

BLACK SANDLOT BASEBALL: THE PITTSBURGH CRAWFORDS

ROB RUCK

WHAT became possibly the best black baseball team of all time began as a group of black and white youths playing ball on the sandlots of Pittsburgh's Hill District. Sandlot ball had its season, until its fragile ecology gave way before the incessant pounding of forces beyond its control. Now, the sandlots are more remembered than anything else, yet their disappearance marked the transformation of sport from a community recreation to the corporate money game. The sandlots belonged to an epoch in sport when a different scale of economics applied and self-organized independent ball thrived in almost every neighborhood in and around cities like Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, Chicago, and Detroit. An intermediate, community-oriented level of sport, the sandlots were a counterpoint to the more heavily commercialized system of professional sport that sought and gained hegemony in the twentieth century. Yet in their prime, the sandlot teams drew more fans and meant more to people on a day-to-day basis in a city like Pittsburgh than did its professional teams.

At first, sandlot simply referred to the field of play, but in the early decades of the century sandlot became identified with independent ball, specifically baseball outside the major and minor leagues. As professional clubs organized into leagues with assigned markets and labor practices designed to restrict player movement, organized baseball took on more of the aspects of the trusts and cartels then flourishing in the business world. By the turn of the century, baseball was itself a fairly substantial business operation. Yet alongside this nascent industry existed a sporting landscape sprouting new non-professional teams wherever there seemed sufficient public interest. Virtually every town and urban neighborhood had its own ballclub. While commercial sponsorship was common, these teams were not geared to the profit motive but towards giving local boys and men a chance to play and the community a chance to cheer.

Sandlot ball commingled amateur and semiprofessional elements.

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Semipro ball simply meant that a player could frequently expect payment for playing. In some cases, the amounts equalled or surpassed what the player could have earned in the pros, but for most, it was an addition, not a substitute for a regular paycheck. The difference between sandlot and professional ball, then, was not that one welcomed commercial forces and the other did not but the relative level of capitalization and commercialization involved. Sandlot ball was often a matter of shared equipment with everyone chipping in what he could, but it also encompassed local leagues with players earning three or four hundred dollars a month.

The sandlots and organized baseball coexisted for the greater part of this century. Many of the players who helped establish the pro game got their start on the sandlots and more than a few, including the Pirates' Honus Wagner, returned there when their professional careers were at an end.

Sandlot baseball reached its zenith during the years between the two world wars. World War I industries sponsored teams, and the armed forces stressed physical fitness through participation in athletics. During the 1920s, a "golden age of sport" dawned in America, carrying with it sandlot ball. Between two and five hundred teams took to Pittsburgh area sandlots each season during the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Most of them were made up of white players, but during the 1920s a score of black baseball teams appeared. One of them, the Crawfords, stood out not only because of its record but its interracial origins.

Organized baseball might have been lily-white in the 1920s, but race did not count that much on Hill District streets when it came time to pick up a game. Black and white boys played together, ate meals at each other's homes, and often collected whippings from both their black and white "mamas" when they got in trouble together. The Hill was a racial and ethnic smorgasbord, and pickup games reflected this variety. As street play became increasingly organized into team competition, however, a sorting-out by race occurred. Consequently, sandlot clubs were rarely composed of both black and white players, even though their members might have grown up playing ball together. An exception, the Crawfords maintained this interracial mix for a time, only to become an all-black squad as they got farther away from the streets.

¹ "How Uncle Sam Created an Army of Athletes," *Scientific American* 120 (Feb. 18, 1919): 114-15; *Pittsburgh Press*, Apr. 11, 1926; "Sandlotters' Baseball Guide, 1927," published by the *Pittsburgh Post*.

The roots of the Crawfords were in the South and the migration northward. Bill Harris was born on Christmas day, 1909, in Calhoun, Alabama. His parents had met while working as cooks at the public school there but neither a piece of land nor a job inspecting cars for the railroad was sufficient inducement for them to resist the lures of the North. The oldest son, Earl, was the first to leave, earning himself the nickname of "Globetrotter" as he came to Pittsburgh and began working construction. Earl wrote home that the money was good, and the family soon followed.² His father worked construction, too, beginning as a laborer and eventually becoming a pusher or gang leader. The five Harris brothers held a variety of jobs but became better known for their feats on the diamond, first in Pittsburgh and then across black America.

Bill had his first taste of ball in the South. Baseball there revolved around a multitude of small-town teams and a few big-city clubs like the Birmingham Black Barons and the Memphis Red Sox. But the young Harris learned the game on the streets and school lots of the Hill. By the time he was in the eighth grade at McKelvey School, Bill had left the pitcher's mound for a position in the infield and had become the de facto leader of the grade school team. "It was just a playground bunch but the guys wanted to play ball," he said years later. There were four blacks on the McKelvey team in 1925 and "the rest were Jewish boys and Italians and white boys." About thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen years old, they played rival school neighborhood teams in games Harris and the other team leaders arranged. One of those competing teams was from Watt School. McKelvey's black enrollment was slightly over 28 percent of the student body in the mid-1920s, while Watt's was the highest in the Hill at 88 percent.³ The Watt team reflected this particular racial balance with its seven black and two white players.

Teenie Harris managed the Watt School team and, while no relation to Bill, the two considered themselves "pretty close." It was simply a matter of time before they arranged a contest. Some sixty-five years later, Bill Harris recalled that when "I told our guys that we were going to play Watt School they said 'Oh no! We're not going to play them cause they fight. If you beat Watt School you got to outrun them, too.' They didn't want to play so I said, 'Look, fellas. Teenie's got those fellas under control the same way I got

2 Interview with Bill Harris, July 29, 1980.

3 Ira DeA. Reid, *Social Conditions of the Negro in the Hill District of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1930), 82-86.

you fellows. We're going to play them." Overcoming his players' misgivings, Harris booked the game for a nearby playground. The game went nine innings and ended with Watt on top of a one-to-nothing score. The McKelvey players might have been youngsters but they were mature enough ballplayers to appreciate a close, tightly-played game and they approached Harris afterwards: "Bill, they no argue, they no fight. They got a good team. Book 'em again." Three weeks later, the two teams tangled in a rematch with Watt once more emerging victorious, this time by three runs to two.

Afterwards, the rival managers hashed over the game. "Look at this," Bill Harris argued. "Two games going down like this and your eight or nine black dudes playing pretty good ball. We have four of us here and each one of us plays a different position. Let's get a ball team together." Teenie Harris agreed, and the black youngsters from the two school teams coalesced into one squad that started playing and practicing down the Hill at Washington Park. The white players fell by the wayside. Bill Harris remembered them as less proficient than the black players, but perhaps more important than this remembered gap in playing abilities was the reality that organized competition on the sandlots of Pittsburgh was normally between squads made up of players with the same skin color. A black team would frequently play a white squad, but a team with both black and white players on it was exceptional.

For the rest of the summer, the as yet unnamed team played games that Bill and Teenie Harris arranged, picking up a player here and there. The following season, 1926, saw most of the players back on the field and ready to see just how good they were. They entered the city's recreation league as representatives of the Crawford Recreation Center (CRC), a combination bathhouse and recreation center catering primarily to blacks on the Hill.

John Clark, a *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist and partisan of the sporting life, pleaded with his readers to support the team:

Crawford Center must have a baseball team. Avenue patrons want to see their boys active on the diamond under able direction. Twilight games played by youngsters furnish a thrill to parents that is absent in the professional exhibitions. The participants are closer to us. We are interested in their every movement — they are ours.

The Column is begging. There is no appropriation from the city for uniforms. So the column requests that every one of its readers donate one dime (ten cents) to Harry Hall, care of Crawford Recreation Center, Wylie Avenue and Crawford Street, Pittsburgh, Pa.

As you know, the Column is not in the habit of begging, and this request is made in the interests of the boys who cannot reach you. Incidentally, it will give the Column an idea of how widely its efforts are appreciated.⁴

⁴ *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 15, 1926.

The response was hardly overwhelming, but a sizable donation from Gus Greenlee, the proprietor of a Wylie Avenue nightspot, paid for a set of uniforms.

The Crawfords won the pennant of the city's recreation league and posed in their new uniforms on the steps of the Carnegie Library on Wylie Avenue. Thirteen youths appear in the photograph, most of whom had been with the Crawfords from their Watt and McKelvey school beginnings. They were a serious, unsmiling group clad in pin-stripes and spiked shoes.⁵

The Crawfords retained their affiliation with the CRC the next two seasons, although they were essentially a self-organized and self-directed team. Bill Harris and Harry Beale booked the games and provided the field generalship, while the CRC's Jim Dorsey, Sr., served as their nominal coach. Players came and went, but the Crawfords continued to improve, ripping off strings of twenty-five and more consecutive victories. Soon, writers for the *Courier* were calling them the most promising team in the Colored Industrial Baseball League, the "fastest and cleverest outfit . . . to perform on a local diamond in the first-class division in many seasons." Perhaps the highest praise came for the bathhouse boys when they were referred to as the "Little Homestead Grays,"⁶ after the area's stellar black pro club which was attracting considerable national attention in the late 1920s.

In the course of the 1927 and 1928 seasons, the Crawfords played their way to the top ranks of sandlot ball. At first, the team had trouble getting the other black clubs, made up of men in their twenties, thirties, and forties, to play them. But the Crawfords were fast becoming the best attraction in town and when what was now the Hill's favorite team played, crowds from several hundred to a few thousand were guaranteed.

The Crawfords took on the area's top black clubs and as they beat them recruited some of their vanquished opponents. First they played the Pittsburgh Black Sox at Washington Park. The Black Sox had a pitcher with a stiff leg, and the Crawfords repeatedly beat out infield hits by bunting the ball to his stiff side. Relying on their

⁵ A copy of this photograph appears in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 20, 1973. The youths are Bill Harris, Teenie Harris, Buster Christian, Jasper Stevens, Wyatt Turner, Reece Mosby, Harry Beale, Johnny Moore, Bill Smith, Bill Jones, Tootsie Deal, and two lads named Julius and Nate whose last names have faded from the memories of the surviving Crawfords.

⁶ *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 11, July 2, 30, 1927.

speed, the Crawfords won and when the Sox demanded a rematch they beat them again. After the second victory, four members of the Black Sox, Harry and Roy Williams and Eddie and Willie Bryant, two pairs of brothers, jumped to the Crawfords. Bill Harris explained the transition as a simple one: "The fellows that were with us playing those positions — they just fell out. No questions asked. They just quit." Teenie Harris, in the meantime, had left the club to help his brother, Woogie, in a new business venture, the popularization of the numbers in Pittsburgh. Next, the Crawfords took on and beat the Clark Athletic Club and the Garfield ABCs, picking up an infielder and two pitchers in addition to the victories.

Finally, the young Crawfords tangled with the Edgar Thomson ball club in Braddock. The Edgar Thomson club, coached by ex-Olympian distance runner Earl Johnson, had been built around a nucleus of young ballplayers who had joined the steelworks club when John Herron disbanded his Pittsburgh Monarchs in 1924. Harold Tinker, Neal Harris, Charley Hughes, Ormsby Roy, Claude Johnson, and William Kimbo were still with the Edgar Thomson team four seasons later when they met the Crawfords. As Tinker recalled,

Those kids came to play Edgar Thomson and we were amazed that we could only beat them two to one or something like that. Those kids were really hustlers. Now, Neal Harris's brother . . . he played third base for the kids and that had something to do with us coming from Edgar Thomson, because he insisted to his brother, Neal, "Why don't you come down and we'll make this a real ball team?" So we quit Edgar Thomson and went down to play with these kids at Washington Park.⁷

With the informal acquisition of the Edgar Thomson players, the Crawfords were far and away the best black sandlot club in town. Their high percentage of victories over white sandlotters indicated that they were likely the best sandlot club, black or white, in Western Pennsylvania.

By the fall of 1928, Bill Harris and Johnny Moore had been picked up by Cumberland W. Posey's Homestead Grays. Both Harris and Moore, in addition to their baseball feats, were all-city basketball players in high school, Harris at Fifth Avenue and Moore at Schenley. Johnny Moore also quarterbacked the Crawfords' counterparts in sandlot football, the Garfield Eagles. The slack was more than picked up by Tinker, Hughes, and the other recruits. Among the latter was a husky youth from the North Side of Pittsburgh, Joshua Gibson.

Harold Tinker had been born in Birmingham in 1910 and trekked with his family to Pittsburgh in 1917 where his father found work

⁷ Interview with Harold Tinker, June 19, 1980.

at Horne's Department Store and as a barber. Tinker grew up playing baseball and soccer on the Hill and running track for Hunter Johnson's Scholastics. "I didn't play baseball just because it was a pastime," Tinker recalled, "I played it because I loved it. If my mother wanted to find me, she didn't have to worry. She'd say 'Go down to the ballfield and tell Harry to come home.' I lived on that ballfield." A youth with an uncanny ability to judge and track down a fly ball did not go unnoticed for long and when he was fifteen Tinker was recruited by the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company (WEMCO) ballclub.

I'll never forget the first game I played. I made a couple of sensational catches — they were sensational partly because of my inexperience. I was running for the Schenley High track team and played baseball in my track shoes. I came in for a line drive, first line drive I'd ever fielded in a sandlot game and the ball was over my head after I started in. I had misjudged it. I tried to put on the brakes, you know, with my heels, and you know how trackshoes are. I stood up on my heels and my feet went up and my hand flew up and I caught that ball. They thought I was a sensation. And I chased one of the balls that day very much off of the playing field and rounded it up. They wouldn't let me go. They said, "Play."⁸

From WEMCO to the Pittsburgh Monarchs and then to the Edgar Thomson club, Tinker matured as a player and found his natural position in center field. Along the way, he picked up the nickname, "Hooks," due to his pronounced bowleggedness. He made a few dollars playing for the Monarchs and a small remuneration from the Edgar Thomson team, which played virtually every night. The money alone was not enough to live on so Tinker began working for RKO pictures in downtown Pittsburgh, first as a janitor and then as head of the shipping department. He could leave work and catch a streetcar to the Edgar Thomson field every night, not getting home until late in the evening. Holding a job during the day did not impair his capacity to play in the twilight. Tinker acquired a reputation as a local black Tris Speaker, after the brilliant defensive center fielder and Hall of Famer for the Boston Red Sox and the Cleveland Indians.⁹ Tinker chuckled when reminded of these accolades and modestly credited his success to watching "the ball from the time it left the pitcher's hand until it left the bat. I was ready to move."

Charley Hughes played the infield like Tinker did center field. His father had become a molder in Chattanooga and was able to work

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ In the spring of 1981, I asked my sport history class to conduct interviews with former sandlotters. Although I had never mentioned Tinker, two of the students heard stories about him and his outstanding play from their subjects.

at his trade in McKeesport after moving to Pittsburgh. Charley grew up in the predominantly white working class section of Lawrenceville in the company of immigrant families from southern and eastern Europe. He played pickup games with Polish boys on Herron Hill before joining the Pittsburgh Blue Sox, a sandlot team from the Lawrenceville and Herron Hill black communities. He met Tinker on the Monarchs and both made the switch to the Edgar Thomson team. It has often been said that for a baseball team to be good, it has to be strong up the middle, that is, the catcher, shortstop, second baseman, and center fielder must be good defensive players. With Tinker in center and Hughes at short, their clubs always had the potential to be strong up the middle. Hughes was induced to join the Edgar Thomson team because he got a job in the bargain, one he returned to whenever he was unable to play professional ball full-time. With breaks for ball and a stint in the army during World War II, Hughes still managed to accumulate thirty-two years of service at Edgar Thomson before retiring. While going over the roster of the Crawfords recently, Harold Tinker stopped and smiled when he got to Charley Hughes's name.

The greatest ground ball man I've ever seen in my life. As much as we cared for that field up there [Ammon Field on Bedford Avenue], there would be a gutter that ran across second base every time it rained. And Hughes would be digging it out, and scraping it and raking it but it would be right back. Balls would get to that gutter and jump right up in his face. You know what he'd do with it? He'd come up with it on his ear. You know, I watched this kid make miraculous catches so many times. One day, I said, "Charley, how do you catch those balls that make that bounce right into your face?" And he said, "I'll tell you something. I watch the ball until it goes into the glove." This boy was marvelous. I never saw him make the wrong throw.¹⁰

Tinker was also responsible for recruiting Josh Gibson to the Crawfords. Joshua Gibson hailed from Buena Vista, Georgia. His father left there in 1921 to begin work for Carnegie-Illinois Steel in Pittsburgh. Three years later, he was able to send for his wife and three children. Josh was not quite thirteen when the family moved to the Pleasant Valley section on the North Side of Pittsburgh. He left school after the ninth grade and worked for Westinghouse Air Brake, a steel mill, and Gimbel Brothers Department Store before finding his calling on the ballfield. A strong, solidly built lad who weighed 190 pounds and stood six feet tall by the time he was eighteen, Gibson played for the Pleasant Valley Red Sox and then the Gimbel Brothers Athletic Club.¹¹ Tinker, meanwhile, had been playing

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ William Brashler, *Josh Gibson: A Life in the Negro Leagues* (New York, 1978) is the source of some of this biographical information but it is not very reliable overall.

a while for a team on the North Side: "I went over there to play with them one day and this boy was playing third base. There were gullies and everything there but this guy was digging balls out and he amazed me by the way he played, not by his hitting. And then I saw him hit a ball up on top of that hill and I said, 'Josh, don't you want to play with a real team?' And he said, 'Yes, Sir, I guess so.' I said, 'Well, I'll tell you what. When we play on Tuesday, you come up.'"¹²

The Crawfords already had a fine defensive catcher in Wyatt Turner. "He was a smart catcher, but he wasn't an excellent hitter — not then he wasn't. We suggested when we saw the way Josh could throw that we would let him catch." Gibson had done some catching before and from his first game with the Crawfords he was behind the plate. "He became a tremendous success. He hit balls out on Bedford Avenue and up in that hospital [a formidable distance from Ammon Field]. He was actually the most tremendous hitter I've ever come across in baseball — I'm barring none." Wyatt Turner, who found himself on the bench with the awesome young slugger and future Hall of Famer in his place, accepted his demotion in good spirits. Decades later, while recounting some of Gibson's feats, Turner summed it up: "If he put his bat down, I'd be ashamed to pick it up."¹³ Gibson stories around Pittsburgh are legion. They often begin with the narrator commenting that it was "the longest hit ball I ever saw." Tinker's favorite involved a game the Crawfords were playing against a white ball club from Port Vue, up the river from McKeesport.

That team got ahead of us some kind of way and they stayed there until about the 6th inning. They were two runs ahead and I was the first man up and I got on base. The next man up hit an infield single and moved me over to second. Josh was due up. He was the clean-up batter. Quite naturally, you know, you walk a man when you got an open base. They didn't have no open base, but they knew Josh. So the man threw two pitch-outs [a pitch-out is an intentionally wide pitch designed to prevent the hitter from swinging and usually used when the catcher expects a base runner to try to steal or, as in this case, intentionally to walk somebody], Josh called time and he called over to me. I met him there on the infield grass and he said, "Can I hit the ball?"

I said, "What do you mean, Josh? The man is giving you the intentional walk and we need two runs to tie."

"I don't know. The man is pitching out too close to the plate."

"Josh, you mean to tell me you could reach out and hit the ball where he's throwing it?"

Josh smiled and said, "I can hit it."

"Well, Josh, if you feel you can hit it, you go ahead and hit it." I walked

¹² Tinker interview.

¹³ Interview with Wyatt Turner, Dec. 29, 1980.

back to second base and the next pitch out that boy threw him was a pitch out on the outside, way out, and Josh didn't hit that ball over the right field fence — he hit that ball over the center field fence. The people went crazy. I couldn't believe it . . . the ball was really out there.

Josh was built like metal. There was no fat on him. If you ran into him, it was just like you run into a wall. Yes sir, that's the way he was built. . . . He was hard. He was a powerful boy.¹⁴

As young men like Gibson, Tinker, and Hughes replaced the youths of the Watt and McKelvey playgrounds, the Crawfords underwent a transition from a neighborhood team to one made up of the best sandlotters in black Pittsburgh. The internal workings of the team changed, too, as the institutional affiliation with the Crawford Recreational Center ended before the 1929 season. Even during their years as the CRC's team, the Crawfords were basically a self-managed operation. Bill Harris and Teenie Harris had handled most of the bookings and managerial decisions in the early years and when Teenie left the club to work for his brother, Harry Beale took on some of the work. Beale emerged as the real organizer of the Crawfords off the field, especially after Bill Harris was signed by the Homestead Grays. He was both a manager and public relations man, setting up games and handling the finances. Highly respected by his teammates, Beale was regarded as an intelligent, level-headed man. "If Harry said it," Harold Tinker reminisced, "we did it." Beale had been a pitcher but as the general caliber of the Crawfords improved, "He realized he didn't have the ability for the kind of ball we were playing. He knew where his ability would help us best and that's what he did." Thus, Beale left the mound for the bench and put his energies into promoting the Crawfords and arranging their games. He also began writing a column about sandlot ball for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Field decisions were increasingly made by Tinker, team captain and comanager with Beale during the 1929 season. Tinker directed the play from the bench, determining when to bunt, steal, or hit and run. The coaching they did for each other, sharing their knowledge of the game and passing on their skills.

In 1929, the team also acquired a financial backer. John W. King was a Democratic ward heeler who worked as a policeman in Soho. He lived in the Hill and ran a coal and ice delivery service on the side. King backed the team financially, not out of a desire to make money, but simply out of his fondness for the players and the game and the publicity that accrued from his support. He bought uniforms and equipment and emptied the ice out of his truck to transport the

14 Tinker interview.

team to away games. "Without him," Harold Tinker argued, "I don't think we would have made it. He was a grand old man who just wanted to help out." According to Charley Hughes, King "wasn't making a quarter" on the team but contributing heavily to its upkeep. During the 1929 season, Steve Cox, from the Spalding-Spiegal Sporting Goods store and a force in area sandlot ball, began booking games for them, too. Cox had contacts with the top white sandlot clubs and was willing to arrange games for the Crawfords without taking a percentage for himself. What he did want became clear only later.

By the middle of the season, the Crawfords were drawing more than three thousand fans to their Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday home games at Ammon Field. As a means of boosting attendance and as a way of reciprocating community support, the Crawfords frequently staged benefit games. By involving institutions like the Coleman Home or the Livingston Memorial Hospital, the games were guaranteed larger ticket sales. The *Courier* trumpeted these games, playing up both the charity angle and the actual contest.¹⁵

When the Crawfords traveled, a good-sized contingent of Hill District residents went with them. Bill Harris remembered a double-header in Vandergrift, some thirty miles from Pittsburgh, where the Crawfords' fans arrived early and in such numbers that the home town crowd had no place to sit. But the size of the crowd did not necessarily mean that the Crawfords were a money-making proposition.

The distinction between amateur and professional sport has always been cloudy and has often reflected class background. On the sandlots, players were generally considered amateurs and no one thought too much of it if they in fact received some payment for their playing. The city, however, prohibited sandlot teams from charging admission at city fields. Outside the city, fields were commonly fenced off, and spectators had to pay their way in. In Pittsburgh, teams and promoters got around this ban by passing the hat and asking for a contribution. Unfortunately, many fans ignored the hat. Crowds of several thousand would wind up contributing only fifty or sixty dollars. The cost of baseballs and umpires took up most of that and the visiting team usually got a flat fee or a portion of the gate.

Tinker recalled that there was a "mob of people" at the first game he played as a Crawford but the collection amounted to less than

¹⁵ *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 12, 19, 25, 1930.

ten dollars. The city was about to open Ammon Field on Bedford Avenue, and Harry Beale suggested the Crawfords apply for a permit to play there. Ammon Field became their home grounds, and the Crawfords gained permits to play there first one and then two and finally three nights a week. At Ammon, they took on the best teams the area had to offer and beat them. The likes of Book-Shoe, W. O. W., J. L. Thomas, and Dormont fell before the Hill's team. Dormont, one of the top semipro teams in the area, often employed former major leaguers and gave the Homestead Grays a hard time, but they could not best the Crawfords. At Ammon, the gate from the passing hat doubled but it was still slim pickings. The away games were usually more lucrative, sometimes bringing in three or four hundred dollars. After a string of several such games, Beale and Tinker would divvy up the profits to the players. The most Tinker ever took home in his pay envelope was twelve dollars and that held more or less for everybody.¹⁶

But during an elimination series for a tournament late in the 1929 season, Cumberland Posey's brother, See, approached the team and suggested running a game for them at Ammon Field. "I'm going to show you kids what you're missing."¹⁷ The red-hot Crawfords, with a record of sixty-five wins and eleven losses late in August, were attracting large crowds.¹⁸ See Posey blockaded the upper part of the field and stationed two policemen there. Everybody had to get in through one gate, and while there was no set admission, each spectator had to kick something in to get by Posey. How he evaded the city ordinance was a mystery to the players. After the ballgame, he spread the take out on a table and Bill Harris remembered that there was over \$2,000 there. The startled players began wondering what indeed they might have been missing.

By the late 1920s, the Crawfords had captured the attention of baseball fans because of their youthfulness and their exceptional play. They were the Hill's team even when the roster expanded to include more and more players from other parts of the city. Furthermore, they were perceived as black Pittsburgh's team, and most blacks felt a proprietary interest in them much the way the residents of a city feel a professional sports team is their own. They were black Pittsburgh's team in a way the Homestead Grays were not, for each member of the Crawfords in the 1920s was either Pittsburgh-born or

¹⁶ Tinker interview.

¹⁷ Harris interview.

¹⁸ *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 24, 1929.

had moved to the city with his family. No one had come to Pittsburgh simply to play ball. While the Grays had germinated in a similar fashion, by then they had become an amalgam of the best black ball-players in the nation. The Crawfords were still composed of young men from Pittsburgh's different black neighborhoods, and the fans responded in kind, filling the grandstands and lining the baselines whenever they played. The strongest support for the Crawfords came from the black population of the Hill, but local whites and blacks elsewhere were also among their most ardent backers. After several matches with the Immaculate Heart team from Lawrenceville, a contingent of white Lawrenceville fans started showing up regularly at Ammon Field. There they mingled with Hill residents and blacks from Homewood, East Liberty, and Beltzhoover who journeyed to Ammon Field when the Crawfords played. The crowds for home games were predominantly black with anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of the audience made up of whites. On the road, especially outside the city, the crowd was often overwhelmingly white. At times, the Crawfords played in small towns outside Pittsburgh where they were the only blacks in town.

The Crawfords were a major topic for street corner and barber-shop discussions, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* followed their ascension on the sandlots with a mixture of enthusiasm and pride. Black Pittsburghers began wagering on the outcome of Crawford games. Many bet on the Crawfords whenever they played, and in this betting without bookmakers between fans of rival squads, those who placed money on the Crawfords were more often than not the winners. But most of the fans simply came to see the game played. There they could witness baseball played with style and skill — a competence few blacks or working-class whites saw in their working lives or on the streets of their neighborhoods. Some knew the players as neighbors, schoolmates, or as men from work. Most recognized them as young men who, except for their athletic talent, were very much like themselves. By supporting the Crawfords, they affirmed not only the players' abilities but their own sense of competence in themselves, their class, and for some, their race.

The games were also an occasion for socializing and entertainment. What better or cheaper attraction could be found on a warm summer night in this immigrant ghetto? It was the sort of entertainment that sometimes transcended its social setting. Feats on the diamond or during a well-played game could temporarily remove the players and the fans from the racial and economic realities of Pitts-

burgh to a situation where what was happening before their eyes was all that mattered. While these moments of transcendence might be relatively few, they were powerful enough to keep the fans coming back in hopes of recapturing that sensation.

Even so, this enthusiasm for the team did not translate into economic support. Wendell Smith and other *Courier* writers took the fans to task for their failure to contribute more to the passing hat. In his weekly column, Smith proclaimed:

One of the most disgusting things the writer has ever witnessed has been the "poor sportsmanship" of some of our people at Ammon Field, where the Crawfords, an up and coming young team, hold forth about twice a week.

Here is a young team with all the earmarks of future greatness. They play the game for all that it is worth. Playing for love of the sport, they give their followers thrills that one seldom sees in this age of "machine baseball."

They're popular and that's a fact. Any time they play a game on their home field, crowds estimated at from 3,500 to 5,000 people pack and jam their way into the park. And right now, they're playing to larger crowds daily, than ANY team in this section.

But here is the irony of the situation. Mr. King, who backs the team, and Harry Beale, the young, wide awake, hustling and resourceful "kid boss," informs us that it is a rare thing when more than \$50 is taken up at the gate.

These youngsters have the opposing team to pay, baseballs to buy (and they need plenty at \$2.50 each), their uniforms to pay for and numerous other sundry expenses co-incident with running a ball club. A nickel a person would see the youngsters on top.

But, no! Out of every ten people who pass through, nine of them have "iron-clad" alibis. We say "iron-clad" because very seldom does one hear the clink of silver. Copper pennies rattle in the box from the fingers of "dressed-up" sheiks, who cleverly hide their contributions.

Mr. Hendel, owner and manager of the Roosevelt Theatre, imbued with community spirit, is offering valuable assistance, but we feel that "cheap sports," the greatest dredge mankind has ever known, should take heed.

Be a real sport. Pay for what you see. Surely to see these games is worth at least a dime a head. Let's vindicate our inherent faith in humanity. It'll be appreciated.¹⁹

A crowd of 6,000 at a Memorial Day game in 1930 contributed less than eighty dollars. After paying the umpires twenty-four dollars and the visiting team another fifty, the Crawfords had less than six dollars left. The dozen balls used that day cost fifteen, leaving the team with a debit.

While an occasional pay envelope with ten or fifteen dollars in it was a welcome addition to a man's income, few Crawfords could depend on it as their sole source of money. Most of the players held down regular jobs or had not yet entered the work force. Lefty Burton, a pitcher who had jumped to the Crawfords from the Garfield ABCs, was a mailman, Harold Tinker a janitor, and Charley Hughes, Bill and Neal Harris, and Bucky Williams labored in area mills and

¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 5, 1930.

factories. Wyatt Turner chauffeured and Bus Christian collected rubbish for the city. Certainly, the prospects of becoming a full-time professional ballplayer were enticing. But the chances for a black youth succeeding as a professional athlete were far slimmer than for a comparable white boy who would have a much larger professional apparatus to shoot for. The rewards, too, reflected the economic disparities between white and black America.

Some of the young Crawfords pursued their youthful fantasies of playing professional ball, and a few actually made it. Bill Harris, whose brother Vic starred for years in the gray uniforms of Cum Posey's Homestead squad, played a number of years as a pro and then became a full-time umpire in the Negro National League. Charley Hughes, William Kimbo, and Josh Gibson left their marks on black pro ball, but most of the Crawfords were motivated chiefly by a desire to play. They had grown up playing ball and for many of them, they had grown up playing ball with each other. That camaraderie was a valuable and treasured aspect of their lives. When Harold Tinker was asked if there was fear of their players being recruited away by other teams, he responded emphatically: "No. They loved each other. Now, you talk about a family. They thought of each other [as one]. They thought that our left fielder was the best left fielder in baseball, that our pitchers and our catcher was the best. You couldn't argue with them about each other. You couldn't bring anything up about each other. I think that was the thing that held us together."²⁰

Some of the players had families of their own and most of them as well as parents, brothers, and sisters came to the games. Afterwards, players with families went off together while many of the single players did a little socializing with each other. As Bill Harris remembered it, the only division on the team was one that came naturally between the younger and older players. The latter "were getting the girls, I guess." Perhaps the best indication of how players felt about each other is the closeness and respect many remarked they felt for each other a half century later.

The 1930 Crawfords were ready to take on the Grays, who were fast becoming the best team in black America. For some of the players, it was about time. "I had an ambition," Harold Tinker explained, "and I said to myself, when I fulfill that ambition, I'll be ready to quit." His aim was to beat the Homestead Grays.

"I sat down there in Forbes Field as a kid and I watched them

²⁰ Tinker interview.

play. I told myself, 'Boy, one day I'm gonna be on a team that will beat these Homestead Grays.' That was my life's desire — to develop a team to beat the Grays."²¹ But getting a date to play the Grays was not that simple. Cumberland Posey, the Grays' owner and manager, put them off until the newspapers and fans clamored for a match and he knew he would get a huge crowd for the game.

Ironically, as the Crawfords geared up for their impending showdown with the Homestead Grays, the team began a transition that was more significant than its evolution from a schoolyard nine to a city-wide team. The Crawfords were shortly to lose their sandlot character and become a professional outfit. They were to shed their self-organized internal structure and accept salaried positions on a club they no longer owned themselves.

During the 1930 season, the Crawfords became a professional ballclub with a paid manager, salaried players, and an owner. Ballplayers from other professional clubs were imported to bring the caliber of the squad closer to that of the teams within the Negro National League. That irrevocably changed the Crawfords and while their ties to the sandlots were not totally sliced away, they were to belong more to the newly burgeoning professional arena of black sport in the years ahead.

Bill Harris, who had returned to the Crawfords after a stint with the Grays, described the catalyst of these changes as an offer from Steve Cox, who was then booking games for the Crawfords. Cox worked at a sporting goods store where the Crawfords bought much of their equipment. He approached the bench in the late innings of a game and addressed the team. "You fellows wait in the guest room after we get through. I want to say something to you." Bill Harris recalled what followed.

So we did. He came down and says, "Fellows, you're playing the same teams the Grays are playing. You're beating every one of them same as the Grays. There's only one thing the Grays have that you don't have." Someone bit. "What's that?" He says, "An owner of the team. Here's my checkbook. I'll write you a thousand dollar check right here and give it to you. Just let me put my name as owner of the Crawfords." So the guys began to jump. "Oh man! A thousand dollars." Big money it was. So I said, "Hold it a minute, fellows. Look, Steve's with us everyday. Why not let us talk it over." That money was in their eyes but they agreed.

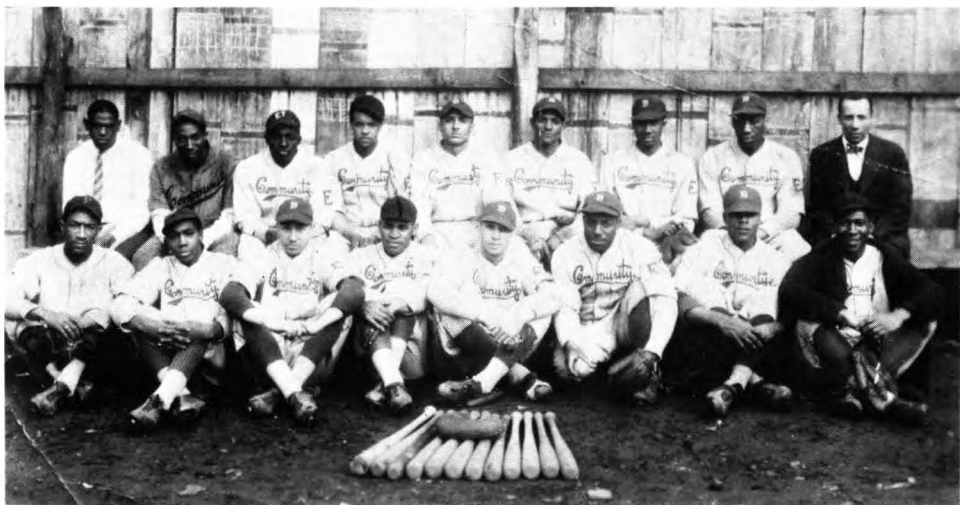
After Cox had left the room, Harris suggested, "Let's go down and talk to Mr. Greenlee. That man [would] do anything for us. If it's worth \$1000 to a white man, it's worth \$10,000 to a black man."²²

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Harris interview.



The Homestead Grays, managed by Cumberland Posey (third from left, second row), were formed by black steelworkers in Homestead. By the late 1920s, they were one of the premier black ballclubs in the country.



ET, as the Edgar Thomson Steelworks team was known, was coached by Olympic medalist Earl Johnson (far right, second row). Several of these players jumped to the Crawfords in the late 1920s. Back row, left to right: Ted Sledge, ?, Neal Harris, Claude Johnson, Rudy Hughes, ?, Charles Becotas, Watson, Earl Johnson. Front row: ?, ?, Gus Neville, Ernest Terry, Harold Tinker, ?, William Kimbo. (Courtesy of Harold Tinker)



The original Pittsburgh Crawfords posed on the steps of the Carnegie Library in the Hill. Front row, left to right: William Smith, Tootsie Deal, Julius, Wyatt Turner, Reece Mosby, Bill Jones, Teenie Harris, and Johnny Moore. Back row: Nate, Bill Harris, Harry Beale, Buster Christian, Jasper Stevens. (Courtesy of Wyatt Turner)



Harold Tinker, manager of the Terrace Village ballclub in the 1950s, instructs Wilbur Brown, Norman Gant, Jim Henderson, and Billy Hull (left to right). (Courtesy of Harold Tinker) Terrace Village was one of the first sandlot clubs to integrate.

Harold Tinker, center fielder on the early Crawfords, also played basketball for the Courier Big Five. (Courtesy of Harold Tinker)



Hill numbers mogul, Gus Greenlee, took the Crawfords over in the early 1930s and remade them into the champions of the Negro National League. (Photo by Teenie Harris)



Eighteenth Ward represented the black residents of Beltzhoover and played its games at McKinley Park. (Courtesy of Wyatt Turner) Led by Willis Moody and Ralph Mellix, it fielded a team for almost three decades.



Eighteenth Ward club.

Greenlee was black Pittsburgh's "Mr. Big." His Crawford Grill was a mecca for jazz aficionados, and the numbers business he and Woogie Harris built in the late 1920s remained black Pittsburgh's major enterprise through the 1940s. They piled into a car and went down to the Crawford Grill. Greenlee was standing in the back of the bar. He took one look at the crew of youths walking through his establishment and called over, "What you kids want?" They briefly explained Cox's offer and he told them to go over to the Washington Club on Locust Street and wait for him there.

The players drove over to the Soho club and awaited Gus's arrival. When the Crawfords told him what was going on, he thought it over and responded: "Well, fellas, I appreciate you thinking of me like this, but I don't know anything about any sports. No sports at all. There's nothing I can do. But if it's money you kids want, I'll give you all the money you want. If it's transportation, I'll buy you all the transportation you want." So we said, "Uh, Mr. Greenlee, it's not that. We want you to own the club. Steve Cox wants to give us a check for \$1000 to own the ball club. We'd rather you have it than Steve Cox." ²³

Greenlee reasoned that if he took the team over, he would have to get a manager to run it. "Whatever the manager did, I would have to go along with it because that's the way I am." He finally told the youths to come back and see him in a week for his answer.

When they did, Gus had brought along his chief advisor, Roy Sparrow. "All he said was 'I have decided to take the team over and this is my secretary here. He's going to take every name and position and we're going to put you all on a salary.' Man, gee whiz! A salary. We just blew up. A salary! So he says, 'I'm going to give you all the same price — \$125 a month. And if you say you're better than this or whatever it might be, I'll raise your salary.' That was a dream to us. We never thought about no salary. We just wanted to play ball." ²⁴ After the brief meeting, Greenlee asked Bill Harris if he could drive. When Harris responded affirmatively, Greenlee instructed him, "Well, you and Pussyfoot [one of Greenlee's aides] go over there and see the Lincoln people on the Boulevard. Tell them I said send me two nine-passenger Lincolns." Harris still chuckles when he remembers it. "No money, no nothing. Just said tell them to send me two nine-passenger Lincolns."

Greenlee decided he wanted to make the Crawfords the best

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

team in black baseball. He sent for veteran Atlantic City Bacharach's shortstop Bobby Williams to manage the club and recruited Sam Streeter, Jimmie Crutchfield, Pistol Russell, and a lanky fireballer named Satchel Paige to bolster his local talent. The team soon became a salaried squad of professional players, many with years of experience in the Negro National League.²⁵ The newcomers displaced many of the Pittsburghers from the roster, just as some of them had moved out the youths from the McKelvey and Watt playgrounds a few years before. Bill Harris was to quit in disgust a few months later and many of the others were to resign within the next season or two. Harris explained: "We were big time then. Nobody balked. But everybody thought the team would stay as it was, like the young Crawfords. Then this guy [Williams] came in and began to weed us out and get his old friends in. But he got a good ball club out of it — a beautiful ball club — one of the best in the world."²⁶

It is not surprising that those who underwent this transformation look back at what happened in different ways. Remembering events of some fifty years ago is a difficult task. Harold Tinker, for example, cast the takeover in a different light than Harris. "The sad part of it is that Gus Greenlee saw the potential of that team and he stole us off of that old man [J. W. King]. That's just what happened." Greenlee, he argued, had the bait to dangle in front of their eyes. "We were all young men and he told us that we would get paid. We would travel in limousines, which we did, and we wouldn't have to worry about expenses, or what it cost to run the team. Two or three guys listened to him but I didn't want to go. Not because I didn't like to progress but because of what was going to happen to Mr. King."²⁷ Even then, Tinker recalled, the decision was not an easy one. After some "stormy meetings" the group voted and "it didn't go anyplace. But after a few more meetings, the guys decided, 'Let's go.'"

Charley Hughes agreed, shortly before his death in 1981, that the team had given John King "a raw deal," but he confirmed that the players had approached Greenlee themselves and voted in favor of his ownership. "Gus was a wonderful fellow. Everybody liked him. He was in the kicks, all right." Virtually everyone interviewed held a similar opinion of Greenlee, including Tinker, who had objected to his replacing King as their main backer. Nor did Charley Hughes and Wyatt Turner recall any resentment as the Crawfords found them-

²⁵ *Pittsburgh Courier*, Apr. 14, 1934.

²⁶ Harris interview.

²⁷ Tinker interview.

selves moved off the squad by the new players. "Nothing we could have done, anyway," was how Turner assessed the situation years later.²⁸

These managerial and personnel changes did not derail the Crawfords' impending confrontation with the Homestead Grays for bragging rights to black baseball supremacy in Pittsburgh. If anything, Greenlee's entry into Pittsburgh baseball added a new and exciting element to the scene — Greenlee himself. The teams first met at Forbes Field in the summer of 1930, before Greenlee was involved. Oscar Owens took to the mound for the Grays against the Crawfords' Harry Kincannon. Owens pitched no-hit ball through five innings until Tinker broke the ice in the sixth and four consecutive batters connected safely behind him to bring in two runs. But the Crawfords went into the ninth trailing by a run and lost the game when Bill Harris's brother, Vic, made a running catch of a drive off Charley Hughes's bat with two on to end the game.²⁹

Their second meeting occurred the following summer after Greenlee had taken over. With his new hired hand, Sam Streeter, opposing Willie Foster, the matchup looked like it would produce another close game. The *Courier* called the impending contest the highlight of the local season and reported that a good deal of money had been placed on the game. Wagers of all sorts were made, with the Crawford supporters asking for odds. Their money was quickly covered by those who did not think the Crawfords capable of trimming the Grays.³⁰ Bettors do not usually pay off after the first inning, but Crawford backers were ready to settle up soon afterwards as the Grays drubbed the Crawfords nine to nothing.

Shortly before the teams met for a third time, Tinker remembers Greenlee telling the players, "You have to do one of two things. You have to quit your job and play ball or quit the team and go to your job." Tinker, like most of the Pittsburghers on the team, had continued to hold down his regular job, even after Greenlee had put them on salary. Most of them had families and needed their jobs, especially during the winter months. Tinker did not want to quit his job at RKO but reminded himself of his childhood ambition to beat the Homestead Grays. "I didn't say I was going to quit the team, and I didn't say I wasn't going to quit my job. He gave us a couple of weeks to think it over."³¹

²⁸ Turner interview.

²⁹ Tinker interview.

³⁰ *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1931.

³¹ Tinker interview.

In the meantime, Tinker and the Crawfords got another chance against the Grays. Harry Kincannon started but after the Grays scored three runs, the Crawfords brought in their newest pitching addition, a lanky righthander named Leroy ("Satchel") Paige, who was to rewrite the record books. "And I'll tell you," Tinker reminisced:

The Grays had one of the best shootin' teams in sandlot, but they hardly hit a foul ball off of Satchel the rest of the game. He was mowing those guys down like mad. He wasn't throwing nothing but aspirin tablets — fast balls. He hadn't developed all that fancy stuff, then. So we beat the Grays. I think we beat them 6-5 or something.

We had another game to play. We played two games a day sometimes. We went to this field for a twilight game and Gus was sitting on the bench. I'll never forget that night. I came in between innings and went over and sat down beside Gus. I said, "I got something to tell you." He said, "What is it, Red?" They called me Red. I said, "I had an ambition and I realized that ambition today." Gus said, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "I had an ambition to beat the Grays with a ball team that was developed by us and we did that today. You gave us an ultimatum to either quit our jobs or quit baseball and I have to quit baseball, because you don't pay me enough to support my family." Gus said, "Kid, think it over. You don't want to do that." And I said, "Yes, I do." He thought it over and said, "I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. As long as you feel like playing, you come up and dress every Sunday that we play, and I'll pay you. Just for dressing and sitting." So I did, through the rest of that year I came up with them on Sunday. But that was my last game with the Crawfords.³²

Within a few years, only Charley Hughes, Harry Williams, and Harry Kincannon were still on the roster. Josh Gibson, who had been lured away by the Grays, returned later in the 1930s via a trade. Tinker, Bill Harris, Wyatt Turner, and the other players drifted away or lost their spots on the roster to better ballplayers. Harry Beale, who had been with the team from its inception and had taken over most of the administrative tasks before Greenlee bought the club, died of tuberculosis a few years later at the age of twenty-four.

The *Courier* reported early in 1932 that the original members of the Crawfords were rumored to be regrouping and seeking an entry in the City League. But nothing came of it. The Crawfords of the sandlots were now Gus Greenlee's Pittsburgh Crawfords, a team destined for greatness. A picture hangs in the National Baseball Museum at Cooperstown, New York, that shows the 1936 Crawfords, champions of the Negro National League the year before, kneeling in front of their Mack bus. With Cool Papa Bell, Oscar Charleston, Judy Johnson, Satchel Paige, and Josh Gibson in the lineup, a quintet eventually selected for the Hall of Fame, the Crawfords, only a decade after their birth on Pittsburgh's sandlots, had become quite possibly the best team ever assembled for regular season play.

³² *Ibid.*