

The Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference - 2006 - Kansas City, Missouri
Theme: Satchel Paige's 100th Birthday Celebration

"Paige family remembers Satchel" by Justice B. Hill
07-10-2006

KANSAS CITY -- At the table with Robert Paige were his siblings. His sisters Lula, Rita, Caroline and Pam were there. His little brother Warren was at the table as well, and throw in his nephew Michael, and Robert Paige had his father Satchel's present and future at his side.



They were there Saturday for a simple purpose: to celebrate the family patriarch's 100th birthday, and they were there, all of them smartly dressed in white-and-red Monarch jerseys, to offer insight into the iconic life of Satchel Paige, the baseball globetrotter and the most storied name from "black baseball."

Theirs was a first-of-its-kind appearance for the Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference here; theirs might be its last-of-kind appearance, too. For the Paige family guards its heritage, even though the family understands its heritage interests so many people. Everyone who likes baseball wants to hear another Satchel Paige story. Everybody wants to know what made this baseball gypsy the man he was.

Was his private life as hectic and as adventurous as his public one? Did he dote over his children the way he lorded over the game of baseball? Did he make life as comfortable for them as he made it uncomfortable for men who had to face him?

Robert Paige and his sibling provided the answers. They spoke in many voices, a rarity for the Paige children. Their mother told each of them early in life that it was, as Pam would put it, "inappropriate for us to do interviews unless we spoke with her or she understood."

"Until this day, I don't do interviews unless I have the right to critique what is being printed," Pam said. "A lot of people say, 'You all never just talk about your dad.' We just have made it a habit that we have a spokesman -- and that's Robert.

"One person speaks and carries the sentiment of all of us."

In breaking what seemed like a vow of silence, they each offered a perspective on a man whose public life captivated sports fans. For their father, a Hall of Famer, was as good as any man who ever strolled to the pitcher's mound, picked up a baseball and threw it.

He left the landscape littered with tales, some of them larger than life, to prove it.

But his children had few first-hand accounts of their father as the Negro League great. They had been born either near the end of his career or when his career was over. So they knew Satchel Paige as simply a loving father, not as a man with greatness stamped to his legacy. To them, he was like any other father.

"I wish you guys had gotten the chance to meet him," Robert Paige said. "He could tell stories all day. And I had to sit there and listen to him."

Robert Paige broke into a laugh. His words did more than suggest that he longed to sit there now and listen once again to more of Satchel's stories. But all he and his siblings have now are the memories -- plenty of memories, too.

"What about the dance contests?" Robert Paige asked his sisters.

Their eyes brightened with the joy that can only come from reliving a moment as cherished as these.

"He'd always have little dance contests," Pam said of her father. "We'd all take turns. Robert, at the time, had a little skit he had to do in elementary school. So they were learning how to do the 'Scratch' or the 'Itch,' which is what it was back then.

"He was so good at it that everybody just loved it."

What everybody loved, Robert Paige said, was being in the family's home. It might just as well have been Grand Central Station with the traffic that rolled in and out of the place. Their father made the home inviting to whoever might come calling.

Uncles and aunts, cousins, former teammates, neighbors, childhood friends, little kids from down the block, all could find a cozy spot to lay up inside the Paige household.

"The party was on," Robert Paige said.

For with company of good friends, the Paiges offered good food and conversation. Their father enjoyed working over a stove, and their mother was more than a fair cook, and when company wasn't there, the house was just as warm and loving.

Their mother, Lahoma, provided the spiritual foundation. She woke the kids on Saturday mornings with hymns and sent them off to do family chores. They had a garden to tend to, and they had 22 dogs.

Their home might as well have been a kennel, because the dogs had plenty of company. The children had chicken, ducks, cats, rabbits and even a raccoon.

"We got our private zoo," Pam said. "It was visited by the health department -- sometimes."

She was quick to point out that the idea for all the critters wasn't anybody's but her father's. Same things went for the garden, which Paige insisted that his children plant in neat rows.

"He'd bring out a lawn chair," Robert Paige said, "and just sit there and look."

None of them begrudged his not pitching in to help. For they all said their father and his success as a baseball player had created a comfortable life for them. They wanted for little, and whenever money did get a bit tight, they adjusted. So their father had earned the right, as one of Satchel's grandsons put it, to "supervise."

He also earned the right to live life on his terms. Satchel Paige, who died June 8, 1982, had his likes; he had his dislikes. He was a caring father; he was also energetic, talkative and a natural comedian.

Satchel Paige's time-honored maxims about age prove the latter:

- About age: "Age is a case of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it don't matter."
- Or airplanes: "Airplanes may kill you, but they ain't likely to hurt you."
- Or work: "I ain't ever had a job, I just always played baseball"
- Or character: "Ain't no man can avoid being born average, but there ain't no man got to be common."

Call Satchel Paige a lot of things, but he wasn't average or common. He was special, particularly so to the men and women who called him their father.

Now, they'd just love one more dance contest with him. Just one more time of whirling around the dance floor to a Motown or jazz favorite. Even an old Elvis tune would do. Their dad's taste in music didn't fit neatly into a pile anymore than his life did.

They remember that fact well, just as they remember endless stories about the man whose legacy they intend to carry on.

Robert Paige, 54, offered one such story:

His mother needed to go to the grocery store to buy some chicken, so she asked Satchel for some money. All he had was a \$100 bill, so he gave it to her. Off she went to the store with Robert in tow.

A short while later, she and Robert returned with the groceries. She took the bags into the kitchen and Robert went to watch TV. A short while later, his father comes into the room.

"Pull the shades back," Satchel told Robert. "He said, 'You know you and your mother went to the store.' I said, 'Yeah, we went to the store.'"

"He said, 'You know I gave her \$100 bill.' I said, 'OK, you gave her \$100 bill.' He said, 'I want you to pull the shades back so I can see the truck that's gonna bring that chicken up in here.'"

Justice B. Hill is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.