



The Ernest Grays and the Summer of '35

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“Ernest Grays Win Opener at Home”, “Grays Defeat Indiana,” “Ernest Grays Take Surprise Win from R. & P Stars, 10 to 4” -- so ran articles in the *Indiana Evening Gazette*'s sports pages in the summer of 1935. Who were the Ernest Grays and what did they do in the summer of 1935 to draw the attention of local sportswriters?

In the 1930s, while the Depression raged, baseball ruled in the mill towns and coal patches of Western Pennsylvania. Boys spent their free time playing games with makeshift balls, gloves, and bats on fields and hillsides across the region. Men, and occasionally women, played in leagues which grew out of places of employment, worship or recreation. In isolated coal towns, baseball was a major source of entertainment. In the evening or on a weekend afternoon, thousands of men, women, and children of diverse nationalities would travel great distances to attend games and socialize on the sidelines as well as watch the play. Mario Romoli (Romeo), a star ball player in his day, recalled that spectators would gather on the hillsides near games to watch the play, making it look like the hill was covered with sheep. While the games were going on, he declared, the main streets were empty and “you could rob the town”.¹

Beginning in the late 1920s, R & P sponsored a baseball league of miner ball players with teams representing mining towns in Indiana and Jefferson Counties. The players reflected the diverse ethnic groups who labored in the pits. Though most players were white, particularly talented African American players could participate in the League, though they were banned from the professional baseball teams of the day. For example during the 1930s the Ernest ball team could boast of at least two talented African American players, Arthur (Arty) Harrison, who played on their championship team of the early 1930, and Alonzo Hicks, who would eventually play for the Homestead Grays.² There was also at least one independent team from the area made up entirely of African Americans, the Ernest Grays.

Ernest, Pennsylvania, was founded by the R. & P. in 1903 and by the mid 1930's it was booming. Mining jobs had drawn hopeful immigrants to Ernest from at least thirteen different nations as well as the mining regions of the American South. The 1930 decennial census shows a handful of black families living in Ernest, most often with household heads from Alabama or Tennessee (states with the largest populations of black coal miners). Many of those names would show up on the roster of the Ernest Grays.

The Ernest Grays, though not sponsored by R & P, was made up of miners from R & P mines. Though an independent team, they frequently played the teams of the R & P League. Oral history interviews conducted in the 1970s with star players from the R & P League (Husky Hess, Cofy Davis and Mario Romaro) show that these star players held the team in great esteem. Husky Hess remembers: “They had a good team, buddy! They beat the R & P All Stars at the fairgrounds. They were a good ball club!”

Newspaper articles from the summer of 1935 support the opinion of these baseball players. That summer, the sports writers of the *Indiana Evening Gazette*, had high praise for the Grays. In May, when the team opened its season, it triumphed over the Sykesville's Polish National Alliance team. The reported praised the talents of the Grays players including Dodge Embry, a speed pitcher who been recruited from

¹Mario Ramoli. (7/1977), Hess Husky (2/12/1977), Zip Zetner, (3/3/1978). Local History Project. MG 30. IUP Special Collections and Archives.

²“Ernest Grays Seek Games.” *Indiana Evening Gazette*. May 12, 1936. “Homestead Grays Call Ernest Man.,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*. March 12, 1947.

Johnstown to work in the mines, Freddy Moorfield, one of two talented brothers which kept the other teams on their toes that summer, and catcher “Boots” Smith an “all around athlete guiding the team from behind the plate and handling Dodge Embry’s burning speeders without a mishap.” He declared that “the Grays presented the best line-up ever to be seen by the Ernest fans,” and that the play was a “treat” to watch.³

By July, the *Gazette* recorded that the Grays had successfully sailed through the early part of the season and racked up a record of 24 wins. By this time the reporter speculated that the Grays “may be considered as good as any aggregation in the R. & P. circuit,” and that it was “one of the best (if not the best) teams to ever represent the colored people of Ernest.”⁴

That winning summer culminated with a game against the R & P All Stars, the best players of the predominately white teams in the League. The highly anticipated game was sponsored by the Central Labor Union of Indiana and was to take place at the Indiana Fair Grounds on Labor Day, Monday, September 2, on a baseball diamond specially constructed to use the grandstands to accommodate what they hoped would be a large crowd.

In spite of their good showing that summer, with wins and squeakingly close losses to individual R & P League teams, Merle Angello, *Gazette* sports writer was not overly optimistic about the prospects of the Ernest Grays winning this challenging competition. He shared what was possibly a widely held opinion that the All Stars were “far superior to the Ernest Grays.” He continued that it was, however, a great opportunity for the Grays to play the pick of the League and to beat the All Stars would certainly be “a big boast,” for them.⁵

When the game was played, it was to a huge crowd, an estimated 15,000 people, possibly “the largest collection of baseball enthusiasts...ever to witness a contest in Indiana County.” And what an upset that crowd witnessed! After playing and defeating another team that morning, the Grays served up a brilliantly executed game in which they soundly defeated the All Stars by a score of 8-3. Merle Angello recorded that the Grays “produced the kind of ball that outclassed their opponents in every manner,” in spite of the fact that Freddie Moorefield, the star player of the game, had an injured finger.⁶ The Grays completed the season with a record of 36 wins and 9 defeats.⁷

At the end of that summer, Embry, the Moorefield brothers, “Boots” Smith, Arty Harrison (who had by that summer moved from the Ernest League team to the Grays) and the rest of the talented players on the Ernest Grays, had demonstrated to whites that African Americans could equal and excel white players on the baseball field. Over seventy years later, Alfonso Embry, the son of Dodge Embry, still remembers the triumph of the Ernest Grays. “In those days we didn’t have a lot to be proud of, but the Grays, they made us proud!”

³“Ernest Grays Win Opener at Home, 12-10,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, May 13, 1935.

⁴ “Ernest Grays Here Tomorrow,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, July 30, 1935.

⁵ Merle Angello, “All Stars, Ernest Grays Labor Day Attraction,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, August 29, 1935.

⁶ Merle Angello, “Ernest Grays take Surprise Win from the R. & P. Stars, 10 to 4,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, September 3, 1935. Though the title of the article states the score was 10-4, the statistics in the article and the article itself state the score was 8-4. In any rate, the Grays won by a large margin.

⁷ “Ernest Grays Seek Games,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, May 12, 1936.

Sources

This essay is the product of research begun in the 1970s by Dr. Dale Landon, Dr. George Wiley and Eileen Mountjoy. At that time, they conducted oral history interviews with R & P baseball players. These interviews are available in IUP Special Collections and Archives (Record Group MG 30, Local History Projects). This research resulted in a series of newspaper articles published in the *Indiana Evening Gazette (IEG)* (“1930’s Mine League Part of ‘The Great Past’,” *IEG*, November 10, 1976; “League Action Hot and Heavy in ’32, ’34,” *IEG*, November 11, 1976; “Ernest Defended Title in 1935” *IEG*, November 12, 1976 “Players Often Given breaks On Work Duties,” *IEG*, November 13, 1976), and an article in *Indiana Heritage Magazine* (“The Last Hurrah! Spring 1978). Another article exploring the experience of coal miners and baseball was written by Mary Ann Slater and published in the *Indiana Gazette* (“A Baseball Team in Every Town,” *IG*, June 13, 2000; “‘Zippy’ walked 7; Ernest lost,” *IG*, June 13, 2000). Their research was supplemented by interviews with Alonzo Embry, son of Dodge Embry, and additional research in 1930s *Indiana Evening Gazette*. More information on amateur baseball play in this period can be found at “Baseball in Pennsylvania.” *ExplorePA.com* <http://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=2> and

Illustrations

Cover photo appeared in the *Indiana Evening Gazette* on May 22, 1936 with the caption “Here’s the long and the short of the Ernest Grays baseball team. Dodge Embrey, giant 6 foot 2 incher, star speedball pitcher, in demonstrating his pitching to technique to Howard (Smokey) Tolliver, diminutive 5 foot 2 inches second baseman. The Grays who are open for games with any first class independent team will open their official season in Yatesboro Sunday afternoon at 3:30. “