

"Only the Stars Come Out at Night: The Story of J.L. Wilkinson"

J.L. Wilkinson made many contributions to the game of baseball through his ownership of the Kansas City Monarchs. One of the most significant was the introduction of a portable lighting system to allow for night baseball before the major leagues played at night. His leadership and innovation also helped propel the Kansas City Monarchs to the top of the baseball world for nearly three decades from the 1920s through the 1940s.

"Accomplishments have no color." - Leontyne Price

Star light, star bright,
 I wish to see a game tonight.
 I wish I may, I wish I might.
 But only Wilkie has the light!

Star light, star bright,
 Can Black players overcame their forbidden plight.
 They wish they may, They wish they might.
 'Cause only the Stars come out at Night.

In 1930, James Leslie Wilkinson initiated the dawning of a new era in baseball with the first portable lighting system. He made it possible for sports enthusiasts to see a constellation of ebony stars perform in the illuminated shadows of the night. It was the birth of night baseball in the Negro Leagues.

Major league fans had to wait five more spring times, until May 24, 1935, to witness the installation of stadium lights. On this historic day, from his oval office, President Franklin D. Roosevelt flipped a switch that generated close to one million watts of electrical power from 632 1500-watt flood lamps in Cincinnati's Crosley Field. Chicago Cubs fans would have to wait a half a century before nighttime baseball arrived at its Wrigley Field in 1988. ¹

The innovator of night baseball was born on May 14, 1878, in the small town of Algona, (home to the 1902-03 Algona Brownies, one of the nation's first interracial teams²) Iowa,

to John Joseph and Myrtie Harper Wilkinson. A young J.L. Wilkinson was attending Highland Park College in Des Moines, Iowa, where he began his brief pitching career with the Hopkins Brothers, the local sporting goods store.³ Wilkinson's semi-pro career was interrupted when a broken wrist halted his pitching career and led him into management. After managing the semi-pro All Nations club which included a rainbow coalition of diverse nationalities, Wilkinson was now ready for the big stage.

A NEW DAYLIGHT!

In 1920, Andrew "Rube" Foster from racially troubled Chicago started the Negro National League of Colored Baseball Professionals. His team, the Chicago American Giants, along with other stable teams -- the Dayton Marcos, Chicago Giants, Indianapolis ABCs, Detroit Stars, St. Louis Giants, Cuban Stars and the Kansas City Monarchs -- were invited to the Paseo YMCA in Kansas City to finalize the charter. Mirrored much like DuBois's theory of self-identity and racial pride, the league's motto boasted "We Are the Ship, All Else the Sea." All the original teams except the Monarchs were owned by black men.

World War I had ended 14 months earlier, and in the aftermath, the country had to deal with lots of racial healing resulting from the red summer of 1919. Would the white ownership of the popular Monarchs be welcomed by league officials and people of color?

A resounding yes! J.L. Wilkinson was elected by team owners as Secretary of the new Negro National League (NNL). J.L., or "Wilkie," as he was affectionately known by his peers, was the only white owner in a league as dark as the country night. He would retain this distinction throughout the life of the league until its breakup in 1931. When the Negro American League organized in 1937, Wilkinson was elected Treasurer. He was with the Monarchs 28 years (1920-1947); six of those years (1931-1936) his teams

barnstormed across the nation's breadbasket harvesting their popularity and introducing new fans to night baseball.

For 28 years, his Monarchs were often compared as the white major leagues' equivalent to the New York Yankees --- a winning team that everyone wanted to beat. During Wilkinson's tenure, the Monarchs won 11 league championships, a feat surpassed only by the perennial champion Yankees. Based on available data, their winning percentage of .785 in 1929 is the highest in Negro League history. In fact, the Monarchs won more than 70 percent of their games in seven seasons, a record. The Monarchs could have appeared in more series if the event had not been discontinued from 1927 to 1941. During the twenties, thirties and forties, baseball America recognized the Monarchs as one of the dominant teams in Negro League baseball.

NEW HORIZONS

Back in 1921, Wilkie challenged the Kansas City Blues of the American Association League to a post-season exhibition series at Association Park. The small park was a single-level wooden structure with a short right field fence with a thirty-foot high screen. Association Park, owned by George Tebeau, restricted blacks in attendance to the top fourteen rows of seats --- even when two black teams were competing on the field.

For the series, the Monarchs brought in Frank Warfield, third baseman from the Detroit Stars and John Henry "Pop" Lloyd, the fabulous shortstop from the rejuvenated Columbus Buckeyes. They also added the burly Buckeyes' pitcher Ed Rile, who had beaten Foster's NNL champion American Giants three times, shutting them out twice.

In the first game, both pitchers Stanwood Baumgartner and Rile were knocked out the box early; Baumgartner in the second and Rile in the fifth inning. The Monarchs won the

premier affair, 7-5. The Blues took the second, 3-2, beating a tough Bullet Rogan, who gave up only four hits. Two wild pitches in the decisive sixth inning led to his defeat.

With the series tied at three games apiece, the Blues started Leon "Red" Ames and the Monarchs designated Ed Rile again. Busloads of fans for the deciding Sunday finale came from St. Louis, and nearby Sedalia and Lexington, Missouri. Also, delegations from Omaha, Nebraska; Topeka, Lawrence and Atchison, Kansas, were found in the packed grandstands. The Monarchs were not much better this time around, as Rile failed to survive the first inning. Slugger Anthony "Bunny" Brief connected for a triple with two on. Edward "Dutch" Zwilling followed with a single, scoring Brief. Frustrated manager Sam Crawford placed himself on the pitcher's rubber. The Blues bumped Crawford for four more runs over the next four innings, building an 8-0 margin after only five innings. With the game slipping out of reach, the Monarchs called Hurley McNair in from the outfield to pitch the final four frames. McNair gave up only one run, while Rogan, Warfield and Pop Lloyd staged an offensive rally by scoring four runs over the next two innings. McNair capped off the final inning with a blast over the right field fence for the fifth and final Monarch tally. The pitching-poor Monarchs lost 9-5, and the Blues were crowned city champions.

The next year the fifth-place Blues met the Monarchs for a rematch. The Blues had led the American Association in team batting with a .313 average and had finished second in the home run derby with 112 homers. Eleven Blues had batted over .300 that season, with Bunny Brief leading the league in home runs (42), doubles (51), and walks (117). During this year's post-season series, the Monarchs' pitching staff of Plunk Drake, Rube Currie, Bullet Rogan and Willie Gisentaner successfully met the challenge. They hurled six complete games and held the Blues to a .278 batting average. The slugging Oscar "Heavy" Johnson of the Monarchs hit three homers in the series, batted .368, and

powered a slugging percentage of .842. This time Monarchs beat the Blues in five of six games.

This was to be the last interracial matchup between the Kansas City teams. The *Kansas City Call*, the city's black newspaper, spoke proudly of the Monarchs' triumph:

The series has done more to boost Negro-organized baseball in this town with the white fans than anything else could have done. While they have always attended in large numbers, still the games they saw were regular league games and they have generally believed that it was an inferior grade of ball. But their eyes are open now to the fact that it isn't lack of ability that keeps the Negro ball players off the big time -- its color.

The *Call* crowned the Monarchs "The New City Champions." This prolific headline, considering the social attitudes of the period, appeared to be in conflict with the best interests of "America's Game," claimed the American Association league's president. The provocative statement prompted President Thomas J. Hickey to ban interleague, or rather interracial play, between the two teams. ⁴

The following year, on July 28, the Monarchs moved to Muehlebach Field, the future home of the American League's Kansas City Athletics. The field, named after brew master George Muehlebach, became Ruppert Field in 1937, when Jacob Ruppert purchased the park for his N. Y. Yankee minor league franchise. Normally seating for the Blues games was segregated; however Wilkinson removed the twisted divider ropes and the crooked segregation signs when the Monarchs played. Fans, regardless of skin color, were allowed to sit without fanfare where ever they liked at Monarchs games.

Wilkinson's move to desegregate the stands was a significant cultural statement for that period. At the time, the city's public golf course at Swope Park banned tax-paying black citizens from playing the links. Furthermore, Circuit Court Judge Brown Harris rejected a petition by black residents to play golf at the park. Judge Harris affirmed, "The course

at Swope Park was for the exclusive use of whites, the same law regulating that as regulating the teaching of colored and white pupils in separate schools." ⁵ The hidden "black tax" was found too steep a price for minorities to pay for golfing privileges. The ban at the Swope Park links was eventually lifted in 1932.

Prior to desegregation of Muehlebach Field, black ballplayers had to dress at home or at the local black Paseo YMCA before entering the ball park. Despite prevailing social attitudes of the period, the Monarchs were allowed to use the all-white clubhouse facilities, demonstrating Wilkinson's impact on the national game at the local level.

The Monarchs celebrated opening day by riding through the urban city in a 300-vehicle motorcade parade. Renowned actor and composer, J. Rosamond Johnson, threw out the traditional first ball. Rosamond and his older brother James Weldon once played for the Morehouse University baseball team. Weldon became the first African American to pass the Florida bar in 1897 and later served as secretary to the NAACP. Together they composed "Lift Ev'ry Voice & Sing," sung today as the "Negro National Anthem".

The Monarchs arrival in 1923 at the new steel and concrete stadium seated over 18,000 fans, replete with an electric scoreboard, propelled the Monarchs to its first NNL championship of the new decade. That year they won 57 and lost 33 games.

THE DEPRESSION BLUES

Although always a popular team, Wilkinson's Monarchs competed for the entertainment dollar against the more established major league baseball teams. It was always a struggle to pay salaries and traveling expenses. In 1929, the midnight hour struck with the cometh of Great Depression. The Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues' meteoric rise to credibility came to a crashing halt. This forced Wilkinson to frantically search for

innovative ideas to keep his team intact and survive the country's financial crisis, invariably causing one of black baseball's darkest moments. Perhaps night time baseball was the solution?

Many entrepreneurs had unsuccessfully tried as early as the 1880s to play baseball under the artificial sunlight. A determined Wilkinson sought out the Giant Manufacturing Company of Omaha, Nebraska, to make his vision a reality. His only competitor for night baseball was his hometown friend, E. Lee Keyser, owner of the Des Moines Demons of the Western League. Keyser wanted to install a permanent lighting system, but conversely Wilkinson saw the commercial value and convenience for touring the Midwest with a portable lighting system.⁶

To finance this dream, Wilkinson and Thomas Younger Baird, owner of a bowling alley and billiard parlor, put up collateral to secure a \$50,000 loan (equivalent to \$682,593 in 2015). The loan enabled them to purchase a Sterling Marine 100-kilowatt generator with a 250 horsepower, six-cylinder, triple-carburetor, gasoline-driven engine. The new power plant consumed more than 15 gallons of gasoline an hour, and required 12 men to install 44 giant non-glare floodlights on telescopic steel poles, mounted on the beds of Ford trucks. The innovative power plant had an estimated illumination power of 198,000 watts.⁷

T.Y. (Tom) Baird wrote proudly of the new lighting system:

"The Kansas City Monarchs invented and built the first and only successful portable baseball lighting plant. This plant was built in 1929 and was first used by the Monarchs in 1930. No other portable light plant could compete in good semi-pro parks. The Kansas City Monarch light plant lit major league ball parks year after year.

We lighted (sic) Forbes Field, Braves Field, Crosley Field, Navin (Briggs) Field and Ebbets Field and lit most of the double A and triple A ball parks throughout the land.

The light plant was built and carried on six trucks. Poles were attached to the trucks. The lights were then assembled on telescopic poles and raised by wenchers. The trucks were stationed outside the foul lines and was (sic) always at same places (sic) according to the blue print plans. The power plant and truck together weighted over 16 tons and was stationed in deep centerfield.

These trucks would parade into a ball park and in less than one hour the crew would erect poles, assemble projectors and equipment, and have the lights on. We have had the lights on in 30 minutes after entering the ball park. After the ball game the light crew of 12 men would have the lights down, loaded and ready to go to the next town in 30 to 40 minutes.

This crew of 12 uniformed men were often referred to as a fire department or a circus crew or as a combination of both. Playing night baseball was a sensation in the early thirties, and at some of our first showing in several towns we had to call the police department to keep the curious out of the way so, we could erect the lights and save them from injury. We lit ball parks from Canada to Mexico and from the Middle West to Portland, Maine." ⁸

One of the crew men, 18 year-old Floyd Ogle wrote of his experience:

"My truck, 1929 Model "A" Ford Truck covered the 3rd base area. Sides were removed – 5 big reflectors were assembled at front where pole shows – 7,500 watts of light on this one truck. Poles were winched straight up and tied off with guide ropes. Power was from a bus chassis with big motor and generator in and cable strung to each trunk.

Team played exhibition games from Eagle Pass, Texas, on Mexican border to North Dakota and eastern Wisconsin. [We] played small town fields, college fields and big league parks. Crowds were always large – people did not believe you could play baseball at night and had to come and see. I had two exciting seasons with the team." ⁹

It was customary for the Monarchs to tour Oklahoma and Texas during April and May in preparation for the upcoming season. However the 1930 spring training tour would be historically different with the introduction of a portable lighting system.

The Panhandle tour started on April 23 in a small town about 60 miles southwest of Tulsa called Crescent. Coach Carl Hewitt and his Crescent Stars received an 18-0 trouncing. The Monarch battery of Andy Cooper and Frank Duncan gave up only one hit to Roy

Waller, the Crescent catcher. Meanwhile the Monarchs slammed 10 home runs. But because of threatening thunderstorms they were not able to assemble their patented lighting system.¹⁰

The next day, the Monarchs traveled 75 miles northeast to Tonkawa to play the Tonkawa Independents. Anticipating a historic event, Tonkawa's coach John Franke claimed, "They're the best drawing card in baseball. We should draw the largest crowd that ever watched a ball game in this vicinity." Battery mates William Bell and T.J. Young of the Monarchs combined for a 4-0 victory. But once again, inclement weather delayed the birth of night baseball.¹¹

Again, loading up the trucks and cars they traveled 45 miles north across the state line to Arkansas City, Kansas. This game scheduled for April 26 was postponed due to rain. There was no time for rest as the Monarchs were scheduled to play the next day in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, which was about 185 miles Southeast and 45 miles from Tulsa. Okmulgee, the Indian town known as "Babbling Waters"¹² had a significant black population of about 20 percent, and a sell-out crowd was expected.

The Okmulgee Merchants were the previous year's O-H-O Tri-Country League champions and had won several semi-pro tournaments. During the previous year the Merchants gave the Monarchs one of their rare exhibition losses. This time the Merchants expected to give the Monarchs their toughest battle of the spring tour. Nevertheless, the Monarchs displayed little respect for their Oklahoma opponents.

With threatening weather, approximately 800 early-arriving fans jammed into Petrolia Park to witness the Monarchs perform their shadow ball warm-up routine. The infield squad performed their drills in rapid-fire fashion, but without the baseball. The show was

led by second baseman Newt Allen, who entertained the fans with his throws to first base, while looking at third. Sometimes Allen would catch infield pop-ups flat on his back, or turn Ozzie Smith-type somersaults before catching high pop flies.

During the game, Chet Brewer intentionally walked three batters before striking out the side. After getting a formidable lead on the Okmulgee team, the Monarchs rotated their fielding positions after each Merchant out. The Monarchs shut down the Merchants by an 11-1 score.¹³

The Monarchs then traveled 155 miles Northwest to Enid, Oklahoma (90 miles North of Oklahoma City) to play Phillips University. The sky had finally stopped crying. On April 28, 1930, on an overcast Monday, the Monarchs made baseball history. Before approximately 3,000 enlightened fans, baseball's first nightshift played the Phillips University Haymakers at Alton Stadium.¹⁴

The Monarchs' curve ball specialist, William Bell and catcher T.J. Young became the first black battery to generate night time excitement. The Monarchs had constructed a canvas fence in short centerfield to allow illumination of the entire field. Any balls hit over the canvas fence were ruled two-baggers. Although no home runs were allowed, much excitement was generated by the 10 errors from the amateurish Phillips team. Coach Tobe Greene, playing second base, accounted for four errors by himself.

The University team jumped on top early with two runs in the first inning and another run in the third. Haymaker shortstop Eash got to Bell for a double and a single in his first two at bats. The veteran Bell reached back for a little "extra" and struck Eash out on the next two plate appearances. Meanwhile, Phillips' first baseman Leonard smacked a long fly over the centerfield fence would have been a triple in most ball parks, but the ground

rules only allowed a double. Player-coach Greene also greeted the centerfield fence with a ground rule double.

The Haymakers' young pitcher Mullican failed to hold the lead. He gave up two runs in the fourth inning and another three in the fifth before collapsing. The seventh inning stretch proved very unlucky for Mullican, as the Monarchs batted around, showering the Haymakers with power, scoring seven runs in the eighth inning, and winning 12-4.

A sudden downpour caused this parade into baseball history to be called after eight innings. A detailed box score of the first night game by a professional team is listed below.

<u>MONARCHS</u>	AB	R	H	E	<u>PHILLIPS</u>	AB	R	H	E
Harding, ss	4	1	1	1	Daugherty, 3b	4	2	0	1
Mothell, 1b	4	1	2	0	Highfill, cf	4	0	1	1
Allen, 2b	3	1	1	1	Leonard, 1b	4	1	2	1
Rogan, cf	4	2	2	0	Eash, ss	4	1	2	1
Taylor, rf	5	2	2	0	Bodine, c	4	0	0	1
Livingston, lf	5	1	1	0	Greene, 2b	4	0	1	4
Joseph, 3b	4	2	2	0	Jess, lf	3	0	1	0
Young, c	4	1	1	0	Killion, rf-p	4	0	1	1
Bell, p	4	1	0	0	Mullican, p	2	0	0	0
					Hildinger, rf	0	0	0	0
-----					-----				
	37	12	12	2		33	4	8	10

By innings					R	H	E
Monarchs	000	203	70x	-	12	12	2
Phillips	201	000	10x	-	4	8	10

BATTERIES: Monarchs, Bell and Young; Phillips, Mullican, Killion and Bodine.

SUMMARY: Doubles: Mothell 2, Allen, Joseph, Young, Rogan, Leonard 2, Eash, Greene. Bases on Balls off: Bell 2, Mullican 7, Struck Out by Bell 7, Mullican 3, Killion 1,

UMPIRES: Watt White, behind plate, Casey Mills on the bases.

Game Time: 2 hours, 10 minutes.

Enid Morning News, 29 April 1930, p 6

The Monarchs completed their nightly trek across Oklahoma by traveling 75 miles northeast to meet the Empire Oilers of Ponca City (on April 29) at Conoco Park ¹⁵ and finally 150 miles South to Chickasha (April 30). Then go to San Antonio (May 2), Texas, 475 miles away, and Northward, 180 miles, days later to Waco, Texas. The 12-day tour of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas, in their cars covered more than 1,380 miles over unpaved and often narrow roads, through rain and soaring heat with no air conditioning. At times they averaged 35 to 40 miles per hour with a few days of rest between stops. ¹⁶ Baseball by daylight, driving by moonlight, and carrying sunlight, the Monarchs lived by the creed expressed in a poem by black novelist, Countee Cullen:

All Day long and all Night through,
One thing only Must I do:
Quench my Pride and cool my Blood,
Lest I Perish in the Flood. ¹⁷

The new lighting system flooded the minds of minor league team executives as they discovered the lights helped ease the financial burdens caused by the Great Depression. The fog of resistance had been lifted. In one of the darkest moments in baseball history, Wilkinson became a tower of power. Club owners found that baseball under the artificial sun often doubled or tripled attendance figures. The *Kansas City Call* hailed the event by stating:

"Night baseball will be a lifesaver, it will revolutionize the old game, restoring small town baseball on a paying basis. It gives recreation for the business and working man who can't afford day games. The Monarchs will probably do to baseball this year, what the talkies have done to the movies."¹⁸

Former Monarch pitcher, Chet Brewer, recalled playing in the eye-opening experiment:

"I thought it was great! But it made double work for us. We would play a ballgame during the day and another at night. We played so many games a day, that when we played one game we considered that a day off. But the fans just loved it. In Enid, they

came from everywhere. Most of them came out of curiosity. They just couldn't visualize baseball being played at night. They came from miles around and they enjoyed every bit of it."

Brewer added:

"That Wilkinson had a great crew. He took the big bus we used to travel in and put an electric dynamo in there and then he had trucks to carry the other material. We put up our own outfield fence using heavy equipment. They would roll those trucks down the there and jack those lights up and run that line over to the bus with the dynamo and turned that juice on --- and oh my, it would be as light as day." ¹⁹

Despite Brewer's enthusiasm, the Monarchs' venture into night baseball was not without hardships and setbacks. Their luxurious Pullman Coach had to be converted to house the generator. Without their Pullman coach, players had to travel in their cars, or "struggle-buggies" as called by the players. Monarch third baseman Newt Joseph and owner of the Paseo Cab Company (later the Monarch Cab Company) leased four cars to Wilkinson. Four players rode in each car, taking turns driving to the various towns and cities.

Night baseball provided many highlights in baseball history. Less than a month later --- on May 6, in Waco, Texas -- John Markham a promising left-hander from Shreveport, Louisiana, billed to replace ace Andy Cooper, pitched the first night time no-hitter. He faced only 28 batters in the errorless defeat of the Waco Cardinals from the Texas League, 8-0. ²⁰ Roughly 3,000 fans witnessed the event under 20 mighty portable lights.

²¹ Markham finished his career in 1947, teaming with Satchel Paige and Cool Papa Bell to form the Detroit Senators. ²²

Later in the season --- on August 2, 1930, at Muehlebach Field --- fans saw two pitching legends, Chet Brewer and Smokey Joe Williams throw laser beams past frustrated batters. Brewer of the Monarchs struck out 19 batters, including ten in a row, including Oscar Charleston, Judy Johnson and rookie Josh Gibson twice each. Despite Brewer's brilliant performance, Joe Williams of the Homestead Grays won the 12-inning affair, 1-0,

striking out 27 batters. Critics claimed poor lighting contributed to this historic event. Let's note that many baseball historians accept, without reservations, Johnny Vander Meer's second no-hitter against the Brooklyn Dodgers on June 15, 1938, in the first night game played in Ebbets Field.

NOCTURNALLY NATURAL

Night baseball was here to stay! A player for the Monarchs and 23-year veteran of the Negro Leagues, Newt Allen, told sportswriter John Holway:

"We were the first ball club that ever played under the lights, and Wilkinson was one of the finest men I've ever known. He was one white man who was a prince of a fellow. He loved baseball, and he loved his ball players. He traveled right along with us every day. Stayed at the same hotels we stayed at." ²³

On June 12, 1930, Thomas Hickey, president of the American Association, who had earlier banned exhibition games between the Kansas City Blues and the Monarchs, spoke notably of Wilkinson's pioneering efforts:

"It looks like a life-saver for the game in many cities. I saw my second night game at Indianapolis, Tuesday, and became more impressed than ever by its possibilities. I regard baseball under the lights as an unusual success." ²⁴

Not all of baseball's gate keepers shared Hickey's observation. Instead of eagerly embracing the technology of the future, major league executives, wedded to daytime play, were reluctant to change their old-fashioned ways. Nevertheless, night baseball spread to the Eastern seaboard. Later in 1930, Alex Pompez, owner of the Cuban Stars, installed lights at Dyckman Oval in New York. Located near the Harlem Ship Canal in Upper Manhattan, Dyckman Oval became the first ball park in New York equipped with stadium lights.

Harlem was considered the cultural center of Negro society, or as the *New York Age* stipulated, "The Crucible of Dark Manhattan". The Harlem baseball club was known for its entertainment-rich audience, routinely featuring Louis Armstrong, Eubie Blake, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Lena Horne, Cab Calloway and the sentimental singing Mills Brothers. Occasionally dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson would lightly tap a buck-and-wing routine on the visitors' dugout roof.

That same season, the Chicago American Giants' new owner William Trimble hurriedly installed lights for the Fourth of July weekend series with the Birmingham Black Barons. And Wilkinson's friend, Lee Keyser from Des Moines, Iowa, sold the St. Louis Stars a lighting system for installation in late July.²⁵

Former Monarch first baseman George Giles remembered his time with the Stars:

"I was with the St. Louis Stars when Wilkie started night baseball. They (the Monarchs) had those portable lights. We had stationary lights on the roof of the Stars' ballpark, there on Compton and Market street. Playing under the lights didn't make me much difference, as long as I got paid. Shoot that was during the depression. Those lights saved baseball. People couldn't go to the baseball games in the daytime --- they were working."²⁶

Night baseball became a struggling owner's salvation. There was no rain check given here. It enabled teams to combat the economic effects of the Great Depression, despite skepticism from baseball purists. The bright lights allowed baseball to maintain its reputation as a working-class diversion, as fans with as little as four-bits (50 cents) could enjoy seeing their idols perform in the spotlights.

The consequences of the Great Depression had caused the collapse of the Negro National League in 1931. This crisis forced Wilkinson's Monarchs to barnstorm around the

country promoting baseball with their new technology. The Monarchs capped a fine season with victories over two white all-star teams. They stomped Grover Alexander and the House of David, 11-2. The next weekend, behind the pitching of Willie Foster, the Monarchs beat the Waner All-Stars, 4-3. The All-Stars included "Little and Big Poison" Lloyd (.314) and Paul Waner (.322); Heinie Meine (19-13) from the Pittsburgh Pirates; Glenn Wright (.284) and Babe Herman (.313) from the Brooklyn Dodgers; Joe Kuhel (.269) from the Washington Senators and several Kansas City Blues members.

In Wichita, Kansas, the Monarchs repeated their victory over the Waner All-Star team. Chet Brewer shut down the major leaguers, 6 to 2, striking out 14 batters, while shortstop Willie Wells belted a two-run homer. The Waner boys could not compete with the talented Monarchs.

As the team benefited financially in post-season play, and the 1932 season approached, Wilkinson decided not to enter the league. Former first baseman George Giles recalled,

"Wilkie said he wasn't going to start up in '32 . . . the Monarchs weren't going to come out. So we all went to the Homestead Grays or the Detroit Wolves (of Gus Greenlee's new East-West League). While we were there in Pittsburgh, along about the first part of July, Wilkie contacted all of his ball players and told us to meet him in Chicago to start a new team."²⁷

Knowing of Wilkinson's reputation as a solid promoter of the game, his faithful players rushed to the Windy City. The reorganized Monarchs, along with Brewer and Wells, added premier performers like Giles, Cool Papa Bell, Dink Mothell, Frank Duncan, Newt Allen and Quincy Troupe to the team. Given the "green light" they won an incredible 42 consecutive games, before Willie Foster of the Chicago American Giants stopped them, 2-1, on a five-hitter. The Monarchs lost only five games that season.

As baseball evolved from the Dark Ages to a brighter era, Wilkinson's Monarchs achieved other baseball firsts. In 1934, they became the first black team to be invited to the heralded *Denver Post* tournament. The tournament, representing the best minor-league and semi-pro talent in the Midwest, had previously been restricted "by-invitation-only" to white teams. Players, baseball executives and fans of the Negro Leagues saw this invite as an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the quality of baseball played by black athletes. Led by their ace Chet Brewer to reach the finals, the disappointed Monarchs failed to win the \$7,500 first place prize. Before a record-breaking crowd of 11,120, they lost the championship game to the bearded House of David team from Benton Arbor, Michigan, 2-1. Ironically, the House of David team had recruited a black battery for the Denver tournament. Behind the plate was cagey catcher Bill Perkins and on the mound was the lanky Satchel Paige. After a disenchanting second-place finish, in later years the Monarchs dominated the tournament.

The Monarchs closed out the '34 season by beating members of the champion St. Louis "Gashouse Gang" in three of four games. The Dizzy Dean All-Stars, as the St. Louis bunch called themselves, were trampled 7-0 and 9-0 in two of the games played. The barnstorming Monarchs could compete against the finest of major leagues pitchers: "Schoolboy" Rowe, "Dizzy" and Paul Dean, Henry "Heine" Meine, Mort Cooper, Grover Alexander, Bob Feller, Mace Brown and many others --- and beat them.

Wilkinson's Monarchs joined the reorganized Negro American League (NAL) in 1937 and won their sixth league championship. The playoff victims this time were the Chicago American Giants as the Monarchs won series four games to one, with an extra game, a thrilling 17-inning, 2-2 tie.

After the Monarchs lost a 10-inning thriller in Dayton, Ohio, 5-4, the Monarchs and Giants met in Chicago. On the mounds were Monarch manager Andy Cooper and the Giants' ace Willie Foster. Cooper had seen his peak years with the Detroit Stars in the 1920s. In fact, in 1924, Cum Posey picked him along with pitchers Bullet Rogan and Smokey Joe Williams to his all-time all-star team. Now, years later the 39-year-old would pitch the game of his life.

After giving up two runs in the first innings, Cooper settled down. Meanwhile, the Monarchs knocked Foster out of the box with two runs in the seventh inning and was relieved by Sug Cornelius. Overall, Cooper pitched 17 innings gave up 10 hits, including a double and triple, and held the Giants blankless until night fall. The inspirational effort by the old man sparked his teammates to sweep the next four games for the NAL Championship.

To cap off a great season, the Monarchs met the All-Leaguers, a team composed of white minor and major league players, and led by Bob Feller. The Bob Feller All-Stars met a one-man assassin in Willard Brown. Brown bombed them for two two-run homers in the first game and blasted four homers in the second game. After losing the first two games, the all-stars salvaged respect with a 1-0 victory behind the four-hit pitching of Bob Feller (Major League season won/lost 9-7), Lon Warneke (18-11) and Mace Brown (7-2). The Monarchs' scoreless attack was led by Bullet Rogan's three hits. For reasons unknown, "Home Run" Brown was a no-show.

In 1939, Wilkinson initiated one of his most popular promotions with the Monarchs' annual bathing beauty contest. Mary Jo Weaver who won the contest of bronze beauties in 1940 recalled: "Churches would let out early to promote the Monarch parade. On

opening day, some churches would even close. All the stores in town would have a cut on clothes and other goods --- because the Monarchs were in town.”

One year he offered two free season tickets to anyone who could guess the attendance of the home opener. He also offered prizes, such as free admission to the next game, if fans could guess the final score of today’s game or that day’s line-up.

During the war years, Wilkinson gave free admission to soldiers in uniform. *Kansas City Call* writer John Johnson declared, "We know that baseball is essential, and we're going to play for the war workers, both day and night games and on Sundays and weekdays." He even adjusted game times to accommodate defense plant workers working the swing-shifts. ²⁸

Knowing the influence that black ministers played in the inner-city community, he customarily gave them free passes and occasionally played benefit exhibition games for the local churches. Ministers cooperated, by dismissing their congregation in time to see a Monarch game.

Wilkinson organized a group of prominent black citizens to promote Monarch baseball. His Monarchs Booster Association became the primary reason for their grand attendance. The Monarch Boosters were able to produce a wide geographical area of fan appeal despite the relatively small Midwestern market. Eventually, the conception behind the Booster Association became the antecedent to the Kansas City Royals' booster organization, the Lancers.

The Monarchs continued their winning ways, with league championships in 1939, 1940 and 1941. In 1942, they met the heavily favored Homestead Grays in the Negro World

Series. The Grays, featuring sluggers Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Jerry Benjamin and Howard Easterling, were matched up against the pitching prowess of the deepest six-man starting rotation ever.

Team leader Buck O'Neil remembers the drama:

"It was the Kansas City Monarchs against the Homestead Grays. The Grays must have won a dozen or so championships out East. We were just a young bunch of guys, and nobody thought we could beat this ball club. They had some guys like Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard who could really hit that ball. They could do it all. They didn't think we had a chance. But I knew we had a chance. Hey, we had Joe Green and Frank Duncan doing the catching. Newt Allen at third base, Jesse Williams at shortstop and Bonnie Serrell at second and I played first. And in the outfield we got Willard "Home Run" Brown, Willie Sims and Ted Strong. Hey, they really didn't know what hit them. Say, we had Satchel Paige, Hilton Smith, Booker McDaniel, a Lefty LaMarque, a Jack Matchett, and a Connie Johnson. We had guys who could really throw that ball. An outstanding team, we beat them in four straight ball games." ²⁹

The Monarchs swept the Grays, holding the mighty Josh to a paltry .125 batting average.

In 1946, the Monarchs made their final World Series appearance, against the Newark Eagles, owned by baseball's queen, the hazel-eyed, silky-haired Effa Manley. The Eagles' pitching staff was anchored by aces Leon Day and Max Manning. Manning had won the league's Pitcher of the Year Award with a 15-1 record. He had lost his first game before rolling off 15 wins in a row. Their infield starred big stick Lennie Pearson at first base, along with a keystone combination of Larry Doby (2b) and Monte Irvin (ss), while the always dangerous slugging, big Johnny "Cherokee" Davis roamed the outfield.

The Monarchs were favorites to win the series. Led by manager Frank Duncan, they had Buck O'Neil (.350) and Willard Brown (.348), the number one and two league leading hitters. With future New York Giant Hank Thompson and Ted Strong, the former Harlem Globetrotter, the foursome featured baseball's black version of Murderers Row.

Despite first baseman Buck O'Neil hitting .333 and adding two home runs -- one a grand slammer -- the Monarchs went down to defeat, four games to three. The deciding seventh game was not without controversy, however. Ted Strong and Satchel Paige failed to show up for the championship game. In an interview with the *Kansas City Call*, Strong claimed he quit the team because of a bribe. According to the paper, Strong did not go with the team to Chicago for the fifth game of the series. He had put his luggage on the bus, and then changed his mind, and summoned a taxi from Blues Stadium. With Strong out of the lineup the Monarchs had no regular right fielder during the last three games of the series, and forced manager Frank Duncan to use pitchers and recall catcher James Greene, who had been on the bench for several weeks with a broken thumb, to fill the position.

Strong contended that three Negro men approached him and offered \$750 cash if he would give them a "confirmation" as to whether the Monarchs would win or lose the fifth game. Strong added, the men looked like gamblers. He had had never seen them before. They flashed money and insisted that Strong could have it if he would tell them who was going to win the Chicago game.

He told them, "I would have nothing to do with their scheme and threatened them if they approached me again. I don't know whether they had talked to other team members or not. But I got sore about their coming to me. And the more I thought about it, the madder I got. So by the leaving (departure) time I was thoroughly disgusted and decided not to leave (for Chicago)."

Strong added that he regretted his act after it was done, and if he had to do it over again he would act differently. He praised Monarch owner J.L. Wilkinson and said he was a swell man to work for, and that Wilkinson had done him favors which he appreciated.³⁰

For the record, Strong hit .133, with two hits in 15 at bats, a home run, three RBI's and no errors in four games.

During the '46 series, Eagles Johnny "Cherokee" Davis and Max Manning had made quite an impression on Wilkinson. Losing the ring prompted Wilkie to sign Davis and Manning to Monarch contracts for the series of exhibitions against the Bob Feller All-Stars. In one game, Davis came up to bat against Yankee pitcher Spurgeon "Spud" Chandler, with one man on base. Davis took a called ball and then took a terrific cut at a waist high fast one. Over in the Monarchs dugout, William "Dizzy" Dismukes commented, "Lord, if he throws Cherokee another one like that, they'll never find the ball."³¹ On the next Chandler pitch, "Big John" slammed a two-run homer for a 3-2 win. Wilkinson's keen eye for talent was on display.

LIGHTS OUT!

In mid-July of 1947, while in Chicago, Wilkinson and some of his players were involved in a tragic car accident. As a result of the accident, Wilkinson ruptured the retina in his right eye. Lacking the science of laser surgery Wilkinson only retained 25 percent of his vision, according to his son, Richard. Later, Wilkie underwent cataract surgery for his other eye at the Kansas University Medical Center. Complications occurred, resulting in the complete loss of sight in the left eye, while still suffering impaired vision in his right eye. Regretfully, Wilkinson was blind during the last decade of his life, so he decided to sell the team. His son, Richard recalled: "My dad saw the handwriting on the wall. With Jackie going to the Majors, he knew the great days of the Monarchs were over. He knew he had to sell the team."³²

The following winter, on February 5, 1948, Wilkinson sold his 50 percent ownership of the mighty Monarchs to co-owner Tom Baird. The contract called for the exclusive rights by Baird to market the name "THE KANSAS CITY MONARCHS BASEBALL CLUB" and a sale price of \$27,000. The Wilkinson's son, Richard Leslie, was allowed to operate a non-league, barnstorming team under the name "KANSAS CITY MONARCHS TRAVELLING CLUB" (or the STARS) with restrictions against tampering with any player currently under contract with the original club, except for one player -- Leroy "Satchel" Paige.³³ Because of his incredible widespread popularity, Paige was available for pitching duty with either club. However, the Paige loophole was short-lived as Satchel was sold to the Cleveland Indians for \$5,000 in mid-season.

According to the contract terms, the new Wilkinson team was restricted from playing in the states of Denver, Colorado, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska. They hired retired speedster, James "Cool Papa" Bell, as team manager in 1947. In a 1971 interview with historians Dr. Arthur Shaffer and Dr. Charles Korr, 68-year old Bell recalled his last days with Satchel and how the two Monarch teams co-existed:

"When Wilkinson's eyes went bad, he sold his interest back to co-owner Tom Baird and gave his [new] team to his son, that was Wilkinson, Jr., and that was a farm team. They were training pitchers developing them to sell to the major leagues who were taking them. So I managed the farm team, and Satchel Paige was with me and he stayed with me a month and nine days and then he went on to Cleveland. But the league team got credit for him, see, they [thought it] was a league team. See, the public didn't know that. We would play in the territory with this farm team, in the territory of the Monarchs we was the Kansas City Stars with Satchel Paige, and then we'd play out of the territory, we'd say Kansas City Monarchs with Satchel Paige. And a lot of scouts were scouting my team, thinking it was a league team. We sold about 38 players and about 20 of the ball players that I had scouted started and developed were sold to the major leagues. All of them didn't make the majors then, but they were in the farm system. Some of them got too old to be in the majors."³⁴

Soon after, officers of the Negro American League met for their annual meeting. Two major decisions came out the meeting. First, they voted (by a slim margin) not to lift the five-year ban imposed on players who had jumped to the Mexican League. But more importantly, by a unanimous vote, they made J.L. Wilkinson a lifetime member of the league.³⁵

Two years later Wilkinson severed his remaining ties with one of baseball's greatest franchises. On March 3, 1950, he sold his remaining rights to the Monarch trademark, the "KANSAS CITY MONARCHS TRAVELLING CLUB" to Baird. Wilkie also sold the team's Pullman Dodge Bus complete with sleeping facilities for \$7,500. In addition he sold the contracts of 18 Monarchs along with three complete uniform sets for a blue-light special price of \$1,500. Baird paid less than \$100 bucks per uniformed player. Baird paid an additional \$1,000 bonus to cover any incidental expenses.³⁶

Richard Wilkinson recalled: "We kept that team for two years. We then sold the team to Tom (Baird), along with the sleeper bus. I had that bus specially built. It slept 15 men. I had the bus stripped and made into Pullman booths, converting seats into beds."³⁷

The farm team was managed by James Bell. Richard remembered, "Cool Papa Bell was a great manager, one of the finest men I have ever known. It was a lot like my father, never drink or smoke. I never even heard him swear. A fine man and a fine ball player too. He reminded me of the guy who played centerfield for the New York Yankees. Uh, his name was Mick [the Quick] Rivers. He ran just like him, even draped his glove like him. He was a spitting image of Mickey. He had that funny way of running; you know where he dragged that foot. But, boy he could flat out scat."³⁸

Baird was able to recoup most of his investment that season. The Monarchs' profit and loss statement from the 1950 season showed a profit of \$20,150.57.³⁹

As rumors circulated in the baseball world about more black players entering the major leagues, a special clause was inserted in the contract stating in part:

"... and shall further pay to first party (J.L. Wilkinson or Richard L. Wilkinson) one-half of the sum or sums received for the sale or assignment of any player on the Kansas City Monarch Baseball Club listed on the 1947 roster over and above the sale or contract price of Five Hundred and no/100ths (\$500.00) Dollars, and one-half of any money received for the assignment and transfer of the player, Jackie Robinson.".⁴⁰

The color barrier had been as solid as the Great Wall of China. So solid, that during the war years, the major league teams signed a one-armed player (St. Louis Browns outfielder Pete Gray), a player blind in one eye (New York Giants pitcher Tom Sunkel) and a player with an artificial leg (Washington Senator pitcher Bert Shepard), before dipping into the talent pool of the Negro Leagues.

Finally, on a Tuesday afternoon, on October 23, 1945, Robinson signed a contract to play for the Montreal Royals. Wilkinson never received any compensation for Robinson. The Brooklyn Dodgers' Branch Rickey claimed Jackie did not have a signed contract with the Monarchs. While Wilkinson and Baird threatened to sue the Brooklyn Club, Robinson responded to the controversy on February 11, 1946, in the *Atlanta Daily World*, stating:

"I wasn't signed to a contract because they didn't know whether or not I would make good, so they didn't want to have trouble getting rid of me."

The Monarchs management countered to *The Sporting News*, claiming:

"Any ball player knows that he can be given his release at any time. Robinson was signed by the Monarchs by letter and telegrams. According to the rules and regulation of the Negro Leagues, any player accepting terms by letter or telegram or playing with a club

becomes the property of that club. Until the 'raid' by Rickey, our only fear of contract jumping was the offers of Jorge Pasqual. We have always held Jackie in highest regard, both as a player and as a gentleman. It is a shame that Branch Rickey had to 'spirit' Robinson away, instead of dealing honorably with us."

Wilkinson's other son, James added, "Dad never got paid for Jackie. Rickey never paid anybody for anything. Nothing could be done about it in those days. If you'd raised a voice about the money, they'd have said, 'Oh, you're trying to hold a man back.' And Dad wasn't like that anyway." ⁴¹

When Wilkinson and Baird were unable to produce a signed contract for the reported salary of \$400 a month, they decided not to file a grievance with the new Commissioner Happy Chandler, stating:

"Although I feel the Brooklyn (Dodgers) or the Montreal (Royals) clubs owes us some kind of consideration for Robinson, we will not protest to Commissioner Chandler. I am very glad to see Jackie get this chance, and I'm sure he'll make good. He's a wonderful ballplayer. If and when he gets into the major leagues he will have a wonderful career." ⁴²

Not everyone thought Robinson would have a wonderful career. Rogers Hornsby, who had resigned as manager of the Vera Cruz in Mexico because the owner refused to release future Hall of Fame shortstop Willie Wells, did not want black players on his team. The two-time Triple Crown winner and seven-time batting king, expressed:

"The Negro Leagues are doing all right and Negro players should be developed and then remain as stars in their own right. A mixed ball team differs from other sports, because ball players on the road live much closer together." Hornsby concluded, "The way things are, it will be tough for a Negro player to become a part of a closely knit group such as an organized ball club. I think Branch Rickey was wrong in signing Jackie Robinson to play with Montreal and it just won't work out." ⁴³

Another critic of Robinson was Bob Feller. Just returning from the war, Rapid Robert Feller, who pitched three no-hitters and 12 one-hitters in his career, had faced Jackie three times in a '45 post-season game. Robinson had been a member of Chet Brewer's Kansas

City Royals, a winter league team based in Southern California. The Royals competed against other Negro League and major league all-star teams. As a member of Brewer's Royals, Jackie greeted the Indians' pitching ace with two doubles. Unconvincingly, a shell-shocked Feller labeled Jackie: "Good field -- no hit," and added, "a sucker for an inside pitches. He didn't seem to me to be a big league prospect. He couldn't pull the ball when at bat, probably due to his football days. Most football players get heavy around the shoulders and have the same trouble." ⁴⁴ But manager Brewer disagreed: "Oh, Jackie was major league talent all the way. He had some of the quickest reflexes I ever saw in a player." ⁴⁵

Others agreed. Robinson's last roommate in the Negro Leagues was Gene Benson, an outfielder from the Philadelphia Stars. Benson and Robinson had traveled to Caracas, Venezuela that winter before Jackie went north to Montreal tells his thoughts about breaking the color barrier:

"You know I was Jackie's last roommate before he went to the major leagues. He had signed with Branch Rickey when we took a team to South American that year. Felton Snow, who was managing the Baltimore Elites at the time, was our all-star manager. He came to me and said Benson, I am going to give Jackie to you as a roommate, because you can help him. You have played against everyone, including the major leaguers, you know what they can do and not do. Jackie needs confidence. You know, Jackie was not the best player in our league. I knew a lot of people could play better than Jackie. But you know he was picked on his educational background. It was my job to try to help him make the adjustments.

I told him, 'Jackie, where you're going is easier than where you came from.' He sat straight up in bed when I told him that. He said, 'Ben, do you really mean that?' I said, 'I certainly do. I could hit those major leagues pitchers better than the pitchers in our league. You see one thing in our league, nothing was outlawed. You know it's a big difference when people are throwing at you. We had to learn how to hit all kinds of pitches. They threw spitballs, sailed the ball, cut it, all kinds of stuff. And you know Satchel had that hesitation pitch. I told Jackie if you can hit all these kinds of pitches with no law to it at all, don't you think you can hit something legitimate, better?' He responded, 'You may have something there, Ben.'

After he made it, he came back and told me, that I had told him the truth. Yes, Ben they were a lot easier to hit." ⁴⁶

Despite the doomsayers and doubters, Robinson won the Rookie of the Year Award (called the Jackie Robinson Award since 1987). The successful entrance of Jackie Robinson into the major leagues ultimately led to the demise of the once prominent Negro Leagues, something Bob Feller thought would never happen. In a 1949 interview with *Ebony* magazine, Feller once again voiced his belief that few if any black players would shine in the majors:

"There will be no avalanche of Negroes into the big leagues mainly because there are few Negro ball players today who can make the grade.

There is one point you have to realize. Baseball is a sport that boasts few Negro stars. Not many Negro youngsters excel in the game of spiked shoes and horsehide gloves.

I find that my statement of the scarcity of Negro talent is valid and still holds water. Baseball today has no politics in playing. There is no discrimination against foreign-born or Negro (players). Either you have it or you don't. If players have the ability, they'll make the grade."

There are few potential big league players in Negro baseball not many. The hardest hitter for me to pitch to last season was Henry Thompson, who played for a while for the St. Louis Browns. He didn't swing hard, but he had a good eye. Our scout Jos Vosmik reports that Minnie Minoso with our Dayton, Ohio, farm team has the makings of a big league star. There are other Negroes who have been taken from Negro baseball who now are performing in minor leagues, but not many." ⁴⁷

ESTATE SALE

The Monarchs were the heart and soul of the Negro Leagues. The avalanche of ball players into the major leagues was patented during Wilkinson's monarchy. The Monarchs won more professional championships than any sports franchise -- black- or white-owned --- in Kansas City history. Paige, one of their brightest, was not the only star for the Monarchs. Evidence of their great strength is sending almost four dozen

players to major and minor league ball clubs, more than any other Negro League team.

The list reads like a who's who of mid-summer classics:

MAJOR LEAGUE TEAMS

1. George Altman - 1b - Chicago Cubs
2. Gene Baker - 2b - Chicago Cubs
3. Ernie Banks - ss - Chicago Cubs
4. Frank Barnes - p - St. Louis Cardinals
5. Walt Bond - of - Cleveland Indians
6. Ike Brown - 2b, 3b - Detroit Tigers
7. Willard "Home Run" Brown - of - St. Louis Browns
8. J.C. Hartman - ss - Houston Colt .45s
9. Francisco "Pancho" Herrera - 1b - Philadelphia Phillies
10. Elston Howard - c, of - New York Yankees
11. Connie Johnson - p - Chicago White Sox & Baltimore Orioles
12. Lou Johnson - of - Los Angeles Dodgers
13. John Kennedy - ss - Philadelphia Phillies
14. Henry "Pistol" Mason - p - Philadelphia Phillies
15. Leroy "Satchel" Paige - p - Cleveland Indians.
16. Curtis Roberts - 2b - Pittsburgh Pirates
17. Jackie Robinson - 1b, 2b - Brooklyn Dodgers
18. George Spriggs - of - Pittsburgh Pirates
19. Hank Thompson - 2b - St. Louis Browns
20. Bob Thurman - of - Cincinnati Reds
21. Quincy Troupe - c - Cleveland Indians

MINOR LEAGUE AFFILIATES

Juan Armenteros, c
 Henry Baylis, 3b
 Sherwood Brewer, 2b
 Gene Collins, p, of
 Doc Connors, ss
 Bill Dickey, p
 Melvin Duncan, p
 Duke Henderson, of
 Bill Hill, of
 Ike "Stonewall" Jackson, c
 John Jackson, p
 Ernie Johnson, p, of
 Jim "Lefty" LaMarque

Eddie Locke, p
 Enrique "Ricky" Maroto, p
 Booker T. McDaniel, p
 Nat Peeples, of
 Gene Richardson, p
 Bill Rowan, of
 Barney Serrell, ss
 Ford Smith, p
 Mickey Stubblefield, p
 Earl Taborn, c
 Don Vaughn, p
 Jeff Williams, of
 Jesse Williams, ss

The Majors received a total of 47 talented tan men from the ranks of the Monarchs. In fact, 13 of the 17 roster players from the 1949 team went into organized ball. Manager of

the club, Buck O'Neil recalled: "The best club I ever managed was the 1949 team. We had Bob Thurman, Elston Howard, Curtis Roberts, Connie Johnson, Gene Baker, Willard Brown, Frank Barnes, oh man!, Booker McDaniel, Bonnie Serrell, Gene Richardson, Herb Souell, oh yeah! This was a team. All the guys, these Monarchs, prided themselves. We were an institution." ⁴⁸

Another accolade came from one of Jackie Robinson's tutors, Monarch infielder Jesse Williams:

"The Monarchs were like a milestone here. Just like every white boy wanted to join the Yankees, it was every black boy's ambition to join the Monarchs. Shoot, the Monarchs were as popular as the Yankees back in our day. Man, the Monarchs were the team! And every black kid knew it." ⁴⁹

A NEW DAY

In 1955, Kansas City baseball underwent a major change. Blues Stadium was purchased by the city and became Municipal Stadium. The minor league Blues were replaced by the hapless Philadelphia Athletics of the American League. As the Monarchs played their last home game, they entered the era of burlesque baseball in the remaining years. The Monarchs, once the brightest-burning comet of all, were now falling to earth.

Fans, both black and white flocked to see the big league A's, which had not won a pennant since 1931, set an attendance record of 1,393,054. The ripple effect caused the Monarchs a loss of over \$10,000. The once magnificent Kansas City Monarchs were sold to Ted Rasberry of Grand Rapids, Michigan. ⁵⁰

Under the Rasberry management, the Monarchs never regained the masterful Wilkinson level of play that once dominated the diamonds of the 1920s, 30s and 40s. The local

black newspaper, The (Kansas City) *Call*, in retrospect to Wilkinson's Monarchs, observed:

"From a sociological point of view the Monarchs have done more than any other single agent in Kansas City to break the damnable outrage of prejudice that exists in this city."⁵¹

Wilkinson's remaining years were spent at the University Nursing home in Kansas City, Kansas.⁵² He had brought baseball out of the aberrant light into the spotlight. He had given sight to night time baseball, only to lose his own vision late in life. On August 21, 1964, at the age of eighty-six, the "Father of Night Baseball"⁵³ died. His remains rest in the Garden Mausoleum at Mount Moriah Cemetery in Kansas City, Missouri. Wilkinson left his wife, Mrs. Bessie Wilkinson of 7240 Wornall Road, a son Richard, a daughter Gladys Catron, and three brothers, Stanley, Ray, Lee, and a sister Hattie.

A contemporary public tribute from the *Kansas City Call* back on September 7, 1928, provided insight to his upcoming greatness:

"The Best club owner in the world to work for --
 who is familiar with the game as it is today
 who knows how to plan for the future
 who believes in us at all times
 who stands for a fair and square deal to all
 who gives the best and expects the best in return
 who loves and is loved by his players
 who believes that charity begins at home
 who knows and appreciates real ability
 who instills the fighting spirit in his club
 who practices what he preaches
 who never turned on a friend."

One of Wilkie's favorite players Buck O'Neil recalls his friendship with the main man behind the Monarchs:

"One of the finest men I have ever known was Wilkinson. J.L. Wilkinson was one of the few men in my life that was without prejudice. He was a thinking man innovative, he was always thinking of ways to improve or better baseball. He was the type of fellow that it was nothing he had that was actually too good for you. A lot of ball players I know,

came to Kansas City when the season was over and Wilkie let them have money all year. Wilkie was that kind of man.

A soft man, if he talked to you, you had to listen. You know! I never heard him raise his voice. No matter how excited he may be about a project, he never raised his voice and always had a nice smile. He wanted to have the best ball club in the world.

You see, before we got there, our reservations were already made. You see, this was all cut and dry. We knew what restaurant we were going to eat in. You took care of busy before we got there. We would let here in the spring and I would tell Ora where I was going to be the last day of the season. He was a good organizer. And as far traveling in the south, we knew where to stop. Good hotels, good restaurant owned by black folks. What happened is this, we knew, city to city, where to stop. Stop here, don't stop here. To stop at a filling station, we may have to stop two or three blocks off the main drag, but it would be a black filling station. If you had to go to white filling station, the players (from the home town) would tell us which one to stop at."

Racial tension! We had none! Wilkie knew how to avoid the trouble spots. We knew where to go and not to go. ⁵⁴

Teammate and pitching ace, Connie Johnson recalled his days as a Monarch. "You know J.L. Wilkinson was one of the greatest guys to ever live. He was just a natural. He wasn't prejudiced, just a natural, down-to-earth human being. Lots of times, he gave money to people on the streets. And you never had to worry about your money. As a matter of fact, he kept a lot of teams going. If he found out a team in the league couldn't make payroll, Wilkinson would let them have some money. Him and Rube kept that league alive. But we, the Monarchs never had to worry about our salaries. I remember one time I borrowed \$25 dollars from him and never paid him back. He never asked for it. J.L. was a nice guy. He helped a lot of people out. He was the type of guy, if you needed money you could go to him. Hey, he was a fantastic man. Yes he was! You could go to him and tell him you were having a financial problem. All he wanted to know was how much you needed and hey, he never asked any questions."

Future pitcher for the Chicago White Sox and the Baltimore Orioles Johnson added "He was one of the finest men I ever knew. That's for sure. You don't find many people like J.L. in this world. He had no conception of discrimination. Everyone was the same to him. All the players liked him. He was for real. No doubt about that, a fine fellow." ⁵⁵

Another hurler, Allen "Lefty" Bryant said, "Wilkie even traveled with the ball club. He made sure we eat whatever we wanted. If we couldn't get served, he got the food and brought it too us. Sometimes there were places on the road, were a black man could not get off the bus and go in and eat. He would go in and get the food and bring it out to us. He always saw that we had plenty of food. That J.L. was one of the finest persons I ever knew." ⁵⁶

Another testimonial came from first baseman, George Giles: "The best man to ever live. Him and Rube Foster were the ones to start the league back in 1920. You know I tell those guys, that all the time I played ball, I never missed a paycheck with Wilkie in charge. Some of the guys didn't get all their money, but Wilkie always paid off." ⁵⁷

Chet Brewer, a two-time all star, also spoke affectionately of the Monarch owner: "That J.L. Wilkinson was one of best white men I was ever in contact with. He wanted his ball players to look nice. We dress, boy did we dress nice." ⁵⁸

Wilkinson's son, Richard or R.L. recalled:

"I never knew a ball player or person that didn't like my dad. He was a very calm, a quiet type of person. He never showed much emotion. Always the professional! Never saw him without a suit and tie and hat on. Never drank, never smoke. Just a fine person, and he helped a lot of players, financially.

A great baseball man, he helped organize the league. He held that league together. I remember as a kid that Foster and the two Martin brothers from Memphis, would call my father for advice. They were extremely close friends. My dad was responsible for scheduling all the games. He was head of the scheduling committee. Dad was just a good business man. He loved baseball." ⁵⁹

Wilkinson was baseball's original drum major. In the mid-20s, he had introduced "Kids' Day" or "Knothole Day" (kids 15 and under, free) and "Ladies Day" or "Fannettes Day" (all ladies in free) at the ball park. Earlier, in 1922, Wilkinson hired attractive lady ushers as an attraction and an incentive for men to use less profanity.

James Leslie Wilkinson was an innovator, a promoter, a beneficiary and personal confidant to his players. He presented our national pastime with a formula for racial harmony and a quality product. Though not given the honor, Wilkinson -- not Branch Rickey -- was the forerunner of interracial baseball. He produced champions of black teams who lived outside the glow of the national pastime, away from the brightest of white lights.

Future Hall of Famer sportswriter Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote on June 9, 1945, one of the greatest living tributes to Wilkinson and his Monarchs:

"One of those who has made a definite contribution to black baseball is J.L. Wilkinson, the silver-thatched, soft-spoken owner of the fabulous Kansas City Monarchs. Wilkinson has been in Negro baseball for more than twenty years, and during that time he has not only invested his money, but his very heart and soul. He has stayed in the game through storm and strife because he has loved it, not because he had to. There is no owner in the country -- white or Negro -- who has operated more honestly, sincerely or painstakingly. His baseball history is an epic as thrilling and fascinating as any sports story ever written."

Sidebar

In 1952, Wilkie picked his All-Time, All-Star Monarch team (Hall of Famers in bold):

Frank Duncan	Catcher
John "Buck" O'Neil	First Base
Newt Allen	Second Base
Newt Joseph	Third Base
Dobie Moore	Shortstop
Heavy Johnson	Left Field
Hurley McNair	Center Field
Cristobal Torriente	Right Field
John Donaldson	Pitcher
Bullet Rogan	Pitcher
Satchel Paige	Pitcher
Andy Cooper	Manager ⁶⁰

His team featured four future Hall of Famers, with three others, Allen, Donaldson, and O'Neil who have appeared on Cooperstown ballots. Besides the owner J.L. Wilkinson, the Monarchs can boast of 14 Cooperstown Hall of Famers; Ernie Banks, Cool Papa Bell, Willard Brown, Andy Cooper, Willie Foster, Pop Lloyd, Jose Mendez, Satchel Paige, Jackie Robinson, Bullet Rogan, Cristobal Torriente, Hilton Smith, Turkey Stearnes and Willie Wells.

In 2006, Wilkinson received his final and highest honor when elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

While in the intimate darkness,
Many fans fantasize over their favorite players.

In the shadows of the artificial light,
They would steal a celebrated hit
Or fantasy pitch from their favorite silhouette.

The fans knew, like Wilkie,
That Only the Stars Come Out at Night,
Only simply to vanish with the sunshine,
Exposing all their childish excitement.

Star light, star bright,
 J.L. Wilkinson, a shining light
 In baseball's darken pastime.

¹ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/chi-chicagodays-wrigleylights-story-story.html>

² A diary by E.J. Murtaugh, a native of Waverly, came to Algona as a 15-year-old bookkeeper for a creamery and would up the area's most important banker. From his dairy dated June 10, 1901, Murtaugh states "Algona has 11 salaried players, five darkies, five whites, and one Indian." We later learned from the diary that the team become all-black from the May 4, 1903 entry, "Murtaugh spent P.M. watching the colored players work out. Nine players are now here. There are more to come."

³ Kansas City Call, 27 July 1928

⁴ Kansas City Star, 20 October 1922

⁵ Kansas City American, 16 August 1928

⁶ A humble Wilkinson never took claim for inventing night baseball. According to a August 31, 1938 article in the Atlanta Daily World, he dispelled the idea saying; "In Chicago Comiskey Park in 1910, we had a game under lights. I was running a team called the Kansas City Bloomers, made up supposedly of girls. Well we did have a couple on the squad, but I had to lay in a supply of wigs for the other players. Mr. Comiskey who had just built his new park, was interested in the possibilities of night play, and installed huge searchlights on top of his stands. They weren't the modern kind, but were real arc lamps, such as they used to use to light streets. The lighting was sputtery and irregular, but we played the game and had a good crowd in spite of a drizzle."

⁷ Kansas City Star, 12 June 1930, Kansas Collections, University of Kansas

⁸ Tom Baird undated press release, Harriett Baird Wickstrom, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas

⁹ Undated letter to the author, circa 1990.

¹⁰ Logan County News, 17 & 24 April 1930

¹¹ Blackwell Morning Tribune, 25 April 1930, and Tonkawa News, 21 & 28 April 1930.

¹² Kansas City Call, 12 September 1952

¹³ Okmulgee Daily Times, 27 & 29 April 1930, p 7.

¹⁴ Enid Morning News, 25 April 1930; Kansas City Call, 2 and 9 May 1930

¹⁵ The Daily Oklahoma, 26 April 1930, p 9 and Ponca City News, 28 April 1930, p7

¹⁶ This documented travel of the K.C. Monarchs through Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas was done by Michael T. Thompson, of Norman, Oklahoma, in January of 1990, where he was a freshman at Oklahoma University. His father Steve described him as, "... a good student, a pretty good ballplayer, great fielding right fielder, fine arm, fairly good contact hitter, no power." Besides major Oklahoma newspapers, he also examined the Newkirk Herald, the Blackwell Herald, the Oklahoma City Black Dispatch, Oklahoma City Eagle, The Tulsa Sun, the Tulsa Oklahoma Eagle and the Enid Daily Eagle.

¹⁷ Countee Cullen's 'Heritage': A Black Waste Land"

¹⁸ Kansas City Call, 38 March 1930

¹⁹ Chet Brewer interview with author, 22 October 1989

²⁰ Missouri Life, March-June, 1975; K.C.'s Mighty Monarchs by John B. Holway

²¹ Kansas City Call, 9 May 1930

²² Missouri Life, March-June, 1975; K.C.'s Mighty Monarchs by John B. Holway

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Kansas City Star, 12 June 1930, Kansas Collections, University of Kansas

²⁵ Missouri Life, March-June, 1975; K.C.'s Mighty Monarchs by John B. Holway

²⁶ George Giles interview with author, 25 February 1991

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Kansas City Call, 28 May 1948, John L. Johnson's Sport Light

²⁹ Buck O'Neil interview with author, 13 September 1990

³⁰ Kansas City Call, 11 October 1946

³¹ Your Kansas City and Mine, by William H. Young and Nathan B. Young, Jr., p 71

³² Richard Wilkinson interview with author, 30 December 1990

³³ Sales Contract addendum, dated 5 February 1948, Kansas Collections, University of Kansas

³⁴ State Historical Society of Missouri oral history project, 8 September 1971

³⁵ Kansas City Call, 27 February 1948

³⁶ Sales Contract, dated 5 February 1948, Kansas Collections, University of Kansas

³⁷ Richard Wilkinson interview with author, 30 December 1990

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Harriett Baird Wickstrom File, Kansas Collections, University of Kansas

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Des Moines Sunday Register, 20 May 1973, p 4-B

⁴² Chicago Defender, "Chandler Doesn't Believe in Barring Negro Players", 12 May 1945, p 8

⁴³ Kansas City Call, "Texas Hornsby Says Negroes will Fail", 2 November 1945

⁴⁴ Ebony, May, 1949, p 40

⁴⁵ Chet Brewer interview with author, 24 November 1984

⁴⁶ Gene Benson interview with author, 6 November 1990

⁴⁷ Ebony, May, 1949, p 40

⁴⁸ Buck O'Neil interview with author, 13 September 1990

⁴⁹ Jesse Williams interview with author, 25 February 1991

⁵⁰ Harriett Baird Wickstrom File, Kansas Collections, University of Kansas

The Profit and Loss Statement from R. R. Slagel, public accountant, for the 1954 season revealed:

TOTAL CASH RECEIPTS	\$ 62,907.80
---------------------	--------------

OPERATING EXPENSES:

Player's Salaries	28,773.62
Officer's Salaries	7,500.00
Lodging for Players	5,894.08
Business Promotional Expenses	3,951.85
Transportation of Players	3,617.45
Loss by Fire	3,091.33
Bus Maintenance & Repair	2,915.27
Player's Meals	2,723.75
Baseball Supplies	2,518.10
Gasoline & Oil for Bus	2,372.60
Telephone & Telegraph	1,250.08
Travel Expense - Management	1,000.03
Miscellaneous Expenses	915.61
Depreciation	810.00
Scouting Expenses	744.76
Stadium Rental	640.99
Bonuses - 1955 Players	600.00
Employment Tax Expenses	570.35
Accounting	411.25
Lease Improvements	363.56
Contributions	340.00
Other Taxes	306.76
Laundry	254.91
League Membership Fees	250.00
Medical Expenses on Players	227.55
Postage	173.81
Taxes and Licenses	142.95
Booking Fees	130.45
Legal Expense	100.00
Office Supplies	81.52
Water and Lights	81.21
Bus Storage	75.00

Insurance	71.51
Dues and Subscriptions	19.95
Freight paid on Supplies	11.98
TOTAL EXPENSES	<u>72,931.88</u>
NET OPERATING LOSS FOR 1954 SEASON	(\$ 10,024.08)

⁵¹ Kansas City Call, 27 October 1922

⁵² Kansas City Star, 21 August 1964

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Buck O'Neil interview with author, 13 September 1990

⁵⁵ Connie Johnson interview with author, 25 February 1991

⁵⁶ Allen Bryant interview with author, 25 February 1991

⁵⁷ George Giles interview with author, 25 February 1991

⁵⁸ Chet Brewer interview with author, 22 October 1989

⁵⁹ Richard Wilkinson interview with author, 30 December 1990

⁶⁰ Your Kansas City and Mine, by William H. Young and Nathan B. Young, Jr., p 127