

# Robert Paige relays stories of Satchel Paige, the father



Despite putting on spikes for dozens of teams over his decades-long career, Satchel Paige has always been most associated with the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the Negro Leagues' greatest, most successful and longest-lasting major franchises. File photo

By RYAN WHIRTY, Special to The Star

PITTSBURGH

On one side of the roof of the car sat Leroy "Satchel" Paige, arguably the greatest pitcher in Negro Leagues history. On the other side perched Judy Johnson, legendary Negro Leagues third baseman.

Clasped in each of their hands was a rifle, which the two eventual Hall of Famers had trained for rabbits,

as the vehicle — which had been rigged by the ever creative Paige to allow people to strap themselves on top — zoomed through the woods.

Behind the wheel of the auto sat poor 14-year-old Robert Paige, who was doing his absolute best to keep the vehicle from careening into a tree or throwing its roof riders onto the forest floor — and attempting to keep his frazzled nerves from snapping completely. Three phonebooks were sandwiched between the driver's seat and Robert's behind so he'd be high enough to operate the steering wheel, which he gripped with white knuckles, and see where he was going.

As the now 62-year-old Robert Paige relayed that childhood memory Friday to a roomful of rapt historians and fans of African-American baseball heritage during the Society for American Baseball Research's 18th annual Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference, the audience periodically burst into laughter. The gregarious younger Paige has a keen knack for storytelling, a skill honed after growing up in Kansas with a man who not only was one of the best pitchers in the history of baseball but also, according to the son, was a wonderful, nurturing father.

"Man, I could tell you stories all day," Robert Paige said with a wide grin and a chuckle after his conference presentation. "I have so many of them."

Sitting in the lobby of the swanky Wyndham Grand Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh on Friday evening as he waited to head to PNC Park with conference-goers to be honored before that night's Pirates-Dodgers game, Robert Paige — who, at 6-foot-8, played center in basketball in college — is outgoing, affable and, above all, enjoying himself as he spoke with one of those Malloy attendees.

His appearance for an hour-long Q&A session was the biggest highlight of the conference, and he had quite effectually brought down the house.

But it hasn't always been this way. Robert Paige, the last living son and eldest child of the almost mythical Satchel Paige, wasn't always so accommodating to reporters, authors and attention-seekers.

For years, he and his five sisters had kept their emotional and mental guard up against the type of interlopers who had repeatedly exploited and took advantage of their relationship to Satchel. The Paige offspring had simply been burned too many times by unscrupulous parties that wanted access to them and their rich memories and stories of their father, not because they cared about segregation-era baseball history, but just to make a buck.

So Robert Paige had turned into a recluse, rarely making public appearances and almost never opening up to the public about his father, who, despite putting on spikes for dozens of teams over his decades-long career, has always been most associated with the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the Negro Leagues' greatest, most successful and longest-lasting major franchises.

But Robert has been convinced by childhood friend Larry Lester and author/professor Donald Spivey to relate his memories of his father once again.

"It's good to see Bob come out in the public again, because Bob is a very sincere person, and a very deep thinker," said Spivey, whose 2012 book, "If You Were Only White': The Life of Leroy 'Satchel' Paige," is considered by many in the baseball history community as the best biography of Satchel Paige.

It took Spivey months — through letters and phone calls — to earn the trust of the Paige family in order to produce the book.

"I'm a scholar and a historian," Spivey said. "That's how I was coming at it. I wasn't in it for the money. I guess that combination is what (Robert Paige) was looking for, what he wanted to hear."

Lester grew up in the same Kansas City neighborhood as Robert. Lester eventually developed into a prolific author, highly respected Negro Leagues historian and the longtime co-chair of SABR's Negro Leagues Committee.

In introducing Friday's Q&A, Lester was frank about how numerous headline-grabbers had twisted Satchel Paige's history by focusing on the negatives, the dark rumors that, Lester said, were simply not what made Satchel the man he was.

"Everything you read in a book is not correct," Lester told the audience.

Lester said that experiencing childhood with Robert Paige made him keenly aware that Satchel's children viewed their father in a much different light, and from a much different angle, than the general public.

"Like most children of celebrities, they didn't know their dad as a celebrity," Lester said. "They knew him as Dad."

Indeed, it wasn't until he was nearly a teenager that Robert came to fully understand who his father was and what he did for a living. It took one of Robert's sisters opening an encyclopedia and pointing to the entry on Dad.

And at the Malloy conference on Friday, Robert Paige packed a lifetime of grand yarns and treasured memories into a laughter-filled hour. He related how, so many times, he had to drag himself out of bed at 2 a.m. to take his mother, Lahoma, to the airport to catch a red-eye to whatever far-flung, backwater burg Satchel had agreed to pitch in that week.

There was the father's deep knack for being able to fix anything in the house, from hanging a picture on the wall to repairing a busted lawn mower to restringing the pearls on Lahoma's necklace.

Or the father's affinity for the outdoors, hunting and fishing — a devotion that still made him only the second-best fisherperson in the family.

"My father had all this expensive fishing gear with him, and my mother had a cane pole," Robert said. "But for every fish my dad caught, my mother caught five."

But, Robert added, "I'd have to take the fish off the hook for her. She wasn't with any of that."

Or waking up on any given morning to see Negro League legends like Cool Papa Bell, Double Duty Radcliffe or Goose Tatum lining up in Lahoma's kitchen to chow down on her exquisite cooking.

“Our house was like a magnet for them, because my mom was a great cook,” Robert told the audience. “That was definitely one of the highlights of my life — being able to meet all these great players.”

But it wasn't just Negro League stars who made a beeline for the Paige household when they were in town. White Major Leaguers also couldn't keep away, including Hall of Fame pitcher Warren Spahn, who was virtually addicted to Lahoma's cuisine.

“Spahn would come, and we'd almost have to run him off,” Robert said. “He'd never miss it when he was in town.”

Spahn also enjoyed heading to the Paige backyard to skip stones with young Robert among the menagerie of animals — raccoons, ducks, cats, blue tick hounds — the Paiges kept in the yard.

“He'd be missing engagements,” Robert Paige said of Spahn. “He'd be out in the backyard playing with me, and this man would be losing money doing it.”

Following Friday's Q&A session, Robert Paige reflected on living through all the decades as the son of a baseball great and Kansas City legend, a man whose legacy has been retold, distorted, dissected, researched and written about for a half-century.

Robert said his father, despite constantly being on the road and bringing home other future Hall of Famers, managed to raise his kids lovingly and expertly, even bestowing his own philosophy on young Bob, who wasn't pushed toward sports by his father, only encouraged to pursue his life's calling the way Satchel pursued his — just believe in yourself and do your absolute best.

That was Satchel Paige's nature, said his eldest child. In many ways, despite the fame and baseball glory, the pitching legend knew his priorities.

“This was my life,” Robert told his audience. “People didn't know about my dad, what he was like. He was so intuitive (as a father), and he was a great family man.”

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