

Baseball in Hawaii During World War II

Gary Bedingfield



In this issue:

Bill Wilcox: A Forgotten Journeyman Minor Leaguer

The Homestead Grays Give Soldier Team a Rare Taste of Defeat

Welcome Back!

It's been a while since the last edition of the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter, but I guess I have a reasonable excuse. Following on from the theme of the last five newsletters I decided to write a book on baseball in Hawaii. It was a project I had been toiling with for quite some time and the pandemic gave me an opportunity to focus my research and get the job done. "Baseball in Hawaii During World War II" was released in April of this year and I'm pleased to say it's received a positive response. Thank you to everyone who helped make that book possible and to everyone who has taken the time to purchase a copy. It's much appreciated.

Since the release of the book, I've been provided with the photo collections of two players who were in Hawaii during the war – Joe Gedzius and Stan Ferek. I'll be featuring these photos in a future newsletter.



Also, this month, I was kindly asked by Gary Cieradkowski to write a guest post for his wonderful "Infinite Baseball Card Set." I've always been a huge fan of Gary's work and it was an honor

to write about a favorite of mine who

played in Hawaii – former Brooklyn catcher Sid "Pudge" Gautreaux. You can read the story here

<https://studiogaryc.com/2021/07/16/sid-gautreaux-guest-author-gary-bedingfield-2/>

This edition of the newsletter looks at a couple of interesting wartime events that have come my way in recent months. The first is the story of Bill Wilcox, a journeyman ballplayer who was wounded in action in World War I, but not to the severe extent the press would have you believe. The second is about a game that took place at Forbes Field in 1943 between the Negro League Homestead Grays and the US Army's New Cumberland Reception Center. Whilst the game holds no real significance, apart from showcasing the power of the Grays, the story links to a 12-year-old batboy who is now 92 and hoping to find a photograph from that day.

A number of people have asked what the next project will be for me. Well, there are no immediate plans, but at some point I'd like to tackle the European Theater during World War II and I'm pretty sure I can talk my good friend, Shawn Hennessy, into assisting with that one.

In the meantime, enjoy this newsletter, my latest book and don't forget to visit my websites!

www.baseballinwartime.com

www.baseballsgreatestsacrifice.com

Gary Bedingfield

Bill Wilcox

A Forgotten Journeyman Minor Leaguer



Bill Wilcox with the Albany Senators in 1914

Bill Wilcox was brought to my attention by Chris Woodman, who runs the Pre-War Minor League Baseball Player Database (<https://minorleaguebaseballplayer.blogspot.com>). During his research of early 20th century players, Chris often uncovers the names of those who were killed or wounded in military service and sends them my way for addition to my website. Bill Wilcox caught my attention because it appeared he'd lost both legs in combat in Italy in 1918. Numerous contemporary press reports corroborated this story and even his Sporting News player contract card stated, "Both legs shot off in Italy in October 1918." Pretty conclusive I thought...until I began to dig a little deeper.

While searching for all available records relating to Bill, I discovered his 1942 World War II draft registration card. Under the section labeled: "Other obvious physical characteristics that will aid in identification," Bill had written, "None." I'm sure that having no legs is an obvious physical characteristic. Something was wrong. Here's the true story of Bill Wilcox.

William P. "Bill" Wilcox, the son of John H. and Mary J. (nee Phillips) Wilcox was born on July 23, 1890 in Somerville, New Jersey. He first appears on the baseball radar in 1910, playing for the Buffalo Pullmans – a semi-pro team sponsored by the Pullman Company of Buffalo which made railroad cars. Bill most likely worked for the company at the time. Unconfirmed reports indicate he may have had trials with the Scranton Miners of the Class B New York State League that year and in 1911. He also played briefly with the Victoria Bees of the Class B Northwestern League in 1912. In 1913, the young outfielder had a tryout arranged by scout William Neal with the Louisville Colonels of the Class AA American Association. Bill was deemed not ready for American Association play but joined the Youngstown Steelmen of the Class B Interstate League and later that season played for the Zanesville Flood Sufferers of the same league.

In 1914, he played 83 games with the Albany Senators of the New York State League and batted .264. He was back with Albany in the spring of 1915 but played the bulk of the season with the Jamestown Rabbits and Wellsville Rainmakers of the Interstate League, appearing in 63 games between the two clubs. The following year, the 25-year-old's baseball talent took him to the south. He made New Orleans his winter home and played for the Mobile Sea Gulls of the Class A Southern Association in 1916, appearing in 116 games but batting only .217. He was on the move again in 1917 after being released by Mobile, playing for the Indiana-based Richmond Quakers in the Class B Central League. Bill played just 14 games when he was released by the club. Not because of his playing (he was batting a reasonable .250) but because of his off-field antics. In May, while intoxicated, Bill entered a hotel lobby in Richmond and began to cause a scene. The hotel manager called the police and a black officer, Patrolman Bundy, arrived to make the arrest. Bill refused to accompany a black police officer to the station and a further police officer arrived to assist with the arrest. Bill was fined \$5 and costs in the city court on May 24

and was released by Quakers manager Bade Myers who refused to countenance such behavior.

Bill's next stop was as manager of a semi-pro team in Patterson, Louisiana, but that would also not last for long. On April 6, 1917, the United States entered the global conflict that became known as World War I. Bill had registered for the draft in June of that year, but rather than wait to be called into the Army he enlisted in the Marine Corps in August. Following boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, Bill was attached to the 114th Company, 3rd Provisional Regiment, and sent to the Caribbean nation of the Dominican Republic where he was stationed at Marine Barracks, Fort Ozama in Santo Domingo. The Dominican Republic had gone through numerous uprisings over the years and the United States had intervened in 1916, leading to numerous clashes with local bandits. Despite these encounters there was still time to play baseball and Bill wrote home that his company team was the best in the Marines.

In October 1918, having been in the Dominican Republic for a year, Sergeant Wilcox was wounded during one such encounter with bandits and was shot four times in the arm and legs. He was one of 14 Marines that had been wounded by November with four having been killed. Bill was returned to the United States for hospitalization and discharged from military service in May 1919.

The first report of Bill losing his legs appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on November 5, 1918. The article stated that Bill "had both legs blown off by a shell while in action on the Italian front." Four days later, the *Plainfield Courier-News*, which covered his birthplace of Somerville, New Jersey, noted that he had only been wounded and that it had taken place in Santo Domingo, but the incorrect stories continued to circulate. The *Pittsburgh Daily-Post* of November 22, declared: "Outfielder Bill Wilcox Loses Both Legs in War," while as late as February 13, 1919, the *Richmond Palladium and Sun-Telegram* stated: "WILCOX'S LEGS TORN OFF BY BIG SHELL." Even as late as April 1919, there was still talk of Bill's tragic injuries. Major League left-hander Rube Kroh, who played against Bill when playing for the Nashville Vols in the Southern Association in 1917, and saw action at Argonne in France, mentioned in a letter to the president of the New Orleans club that he was "sure sorry they knocked [Bill Wilcox's] pins from under him."

How these stories came about I have no idea. One newspaper, the *Arkansas Democrat*, even goes as far as explaining that it happened during the Battle of the Piave River. I can only assume it was a case of mistaken identity, but I've never been able to identify the actual person who suffered these tragic wounds.

Despite the profound and final statement, "Both legs shot off in Italy in October 1918," appearing on his Sporting News player contract card, the story doesn't end there. With both legs intact, despite bullet wounds, Bill set about continuing his baseball career. In 1920, the 29-year-old started the season with the Battle Creek Custers of the Class B Michigan-Ontario League, appearing in 39 games and batting .298, before joining the Kalamazoo Celery Pickers of the Class B Central League, where he played 93 games and batted .279. It seems he didn't return to organized baseball in 1921, and in December of that year he married Anna Kelly at Batavia, New York. Baseball came calling again in 1922, this time as an umpire and he started the season officiating in the Central League. However, when Carrington

Sweeney, manager of the Ionia Mayors of the same league left to join the Muskegon team, Bill took over as player/manager and made 19 appearances on the field for a .250 batting average.

Bill was out of baseball in 1923, by which time he and Anna had two children, Gloria and William (Barbara and David completed their quartet of children, arriving in 1926 and 1931 respectively). He returned for a final time in 1924 as an umpire in the Class B New York-Penn League before starting a career as an auto bodybuilder at the Chevrolet plant which had opened in Buffalo, New York in 1923.

In April 1942, with the world at war again, 51-year-old Bill registered for the draft that was known as the "Old Man's Draft" because it targeted men 45-64 years of age. By this time Bill was working for the Curtiss-Wright Corporation in Buffalo, the largest aircraft manufacturer in the United States.

Bill and Anna had been married 58 years when Anna passed away in 1980. Bill was 10 days shy of his 92nd birthday when he died on July 13, 1982. He is buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo.

The Homestead Grays Give Soldier Team a Rare Taste of Defeat



Josh Gibson

On August 11, 1943, 5,093 fans witnessed the Negro National League Homestead Grays take on the New Cumberland Reception Center Army team at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field. The soldier team – all from Pennsylvania - had an impressive record of 30 wins in 33 games but the Negro Leaguers boasted a formidable line-up that included five future Hall of Famers – Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Cool Papa Bell, Jud Wilson and Ray Brown.

Beneath the floodlights the soldiers opened the scoring in the top of the first with a single by second baseman Lynn Myers, who had played for the Cardinals in 1937/38, and a double to left field by third baseman Bobby Rhawn, who would play three post-war seasons in the majors. The Grays tied the score in the bottom of the first with singles from centerfielder Jerry Benjamin and first baseman Buck Leonard,

followed by a long fly from Josh Gibson. The soldiers went ahead again in the second with a single by catcher Bill Peterman, who played just one game with the Phillies in 1942, and a triple from leftfielder Chuck Harig, who was with the Lancaster Red Roses before military service.

The soldiers maintained their lead until the bottom of the fourth, when Leonard led-off with a home run into the right field stands. Gibson followed with a triple that

travelled 420 feet over Pat Mullins' head in centerfield but was run down between third and home on Dan Bankhead's fielder's choice. Right fielder Vic Harris was safe on an error and Bankhead scored when Harris was caught in a run down between first and second, giving the Grays a 3-2 lead.

The lead was short-lived as the soldiers responded in the top of the fifth when Rhawn doubled to left, shortstop Stan Shargey, who was with the Centreville Red Sox before service, hit a long fly to right and Rhawn tied the game on a fielder's choice.

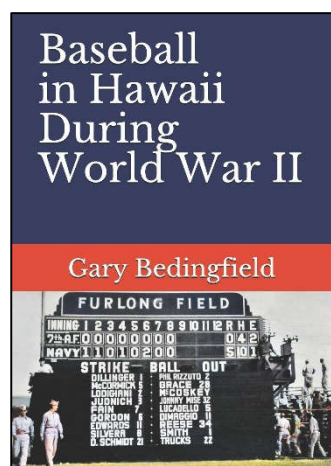
The Grays surged ahead in the bottom of the sixth when Benjamin and Leonard singled and were both sent home on a 400-foot double from Gibson. With a 5-3 lead, the Grays added an insurance run in the eighth and pitcher Ray Brown held the soldiers scoreless over the final four frames. Phillies hurler Tommy Hughes suffered the loss.

New Cumberland Reception Center		Homestead Grays	
Tommy Hughes	P	Ray Brown	P
Bill Peterman	C	Josh Gibson	C
Ducky Detweiler	1B	Buck Leonard	1B
Hal Marnie	2B	Joe Spencer	2B
Bobby Rhawn	3B	Jud Wilson	3B
Stan Shargey	SS	Sam Bankhead	SS
Chuck Harig	LF	Cool Papa Bell	LF
Pat Mullin	CF	Jerry Benjamin	CF
Lynn Myers	RF	Vic Harris	RF
Joseph Lawler	Manager	Candy Jim Taylor	Manager

Jerry Kruman lived in the Oakland area of Pittsburgh, right near Forbes Field. He worked at the ballpark from age 11 to age 17, doing whatever the players needed. He often went to Isley's Restaurant for food and brought it back to them, and Jerry and his friend alternated days getting paid \$1 a day by Rip Sewell to stand in the batter's box when he worked on his ephus pitch. Rip would come in two hours before the team to work on his pitch.

But the most exciting thing he recalls about his time at the ballpark was that August evening in 1943, when the Homestead Grays played a US Army team. Jerry and his friend were there way before the game because they were running errands for players, or to sell newspapers, and the Grays realized that they hadn't brought a batboy that day. They looked around and saw the two (white) boys there and asked them to stand up. Jerry was the taller of the two, and he got called to be the batboy for the Grays that night. He was like one of the team...helping them out...even sitting on the bench with them. Jerry crossed the color line the other way. At the end of his night, Jerry was given \$20 for his services, and he donated that to the Bond Drive. For years, Jerry, now 92, has told the story of that day to his family, and his son Steve has been searching for a photograph that shows his dad with the Grays. If anyone can help with a photo of the Grays from that day with Jerry as the batboy, I'll gladly pass it along to the family.

Baseball in Hawaii During World War II



“Baseball in Hawaii During World War II” – is the first in-depth look at the wartime exploits of over 150 major leaguers and countless minor league players who found themselves stationed in the Hawaiian Islands between 1941 and 1945. With the inclusion of 150 biographies and over 80 photographs – many of which are from the collections of Harrington “Kit” Crissey and Shawn Hennessy and have never been seen before – the book details every victory and every tragedy of wartime baseball in the paradise of the Pacific. Produced in a chronological order, the book first delves into the history of baseball in the Islands and how varied ethnicities shaped the structure and development of the game. Starting with 1941, the book then takes a year-

by-year in-depth look at the war, Hawaii and baseball as played by civilians and servicemen. Included in the book are rosters for all significant teams and a complete list of all major league players who served in Hawaii between 1941 and 1946.

Order your copy from amazon <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B091FNND CJ>

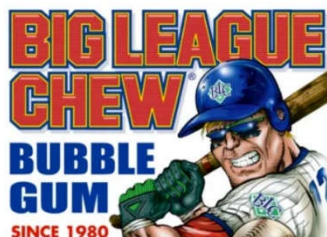
SABRcast with Rob Neyer

I recently had the great pleasure of chatting with Rob Neyer about my new book, baseball in Great Britain and why an Englishman should be so attracted to an American sport. You can listen in here: <https://sabr.org/sabrcast/episode/115>



EBBETS FIELD FLANNELS

EST. 1988



[Chevrons and Diamonds](#)

Spotlighting the U.S. Armed Forces' Inseparable Bond with America's Pastime