

The Negro Leagues made the dream of night baseball a reality.

In 1930, James Leslie Wilkinson, owner of the prominent Negro Leagues team Kansas City Monarchs, initiated the dawning of a new era in baseball with the first portable lighting system. He made it possible for fans to see a constellation of Black stars perform in the illuminated shadows of the night. It was the birth of nighttime baseball.

As early as the 1880s, entrepreneurs had attempted — unsuccessfully — to present baseball under the artificial sunlight. A determined Wilkinson sought out the Giant Manufacturing Company of Omaha, Neb., 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 from the Western League, a minor league in existence in various forms from the late 1800s. Keyser wanted to install a permanent lighting system, but Wilkinson saw the commercial value and convenience for touring the Midwest with a portable version.

To finance this dream, Monarchs co-owner Thomas Younger Baird, also the owner of a bowling alley and billiard parlor, put up collateral to secure a

The Kansas City Monarchs hold a prominent place in baseball history for their barnstorming tours, introduction of nighttime games and legendary players such as Satchel Paige.



SILHOU BY LARRY LESTER IN THE

NIGHT BASE BALL

BY ELECTRIC FLOOD LIGHTS

KANSAS CITY MONARCHS



WORLD'S-COLORED CHAMPIONS

The most Spectacular Outdoor Exhibition ever attempted, the Monarchs carry their PORTABLE ELECTRIC LIGHTING PLANT, and illuminate the baseball park to play regulation baseball at night the same as by day. NOT an EXPERIMENT, but a SUCCESS

vs CONCORDIA

Tuesday, Sept. 16

Fairground, Concordia . . 8 P. M.

Concordia will have in their lineup such players as:

EDWARDS	GULIC
HERRIOTT	McKAIN
CARROL	COWELL
CULP	TITUS SHROUF



Actual Photograph of one of our towers supporting the Electric Flood Lights

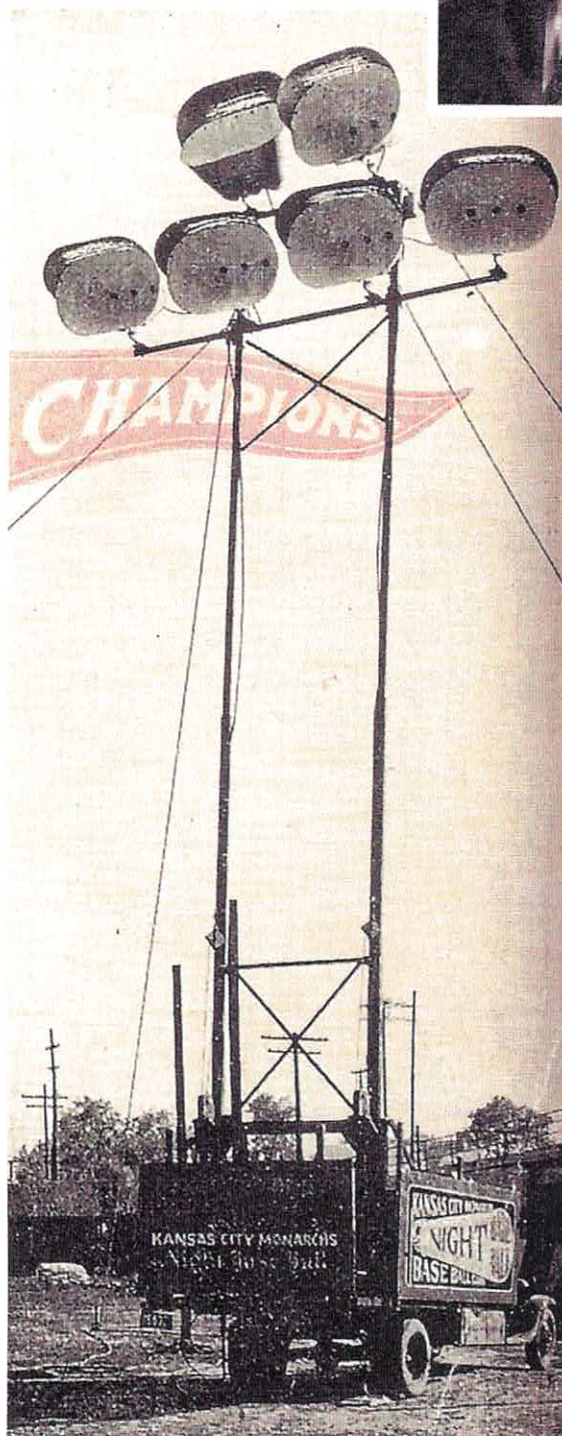
This broadside advertises a night game in Concordia, Kan., on Sept. 16, 1930, between the local team and the Kansas City Monarchs. The posters were reproduced at multiple sites, with the local team able to add its name and pertinent information about the nighttime matchup.

ETTES SHADOWS

Hall of Fame executive J.L. Wilkinson was the visionary behind the first practical night baseball equipment used in the Negro Leagues.



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM



To illuminate the field for nighttime games, the Monarchs used 44 giant floodlights mounted on the beds of Ford trucks.

\$50,000 loan (equivalent to nearly \$1 million in 2024). 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. It also 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.

One of the crew who set up and ran the equipment, 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 — 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 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."

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

The Panhandle tour started on April 23 in a small town about 100 miles southwest of Tulsa called Crescent. The Monarchs trounced the Crescent Stars, 18-0. But because of threatening thunderstorms, they were not able to assemble their patented lighting system. The next day, the Monarchs traveled 70 miles northeast to Tonkawa to play the Tonkawa Independents. But once again, inclement weather delayed the birth of night baseball.

Again loading up the trucks and cars, they traveled 45 miles north across the state line to Arkansas City, Kan. This game scheduled for April 26 was postponed due to rain. There was no time for rest as the Monarchs were slated to play the next day in Okmulgee, Okla., which was about 40 miles from Tulsa. Okmulgee had a significant Black population of about 20 percent, and a sellout crowd was expected for the contest vs. the hometown Merchants.

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 its 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. After gaining a formidable lead, the Monarchs



rotated their fielding positions after each opposing batter was retired. They won the game by an 11-1 score.

The Monarchs then traveled 155 miles northwest to Enid, Okla., to play Phillips University. And on April 28, 1930, on an overcast Monday, the Monarchs made baseball history. In front of approximately 3,000 fans, baseball's first night shift played the Phillips University Haymakers at Alton Stadium.

The Monarchs' curveball specialist, William Bell, and catcher T.J. Young became the first Black battery in a night game. The Monarchs had constructed a canvas fence in center field 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 Haymakers. Coach Tobe Greene, playing second base, accounted for four of the miscues.

The University team jumped on top early with two runs in the first inning and another run in the third. But 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, and the Monarchs went on to win, 12-4. A sudden downpour caused this parade into baseball history to be called after eight innings.

The new system enlightened the minds of minor league team executives as they discovered the lights helped ease some of the financial effects — lower attendance chief among those issues — brought on by the Great Depression. Minor league club owners found that baseball under the artificial sun often doubled or tripled attendance.

Fans of the white major leagues had to wait five more years to witness the installation of stadium lights. On May 24, 1935, from his oval office, President Franklin D. Roosevelt flipped a ceremonial switch that generated close to one million watts of electrical power from 632 1500-watt flood lamps in Cincinnati's Crosley Field. 🟡

Larry Lester is a curatorial consultant for the Hall of Fame's ongoing Black Baseball Initiative.

Reds general manager Larry MacPhail supervises the lighting of Crosley Field in Cincinnati on May 24, 1935. The game was the first night contest in NL or AL history — but Negro Leagues teams had been playing games under the lights since 1930.