

UP FRONT



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

By Craig Britcher, Sports Museum
Project Coordinator/Curatorial Assistant

Josh Gibson—Baseball Star, Westinghouse Air Brake Employee

Nestled amidst more than 60,000 index cards in the Heinz History Center's Westinghouse collection lays the signed employment card of an 18-year-old janitor from the North Side. The recently discovered card documents the time just before this worker, Josh Gibson, emerged as the most feared power hitter in baseball's Negro Leagues. He became known as the "Black Babe Ruth," although many fans have claimed Babe Ruth should be known as the "White Josh Gibson."

Gibson's father, Mark Gibson, like many southern African Americans, migrated from Georgia to work in a Pittsburgh steel mill, saving his wages for several years to bring his family to settle on Charles Street in Pittsburgh's North Side neighborhood. Josh enrolled in vocational school to become an electrician. At age 16 he began playing third base for Gimbel's Department store (where he worked as an elevator operator) and the then semi-pro Pittsburgh Crawfords under Harold Tinker.

While the Depression deepened across the U.S., Gibson found 1930 to be exciting, tumultuous, and transformative. On March 7, he married

Helen Mason. With the couple expecting a baby, Gibson gave up his aspirations of becoming an electrician for solid work. His love of baseball served as inroads to employment at Westinghouse Air Brake Company. By day, Gibson worked in the "gage department," which manufactured air pressure gages; by night, he played for several Westinghouse company teams, sometimes traveling throughout the tri-state area.

Competition between company teams in industrial leagues led to intense pride

among employees. Chuck Klausing, a former high school and college football coach, remembered Gibson's brief employment in the summer of 1930. Klausing's father took him to games at Concourse Grounds in downtown Wilmerding. Air Brake foundry boss and coach Al Macha (whose nephew Ken later played and managed in the majors) hired Gibson—clearly for his bat, not his broom. Klausing's father used to point to a loose board near the top of the Wilmerding

DEPT.		CHECK No.	NAME	571
Gage		40	Joshua Gibson	
PLACE OF BIRTH		Georgia	DATE OF BIRTH	12-21-11
IF FOREIGN BORN ARE YOU NATURALIZED?			IF NOT, HOW FAR HAVE YOU PROGRESSED?	
HAVE YOU EVER WORKED FOR THIS Co.?		No	WHERE WERE YOU LAST EMPLOYED?	
5-2-30		19	THE ABOVE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF.	
L S Weight		Joshua Gibson		APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE
WITNESS		DATE		INITIALS
EMP. DEPT.		ACCEPTED	WILL START TO WORK	5-5-30
REJECTED			OCCUPATION	Janitor
RELIEF DEPT.		ACCEPTED	No. 173	
REJECTED			ADDRESS IN PENCIL	
No. 49379		2106 Charles St., N.S., Pittsburg, Pa.		
REMARKS				

Gibson autographs are extremely rare and highly sought after by memorabilia collectors. Less than 20 authentic examples are believed to exist, this card being the earliest known.

HC L&A, Westinghouse Air Brake Company Records.



The Pittsburgh Crawfords at Ammon Field, 1929. Gibson is fifth from left. The ballfield, in Pittsburgh's Hill District, was renamed for Gibson in 2008.


Courtesy of Lou Swartz.

Ice Plant's tower, beyond the left field fence. That, he said, was where 18-year-old Gibson hit Concourse Grounds' longest-ever home run, probably more than 450 feet.

Gibson's professional career began the same year when Homestead Grays owner Cum Posey lured him away from Westinghouse to be a starting catcher in the Negro Leagues; his first game was July 31 at Forbes Field. Managed by future-Hall of Famer Judy Johnson, Gibson played alongside first baseman Oscar Charleston, and caught legendary pitcher Smokey Joe Williams. Soon though, tragedy struck: on August 11, Gibson's wife Helen died while prematurely giving birth to twins. Heartbroken, Gibson kept his loss private while his in-laws assumed custody of the children.

Later in 1930, Gibson became the first player to hit a home run to dead center at Forbes Field and two days later allegedly hit a ball completely out of Yankee Stadium. In an age without reliable statistics, his legend can seem Bunyan-esque, but Gibson's

power is certainly comparable to that of his contemporary, Babe Ruth. In 1947, while he was hoping for a call to the majors, Gibson died at age 35 of a brain tumor—just months before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. In 1972, Gibson became the second Negro Leagues player inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, after pitcher Satchel Paige.

The few existing Gibson autographs are prized by collectors. Often signed "Joshua," some of the auctioned items include player contracts from Puerto Rican winter league teams, a few baseballs, and scrapbook pages. In 2005, a twice-signed, 1931 Homestead Grays spring training, real photo postcard sold for \$81,200, the only known signed portrait of Gibson in an age when no baseball cards were made of Negro League players. And now, the "Joshua" Gibson Westinghouse Air Brake Company employment card has brought to light his earliest-known surviving signature. 

The History Center will display Gibson's employee card and more on his career in conjunction with the exhibition *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*, which features the paintings of Kadir Nelson; the exhibit opens July 1, 2012.

Sources

Josh Gibson Foundation.org.

Klausing, Chuck Jr., phone interview with author, Feb. 4, 2011.

Ed Reis, History Center Westinghouse Historian.

Ribowski, Mark. *Josh Gibson: The Power and the Darkness* (University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Ruck, Rob. *Sandlot Seasons* (University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Spence, James. President of James Spence Authentication (autographs), various emails with author.