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For Negro League Players, a Measure of Recognition

By **ALAN SCHWARZ**

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Only something so heavy could lighten their burden. Three men gripped a 150-pound headstone around the edges, lugged it 40 feet across the grass and lowered it into the dirt.

“Got it?” the anesthesiologist asked, tilting the slab in gently.

“Yeah. Yeah, over here,” the insurance man said.

They rose from their knees, brushed off their hands and stood back from the grave.

“Big Bill Gatewood,” the historian said with a sigh.

For almost 50 years, William M. Gatewood lay in obscurity in an unmarked grave here at Memorial Park Cemetery. But that ended Tuesday, when three baseball fans continued their quest to locate every former Negro leagues player without a headstone and do their share to right the wrong.

Gatewood was a star pitcher and manager in the early Negro leagues who is credited with giving James Bell his nickname, Cool Papa, and teaching Satchel Paige his hesitation pitch. Gatewood died in Columbia in 1962 with no one to arrange for a grave marker.

On Tuesday, he became the 19th player for whom the Negro Leagues Grave Marker Project has provided a headstone. The project volunteers track down unmarked graves, raise money for headstones and install them, often with their own hands.

“These were great ballplayers who don’t deserve to be forgotten, but they have been,” said Dr. Jeremy Krock, a 52-year-old anesthesiologist from Peoria, Ill., who began the effort seven years ago. “A lot of these guys, by the time Jackie Robinson made it, they were way past their prime. It was too late for them. And not having a marker on their grave for people to remember them only made it worse.”

Krock was joined at the gravesite Tuesday by Larry Lester, a Negro leagues historian from Kansas City, Mo., and Dwayne Isgrig, a customer service representative for a St. Louis insurance company. They convened under the beaming sun in central Missouri, drawn to Bill Gatewood’s grave by baseball, Negro leagues history and purposeful regret.

Since 2004, the remains of Highpockets Trent (Burr Oak Cemetery outside Chicago), Steel Arm Taylor (Springdale Cemetery, Peoria), Gable Patterson (Greenwood Cemetery, Pittsburgh) and other baseball pioneers have been tracked down and memorialized by the group.

It raises money for the \$700 headstones primarily through members of the [Society for American Baseball Research](#), although after hearing about the effort, some in baseball have quietly written checks, including the [Chicago White Sox](#) owner [Jerry Reinsdorf](#), the former commissioner [Fay Vincent](#) and the former player, manager and coach [Don Zimmer](#).

At the annual symposium of SABR's [Negro Leagues](#) Research Committee on July 15 in Birmingham, Ala., Sap Ivory — a first baseman for the local Black Barons from 1958 to 1960 — will get a headstone above his nearby grave.

The group's primary targets now include two members of the National [Baseball Hall of Fame](#) in Cooperstown, N.Y., [Pete Hill](#) and [Sol White](#), among about 20 more on its growing list. Hill's remains have yet to be found, and White is buried in an unmarked group grave at Frederick Douglass Memorial Park on Staten Island.

"We don't want these men to continue to be unrecognized and invisible," Lester said beside Gatewood's new marker. "That's just not acceptable."

Ron Hill, Pete Hill's great-nephew, who has been in touch with Krock's group to help find his Hall of Fame relative, said in a telephone interview: "You wonder who these people are. But they were very sincere."

Krock is a [St. Louis Cardinals](#) fan who had no particular interest in baseball history before he began the effort essentially by accident. Some older relatives had grown up in Ardmore, Mo., and still talked reverently about a 1930s Negro leagues outfielder from the town, [Jimmie Crutchfield](#). Krock consulted an obituary, wanted to learn where Crutchfield was buried and eventually determined that he lay in an unmarked grave near Chicago.

A conversation with SABR's Negro Leagues committee led to a mention in the group's newsletter, and \$25 checks from strangers started arriving at Krock's home.

Krock came across two more players at Burr Oak, got headstones for them, too, and soon was after others. For Negro leagues players who died destitute enough to end up in unmarked graves, only fraying cemetery records can lead Krock to remains, as groundskeepers walk off distances with tape measures to pinpoint where the players might lie.

In the early Negro leagues, Gatewood — a huge man for his era at 6 feet 7 inches and 240 pounds — was the right-handed equivalent of [C. C. Sabathia](#). Gatewood won 117 games for more than a dozen teams from 1906 to 1928 and pitched the first documented no-hitter in the newly organized Negro National League, in 1921. He threw another in 1926, when he was 45. As a manager, he mentored Cool Papa Bell, converting him from pitcher to star outfielder, and coached that quirky right-hander named Satchel.

Many decades later, Krock tracked down Gatewood's remains at Memorial Park Cemetery just off Interstate 70 — although that was an even harder task than usual, because the original burial records burned in a church fire decades ago and Big Bill's file read "Gatenwood." Isgrig was a Gatewood fan because of their mutual ties to Missouri and arranged for the headstone for his forgotten hero.

On Tuesday, Krock spent his day off from the Children's Hospital of Illinois by driving three hours to St. Louis, transferring the stone from a monument company pickup to his own Honda Pilot in a Denny's parking lot, and driving another two hours to Columbia to meet Lester and Isgrig at the cemetery.

On mostly open grass made wavy by sunken graves, the three hoisted Gatewood's stone by hand and placed it in a newly dug rectangle at what had previously been known to groundskeepers as Calvary 5, Row 3, Space 9. Krock wore a white polo shirt and khakis as he delivered prepared remarks; Isgrig and his two young children stood in Kansas City Monarchs shirts.

The gleaming stone read:

NEGRO LEAGUES BASEBALL

PITCHER AND MANAGER

“BIG BILL”

WILLIAM M. GATEWOOD

1881 1962

Instead of a hyphen between the years, they put a drawing of a baseball inside a glove, symbolizing Gatewood's passion for the game that they, too, had inherited. None of Gatewood's family, including four surviving grandchildren to whom Krock wrote letters, attended the ceremony.

“It won't be a tourist attraction,” Isgrig said, “but it's something.”

Several cemetery employees stood nearby to pay their respects and listen to stories about a man they had no idea was on their grounds.

The Westwood Memorial sales director, Bill Boos, had known nothing of the big pitcher or Negro leagues baseball. “Hearing everything today,” he said, “it almost feels like Big Bill Gatewood is coming back to life.” He offered Krock help connecting the group with other cemeteries.

As others walked toward the concrete path after the ceremony, Krock stopped, bent down and used his hands to adjust the stone a tick. Just to make sure it's steady, just to make sure it stays.