

Etching Negro League names in stone

Illinois baseball fan's project has helped mark the graves of more than 20 players

July 25, 2011|by **John Owens**, *Chicago Tribune* reporter

Armed with a yellow bucket filled with cleaning supplies, **Jeremy Krock** made his way toward the grave of **John Donaldson**, who was interred at Burr Oak Cemetery more than 40 years ago.

Krock, 53, an anesthesiologist from Peoria, spruces up Donaldson's grave and many others at Burr Oak a few times every year. But on this pleasant July morning, Krock was taken aback by a problem with Donaldson's engraved picture on his headstone.

"That's not good," Krock said. "Looks like a motor blade took off the tip of John's nose."

After jotting down a note about the problem, Krock cleaned the headstones of others buried at the cemetery near Alsip, such as "**Candy Jim**" **Taylor** and **Jimmie Crutchfield**.

Krock never had the chance to meet these men, who had one thing in common — they were great baseball players in the Negro Leagues, where African-Americans were relegated before Jackie Robinson broke the major league color barrier in 1947.

Though these men have few, if any, known survivors, their legacy is remembered by Krock, who has been instrumental in providing headstones for Negro Leagues luminaries buried in unmarked plots.

Eight years after Krock launched the **Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project**, headstones have been added for 22 players. Fourteen are in the Chicago area, including 12 at Burr Oak.

It hasn't been the easiest project. Krock, puts thousands of miles on his pickup truck each year, and he spends late nights on the phone with colleagues and cemetery officials, tracking down unmarked graves and planning headstone installations.

He's also had to deal with controversy at the cemetery where much of his work was done: Burr Oak was at the center of a grave-reselling scandal in 2009.

"Running a small charitable organization like this has taken more time than I ever could have imagined," Krock said, but the 10 to 20 hours a week he spends on the project have been rewarding.

"I think part of it is just to honor these men," Krock said. *"My colleague (Negro Leagues historian) Larry Lester uses the phrase 'recognition, redemption and respect' with regards to these players."*

"Jeremy's sincere about recognizing these legends," said Lester, co-chairman of the Negro Leagues Research Committee, a division of the Society for American Baseball Research, which helps raise funds for the grave markers.

Krock became involved because of his interest in **Jimmie Crutchfield**, a speedy 5-foot-7-inch outfielder who played for a variety of teams from 1930 to 1945. After his career ended with the Chicago American Giants, Crutchfield stayed here and worked for the post office.

"Crutchfield was born in my grandparents' hometown of Ardmore, Mo.," Krock said. *"My grandparents were about 10 years younger than Crutchfield, but they knew of him, and everyone in Ardmore knew of him, I think, because he was a source of pride for the community and he was the most famous person to come out of Ardmore."*

Krock learned that Crutchfield was buried at Burr Oak. *"But when I came out to visit the most famous man in Ardmore, Mo., I found him in an unmarked grave,"* Krock said. *"I thought it was sad and I thought it was an injustice that could be corrected."*

After learning that Crutchfield didn't have surviving family members, he contacted Lester and **Dick Clark**, who published a story in the Negro Leagues Research Committee newsletter about Krock's efforts to raise money for a headstone. Krock also reached out to **Fay Vincent**, then the Major League Baseball commissioner; former player/broadcaster **Joe Garagiola**; former Cubs manager **Don Zimmer**; and others for donations.

Krock raised the \$1,000 needed, and then he and the Negro Leagues Research Committee became intrigued about other unmarked graves. With the help of Burr Oak's staff, they located the unmarked graves of Taylor,

who was a player or manager for five decades, and Donaldson, a brilliant left-handed pitcher.

Donaldson later became one of the first black scouts in the majors, working with the White Sox from 1948 to 1954, where he signed some of the team's first black players, including **Connie Johnson** and **Sam Hairston**, the father of longtime Sox outfielder **Jerry Hairston** and grandfather of current Washington Nationals utility player **Jerry Hairston Jr.**

A variety of donors paid for Taylor's headstone. White Sox majority owner **Jerry Reinsdorf** provided much of the funding for Donaldson's. After those successes, Krock officially joined forces with the Negro Leagues Research Committee to create the project.

In most cases, Krock has found that there aren't surviving family members for the players. But that's not always the case.

William "Bobby" Robinson, who played from 1925 to 1942, died in 2002 and was buried at Restvale Cemetery in Alsip without a headstone because his family couldn't afford one.

"We had planned on a headstone, but real life kicks in," said his daughter, Patricia Hawkins, of Chicago, who with her husband supports five teenage foster children.