best."

The ads were among many things Vero Beach leaders did to welcome the Dodgers. Columnist Tom Meany, from New York's Newspaper PM, described it this way.

"It wasn't enough that (baseball) Commissioner (Albert "Happy") Chandler, the Governor of Florida, Millard Caldwell, and the Mayor of Vero Beach, Merrill Barber, were on hand. Oh no. Four (A-26) National Guard planes had to fly down to participate in the dedication of the Dodger Town Ball Park.

"One of them, the Sky Dodger, was autographed by the Brooklyn players in one of the most startling ceremonies since (actress) Mae Murray went up to the Grand Central and kissed the locomotive of the 20th Century for the benefit of press photographers."

Meany described the vigorous "tootling" of the Vero Beach High School band as a "daffy touch." The day also was notable for a greeting between Chandler and Dodgers Manager Leo "The Lip" Durocher, who was coming back after a year suspension the commissioner imposed in 1947. Durocher was accompanied by his wife, film star Laraine Day. All of this was how a city of about 4,600 drew so many people to a makeshift field at a defunct Naval Air Station.

The Press Journal was right on in its assessment of how big a day it was. "It was a big deal, the Dodgers coming to town and playing baseball," Thompson said of what would become a 60-year spring training tradition.

"This particular event has lived on over the years," Hudson said. "The fact we were able to witness that ... certainly lives with you all the time."

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