



Photos courtesy Ken McCabe, Indian Head Rural Sports Hall of Fame and Museum

This team photo of the 1952 Indian Head Rockets includes: front, from left, Percy Trimont, Winters Calvin, Elijah "Pumpsie" Green, Willie Reed, Toribio Leal, Rolando Garcia, Joseph Brooks; standing, John Jones, Emmett Neal, Hiram Marshall, Nat Bates, Eloyd Robinson, Horace Latham, Adair Ford, Charlie McMillar, Andy Porter and manager Jim Williams. Not shown in the team picture are players Ira Donaldson, John Ford and Jim Morrow.

Rockets once ruled Indian Head

Players reminisce about Negro league team that played in rural Sask.

BOB FLORENCE
FOR THE STARPHOENIX

The team's bus ride to Calgary takes nine hours, so Joseph Brooks is well stocked. He brings loaves of McGavin's bread and soft drinks and sardines and meat. He even has salt and pepper.

Brooks is a pitcher on the semi-pro baseball club. Teammates call him Duchess because of the food and fixings he shares. He sits in the back of the bus by choice.

This is the summer of 1952

There are fewer than 20 African-Americans in the major leagues. Ten of the 16 teams have not yet integrated. Brooks, who is from New Orleans, is with 19 other blacks on a team in Canada. Some are from Florida, others California. They play in a farming town east of Regina for the Indian Head Rockets.

Jim Robison is the mayor of Indian Head and a man with a plan. Besides promoting the town he has bushels of time for curling and baseball. He makes time. Robison works with a baseball group that includes Graham Williams, a land inspector for CP Rail, Cliff Hunt, who is the town registrar, farmer Tom Jackson and Dick Jewitt, a grain buyer with Parrish and Heimbecker.

Robison strikes it big

In 1950, he went to Wichita, Kansas, home of the National Baseball Congress, and bought the Jacksonville Eagles, a team on a naval airbase in Florida that played in the Negro American League. The athletes travelled to Saskatchewan by bus and made Indian Head their summer place.

The Rockets played 80 games in 1950 in money tournaments at sports days and exhibitions. They hit Lancer in southern Saskatchewan and Lacombe in central Alberta. They were in Prince Albert and Moosomin.

In 1951, they reached the



Elijah "Pumpsie" Green on a 1961 Topps baseball card when he played for the Boston Red Sox.

Western Canada final, losing to the Sceptre Nixons at Cairns Field in Saskatoon.

The Rockets' lineup changes every season, with new faces from different places, but Robison keeps the drive alive. Early in the 1952 season, the team's third year, the Rockets go to a tournament in Lloydminster. They are in the semifinal against the Saskatoon Gems when the game is cancelled in the first inning due to rain.

On a trip in June of 1952, with Brooks up to his elbows in sandwiches, the Rockets play in Calgary's Buffalo Park. Indian Head wins both games against the Florida Cubans in the Saturday doubleheader. Indian Head played two more seasons. Although the Rockets folded after 1954, the Saskatchewan experience lasts a lifetime. Players can see it still.

Willie Reed is now 82, Nat Bates 80, Elijah Green 78. Teammates at Indian Head in 1952, they stay in touch in the Bay Area of California, their home since they were friends as kids. They meet on special occasions such

"DON'T CALL ME ELIJAH, CALL ME PUMPSIE, I'VE BEEN PUMPSIE BEFORE I KNEW WHAT MY REAL NAME WAS."

ELIJAH GREEN

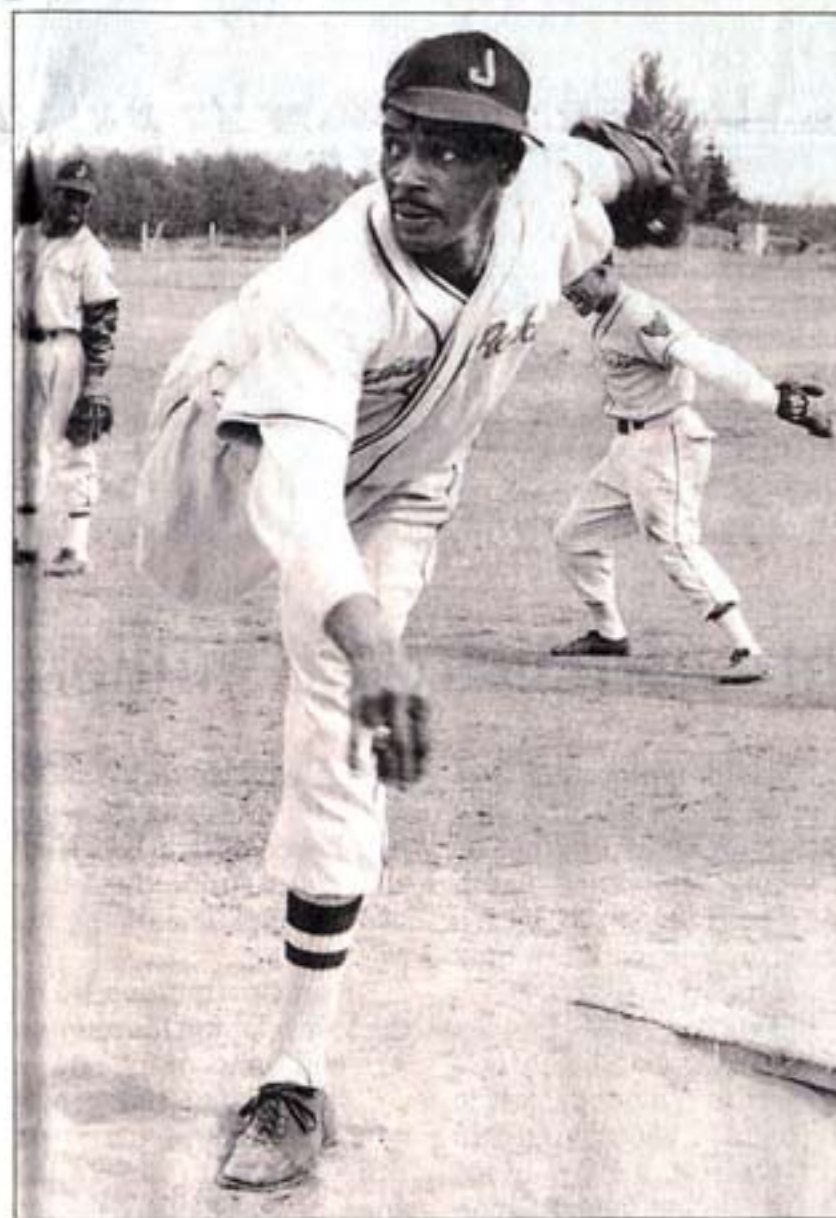
as Green's anniversary with his wife Marie.

Bates said he is running for re-election on city council in Richmond, Calif., pursuing his eighth term. He first served in 1967 and was later mayor. He keeps coming back for more.

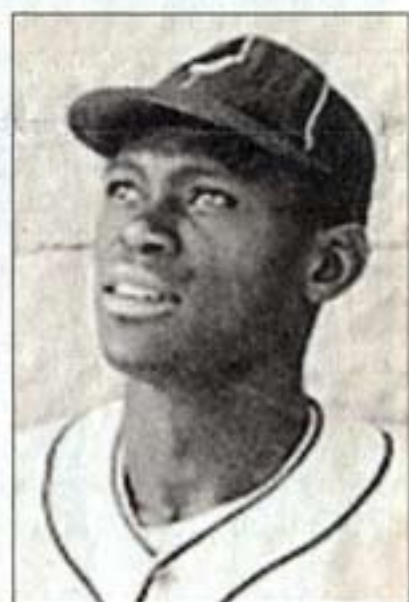
On April 15 this year, Green threw out the ceremonial first pitch at Boston's Fenway Park on Jackie Robinson Day, held in major league ballparks to honour Robinson as the first black in professional baseball. In 1959 the Boston Red Sox were the last big league team to include an African-American in the lineup.

The player was Green, who was a shortstop in Indian Head.

"Don't call me Elijah, call me Pumpsie," Green said recently on the phone from his home in El Cerrito, Calif.



Edward "Peanuts" Davis



Tom Alston

baseball on the phone he had a second line installed in his business, Robison's General Store, so customers could place orders.

His teen daughter Leone went to Rockets games. She saw black players in white uniforms.

She saw Jesse Blackman, a first baseman and pitcher with the Indians who went on to be an all-star with another team in Saskatchewan, the North Battleford Beavers. She saw Tom Alston turn a triple-play. Like Pumpsie Green, Alston was big-league calibre. He became the first black ever on the St. Louis Cardinals in 1954.

Jim Robison's son Allan married Elinor Anderson in 1951. Allan and Elinor spent much of their honeymoon on the road, travelling with the Rockets as the team bounced around the Prairies.

Allan soon took over the Robison family store. Born into baseball, he became a fan of the New York Yankees. He later went to spring training to watch the Yankees and kept track of the game on a Spalding scoreboard.

"My earliest memory isn't of a hockey stick, it's holding a baseball bat," said Allan's son, Ron Robison, who was born in 1955, a year after the Rockets ended a five-year run.

"We always had a Rockets bag at home with bats and baseballs.

"It was an incredible time for the community, a wonderful thing to rally around."

He remembers Toribio Leal's sweet curveball. He remembers the team calling manager Jim Williams "Muscle Jaw" because of the way Williams clenched his teeth.

"I remember going to the doubleheader in the Stampede City," said Reed. "What do you call it, Calgary? I had five, six hits. I hit fantastic. Pumpsie was better. I think he was eight-for-10."

This team of Americans and Cubans was a smash on the Canadian prairie, drawing 10,000 fans to games. Indian Head's ballpark had three diamonds, two inside the racetrack, and a big wooden scoreboard. The town built bleachers. Lights were imported from South Dakota. After rain, shavings were scattered on the basepaths and burned to dry the infield. Players lived above Dominion Cafe on the main street. They sat outside on the sidewalk and sang.

Jim Robison of Indian Head had a blast

He was so busy talking

See ROCKETS, E2

Rockets Community opened up to players on the club

CONTINUED FROM E1

Ron is now commissioner of the Western Hockey League in Calgary. His mother Elinor is in Regina and his aunt Leone is in Vancouver.

One of the strongest ties to the Rockets is Ken McCabe in Indian Head. He went to their games as a boy.

McCabe saw Horace Latham clobber a home run. He delivered the newspaper to catcher Herbert Barnhill. He laughed at the freckles on the face of Henry Cameron, a cleanup hitter whose fair skin earned him the nickname Red.

"Us kids made a nickel a ball chasing foul balls," said McCabe. "Sometimes we'd sneak into the game so we didn't have to pay. If we got caught they made us chase foul balls for nothing."

"We looked at these guys like they were big-league players."

Team secretary Marj Holden kept tournament posters and scoresheets from every game. McCabe has them. A former publisher of the Indian Head-Wolseley newspaper, McCabe has a busload of Rockets memorabilia for show and tell at the Saskatchewan Rural Sports Hall of Fame and Museum in Indian Head.

The Rockets could be a movie

Trayton Adair crafted a career making commercials and doing documentaries. He started putting together a manuscript on the Rockets, then suffered a stroke.

"I can't do this story, but somebody has to," Adair said from his home in Ontario.

"I don't have the gist of the whole story like Norman Jewison did in *A Soldier's Story*. A screenwriter would. This is a nugget for a good film."

Adair's grandfather Archie, a shipbuilder in Collingwood, Ont., moved West in 1892 and was a councillor in Indian Head for 25 years including being mayor in the 1930s and '40s. Trayton was born in Saskatoon and played high school football in Regina with the Champion Maroons. He went to Rockets games as a kid. This was before TV. Baseball tournaments in Saskatchewan drew the big names in radio, with Regina



Manager Jim Williams and Chet Brewer

broadcasters Lloyd Saunders of CKCK and Johnny Esaw of CKRM on the scene in Indian Head.

"Ten years old and I'm in the bleachers in Indian Head seeing Johnny Esaw give out the hardware after a tournament," Adair said. "Ten years later I'm working with him at Channel 9 in Toronto."

"MY EXPERIENCE IN CANADA WAS THE MOST PLEASANT, REFRESHING TIME IN MY LIFE."

NAT BATES

The Indian Head story is more than a flash from the past

It's Roberto Barbon, a Rockets infielder from Cuba. Barbon's wife is Japanese. He played in Japan for 11 years and has lived there since 1955. He is with the Orix Buffaloes team and teaches baseball to children in Kobe and Osaka.

Orlando Chico O'Farrill was another Cuban on the Rockets. He has coached in Nicaragua for 50 years.

Pumpsie Green is the oldest of five brothers in his family. One of his brothers, Cornell, played every game in 13 seasons in the NFL and won the Super Bowl in 1972 as a starting cornerback with the Dallas Cowboys.

"When I came to Canada, I was still a kid," said Green, who played for Indian Head when he was 18. "It was up to my mother if I went or not. Bless her heart. She said I should go."

Indian Head is Chet Brewer, who pitched in nine countries and was the first black to play in Mexico. Edward Davis, whose knuckleball was slow and snappy, was given the nickname Peanuts because he made extra money selling peanuts in a minor league park in Jackson, Miss.



Photos courtesy Ken McCabe, Indian Head Rural Sports Hall of Fame and Museum

Wood chips are burned on the diamond in Indian Head to dry the base paths after rain overnight.

Indian Head is Winters Calvin, who is Willie Reed's best friend. Calvin was a power hitter with grit but a heart as big as an outfielder's glove. It's Emmett Neal, who died in the Korean War.

The Indian Head story is more than baseball

"Racism in this country was so prevalent," Bates said of the U.S. in the '50s. "My experience in Canada was the most pleasant, refreshing time in my life. People treated you on the basis of who you were."

"The most offensive thing to us was when people there called us darkies. That hurt. It was nothing disrespectful, they just didn't know. After we were there for a while, when we could relate to the community and they understood us, we started to laugh about it."

"Families invited us into their home," he said of Indian Head. "Girls asked us to dance."

Bates was raised by a single mother who didn't finish high school. Appreciate what you have, she impressed on him. Adapt and improve, she said. Forget regret.

Nat is a father, a grandfa-

ther, a great-grandfather. He worked in probation for 35 years.

"I'll tell you story," Bates said about an event he went to one June that commemorates the end of slavery in the U.S. in 1865.

"I'm outside having barbecue ribs and a gentleman comes up to me. He said 'You don't remember me, do you? I'm Lenny Williams.' Williams was one of the main singers in the Tower of Power. If you know music this is big-time stuff, like the Jackson Five."

"He said 'I want to thank you for what you did for me. I served time. You counselled me. I remember you said if I want to make something of myself I had to get my life together.'"

"What I said to him resonates with him throughout his life," Bates said. "I couldn't imagine him attributing that to me."

Williams was a lead vocalist with Tower of Power. One of his songs is *I Got the Chop*.

"I can't get stopped," Williams sings.

"I've been through a lot."

"Give it all I got."

The Indian Head Rockets connected. Then and now.



Toribio Leal throws a ball during a game.