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LOOKING BACK: A SPORTS HISTORY OF HUNTSVILLE

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Huntsville, Alabama

CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN PRUETT is Sports Editor of the Huntsville Times.



EDITOR'S NOTE: Two years ago John Pruett, Sports Editor of the Huntsville TIMES, wrote what I believe is the only comprehensive survey of the history of sporting activity in the Huntsville area. This survey appeared in twelve segments in the TIMES during May, 1977. It, in Mr. Pruett's words, "was designed to focus on the highlights of the athletic heritage of Huntsville, which has always been one of Alabama's most sports-minded cities."

Sports are a part of our lives, a most important segment of popular history, and is certainly a proper subject for study by the historian. Mr. Pruett is aware of the problems of studying history, for he warns us that"

Although the scope of the material in these stories includes the whole of the 20th century, most of the research centered on the past fifty years, primarily because records beyond that are sketchy at best. No effort was made to place each segment into a particular chronological order. Rather, most of them revolve around a particular individual - or particular individuals - and their roles.

This is good history. We hope you enjoy the series as much as we do.

— Part I —

From the early part of the 19th century until the first half of the 20th, Huntsville was scarcely more than a wide spot in the road between Chattanooga and Birmingham.

But Madison County, Ala., always enjoyed one major agricultural-industrial bonus—its farmers grew more and better cotton than anybody else in the state. Cotton was money. Cotton was jobs. Cotton nurtured this community and allowed it to flourish, at least in a modest fashion, for more than 75 years until the space age introduced a dramatic new way of life to the Tennessee Valley.

Long before there were Saturn rockets and men who dreamed of flights beyond our planet, however, there was King Cotton.

In those early years, cotton was Huntsville's heart and soul. And its pocketbook. And its lifeblood.

The first cotton mill in this area (Huntsville Mills, located on Jefferson Street near the old train depot) was built in 1881. Two "suburban" mills—West Huntsville and Dallas—came along in 1892, and in 1900 the fourth and largest—Merrimack, which became Huntsville Manufacturing in 1946—was completed.

In the early years of this century, there were only two large public schools in the vicinity—Madison County High School at Gurley and Huntsville High School. But there were also several smaller schools, those which sprang up around the various mills. These "mill" schools were to be an important part of Huntsville's heritage until they all merged in 1952 into what is now known as Butler High School.

But for many years, the mill schools—Joe Bradley, Lincoln, Rison and West Huntsville—were separate little kingdoms of their own, zealously protective of their own "territories" and their own traditions.

Such was the situation when Cecil Fain first came to Huntsville to begin his career as an educator. The year was 1914.



Sixty-three years have passed since Cecil Fain—then a teenage teacher—moved from Ozark, Ala., to Huntsville. Now in his eighties, this extraordinary man is still here, doing as he has done for all his adult life—serving the youth of Huntsville and Madison County.

A teacher in Huntsville's public schools for half a century, Fain presently serves as a special consultant for Alverson-Draughon Business College. And he still works every day, and wouldn't think of having it any other way.

An acquaintance was once asked, "How would you best describe Mr. Fain?" His reply: "A great teacher, a great person, and a great sportsman."

In many respects, Cecil Fain has probably done more for sports in Huntsville than any other man in the city's history.

For years, he has been known as "Huntsville's Mister Tennis." That nickname, however appropriate, is not sufficient unto itself. "Huntsville's Mister Athletics" would be more accurate.

"When I first came to Huntsville, there wasn't much going on in the way of athletics," recalled Fain. "Of course, our country was about to get involved in World War One at that time. It wasn't until after the war that organized sports really got started here."



When it did get started, the prime mover was Cecil Fain.

About 1920, two years after "the war to end all wars" had ended, Fain—by then the principal of Joe Bradley School—began organizing junior and senior high basketball tournaments with the help of Lee Rice and the cooperation of the city's two YMCAs—the Central, located downtown on Green Street, and the West Huntsville (now called McCormick YMCA).

Soon Fain was coaching football and a variety of other sports at Joe Bradley. It wasn't long until Rison (where Fain became principal in 1926) also began to add sports to its educational program. Lincoln and West Huntsville soon followed suit. And so by the late twenties, the four mill schools—along with Huntsville and Gurley—had football, basketball, baseball and track.

Before long, independent basketball and baseball became a hot item in the four mill villages—an outgrowth of the programs which began in the schools. Among the earlier pioneers in these mill sports were Hosee Watson, W. P. Fanning, Obie Johnson, Andy Boyd and Hub Myhand.

In the high schools, basketball was the first sport to win widespread popularity, although most of the games were played outdoors—even in freezing weather—until gymnasiums were built throughout the county in the mid-30s by the Works Progress Administration. From the 1920s until the great depression of the following decade, there were only a few indoor courts—at Dallas, at Huntsville High and at the West Huntsville and Central YMCAs.

At Rison, Cecil Fain's reputation as a principal-teacher-coach continued to spread. And his scope was coeducational, too. For two decades from the mid-20s until the mid-40s, his Rison girls basketball teams won 30 championships. Assisted by Ferrell Tabor, Fain also built a locally renowned girls softball dynasty by combining talent from Rison, Lincoln, New Hope, Gurley, Bradley and Huntsville. They went on to win several local, district and state championships (and one southern championship) under the names of Dr. Pepper and, later, the Huntsville Rockettes.



It should be noted that Cecil Fain—and others like him, men such as W. O. Woolley and O'Brellis Richardson—organized these pioneering sports programs without monetary compensation.

Fain coached for 50 years and never got a penny for it. There were no coaching supplements in those days. Only devotion to sport, and dedication to the physical development of young people.

"The old American volunteer spirit was what guided us in those days and led to today's fine athletic programs," said Fain. "I like to reflect on those years when we coached and the players played for the love of the game. We didn't have much equipment and we operated on a shoestring budget and there were no grants from boards of education and there was no state athletic association, but we loved it. Sometimes by mutual agreement, even we—the coaches—would play.

"It makes me proud to see the sort of athletic programs we have in our schools today, and the sort of dedicated people who administer them. I'm sure the coaching is much better today, and the players are much better, than when we were starting out.

"But I doubt whether they have any more fun now than we did."

Nor any more influence on the lives of others, he could have added.

Part II

His initials are H. E., but hardly anybody pays much attention to that. Most people just call him Hub.

Hub Myhand grew up in Monticello, Ark., and even as a small boy, it soon became apparent that he was going to be an athlete of considerable accomplishment. As a teen-ager, he began playing baseball for a local lumber mill team. After graduation from high school, he went on to college at Erskine in South Carolina, where he played football, basketball and baseball.

He played them all, but baseball was No. 1 in his heart.

Myhand was a right-handed pitcher with a tricky assortment of fast balls, curves and "drops," as they were called in those days. Several professional scouts watched him pitch and liked what they saw, and in 1924, Hub decided to try his hand at professional baseball. He signed on with Ashville, N.C., of the Class B Sally League. The next season, he pitched for Bristol, Va., and Tupelo, Miss., and in 1926 he was on the roster of Tupelo and then Jackson, Tenn. In 1927, he pitched for Waterloo, Ia., in the Mississippi Valley League. Although his won-loss record at all these little whistletops in the minors was impressive, that season would be the last of Myhand's professional career.

In the fall of '27, he accepted a job as physical director at a sprawling cotton mill called Dallas Manufacturing Company, located in a little town in North Alabama—Huntsville.

★ ★ ★

That was half a century ago. Huntsville is not such a little town any more and Dallas Manufacturing has been closed for 28 years, but Hub Myhand is still here and, in his seventies, he probably still knows as much about baseball as anybody in these parts.

He ought to—he WAS baseball in Huntsville from the late 1920's until World War Two.

"Hub has probably forgotten more baseball than most of us ever knew," said Jim Talley, himself a local latterday giant of the sport.

Myhand, always a soft-spoken and modest man, shrugs off that sort of flattery, although he has heard it often.

"I knew a little about baseball, but not much," he said in an interview at his neat brick home on Andrew Jackson Way. "But when I first came to Huntsville in '27, that wasn't saying too much. They had some sports programs in the schools, but not much in the way of recreation for the mill people. There didn't seem to be much interest in baseball until they built Dallas Park (now known as Optimist Park) in the spring of '28. After that, independent baseball began to catch on in a pretty big way."

Oldtimers still talk about the quality of baseball played by the various mill teams back in the late 20's and throughout the 1930's. Indeed, it was semi-professional baseball at its best, probably on a par with the Class A or Class AA teams of the era. It was also the best entertainment in town—and the most popular.

"Remember, we didn't have but about 16,000 people living in this area at that time," said Mrs. Myhand, as much a sports fan as her husband. "Aside from a few picture shows, there wasn't much to do except go watch the mill baseball games on Saturdays. I can remember when people looked forward to the Fourth of July because that was the day of the biggest baseball game of the year."

"I've seen as many as five or six thousand people come out on the Fourth to watch a game between Dallas and Lincoln or Merrimack," Myhand said. "Some of the mills put a lot of money in their teams. Merrimack would bring in a lot of good players for the summer and give them jobs—college boys who were outstanding players. Lincoln did the same thing. At Dallas, we used mostly home-grown boys and we usually did all right."

"All of the teams were pretty even and the competition was pretty lively. I never did see it get out of hand, but we had some pretty good scraps. And everybody in town seemed to be pretty involved in it. I can remember when there was a Class D team in Huntsville—in '31 or '32—and they didn't last but one year. They played at old Martin Park downtown, about where the civic center is located now, and if they were playing a game on the same day as the mill teams, they didn't have anybody in the stands. Everybody was out watching the mill teams."

Myhand remembers the competition between Dallas and Lincoln, two adjoining mills, as being particularly intense. "I can still call out the lineups," he said. "We had fellows like Roy Green, Jim Tom Gentry, Eugene Williams, Commodore Pinlon, Theron Fisher, Alfred Fitch, Houston Goodson, Lawrence Howell, Norman and Willie Allen. Clark Grant, the Lincoln manager, had some fine players like Archie Grant, Floyd Bryant, Jack Phillips, Eugene Williams, Lev Gentles...It was a great rivalry. Both mills used to sell season tickets."

★ ★ ★

Shortly after he came to Dallas Village, Myhand entertained a tempting offer. Gabby Street, a Huntsville native, was managing the St. Louis Cardinals. He had seen Myhand pitch and thought he had a chance to make it to the majors.

Street sent Hub a ticket to the World Series of 1928 between the Cardinals and the New York Yankees.

"He wanted me to come up, watch the Series, and maybe sign a contract," Myhand recalled, "and so he sent me this." He produced a ticket stub for Sportsman's Park in St. Louis dated Tuesday, Oct. 9, 1928—the day the Yankees beat the Cardinals 7-3 to complete a four-game sweep. "The thing I remember most about that game was Babe Ruth hitting three home runs," said Myhand.

Street kept trying to persuade the young recreation director from Huntsville that he ought to sign with the Cardinals, but Myhand kept stalling. "I started to go to spring training in St. Pete one year," said Hub, grinning at the memory. "They sent me a train ticket, but I sent it back. Finally I signed a contract and sent it in, but they wanted me to go to Rochester, New York, or to St. Joseph, Missouri, and I didn't care anything about that. I just never showed up."

Instead, he stayed with Dallas Manufacturing as recreation director until the mill closed in 1949, and after that he coached at Gurley and at Rison before his retirement in the mid-60's.

He never second-guessed the decision to stay.

"I wouldn't change anything," said Myhand as he looked back across the years. "Particularly the baseball—the heyday part of it."

The heyday of mill baseball in Huntsville lasted from 1928 until about 1935 when Lincoln and Dallas combined into one super-duper independent team. "But after about '35, independent baseball began going downhill," said Myhand. "They began having some labor union problems and things like that, and the plant managers just didn't have much time to spend on baseball any more. After '35, I didn't fool with independent ball any more."

Instead, he concentrated on coaching youth baseball and basketball teams from the recreation center, and through the subsequent years, his teams won countless trophies in city, county and area competition.

"Mostly, I just watch now," Hub Myhand said. "I still like to go out to the park occasionally and the baseball games. I've noticed the players are better today, and so is the coaching. They know a lot more than I used to."

Not likely.

— Part III —

There were two "lead" stories on the front page of the Huntsville Daily Times on Friday, March 29, 1935.

One was a wire story datelined Jackson, Miss., which began: "Two desperate bandits believed to be Raymond Hamilton, the southwest's No. 1 outlaw, and an unidentified member of the old Clyde Barrow gang today slipped through an army of peace officers, national guardsmen and armed citizens and roared northward to Memphis, after a 24-hour 'reign of terror' in Mississippi, marked by frequent shootings and kidnappings."

The other story, with an even larger headline, was a local item written by sportswriter P. I. Prullt. It started this way: "The question of whether or not Huntsville will have a baseball team this season was put squarely before the fans today with the announcement that a single ticket sale will begin Monday to raise funds to finance a single club. The team will represent Lincoln and Dallas, instead of the two mills supporting a club aplece. Following a conference between Phil Peeler of Lincoln and W. L. Denham of Dallas, the announcement was made that the only logical course to follow was to have one team represent both mills."

The microfilm of that old newspaper from more than 40 years ago illustrates the degree of importance most Huntsvillians attached to community baseball in the 1930's. Baseball as it was played by the various mill teams was, simply stated, the major entertainment of the spring and summer. Times were hard, money was scarce and television was still more than a decade away. Practically the only diversion was playing baseball—or watching it.



As we have already seen from previous stories in this series, the zenith of mill baseball in Huntsville was from the late '20's until 1935, the year of the Lincoln-Dallas team merger. After that, interest began to wane under the shadow of several storm clouds—among them, labor union disputes and the approaching World War Two.

The mills continued to field teams up until the onset of the war, but the golden era of community baseball had come and gone. Not long after the war ended, both Dallas and Lincoln mills shut down, permanently closing an important chapter in Huntsville's sports history. Many thought independent baseball was finished, but a few local sportsmen refused to turn their backs on the happy memories of the past. They resolved to keep the sport alive in Huntsville. Among the leaders of the keep-baseball movement were Obie Johnson, Frank Williams, Floyd Bryant, Brooks Church, Floyd Bright, Sonny Westbrooks...and a tough, raw-boned first baseman just back from the navy—James Talley.

* * *

In the years since World War Two, a number of "baseball people" in Huntsville have come in one door and out the other.

But Jim Talley has always remained.

Hub Myhand was Huntsville's Mr. Baseball before the war. Jim Talley assumed that title shortly after the war, and he has worn it ever since.

Myhand, Johnson and Williams helped revive mill baseball following the war until Dallas and Lincoln closed, and Bryant kept a team going at old Merrimack, by then known as Huntsville Manufacturing. The Huntsville Manufacturing team of the late 1940's was called the MLs, and they were a stout bunch. The MLs once beat the University of Alabama 1-0 in a 16-inning game at Huntsville Park. Hershie Freeman was the winning pitcher, going all the way. The MLs finally folded in 1953.

In 1949, Talley—probably the top baseball player in the area at that time—joined a newly formed local club called the Huntsville Boosters. The Boosters were organized and managed by Leroy McCollum, and that first year they played out of New Market. The next year, the Boosters became the first Huntsville team to represent this area in the National Baseball Congress World Series at Wichita, Kan.

The Boosters, who played at Optimist Park, disbanded in 1953 and gave way to the Huntsville Parkers, who played their home games at Huntsville Park, the old Merrimack field. Westbrooks managed the Parkers and took them to Wichita twice, 1954 and the next year. It was at Wichita in 1955 that the Parkers' first baseman, a 16-year-old strongboy from Butler High School, got his first national exposure. He made the most of it, ripping the baseball like he was already in the majors—which he soon would be. His name was Don Mincher.

For a time in the late 1950's, Huntsville had several independent teams—the Parkers, the Merchants, the revived Boosters. But in 1965, Jim Talley brought everybody under the same roof. He organized and managed a team which would become a dynasty in amateur/semi-pro baseball in the Southeast. He named them the Huntsville Independents.

* * *

Max Burleson, now the head football-baseball coach at Huntsville's Johnson High School, was a member of Talley's original Independents. So was Bobby Skelton, the colorful ex-quarterback at Alabama. Ray Cox played on that team, and George Johnson, and Frank Duke.

"That was a pretty good bunch," remembers Talley. "We didn't have much trouble getting to Wichita that year." Nor many other years, either. In fact, the Independents have represented Alabama in the NBC tournament every year since except '66, '71 and '72. One year when Talley decided not to manage (1974), they went under the name Huntsville Bulls and finished fifth nationally. But everybody knew the Bulls were really the Independents.

Today, Talley—a deputy director of the city's Parks and Recreation Department—will tell you that he's uncertain of the future of the Independents, or of any other possible successor. But if the future is cloudy, the past has been bright, as Talley readily admits.

"In my time, from the 40's on up, we've had some terrific baseball in Huntsville—as good as anybody's," he said.

"You take the guys who played in the '40's—guys like Jack Troup, Slick McGinnis, Taylor Myers, Ty Samples, Freck Payne, Bill Daniel, Dee Dee Murphy, Floyd Bryant, Howard Wallace, Brooks Church... these were all guys who played pro ball or could have if they'd had a chance. Carlos Ramsey—he could've pitched for anybody. And Josh Cole. George Burns was a good lefthander. Those were some good ballplayers.

"In the 50's we had players like Mincher, Billy Michael, Cliff Coggins, Bill Gant, Bill Stewart, Max Burlison, Brooksie Gentle, John Dudley, Dave Hall... I wish I could name 'em all. And in the '60's a lot of the high school kids began to come along—Ricky and Randy Davidson, Eddie Echols, Dave Beck, Condredge Holloway. They all played for the Independents at one time or another. They played on some good teams."

* * *

So did Talley before he finally decided to give up playing and concentrate on managing. He especially remembers the 1950 Boosters, the first Huntsville team that ever made it all the way to Wichita.

"McCollum was managing that team," said Talley. "I remember we played a major league All-Star team here that summer. They had Harry the Hat Walker, Roy Campanella, Rube Walker, Carl Erskine. They beat us 3-2, but the thing I remember most is the home run that big first baseman for the Cubs, Hank Sauer, hit out of Optimist Park. That was the longest ball I've ever seen hit.

"Boy, we had a crowd out there that time. They were standing in outfield."

Talley recalls the days of the big crowds with a special nostalgia.

"Back before people had TVs and boats and cars and before drive-ins, going to the baseball game was the thing to do," he said. "That's why we had the big crowds, and why there were so many good players around here. We had good baseball players 15 cents a dozen. Now, for what they pay ballplayers, you could've filled 40 teams."

Jim Talley grinned. "I believe," he said, "those were what we called 'the good old days.'"

Part IV

From the latter part of the 1920's until the mid-30's, baseball—more specifically, mill baseball—was clearly the primary spectator sport in Huntsville.

High school athletics had not yet reached a level of widespread appeal, and the grand old game of Abner Doubleday was the undisputed No. 1 pastime, not only nationally but locally as well.

If there was a rival to baseball in that era, it was boxing.

By the late '20's, Huntsville had produced a number of outstanding young boxers in various weight classes, including Carl Powell, Dummy Robinson, Kid Moorehead, Julius (Country) Bailey, Ed Gattis, Charles Herrin, Dutch Smith, Gerald Armstrong, Bill Bevel, and a black fighter with a classic name—Blue Steele.

Of all the local boxers, the West Huntsville-born Powell—whose career will be covered tomorrow in this series—was probably the most promising. But many of the others were among the top amateur or professional fighters in the Southeast, and each had strong followings.

By the late '30's, however, boxing in Huntsville was nothing more than a memory. Its time had passed. Prominent boxers like Powell had to go elsewhere, even as far away as New Mexico, to display their skills.

But before boxing vanished from the Huntsville scene, it left two indelible marks on the sports history of the city.

The dates were May 23, 1929, and May 30, 1932.

★★★

In the summer of '29, Sergeant Sammy Baker—born at New Hope, Ala., in 1902—was one of the top contenders for the welterweight title held by Joe Dundee. So was a young fighter from New York named "Irish" Tommy Jordan.

Baker and Jordan had fought to a furious 10-round draw the year before. Now they were ready for a rematch. And this time, thanks to the tireless efforts of the Huntsville Post of the American Legion (whose adjutant was a rising young lawyer-politician named John J. Sparkman), the fight would be staged before Baker's "home folks." It would be only the second major fight ever held in the Deep South, the other being the Young Stribling-Jack Sharkey heavyweight bout in Miami earlier that same year.

The Baker-Jordan fight was trumpeted for weeks. The Huntsville Daily Times sportswriter, using the quaint pen name "Peter Piper," interviewed everybody from Baker's parents in Decatur to Huntsville Mayor A. W. McAllister in a frenzy of pre-flight publicity. A week before the big event, the newspaper was calling it "the greatest sporting classic ever staged in this section of the country" and forecasting a crowd of "about 12,000."

The prediction, as it turned out, was optimistic. By the evening of the fight, about 7,000 were in the specially built grandstands at the old Fairgrounds. It was still by far the largest crowd ever to attend a sporting event in the Tennessee Valley up until that time.

In the preliminaries, Sammy's younger brother Jackie knocked out Big Boy Oscar of Birmingham in the second round, and a cousin—Tommie Baker—fought Leo Woods, the lightweight amateur champion of the South, to a draw. When his turn came, Sergeant Sammy Sergeant did not disappoint. In the eighth round, he caught Jordan on the ropes and knocked him down for the full count with a series of punishing combinations. The crowd, as the newspaper reported, "was agog."

A few years later, Baker fought in Huntsville again, quickly disposing of Jerry Cline. But the oldtimers hereabouts still remember is the brawl with Irish Tommy. It was the first of the big fights—and the best.

Three years later, The Daily Times was ballyhooing "the biggest fistic program in Huntsville's history." Young Stribling, who had fought both Sharkey and heavyweight champion Max Schmeling, had agreed to fight in Huntsville against a 21-year-old heavyweight from Dayton, Ohio, named Johnny Freeman.

By that time, Jack Dempsey had retired and Stribling was perhaps the most popular heavyweight in the country. Certainly he was the most popular boxer in the South. And so it was with a great deal of excitement that Huntsville awaited the Stribling-Freeman fight, which took place just three weeks before Sharkey won the title by decisioning Schmeling in a 15-rounder on Long Island.

Stribling flew his own plane to Huntsville, landing at the old airstrip on Whitesburg Drive. A crowd estimated at 4,000 was there to greet him. Stribling checked in at the Russel Erskine Hotel, then drove to Huntsville Country Club for nine holes of golf with Ike Dillard, Charles Martin and the golf pro, Bob Lowry Sr.

The next night (May 30, 1932), he climbed into the ring with Freeman at the old Martin Park and won a 10-round decision in what most of the 3,000 spectators regarded as a dull anticlimax. The most excitement, in fact, occurred in one of the preliminaries when, according to newspaper accounts, a local fighter named Battling Bullet (real name, Elmer Whitworth) "ran into a hard right to the head after a minute and 27 seconds of the first round of his bout with Tut Estup of Athens and was out for almost 30 minutes."

Whether the mediocrity of the main event hurt local interest in boxing is a matter of conjecture. Yet the fact remains that the Stribling-Freeman encounter was the last nationally important fight staged in the Tennessee Valley.



Stribling, however, made many friends during his brief stay here, and so there was a great deal of consternation when Huntsvillians read on Oct. 2, 1932, that the big heavyweight had been seriously injured in his hometown, Macon, Ga.

Stribling was riding his motorcycle from a golf course toward the Macon hospital, where he was to visit his wife and their two-week-old child, when he struck an auto driven by a friend, Roy Barrow. As Barrow ran to the scene, Stribling managed to say with a grin: "Well, kid, I guess that means there will be no more road work."

It meant more than that. At the hospital, Stribling's left foot had to be amputated and doctors grimly revealed that he only had "a fair chance" to live. That night, acute peritonitis set in and Young Stribling died at 6 o'clock the next morning, shortly after saying to his wife, in his last words, "Hello, sugar."

In his 29 years, Young Stribling had fought professionally more than 300 times. His last real shot at the heavyweight title had been on July 3, 1931, when he lost on a technical knockout in the final 14 seconds to Schmeling at the Cleveland Stadium.

Over the years, his opponents had included Schmeling and Sharkey, Primo Canera, Tommy Loughran and Maxie Rosenbloom...and a guy named Johnny Freeman on a Monday night in May in the year 1932 in a little town called Huntsville, Ala.



Part V

Every new endeavor requires a single-minded personality to get it started.

Cecil (Bushy) Bolton was just such a fellow.

Raised in the rough-and-tumble area of Florence, Bolton took a liking to prize fighting at an early age and eventually developed into one of the few knowledgeable boxers in the Alabama-Tennessee-Mississippi area around the turn of the century. In the 1920's, Bolton moved to Huntsville where, after he quit fighting himself, he turned to managing and promoting. He used to hang out at a little downtown gymnasium—located across from the Russel Erskine Hotel and behind a bowling alley—looking for new boxing talent and dreaming of building his own stable of fighters.

It was here that Bushy Bolton met Carl Powell.

Powell was a feisty little 16-year-old student at Joe Bradley High School. He had been an all-county basketball player, but when he took up boxing, he dropped everything else. It soon became obvious to everyone who saw him work out, and particularly to Bushy Bolton, that the youngster from Joe Bradley was something special.

"You know, kid, you might could be a pretty good featherweight some day," Bushy told him. "How about letting me manage you?" And that's how Carl Powell got into the fight business.

"Bushy was quite a promoter," recalled Powell, still in prime physical condition at age 64—he still exercises and works out with a punching bag at his brick home on Blue Spring Road. "You'd sign a contract with Bushy and he'd book your fights. You'd give him maybe 30 per cent of your earnings from a fight. In those days, a fighter would get about \$150 or \$200 for a fight, maybe \$300 to \$500 for a main event. That wasn't bad money back then, and the thing is, you got to keep a good part of what you made because the taxes weren't so high.

"It was pretty good money and it was fun. I started fighting when I was 17, and every Friday night, I'd be off fighting someplace."



Bolton gave Powell a nickname, "The Huntsville Tornado," and the label was appropriate throughout most of the 1930's.

Powell took on and beat every contender in the Southern junior lightweight division and later fought many nationally known 126-132 pounders, including Joe Mandez, Johnny Cruz, Babe Colima, Jimmy Box, Grady Gentry and Jackie Osborne. Perhaps his biggest fight came in 1933 when he met highly regarded Mexican Babe Colima in the Juarez bull ring. Colima had earlier lost to Cruz, a fighter Powell had knocked out in El Paso, but the Babe prevailed in Juarez before his home fans. "It was the only decision I ever lost that I didn't get back," said Powell.

In fact, it was one of the few decisions he ever lost, period. When he retired from the ring in the late '30's, Powell had lost only six of 125 fights—and had never been knocked out.

His only regret is never having had an opportunity to fight for the world title in his division. Probably the main reason he didn't was the fact that Bolton wasn't nationally known as a trainer. But Pa Stribling of Georgia was. His stable included his son W. L. (later known as Young Stribling) and a tough light-heavy from Birmingham named Battling Bozo. Once, Young Stribling told Powell that he wanted to talk to Pa about adding Carl's name to the Stribling stable. But it never happened—Young Stribling was killed not long afterwards in a motorcycle accident.

"Maybe if I'd had the right manager, I'd have fought for the title," Powell said, reminiscing. "It was just like today. You had to be in the right place at the right time, and I don't guess I ever was."

Powell regretted Bolton's failure to land him a title shot, but never resented his manager personally. "Bushy later won the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War Two," said Powell, "and after the war, he

stayed in the army for quite awhile. Later he moved someplace else and I lost track of him. I sorta missed him, really."



Besides Powell, Bolton trained and managed three other prominent local fighters—Dummy Robinson (so named because he was deaf in one ear), Kid Moorehead and Blue Steele.

Blue Steele was one of Bolton's biggest buddies. He was also one of the hardest hitting middleweights in the South although he never received widespread recognition because in those days, black boxers in Alabama fought only against other blacks. Steele later died of a gunshot wound in Florence.

Robinson and Moorehead fought many fighters in their careers, but their bloodiest matches were almost always against each other—usually at the old Punch Bowl (a boxing ring, surrounded by wooden bleachers, located near Big Spring) or at the old Elks Club arena.

"There was bad blood between them," recalled Powell. "They had some real brawls."

One of the last Robinson-Moorehead fights took place in 1937 when Robinson won a close 10-round decision. Not content with what they had done in the ring, the two wound up in bare-knuckle fisticuffs while they were being checked by a doctor after the bout. "Boxing history for Huntsville, and we believe for Alabama, was in the making when Robinson and Moorehead staged their furious 10-round battle on the American Legion's card," said Huntsville sportswriter P. I. Pruitt in his Daily Times column "As Seen From the Press Box." He added, "Not since your correspondent has been engaged in sports writing has he witnessed a fight touching this one for sheer thrills. The unexpected was breaking out nearly every minute between two young fellows who let their tempers get the best of their better judgement. As a result, the rules of boxing and caution were tossed to the winds as they tore into each other."

Moorehead still lives in West Huntsville, where he was born. Robinson went to work as a foreman for Ringling Brothers Circus shortly after World War Two and is still employed by Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey.

After he quit boxing, Carl Powell trained a few young fighters at the Elks Club and dabbled in promoting. But the war put an end to that.

"I'm glad to see an effort now being made at Hazel Green and in Huntsville to bring amateur boxing back," said Powell. "I believe there'd be quite a bit of interest in it again."

Perhaps. But not like in the old days—not like in the days of "The Huntsville Tornado." Those days are gone forever.

Part VI

The University of Alabama at Huntsville is just beginning to establish a solid athletic tradition.

But Alabama A&M already has such a tradition—and has been building on it for half a century.

In fact, probably no black university in the state (with the possible exception of world famous Tuskegee) boasts such a rich sports heritage as the picturesque school on The Hill at Normal.

George McCalep was a member of the faculty at A&M for more than 40 years before his retirement in 1975. For much of that time, he served as faculty manager of athletics. He probably knows more about A&M sports than any other person, and he can still rattle off names and dates which others have long forgotten.

When McCalep came to A&M in 1934, the school had a football team (coached by Porter James) and a girls basketball team. That was the extent of the athletic program. Dyke Smith briefly succeeded James as head football coach and in '38 Dwight Fisher came along, fielding strong single wing teams for the next three years. One of his players was an elusive halfback from Birmingham named Louis (Screwy) Crews, who later became the most successful head coach in A&M history.

Fisher's successor was George Hobson, and he would lead A&M into a new and progressive era of athletics.

Hobson came to A&M as football coach, basketball coach and athletic director in 1941 and immediately began expanding the school's program.

He added track in '42, tennis in '48, baseball in '54 and golf in '57. He got A&M into the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC). He worked at upgrading the antiquated playing facilities. He improved the football field and was instrumental in the construction of a new gym (which has since been replaced by the modern Elmore Health Building). But then, as now, the main interest on campus was football. And football is what George Hobson remembers best—three games in particular.

"I guess the one that comes to mind first in the first time we beat Alabama State in the Magic City Classic," said Hobson, who still works at A&M and who serves as commissioner of the SIAC. "That was in '42, and we won the game 24-6.

"In '47, we played South Carolina State here and they had us down 18-0 in the first quarter. We came back and went ahead 20-18, but they got a safety near the end and it ended 20-20. But the statistics were the big thing about that game. We had 421 yards to their 29 and 21 first downs to their three, and still it was a tie game. They still talk about that one.

"Another big game for us was in '49 when we went to Jackson State and helped them dedicate their new stadium. We beat 'em 18-6, their only loss of that season."

Hobson coached several marvelous players during his football regime at A&M, including lineman Charles Bates (now the head coach at Southern University in Baton Rouge) and halfback Willie Hinton, who went on to play for the St. Louis Cardinals and later the New York Titans. "But the best thing I like to remember about my players," he said, "was that most of them completed their educations. That was the most important thing."

Hobson coached until 1960, at which time Crews became head football coach and Mooney Lewis (whom McCalep calls "one of the great names in black athletics") took over as basketball coach.

Over the next 15 years, Crews coached the football Bulldogs to their greatest heights, turning a second division team into a perennial contender and eventually winning the SIAC championship. Crews was replaced last season by the now-departed Curtis Gentry; Lewis was succeeded as basketball coach by the colorful Duane Gordon, who gave way to the present head coach, Clarence Blackmon. Under Blackmon, the Bulldogs have been solid SIAC contenders every year.

* * *

Organized athletics at the University of Alabama-Huntsville began modestly in 1965 with a rowing team, and for a while, it was UAH's only noteworthy intercollegiate sport.

Perhaps the highlight of UAH crew came in '68 when the Chargers defeated Purdue and Kansas State, finished second in the Southern Rowing Association meet and third in the President's Cup Regatta at Washington, D.C.

Dr. Ostap Stromecky later brought UAH soccer into national prominence. Over the years, Stromecky's teams have won five area titles and last season UAH finished seventh nationally in the NAIA tournament at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif. Because of Stromecky's reputation, the NAIA nationals will be held in Huntsville this year.

Kayo Willis came to Huntsville from an assistant's post at Murray State, Ky., and proceeded to put UAH's basketball program on the map in a big way. After two years of growing pains, Kayo's Chargers went 28-9 and won two games in the NAIA national tournament at Kansas City in 1976. This season, the Chargers went back to Kansas City as District 27 champions, upsetting powerful Kentucky State before losing in the second round.

Two of Willis' players, forwards Ricky Love and Tony Vann, are considered professional prospects. Their level of accomplishment accentuates the progress of intercollegiate athletics in Huntsville.

Indeed, it has come a long way since UAH crew members first dipped their oars in the Tennessee River—and an even further distance since George McCalep first came to town.

James Record, chairman of the Madison County Commission, has already written one comprehensive book on the history of Madison County and his second volume—covering the last century—is now at the printers.

While researching the second book, Record compiled a list of almost 400 individuals from this country who went on to play athletics either professionally or collegiately. His oldest record dates back to the 19th Century when William B. Bankhead, father of Tullulah, went off to play football at the University of Alabama. Later, Bankhead became speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives—the highest office ever held by anybody who ever lived in Madison County.

Of the athletes on Record's list, only a few became professionals—but those few are illustrious names in the sports heritage of North Alabama.

Perhaps the first professional athlete from Huntsville was Charles (Gabby) Street, born here on Sept. 30, 1883. At the age of 12, Street began playing with a local semi-pro team named the Milligan Sluggers, who competed in a turn-of-the-century league against teams from Memphis, Tullahoma, Ensley and Decatur. Later, Street went to the major leagues and was the catcher for the Washington Senators when Walter (Big Train) Johnson was the best pitcher in baseball.

Street, who managed the St. Louis Cardinals to a National League pennant in 1930 and to the world championship in '31, still holds the distinction of being the only man who has ever caught a baseball dropped from the top of the Washington Monument—for what it's worth.

The first version of a "Huntsville ticker-tape parade" took place on April 5, 1931, when the citizens of Huntsville celebrated "Gabby Street Day." (National focus was on this area at the same time: the first trial of the "Scottsboro Boys" was under way.) Street brought many of players with him to Huntsville and the Cardinals played an exhibition game at Martin Park (where the Von Braun Civic Center is now located), beating a Huntsville all-star team 14-4 despite the fact that the Street loaned Dizzy Dean to the Huntsvillians. Sonny Jim Bottomly was the big hitter for the Cards, going five-for-five with three singles, a double and a triple.

It was the second time the St. Louis club had played in Huntsville. The first was in 1924 when the Cardinals met the Detroit Tigers (and Ty Cobb). Several major league clubs, in fact, occasionally stopped off in Huntsville on their way north at the end of spring training in the '20's and '30's. Scoop Hudgins, now the Southeastern Conference publicity director but then a student at Rison, remembers serving as a batboy when the Indians (featuring Walter Johnson and Earl Averill) played the New York Giants at the old Dallas field in 1934.

There were other baseball players from Huntsville who made it to the majors, some for brief stays and others who enjoyed lengthy careers. In the early '30's, two Merrimack players signed big league contracts and played for a short time at the top—pitcher Buck Carter, who went to the Philadelphia A's, and third baseman Charlie English, who played with the White Sox. And in 1934, pitcher Earl (Wee Willie) Allen of Dallas Village signed a pro contract and played with Nashville and Tallahassee before being called up to the Phillies for the latter part of the '38 season. "The first big league game I ever saw, I pitched in," said Allen, who now lives in Virginia. "I pitched three innings against Pittsburgh that day, and the first man I faced was Paul (Big Poison) Waner. He popped up." Allen finished the season with a 5-3 record but hurt his arm in spring training the next year, curtailing a promising major league career.

Until Don Mincher came along in the mid-50's, probably the most famous professional athlete from the Huntsville area was James Tabor of New Hope. Oldtimers still insist that Tabor is the best baseball and basketball player ever to come out of Madison County. He attended Alabama briefly, starring in both sports as a freshman, but signed a major league contract with the Boston Red Sox his sophomore year. Tabor played third base for the Red Sox for several years in the late 1930's and early '40's. "He had such a strong arm from third base that his first baseman had to wear a special glove," recalls an old friend, Smith Ledbetter. "He was the best player I ever saw." Tabor died young (age 40) on the West Coast.

Don Mincher first caught the attention of professional scouts in 1955 when, as a strapping high school junior and the youngest member of the old Huntsville Parkers, he was a hitting terror in a series of games at the NBC tournament in Wichita.

Mincher signed a professional baseball contract the next year and went up to the Minnesota Twins in 1961. He was a heavy hitting first baseman for the Twins until 1967, when he was traded to the California Angels. Mincher later played for Seattle, Washington (later the Texas Rangers) and Oakland before retiring in 1972.

Of the many highlights of Mincher's career, two stick out in his mind—his thunderous home run in his first at-bat against Don Drysdale in the '65 World Series, and his key two-run hit which won the fifth game of the '72 World Series.

"Players like Mincher come along about once every 30 or 40 years," said Fulton Hamilton, who coached Donnie in football at Butler.

★★★

Huntsville has produced its share of professionals in other sports, too.

Johnny Stallworth, who played at Alabama A&M, is now a prominent member of the former world champion Pittsburgh Steelers. Ex-A&M'er Ronnie Coleman plays for the Houston Oilers. Bobby Luna, a high school All-America at Huntsville High in the early '50's and a college All-America at Alabama, went on to a career with the San Francisco 49ers.

Huntsvillian Jimmy Certain is a familiar face on the pro bowling tour, and Les Mendenhall—who once lived here—used to be.

As we have seen, several top professional boxers came from Huntsville in the 1930's, including Carl Powell, Dummy Robinson, Kid Moorehead and a young welterweight who may have been the toughest of them all, Tommy Baker.

Baker, who recently returned to Huntsville after bartending for 34 years in Michigan, was one of 15 children. He fought throughout the Deep South in the '30's under the tutelage of Bushy Bolton and another Huntsville promoter, Kid Giant, who ran a pool room and a boxing gym across from the Russell Erskine.

"I remember in 1935 or '36, Glant was going to take four of us—me, Moorehead, Powell and Robinson—up to New York to give us more exposure," said Baker. "He already had our bus tickets. But a couple of days before we were supposed to leave, Glant was hitting a punching bag and fell over and died. So we didn't go to New York."

★★★

Huntsville has also boasted professional teams as well as individuals—although the teams were usually short-lived.

The city's only pro baseball team came in 1930 and departed the same year, victimized by competition from the more popular mill teams. The Huntsville Professionals played in the now-defunct Georgia-Alabama Class D League along with Anniston, Talladega, Carrollton, Cedartown and Lindale, Ga. They left after the summer of '30, vacating Martin Park for greener pastures where the fans wouldn't be watching the likes of Lincoln, Merrimack and Dallas.

Racing of various forms was popular in town at one time or another. In the '20's, the trotters were a popular attraction in late September at the old Madison County Fair on Church Street. Auto races were also staged at the Fairgrounds, but big-time races involving cars didn't really get started until Huntsville Speedway was built in the '50's down near the Tennessee River. The biggest attraction at the Speedway came in 1962 when track officials staged the Rocket City 200 NASCAR late-model race. The race was won by a promising young driver from Randleman, N.C., named Richard Petty, who finished just ahead of Jim Paschal and Buck Baker.

And there was a pro football team in Huntsville, too. Remember?

Local businessman Jimmy Lane took over an old semi-pro team called the Rockets, changed their name to the Alabama Hawks, and got the team into the Continental Football League, which spread all the way from Orlando, Fla., to New Jersey.

At that time (this was before the World Football League fiasco), many people—including Lane—thought the Continental League could be eventually developed into another NFL. He believed Huntsville could blossom into a latterday Green Bay. Lane brought in a knowledgeable coach (Marv Matuszak, who later coached on the Atlanta Falcons staff) and a group of good college players who had been cut from NFL rosters. Among the Hawk players were Jeff Van Note (who went on to play for the Falcons), Skip Myers (who later played split end for the Cincinnati Bengals) and Jim Dyar, now an assistant on Johnny Majors' new staff at Tennessee.

The Hawks won the very first league championship in 1967. But hard times set in and both the franchise and the league folded two years later.

"I don't regret anything about it," Lane says today, "except for the fact that we had to fold. I'm proud we made the effort. In the beginning, I figured it would take five years for it to become successful in a space-oriented town and for us to begin attracting people from a 50-mile radius. Economically, it could've meant a lot to the city. But..."

But it didn't happen. The Hawks were an artistic success—and a financial failure.



Today's subject is basketball, and what better place to start than the story of Bud Buford?

"Nobody who ever played basketball in Huntsville could shoot like Bud," many of the oldtimers say. "And nobody was ever a better referee, either."

There might be a reasonable argument against the first contention by citing later dead-eye shooters like Ty Samples, Randy Hollingsworth and Danny Petty. But it's generally agreed that Buford, after his playing days were over, had few peers as an official.

Bud Buford was a member of a member of the famous 1925 Joe Bradley Junior High team which beat everybody in sight, of every age group—including St. Bernard College! Other members of that team were Gerald McCutcheon, William and Edward Osmond, J. D. Jones, Willie Venable and William Childress. They went on to ever greater heights as senior high players at Bradley. Buford was usually his team's high scorer, often getting 30 or more points—a remarkable total in those days—with a deadly set shot. "The one thing I could do is shoot," says Buford, who today lives only a few hundred yards down Triana Boulevard from his old Joe Bradley gym.

After high school, Buford turned down an offer to play at Alabama and instead went to work for Merrimack Mills. He played and coached in the mill leagues for a while ("Some great teams—Dallas, Merrimack, Lowe") and later went into coaching at the West Huntsville YMCA. One of his teams won the 'Y' state championship. About this time, he got into officiating and before he retired in the 1950's, he had called more than 2,000 games.

In those early days, only one man worked a game. Buford usually drew the toughest assignments—Huntsville-Decatur, Gurley-New Hope...and Scottsboro-Pisgah.

"I remember when Mickey O'Brien was at Scottsboro, he used to want me to call a lot of their games," said Buford. "One day he called me and said, 'How about coming up here for our Pisgah game?' I didn't much want to go so I quoted him a price I thought he couldn't afford. He said, 'Okay, be here at 5 o'clock.' Those two teams really went after each other. After the game, the Pisgah coach came up to me and said, 'How about coming up and calling it when they come to our place next week?' I told him that was too far back on the mountain for me—and it was in those days."

During his officiating career, Buford saw most of the top athletes of Madison County from the '20's until the '50's. "The three best I ever saw," he said, "were Jim Tabor at New Hope, Billy Joe Rowan at Huntsville and Bill Allen at Huntsville." He also remembers calling girls basketball games for some "great girl athletes—the McCrarys and Vaughns at Monrovia, the Steakley twins at Huntsville High, a lot of good ones who played for Mr. (Cecil) Fain at Rison, and the Brocks, Jessie, Juanita, Maggie and Billie, at Joe Bradley."

Bud Buford added, "Huntsville has been fortunate to have a lot of fine coaches over the years, too. I played for some of them and officiated for a lot of others, going all the way back to Jesse Keene."



Jesse Keene coached a number of good basketball players at Huntsville High in the late '20's and mid-30's, including Charles O'Reilly and Houston Goodson, both of whom went on to play for Auburn. But Keene's forte was football. The same applied to Milton Frank, his successor at Huntsville High. Probably the first top-line high school basketball coach in the city was Bob Warden, who is still called "Coach Bob" by his legions of friends.

Warden, himself a former all-sports star at Huntsville High, was the head basketball coach at HHS from 1946 until 1985. He took teams to the state tournament three straight years (1949-51) and one of his former players, Bobby League, held the state tournament record for the highest one-game point total (36) for several years.

Over the years, Warden coached several other blue-chip players—Billy Sexton, later a three-year starter at Alabama for Johnny Dee; Ty Samples, who played for Joel Eaves at Auburn; Bobby Luna, a football star at Alabama; and other quality players like Jim Rosser, W. C. Baker, Frank Woodard, Charles Hill, Jim Sturdivant and Ollie Crowson, to mention a few.

"Those were good times," said Warden. "We had some heartaches, but we had a lot of fond memories, too. I think the coaches, as a group, might have been a little closer in those days, too. We were all a close-knit group. I liked Gilbert Ayers, who was Butler's first basketball coach. And I always regarded Cotton Rogers as one of my closest friends, even though we were rivals on the court."

T. E. (Cotton) Rogers came to Huntsville from Tuscaloosa in 1954. He had just turned down a coaching opportunity in Atlanta, but he liked what he saw at three-year-old Butler High School and he liked what he heard from Butler's tough little principal, J. Homer Crim.

"But there was one thing that made up my mind to come here," recalled Rogers, now an instructor at Johnson High School. "My wife and I were eating lunch at the old Central Cafe downtown and we overheard some Huntsville High kids talking. They were saying, 'Butler may beat us in football, but they'll never beat us in basketball.' I took that as a challenge."

Rogers took on a lot of challenges over the years, and usually he came out ahead. When he retired as Butler's coach in 1972, he had compiled one of the most extraordinary coaching records in the history of the Alabama High School Athletic Association: 422 wins with only 132 losses (an average record of 21-6 per year), seven Tennessee Valley Conference championships, seven trips to the state tournament (five in a row between 1963-67), and one state championship.

"All I had to do was drive the bus," Rogers says today. "Anybody could've won with the boys we had."

It was true that for most of Rogers' era, Butler had an abundance of top basketball players—partly because, as Rogers grinningly admits, "we could recruit a little from out in the county back in those days."

Many, including Rogers himself, believe his greatest squad was the 1965 team which went 28-0 in the regular season only to lose in the opening game of the state tournament to Emma Sansom, a team the Rebels had waxed 35 points two weeks earlier. "I guess we had more depth on that team than any of the others," said Rogers. Those unbeaten Rebels included Glenn Wallace, Louis Vaughn, Jimmy Brooks, Ronnie Noblitt, Ronnie Stapler, Larry Cowart, Basil Broadway, Larry Berry, Larry Davis and Randy Hollingsworth.

The next year—the 1965-66 basketball season—was a milestone for athletics at Butler, for the city of Huntsville itself and, indeed, for the entire state of Alabama. A tall black kid named Danny Treadwell had moved here from Gadsden, and Cotton Rogers wanted him to play center for Butler. Treadwell became the first black basketball hero at a previously all-white high school in Alabama. That season, Butler went 28-3 and won the state championship, beating Lanier of Montgomery in the dramatic finals at Foster Auditorium in Tuscaloosa. Hollingsworth (who later played for Bama) and Treadwell were the stars but there was plenty of other talent—Tommy Lewallen, Don Faint, Brian Elliott, Larry Berry, Billy Broadway, Emmett Phillips, Walter Rogers, Jimmy Brooks and David Pearce.

Rogers coached several genuine stars throughout his career: Jerry Dugan, Jerry Rice and Don Mincher in the mid-'50's, big John Whitworth (who went to Birmingham-Southern) in the late-'50's, and Ronnie Quick (who went to Auburn) in the early '60's.

Of the coaches at the five city schools this past season, four of them—Quick at Johnson, Dugan at Lee, Stapler at Grissom and Rice at Butler—played for the same man: Cotton Rogers. The only exception was Wade Lipscomb, who coached Huntsville High to its first state tournament trip in a quarter of a century.



Dugan's coaching story is itself remarkable. In 1967, he coached Hazel Green to the state 3A basketball championship and the next year, as Lee's coach, his Generals won the state 4A title.

Dugan is the only coach in Alabama who ever won back-to-back state championships at different schools. Since then, his reputation has continued to grow. Most knowledgeable observers consider him to be one of the two or three premier coaches in the entire state. The standard quote about Dugan ("He'll always have 'em ready by tournament time") probably originated in '68 when Lee—too small and too slow—beat everybody in the regionals and then the state. Bespectacled Danny Petty was the shooting star of that team, which also included Dave Beck, Mike Colburn, Ricky Davidson, Gar Dovers, Mike Griggs, Bobby Keel, Mike Loper, Dan Poole and the late Porter Moore.

Many other Rogers pupils went on to successes in coaching: His No. 1 aide at Butler, George Newby, was the first basketball coach at Grissom, and was succeeded by a former Rogers-Newby player, Stapler. Quick was an assistant under Rogers before taking the head job at Johnson when that school was formed. Scooter Vaughn, a guard on Rogers' awesome mid-'60's teams, took Sparkman to the state tournament before going into the insurance business. Rice is now in the process of rebuilding the basketball program at his alma mater. And so Cotton Rogers' influence lingers, long after he retired from the game he coached so long and so well.



— Part IX —

The first Huntsville High School was built in 1916 on West Clinton Avenue.

In 1927, the school was moved to Randolph Street when the city built two new high schools—Council for the black children and the new Huntsville school for the whites. The present Huntsville High School, located on Billie Watkins Avenue, was completed in 1954.

Football has always been one of the cornerstone traditions at Huntsville High, even back to the earliest days, and the school has a long history of superb coaches.

The first of the premier HHS coaches was Harry Esslinger, who came to Huntsville in the early 1920's. Esslinger, an All-Southern and All-American at Auburn, turned out a series of strong teams, particularly in 1922 when the school's 11-member (no subs) team routed several opponents, including Coffee of Florence by the resounding margin of 82-0. One member of that squad was Paul Styles, who still lives here.

"We started off with 11 guys that year," said Styles, "but I believe we got three more to come out one day at a pep rally. That '22 bunch started the first H-Club. Our big day was that 82-0 win over Coffee. We were pretty good, but we came back to earth the next year—Decatur beat us by the same score, 82-0."

In the late '20's, Jesse Keene took over as both football and basketball coach at Huntsville High. Keene, a 6-3, 230-pounder, came here after graduating from Vanderbilt. A hard-nosed fundamentalist, Keene's teams always reflected the same sort of tough spirit. His 1929 team was undefeated (and his basketball team of the next year won the state championship).

Keene left in 1935 to accept a professorship in history at the University of Tampa. After an extended search, a successor was announced. He also came from the state of Tennessee. His name was Milton Frank.



In the next decade, Milton Frank forever etched his name in the athletic hall of fame at Huntsville High School.

Years later, the city of Huntsville would honor his name for all the ages by renaming the new municipal stadium at Brahan Spring Park in his honor.

Frank was a tough all-conference lineman for Robert Neyland at Tennessee, and when he came to Huntsville High, he brought General Neyland's single wing offense and spartan philosophy with him. The combination worked for Frank just as it did for the General.

Frank never had a losing season at Huntsville High—and equally as significant was the fact that he was able to hold his own against the venerable Decatur High coach, Shorty Ogle. For years, Decatur was the No. 1 powerhouse in North Alabama football. When Frank's team beat the Red Raiders 7-0 in the second game of the 1937 season, it marked the first time since 1925 that Huntsville had tamed Decatur. (The fact that Decatur came back in the eighth game of the '37 season and blitzed Huntsville 47-6—the two teams played twice a year in those days—didn't detract from the accomplishment).

Except for 1942, when J.B. McClendon directed the Crimson Panthers, Frank coached all through the war years, producing some of the school's greatest teams. In the later part of the war years, he worked at Redstone Arsenal, and after the war, he retired from active coaching. Later he went into the jewelry business in downtown Huntsville and was one of the city's leading businessmen until his death in 1967.

At Huntsville, Frank coached a succession of noted football players, including Charlie Hopper, Wendal Payne, Gene Varin, J. W. Daye, Frank Swain, Lennie Taylor and Albert Huffman. But perhaps his greatest player was Billy Joe Rowan, a 6-4, 210-pound tailback who later played at Tennessee. Rowan, whose son Robby was an All-Stater at Huntsville two decades later, was an All-Southern prep star at HHS.

"Coach Frank was tough and hard," says the elder Rowan, a Huntsville insurance executive. "And I guess we all thought he was unfair. It wasn't until later that we really appreciated him. We got to be real close in later years. Before he died, he was sort of asking for me, and I



went down there and we talked about the old days for a long time. I like to think it did some good at the time.

"The thing I remember most about Coach Frank is the fact that he knew so much basic football. When I went to Tennessee, General Neyland was surprised that I already knew most of the basics of the single wing. That wasn't because of me. It was because of Milton Frank."

Joe Dildy coached briefly at Huntsville after the war, then Buck Hughes came along.

Hard times hit in the early '50's. In 1952 came one of the low points—or high points, depending on allegiances, when the Gurley Cotton Pickers—coached by young Mike Pietkiewicz (father of present Auburn basketballer Stan Pietkiewicz)—beat Huntsville 24-7. In 1953, a former Hughes assistant, Clem Gryska, became the head coach and stayed for the next six years until he joined Bear Bryant's first coaching staff at Alabama.

"Coaching at Huntsville was one of the most enjoyable experiences of my career," recalled Gryska, now in charge of recruiting at Alabama. "In those days, the TVC (Tennessee Valley Conference) was a big thing. Decatur had always been Huntsville's big rival, but by that time, Butler ranked up there with Decatur—even ahead, I guess. Butler was tough from the word 'go,' and we still had some great games with Decatur. One year in the early '50's, the two big players in North Alabama were Bobby Luna, who played for us and later went to Alabama, and Bobby Freeman, who played for Decatur and went to Auburn. They were great rivals in both football and track."

Gryska coached other top players, too, including Benny Nelson, Mike Hopper and Boots Ellett, who went to Alabama; and Sam and Bob Sullins and Bruce Hammer, who played at Vanderbilt.

After Gryska, Huntsville was coached by Jerry Lambert and then Max Kelley, both Alabama graduates. And then in 1964 Huntsville High hired a new coach from Daytona Beach, Fla., a graduate of Florida State. His name was Tom Owen.



For the next 11 years, Tom Owen coached Huntsville High to its greatest football heights.

Many a rival has said, "Tommy Owen is the best coach I've ever gone against."

An intense personality who abhorred defeat, Owen demanded—and got—the last ounce of devotion to the Big Red cause and the ultimate degree of talent from each of his players. As a motivator and a Rockne-type pre-game speechmaker, he had no peer.

"It was a memorable time, those years," recalled Owen, now an assistant principal at Lee High School. "During that period, I think the football played in Huntsville and Montgomery was as good as any high school football in the country. I'd seen what I considered to be the best high school football a few years earlier in Miami, but I believe our '68 team that played Lanier could have played with any of them."

Owen took two Huntsville teams to the state playoffs. The '66 team lost in the first round to Robert E. Lee of Montgomery and the '68 team got to the finals before losing a close one to Lanier. In his remarkable career, Owen's teams won 73 games, losing only 34 and tying one. (The record was 55-12 when there were only three city schools—Huntsville, Butler and Lee.)

Tom Owen probably sent more players to major colleges than any other coach in northern Alabama. Among them: Wayne and Randy Hall (unrelated), Phil Chaffin, Robby Rowan and Duffy Botes, all of whom went to Alabama; Bobby Davis, who later won the Cliff Hare Award at Auburn; and Jeff Smith, who went to Georgia Tech.

Owen resigned before the start of the '75 season and Huntsville has been through three coaches—Cliff Sims, Larry McCoy and now Paul Glover—since then.

"Football has been kinda down the last few years at the school," a former player was saying recently. "And we'll be back up there before long. But I don't know if there'll ever be another Coach Owen at Huntsville High School."

Part X

In 1950, the principals of Huntsville's four mill schools sat down at a meeting with County Superintendent Edward Anderson.

The principals were J. Homer Crim of West Huntsville, Cecil Fain of Rison, Elmon Brown of Lincoln and E. F. DuBose of Joe Bradley. They were meeting with Anderson, with the blessing of the city school board, for the purpose of consolidating the four "county" schools into a single "city" school. The new school would be located at intersection of Clinton and 5th Avenue (now Governors Drive). Its principal would be J. Homer Crim. After some deliberation, they picked a name for the school: S. R. Butler.

In the early days of the 20th Century, there had been another Butler School in Huntsville. A private institution on Eustis Street, it was opened by S. R. Butler, who would later become superintendent of education in Huntsville. When Butler went into public education, the school changed hands and was renamed Wills-Taylor Private College. Wills-Taylor was an early athletic powerhouse in the city, usually beating all comers—including Huntsville High—in a variety of sports, including football and baseball. Among the well known baseball players from Wills-Taylor were Tank Almon and J. S. (Mr. Mac) McDonnell.

The Butler name was resurrected when the four mill schools formed one new city school in the summer of 1951. Eventually, S. R. Butler would become the largest high school in the state of Alabama, and in the late-60's, it would be moved to a modern new building on Holmes Avenue.

From the first, it was expected that the new Butler school would be a dreadnought in Tennessee Valley football. And so it was.

Butler's football tradition, which has continued to grow over the years, began with that first class—and with the first coach, Fulton Hamilton.

Eventually, Hamilton would become a principal when the city built a third high school, Lee, and after that he would become an administrator at the city board of education. But in 1951, he was a football coach, and a good one. Hamilton came to Rison from West End of Birmingham when Butler was being formed and because of his background, he was a logical choice for football coach.

"That first year, we had some adjustments to make," recalled Hamilton, "and I think maybe the people of the city had some adjustments to make. For so many years, Huntsville High had been the big name and now suddenly here was this big newcomer over on the west side. One thing for sure—it set up a quick natural rivalry, which was a great thing for the city."

The first Huntsville-Butler football game ended in a 7-7 tie. "In all fairness, we should've won," said Hamilton, "even though Huntsville had a disappointing season and even though they put it all together against us. I made a bad call in the fourth quarter with us leading 7-0. I let the boys talk me into going for a first down deep in our territory—or rather, they more or less decided on their own to go for it. We didn't make it and Huntsville took it on in for a tie."

That first Butler team finished with a 5-4-1 record. The next year, the Rebels were undefeated through the regular season, losing only to unbeaten Bessemer on a cold Thanksgiving morning in the final game of the year.

"For that day and time," said Hamilton, "I believe our 1952 team was one of the finest high school football teams I'd ever seen." Simply stated, the Rebels were loaded with stars, including Herman Daniels, Marvin Miller, Donald Crutcher, Jack Ayers and a slick quarterback named Glen Nunley, who later went to the University of Georgia—and still later came back as head coach at Madison Academy, and now serves as offensive coach at Lee.

Butler punished Huntsville 32-7 in the second game between the two schools, and it would be another five years before the Crimson Panthers finally got revenge.

The Rebels fielded another powerhouse in '53, going 8-1-1. The only loss was a 19-13 defeat by West End, which went on to the state title. West End had a speedy halfback named Keith Wilson, who burned the Rebs with three long touchdown runs. Wilson went on to play football at Kansas State, and a decade later, a couple of years after Fulton Hamilton became the first principal at Lee, he hired Keith Wilson as his head football coach.

Hamilton got out of coaching briefly to be succeeded by Vernon Wells, but returned to coach three more years at Butler between 1958-60. When he went into school administration at Lee, Marvin Clem—now the principal at Athens High School—became Butler's head coach.

Clem coached from 1961 until 1965. In January of 1966, Homer Crim announced that Butler had hired a new head football coach. His name was John Meadows.

John Meadows came to Butler as one of the most highly regarded high school coaches in the state. Already, he had coached undefeated state champion teams at Hanceville, Gordo and Scottsboro.

While at Scottsboro, he had two 10-0 teams and two 9-1 teams. He accepted the Butler job after his last unbeaten season at Scottsboro.

"I guess I just wanted to try a bigger school to see if I was up to the challenge," said Meadows, recalling those first hectic first days when he came to Butler. "I made sure to bring some good coaches with me." From Scottsboro, Meadows brought his No. 1 assistant, Larrie Robinson, who would later become the first head coach at Huntsville's fourth high school, Grissom. He also brought Doug Styles and Glynn Stowe and hired Max Kelley, who had coached at Huntsville.

Taking advantage of the fact that the city schools were just beginning to be racially integrated, Meadows got several black athletes from Council High School, where they had been tutored by Adam Kellam, an excellent football coach in his own right. One of Meadows' first "recruits" was a roadrunner halfback named Leonard Thomas. At Butler, Thomas soon acquired a nickname that will probably stick all his life. They called him "Rabbit" because he ran like one. Later, Rabbit would become one of the all-time leading rushers at North Alabama (then Florence State) and would then return as the first black assistant coach at Butler.

"Rabbit was the showpiece of our first team at Butler," said Meadows. "We had Junebug Walker at quarterback and a big end named James Wilson, who went on to be a captain at Eastern Kentucky, and we had a bunch of scrappers." Meadows' first Butler team finished 8-2, losing only to Coffee (7-0) and by 13-7 to Keith Wilson's great Lee team which won the TVC championship. That same year, Butler and Huntsville—coached by Tom Owen—played before the largest crowd ever to see a football game in Huntsville. More than 15,000, far more than capacity, jammed Milton Frank Stadium to see one of the memorable games ever played here. The final score was Butler 20, Huntsville 17.

Butler was 10-0 the next year, losing only to Lanier in the state playoffs. And over the next few years, Meadows would take three other Rebel teams to the state playoffs: In '71, when they lost 8-0 in the rain to Decatur in the championship game, in '73 when they lost to Banks in the semifinals, and last year when they again got to the semifinals.

Among the top players who've worn the green and gold for Meadows have been Charlie Krause, Bill Baker, Gary Robinson, Joe Little, Van Barnes, Gary Reynolds, Bo Mathews (who went on to Colorado and the San Diego Chargers) and Clifford Toney, who is going to Auburn this year on a football scholarship.

Over the years, Meadows has compiled one of the most remarkable coaching records in the state: 167 victories, 40 losses and seven ties in 22 years of head coaching at four different schools. Only once has he coached a losing team.

As long as there is a football team at Butler High School, John Meadows' name will be remembered.

— Part XI —

By the middle 1950's, Huntsville was a boom town caught up in the excitement of the space age. The census of 1910 showed that 7,600 lived within the city limits of Huntsville. By 1956, it was almost 50,000, and that figure ballooned to nearly 125,000 in the next decade.

All this meant more families and more children—and more children meant that Huntsville required a new high school. To meet the need, Lee High School was built in 1958 (although the first senior class didn't come along until '64. Bill Godsey, now a Huntsville insurance executive, coached the early Lee football teams. Probably the first football star at Lee was Don Cornelius, who went on to become the all-time leading passer at the University of North Alabama (then Florence State).

In 1964, the same year that Huntsville High hired Tom Owen, Lee hired a new head coach from Jones Valley in Birmingham. In the next decade, Keith Wilson established himself as one of the giants in the prep sports heritage of Huntsville.

"Everything in Huntsville was very exciting at the time," said Wilson, now a middle school administrator, "because the city was going through such a growth explosion. I regarded it as a great opportunity. It was a highly competitive situation, but I was impressed with the commitment to athletics at Lee."

Wilson's first football powerhouse burst on the scene in the fall of '66. Using a new offense called the Run-and-Shoot (directed by a strong-armed little quarterback named Greg Patterson), the Generals swept to the TVC championship with a 9-1 season. Their only loss was to Huntsville, an old Lee nemesis.

"I think the '66 season may have been the all-time highlight of high school football in Huntsville," said Wilson. "We were 9-1, Huntsville was 9-1 and Butler was 8-2, and every time any of us played, the stadium was packed. It was a great year not only for us, but for everybody else in the city."

Wilson coached other stout teams at Lee: In '68, the Generals lost only to Huntsville and Butler; in '69, they lost three of the first four but then swept the last six; in '70, they lost only to Butler and to Robert E. Lee. Wilson calls the 1970 team "our best one at Lee." That team featured Condredge Holloway, who turned down a baseball contract with the Montreal Expos to play quarterback for Tennessee.

Among the other Lee players who went on to play collegiately were Dave Beck (now an assistant coach at his alma mater, Auburn), Danny Webster, Ralph Murphy, Carl McCulley, Dwight Scales (who went from Grambling to the Los Angeles Rams), tough little Carl McCulley, and the Butler boys, Zacky and Keith, who went to Memphis State.

Wilson went into school administration two years ago and was succeeded by John Childress, who had coached junior high football in Huntsville and later was an assistant at Grissom and then Jacksonville State.

Wilson was more than a football coach. He believed in building a total athletic program, and that's exactly what he did. Two of the top coaches in the state joined Wilson's staff—Max Burleson for football and baseball and, later, Jerry Dugan for basketball. Wilson himself was the pioneer of high school wrestling in North Alabama, paving the way for the excellent wrestling programs which have since been established at all the other city schools.

His two sons, Russ and Jeff, developed into state wrestling champions. One of Wilson's former footballer-wrestlers, Tim Lull, is now the head wrestling coach at Huntsville High.

Later, Butler became the top wrestling power in North Alabama under the coaching of Glynn Stowe, but it all began with Keith Wilson.



In the late '60's, Huntsville went through another expansion of its public school facilities with the additions of a new elementary, junior high and high school. The schools were named after the three American astronauts who had died in the Apollo I fire: The elementary school was called Chaffee, the junior high became Ed White. And the new high school, located on Bailey Cove Road in southeast Huntsville, was named for Virgil (Gus) Grissom, one of the seven original Mercury astronauts.

Larrie Robinson came from Butler to coach football and to coordinate the overall athletic program at Grissom. In quick order, Robinson's football team was a state power, and the school's sports program in general ranked with anybody's. George Newby started a solid basketball program which has continued to flourish under Ronnie Stapler, and Grissom has had a succession of good basketball players, including Dan Bell, Leroy Madkin, Kevin Fairclough, Pat Kannapel, Glenn Dooley and David Finley. David McKannan, who went to Auburn, and Steve Boit, who later set the SEC mile record at Alabama, helped establish a track tradition at Grissom. Al Smith began a steady baseball program, which Ray Walker has continued.

In the money sport, football, Robinson remembers being "very apprehensive—scared to death, really" at the prospect of starting a program at a new school. "I began to feel better when I saw how the parents got behind us down here. And they've been behind us ever since."

Robinson especially remembers what he calls "the two hump games we've had at Grissom." The first came when the Tigers, playing a 4A schedule for the first time, traveled to Cramton Bowl in Montgomery and shocked Sidney Lanier 7-6. "They had Bucky Berrey," said Robinson, "and he kept trying to kick field goals and Gary Wagner kept blocking 'em. I

think Wagner blocked three that night. Later on, he blocked a bunch at Jacksonville State." The other "hump" game in Robinson's view came in 1973 "when we finally beat Butler for the first time." Since then, Grissom has beaten Butler four in a row and has participated in the state playoffs three times, once getting all the way to the finals (1973) before losing to Banks.

Robinson has sent many Grissom players off to play football in college, including Foster Christy (Auburn), Steve Cash (Alabama), Charles Adams (West Point), Bill Holby (Vanderbilt), Greg Phillips (Tennessee) and many others—Bo Emerson, Mark Huskey, Bobby Hartselle, Bill Wade, Jeff Whitt, to mention a few—to various small colleges.

* * *

Johnson became Huntsville's fifth high school in the fall of 1973. Max Burleson, who had been the head baseball coach and Wilson's No. 1 football assistant at Lee, took over in the dual role as head football and basketball coach.

From the first, Burleson's football teams have been competitive. The Jaguars were 7-3 in their first full varsity year. The next year, they went 9-1 before losing to Anniston in the state playoffs. Johnson was 8-2 and 5-4 the next two years.

In 1975, Johnson played Grissom (losing 8-0) before the first standing-room-only crowd at Milton Frank Stadium in five years.

Among the top football players who've suited up for Burleson at Johnson are Butch Cassidy, Nelson Jennings, Frank Humphrey, David Hall, Ricky Skiles (who went on to Louisville) and Randy Harkins (who went to West Point).

Johnson's basketball program, under Ronnie Quick, has been one of the strongest in the state in recent years. The Jaguars went to the state tournament this year behind the play of big all-state center Bobby Cattage, who has signed a basketball grant-in-aid with Auburn. The previous year, JHS guard James Mundie signed with Mississippi State.

In baseball, Burleson quickly took up where he left off at Lee. As the Lee baseball coach, his Generals went to the state playoffs in 1970 and had won the state title in 1971. Burleson produced with a long line of accomplished baseball players at Lee—Holloway, Steve Peterson, Mike Parvin, Eddie Echols, Ricky and Randy Davidson and Danny Parks, to name a few. At Johnson, Burleson has coached two teams into the state playoffs; the '75 team finished second to Robert E. Lee. Among the ringleaders in baseball at Johnson have been Mike Norment, Mike Morgan, Dennis Gray, David Parks, Ricky Skiles and Nelson Jennings.

— Last —

From P. I. Pruitt's sports column in The Huntsville Daily Times, July 11, 1937: "From what we hear, little Bobby Lowry, six-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Lowry, is going places in the golfing world some of these days. He's still too short to get a good grip on his clubs, but the youngster shoots a fair stick. He has covered a par four hole in six strokes at the Orchard Place club. Like father, like son, maybe. Remember, his popper was once the professional for the Huntsville Golf and Country Club."



P. I. Pruitt (no relation to the present writer, for those who've asked) must have had a crystal ball when he wrote those words 40 years ago.

"Little Bobby Lowry" grew up to be Bob Lowry Jr., one of the finest amateur golfers ever produced in the state of Alabama. After he got big enough to get a good grip on his clubs, he went on to win the Alabama Open three times, the prestigious Huntsville County Club Invitational literally more times than he can remember, any number of invitationals throughout Alabama, and also distinguished himself in several national tournaments, including the North-South at Pinehurst and the United States Amateur (1948 at Memphis, 1960 at St. Louis and 1965 at Southern Hills in Tulsa).

Lowry, a Huntsville insurance man, is still one of the best amateurs in the state and is highly placed in the United States Golf Association, one of the two ruling bodies (the other being the Royal and Ancient of St. Andrews, Scotland) in the game of golf. He is also perhaps the foremost golf historian in the city.

Lowry, however, isn't old enough to remember Huntsville's first golf course. There aren't many left who do, as far as that goes. The first course, built in the second decade of this century, was located at what is now the intersection of Oakwood and Andrew Jackson Way on the site of what is now

the old Rison School building, the Oakwood shopping center and the Optimist Park baseball field. Lowry's mother, Helen, remembers caddyding for her father, S. O. Holmes, at the old course, and retired judge Inzer Wyatt also caddied for his dad there.

The course (its name has long been forgotten, if there was a name) was literally a cow pasture—mill workers from Dallas and Lincoln who owned cows let their animals graze on the "fairways."

The city's first course was allowed to quietly return to pasture when Huntsville Country Club was formed in 1925 on the site of an old nursery. Originally, the course had nine holes on the north side of Oakwood Avenue and nine on the other side, the present site. The northern nine was lost during the depression and the course was left with just nine holes for the next two decades.

Huntsville County Club's first golf professional was George Black, who migrated to Atlanta from a bleak little Scottish town on the North Sea, Carnoustie. Before coming to Huntsville, Black was a renowned clubmaker. Among those who commissioned his services was a young Atlantian named Robert Tyre Jones Jr. Using a set of George Black hickory-shafted clubs, Bobby Jones won the U. S. Amateur, the U. S. Open, the British Amateur and the British Open in 1930—the fabled Grand Slam, a feat never equaled before or since.

Black later moved to Gadsden, where he died two years ago. Huntsville Country Club has had a succession of fine pros since then, including Lowry's father, Milton Ward and now Bill Reilly, who came here from the famed Winged Foot course. HCC also has produced as many good amateurs as any other club in the state, foremost of these being Lowry and Frank Campbell.

A second country club (then Willowbrook, now Valley Hill) was built in the early '60's, and it has matured into one of the toughest and best-conditioned courses in North Alabama. Its first pro was Sam Byrd, who once played baseball with Babe Ruth and the New York Yankees, and who is now the golf pro at Anniston Country Club.

Gus Weeks, who recently retired from the Jetport course, came to Huntsville as the first pro at the municipal course, which was built 22 years ago near the old airport. Weeks, who has played exhibitions with Bobby Jones, Byron Nelson and Ben Hogan in his 60 years of golf, was responsible for getting Arnold Palmer to come to Municipal for golf exhibitions two straight years in the mid-60's.

Other nationally famous golf personalities have played in Huntsville over the years. Sam Snead appeared in an exhibition at Colonial in 1968. Lee Trevino, Hubert Green and a number of other touring pros played for two years at Valley Hill in a big pro-am. And among those who played at Huntsville Country Club were Lawson Little, whose cousin, Mrs. David Grayson, lives here; Cary Middlecoff, who played here shortly before winning his first U. S. Open; Patty Berg, the women's champion; and Walter Hagan, who left us with one of golf's most famous quotes—"Take time to sniff the flowers."

No study of the history of sports in Huntsville should omit the Young Men's Christian Association—and though the account of the YMCA is given last in this series, its contributions certainly aren't least. "The YMCA program pulled athletics together in this town," says YMCA Director Russell Barber. The statement is not an idle boast.

The Central YMCA was built in 1910, followed five years later by the West Huntsville (now McCormick) branch. Early 'Y' activity centered around basketball. All junior high basketball in the city was played at either the Central, West Huntsville or Dallas YMCAs. And after the West Huntsville gymnasium burned, the West Huntsville branch served for a time as home court for West Huntsville and then Butler.

In addition to basketball, bowling was one of the primary YMCA sports in the early days. In the '30's, there were just 14 bowling lanes in Huntsville: two at the Central YMCA, two at West Huntsville, two at Dallas, and eight at the old Times Building. When the lanes were closed at The Times and Dallas, the two alleys at Central were moved to West Huntsville—and that was the only bowling site in town until Playmor was built in the early '50's.

One of the early giants of youth athletics in Huntsville was Obie Johnson, who started a baseball program for boys in 1937 at Lincoln Village. His kid teams played at the old Lincoln Park, where Ray and Pearman is now located. A similar program was going on across the railroad tracks in Dallas Village, where Hub Myhand was in charge under the directorship of W. P. Fanning. At Merrimack, early youth leaders were W. S. Copeland and Brooks Church, followed later by Floyd Bryant, Bud Buford and Sonny Westbrooks. And at West Huntsville, the program revolved around the 'Y' director, Andy Boyd, from the '30's until 1941, when the building was taken



over by the USO. The YMCA got it back in 1945; Judson Bailey was the director there briefly, and Bill Childress then ran it from 1946 until 1954.

The prime mover of the Huntsville YMCA program was (and still is) native Arkansan Russell Barber, who came to Huntsville from the army in '45. Barber had a broad sports background and so did his wife, the former Kathryn Rich, daughter of the pastor—at that time— of West Huntsville Baptist Church. The future Mrs. Barber once averaged nearly 40 points a game for West Huntsville.

Barber developed Huntsville's parks and playgrounds system and turned it over to the city fathers in 1948. He also gave the new Parks and Playgrounds Department (now called Parks and Recreation) its first director, W. E. McBride, previously a member of the YMCA staff. McBride was followed by Charles Langner (whose son David would, years later, score two famous touchdowns on blocked punts against the University of Alabama). After Langner came Paul Anderson, Jim Talley and the present director, Glenn Wallace.

When Barber first came to Huntsville, the YMCA had only 300 members and a few scattered programs. Now more than 25,000 participate in the organization's various programs, which include baseball, football, basketball and even soccer. The 'Y' also started the first ice hockey program, which has since grown to one of the largest of its kind in the South. The YMCA's allied organization, Parks and Playgrounds, is the largest in the state.

Barber now has several YMCA branches scattered throughout Huntsville and Madison County. His rural director is E. C. (Buttermilk) Johnson, a former ambidextrous athlete at West Huntsville who assumed his present duties in 1960. Johnson is the founder and corporate president of the Dizzy Dean League, is a life member of seven franchised youth sports program, and also holds the distinction of being the youngest person ever inducted into the Alabama Bowling Hall of Fame.

"In a large measure," says Russell Barber, "the history of the YMCA is sort of like a mirror on the sports history over Huntsville. Before, we had a lot of different and rival segments, sometimes pulling against one another—Dallas, Lincoln, Merrimack and so on. But the 'Y' pulled them all together. I don't think I'm being immodest in saying that the YMCA has played a tremendous part in the sports history of Huntsville." And so it has—for 67 years.

Tennis has enjoyed quite an evolution in Huntsville and is now one of the most popular sports in the city. It wasn't always that way, though.

In the early part of this century, only a few—notably Harry Landman, Hugh Doak, Sr., and Harry Esslinger—played the sport under the auspices of the YMCA. In the 1930's, however, the game caught on at Huntsville Country Club and elsewhere, spurred by the international fame of Americans Bill Tilden and Helen Wills Moody. The most locally famous group of tennis players played on courts behind the Meridianville plantation of Leslie Cummins and called themselves the "Hog Meadow Tennis Club." The Hog Meadow boys never lost a match in competition. Members included Basil Adams, Leslie Cummins, Virgil Uptain, Bill Popejoy, Cecil Fain, Bill Cummings, Jeff Darwin, Milton Cummings, T. T. Lanier, Robert Burkhardt, Junior Lanier, Louis Carroll, John Sparkman, Hubert Williams and Harry Esslinger.

Dwight Wilhelm, Jimmy Davis and John Clark were among the founders of the Huntsville Tennis Club, which flourished for a time on Randolph Street in the '30's. Among the earliest private courts were those located near the present Mims Court on Brandon Street, frequented by J. D. Thornton and M. U. Griffin, and courts belonging to Judge Horace Garth, to Lawrence Hereford and to the Fords (Earl Sr. and Jr., Ralph, Frank and Annie Laurie—Huntsville's most outstanding tennis family of those early years).

Within the past 20 years, tennis activity in Huntsville shifted first to Big Spring Park (developed by sports-minded city councilmen Milton Cummings, Jimmy Walker and Ed Mitchell) and later to the present facilities at Brahan Spring Park.

The best known local tennis personalities of the past two decades have been Cecil Fain, Paul Anderson, Henry Rupp, Alex Hayday, Fred and Jean Weckwarth, Kathy Deaton and the Wardens—Gordon Sr. (Polly) and his two sons, Charles and Gordon Jr. (Brick). The Wardens lived near the old "Alabama Power Courts" on McClung.

One of the most significant milestones in local tennis occurred when the Huntsville Industrial Tennis League—which has helped promote the sport in the schools and elsewhere—was organized eight years ago.

AMELIA GAYLE GORGAS, A BIOGRAPHY, by Mary Tabb Johnston with Elizabeth Johnston Lipscomb. The University of Alabama Press, 1978. 149pp. \$11.50.

An affectionate biography of one of the grande dames of the South, well-written, concise and appealing, this book should be a must reading for Alabamians and others interested in Southern history.

Amelia Gayle Gorgas, daughter of a governor of Alabama, lived a very long and rich life, spanning the historical eras of the Old South, Civil War and Reconstruction, and New South. Her life seemingly was one of triumph over whatever obstacles were placed in her path, culminated by long years of service to the University of Alabama as librarian and mother confessor to its students. We can well be proud of this courageous Alabamian.

Born in Greensboro, Alabama, she had been raised as a Southern lady, yet she married a northerner, Josiah Gorgas. He became, however, the chief of ordnance for the Confederacy. Ironically, her eldest son also married a Yankee, before he became famous for his efforts at eradicating yellow fever in the tropics, particularly during the construction of the Panama Canal, where he was chief sanitary officer.

After the Civil War her husband unsuccessfully attempted to manufacture iron products in Alabama, then turned to an academic life. For eleven years he was the vice-chancellor of the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee. Gorgas became the president of the University of Alabama in 1878, but a stroke left him incapacitated less than a year later. He then was appointed librarian at the University and Amelia, with the aid of several of her children, actually carried out his duties until his death in 1883. Amelia then officially became the librarian and, later, the postmistress as well. She finally retired at eighty, living on at the university until

her death there in 1913. Her memory is preserved in the name of the library and the Gorgas home on the campus. After the death of the last of her six children in 1953 the home was restored and opened to the public, and many of the mementos of the family remain on display.

Mrs. Gorgas' biography naturally centers about her two greatest concerns, her husband and children. But throughout her life we are presented with rich glimpses into the society of her day. Some of her correspondence is quoted in detail by the authors, but this adds rather than detracts, for it gives us good insight into her inmost thoughts.

The authors are mother and daughter, for in the preface Mrs. Johnston writes that "my daughter Elizabeth Johnston Lipscomb edited the manuscript and is responsible in large measure for its final form." They have produced what I consider to be an excellent biography of a courageous woman.

Editor



MISSISSIPPI, A BICENTENNIAL HISTORY, by John Ray Skates. W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1979. 181 pp. \$9.95.

The history of Mississippi has been so entwined with ours that all Alabamians should read this bicentennial salute to her. One of her best, if not the best, of the entire series of Norton's "The States and the Nation," this volume achieves the goals of the series; to present the significant events and special conditions that have moulded a state and have made that state a distinct entity different from all the others. This is good history, factual yet interpretative, often probing deeply beneath the surface. Mississippi is often an enigma to outsiders, even to Mississippians, and Skates, chairman of the history department at the University of Southern Mississippi, has given us a balanced view of her virtues and faults, explaining why and how Mississippi has been so misunderstood.

Editor



THE REGIONAL IMAGINATION, THE SOUTH AND RECENT AMERICAN HISTORY, by Dewey W. Grantham. Vanderbilt University Press, 1979. 258 pp.

This is not a new major work by a historian considered to be of first-rate stature, specializing in twentieth century, primarily Southern, United States history. Instead, this is a compilation of 14 essays, some never before in print produced by Grantham over the past twenty-odd years. They cover Southern history from the Progressive Era to the present and portray both the uniqueness of the South in American history and the loss of some of this uniqueness after World War II. Unfortunately, most are dated, as Grantham ruefully admits, and I feel these should have been rewritten to reflect changes in Southern historiography. Advanced students may benefit most by noting the changes in Grantham's viewpoints over the years. Recommended only for libraries without any of Grantham's works and lacking major holdings in twentieth century American history that may wish to have a little of both areas in one book.

Editor



A COLONIAL SOUTHERN BOOKSHELF, READING IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, by Richard Beale Davis. The University of Georgia Press, 1979. 130 pp. \$9.00.

The author is one of the deans of southern letters and what he has to say carries weight in the world of learning.

His thoughts here are basically a distillation of his career-long study of Southern life, given in a series of lectures at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and published as that institution's Lamar Memorial Series Number 21.

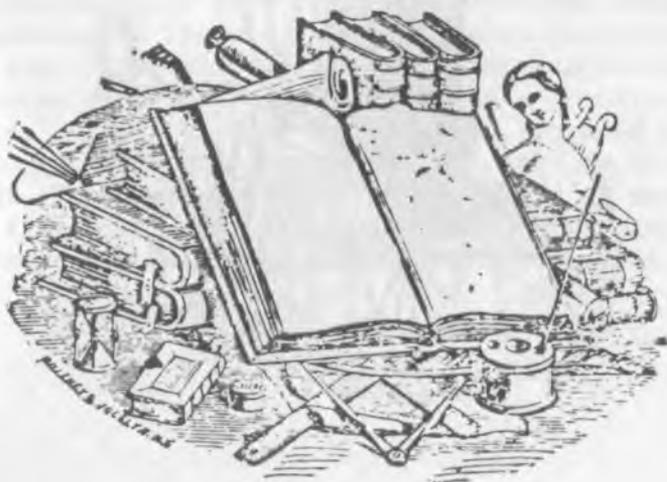
Davis has found, much contrary to "Sahara of the Bozart," that Southerners of many social and economic levels during the colonial period owned and read books. This conclusion is drawn from his study of three groups of books popular among Southern readers: books in history, politics and law; books on religious topics; and belle lettres. Davis is probably the first essayist of note to utilize inventories of books in private and public libraries, bookseller's lists and sales catalogues.

His conclusion leads him to question most historians concerned with the colonial period, who have tended to underestimate the degree of literacy in the Southern colonies. Even "the poorest and least educated usually had the Bible and a simple commentary or two," and the better libraries "represent a broad spectrum of interests and views."

Davis also finds distinction between the tastes of the Southerner and his more northern counterpart. For example, the Southerner "owned and enjoyed belletristic writing with apparently fewer inhibitions than his Pennsylvania or Massachusetts neighbor, and especially the dramatic and the somewhat bawdily satiric."

This book is highly recommended and deserves a much wider audience than it will probably reach.

Editor



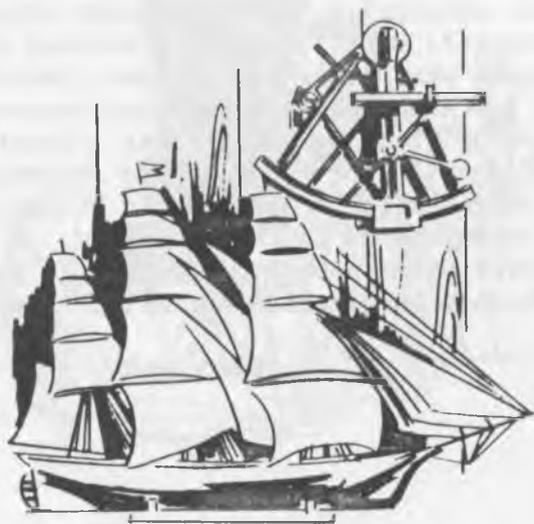


JOHN HOARY DENT, SOUTH CAROLINA ARISTOCRAT ON THE ALABAMA FRONTIER, by Ray Mathis. The University of Alabama Press, 1979. XIV, 260 pp. \$17.50.

This is one of the best books on Alabama published in the last decade. It is an excellent, in-depth case study of a young man who moved to Alabama in 1837 and became a planter with myriad interests, then moved to northwest Georgia following the Civil War. Mathis, professor of history at Troy University, Alabama, has utilized lengthy journals compiled by Dent in developing this study. Categorizing Dent as apparently typical of large planters who comprised less than one per cent of the population, Mathis is very objective in his treatment of Dent. Dent is portrayed above all as a businessman who places his economic interests above all else; for example, "His dominant concern was economic stability. He was at best a doubting Confederate." Primarily for graduate and advanced undergraduate students, this work should become a standard point of reference in Southern history. A must for all libraries with extensive holdings in Southern history, highly recommended for all four-year libraries.

Editor





JOHN TAYLOR WOOD, SEA GHOST OF THE CONFEDERACY, by Royce G. Shingleton. The University of Georgia Press, 1979. IV, 206 pp. \$15.00.

This is for all buffs of the Civil War, naval affairs or swashbuckling sea tales. Wood's Civil War history is affectionately portrayed by Shingleton, who has used primary sources very well, such as the Wood family diaries and scrapbooks.

Wood was a northerner by birth, and his father, a career Union Navy man, remained in Union service through the Civil War. Wood was drawn to the Southern side before the war by the marriage of one of his aunts to Jefferson Davis. After the death of this aunt, Davis' first wife, he married Varina Howell, whom Wood referred to as Aunt Varina. Through Davis, Wood was able during the Civil War to secure assignments he wanted, in between serving on Davis' staff with the rank of Colonel of Cavalry.

Wood's assignments included a position on the C.S.S. Virginia, when she fought the epic battle with the Monitor; leading a number of raids on Federal vessels blockading the North Carolina coast, and serving as captain of the raider C.S.S. Tallahasee.

With the collapse of the Confederacy, Wood attempted to flee the Confederacy with Davis. After they were captured, Wood escaped and made a fantastic voyage South along the east coast of Florida. Commanding a small boat Wood, along with several others, including John Breckinridge, made it safely across the Florida straits to Cuba. Wood eventually settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he became a successful businessman and enjoyed flying the Confederate flag over his establishment.

Editor

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