

In America's long hard slog toward civil rights, blows have been struck by great men and women, giants with steel backbones and a transcendent gift for words. Their names and faces are indelibly etched in our history and to this day help lead us toward that "more perfect union".

Other, less publicized steps forward garnered little attention but were victories nonetheless. In 1951, at the peak of the civil rights turmoil, the actions of one Virginia town resulted in a small yet hugely symbolic move towards equality for all people.

In the 1950s, the Commonwealth of Virginia was one of the battlefields in the larger struggle with its policies of enforced segregation in all aspects of life. But here in the coalfields, the situation was slightly different. Although the coal camps and the larger towns were segregated, there was more interaction between the races and always had been. Black and white miners often worked side by side underground. And coal mining communities shared a strong bond based on the extraordinary dangers miners faced every day that they went under the mountain. A mining disaster left no inhabitant of the coal town untouched.

Norton was one such town, its prejudice battling against a natural inclination to live and let live. "I can't say that we were an enlightened community, but we were more tolerant than the rest of the Commonwealth," says Bill Kanto, a native. Bill describes his hometown in 1951 as a rough town "but it had its softer side depending on where you were. Sort of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde-type town." Kanto has a talent for keen detail and tells of a vibrant downtown, its streets lined with five-and-dimes, banks, pharmacies, department stores, eateries, theaters, beer joints, pool halls and bordellos. Every weekend the streets were impassible, he says, thronged with miners and their families coming in to shop. Yet a block away, one could find the staid and settled residential areas of solid houses and well-kept lawns. On the other side of the railroad tracks was Southside, Norton's African American neighborhood.

So Norton was just another typical small town in the coal county of southwest Virginia, was it? Not quite. Because in 1951, this little city, led by a handful of courageous adults and four teams worth of baseball-loving boys, took a step toward equality that is remembered to this day.

It all began with an advertisement in the May 8, 1951 *Coalfield Progress*, a citywide call for boys between 10 and 12 to try out for the newly minted Norton Little League. This league was the brainchild of local optometrist Charles Litton and fellow sports lovers Ralph Bradley, Reid Simmons, Jack Hatcher and Gene "Moon" Mullins, all veterans of the recent war. These five allies were just old enough to devise a solid plan and just young enough to have idealism and energy enough to see that plan through to its historic end.

What made the Norton Little League different from all the others in the South was the charter outlining its geographic boundaries. Dr. Litton and his allies could have defended the status quo and kept the little league safely white simply by structuring it to exclude Southside. Instead, they opened the league to any child with the desire to play. And that included black children.

So enthusiastic was the response to the announcement, on May 21, 1951, the Norton softball park thrummed with the energy of one hundred hopefuls, all trying to land a post on one of the league's four teams, sponsored by the local Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, Boosters Club and the

Junior Woman's Club. Naturally, the fiercest competition was for a position on the Lions, Kiwanis or Boosters, as no boy in his right mind wanted to wear a jersey with "Junior Woman's" emblazoned on it. Robert Stump played for the Junior Woman's club. When asked if it embarrassed the boys to play for a club with that name, he laughs. "Gosh yes, no question about it. On our backs, on our fronts, there we were. Yes, I was embarrassed—I still am."

To the delight of the organizers, a couple of African American kids from Southside showed up along with their parents. In fact, as former Kiwanis player Robert Raines recalls, "When the two black kids showed up, Dr. Litton told them to go find more." At the end of the day, four African American boys had been drafted, one for each team. Despite a handful of protests by local whites, the Norton Little League was born officially integrated, the first in Virginia and possibly the first in the South.

Three of the African American players—Johnny Blair, Harold "Mitch" Mitchell and Robert Strong—were best friends having grown up together. They became essential players to their teams. Sadly, after 70 years, the name of the fourth child, who played for the Norton Boosters, is lost to us.

The late Lann Malesky, Lions 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman, introduced the story of the Norton Little League to the larger world in the summer 1999 issue of the *Virginia Cavalcade*. He wrote, "We boys, black and white, played together and cheered our teammates, whatever their color." But he added, with obvious regret, that when the games ended, the boys divided and walked home to their respective neighborhoods.

Robert Stump's memory is much the same, with an essential difference. While he admits that the white boys and the black boys didn't socialize outside of baseball, they made the most of those hours on the field and continued the fraternity off it. His black teammate on the Junior Woman's club was Harold Mitchell. "I loved him," says Stump. "He was a small, wonderful boy, one of my real good friends." He describes post-practice and post-game celebrations at downtown eateries like Paul's Restaurant and Katie's Kitchen where the all the team members would rehash every play over burgers and fries. "We were young and didn't think of Mitch as anything but just another guy, just one of the gang."

Preston Miller, outfielder for the Lions Club nine, agrees with him. "The kids, they didn't care what color their teammates were, they just had to be good ball players. In athletics, you just want to win so if they could help you win, you wanted them." Bill Kanto concurs. "When we played baseball, we played together. As a team."

At the end of the season, because Norton was the only town in the western part of Virginia to field a little league, it was the default winner of the Western Regional Championship and automatically headed for the state competition. From the best of the four clubs, an all star team was assembled. It included Harold Mitchell, Johnny Blair, David Wood, Gary Hubbard, Bobby Morley, Robert Lively, Norman Payne, Buford Sturgill, Roger Allen, Joey Maiolo, Jimmy Jenkins, Tommy Taylor and Gary Kiser.

With its All Stars organized, Norton was ready to compete with the Eastern champs, Charlottesville, for the Little League Championship of Virginia. There was just one catch. Charlottesville informed Norton that it would not be allowed to play on its segregated field if Blair and Mitchell were on the team.

And this is the moment that Virginia's Smallest City—and some of its smallest citizens—made a strategic move, one calculated by Dr. Litton. He informed the Charlottesville officials that they could either play the Norton All Stars or forfeit the championship. Dr. Litton did, however, offer an escape route for the eastern team: Charlottesville would be welcome to play Norton *in Norton*.

The eastern champs tentatively agreed, but only if Johnny Blair and Harold Mitchell were taken off the team for the game. Again, Dr. Litton stood up against the larger city. Finally, the cornered Charlottesville team conceded, and the tournament was scheduled for August 4, 1951. The winners would then travel to Fairmont, West Virginia, to meet that state's victors.

The stakes couldn't have been higher.

The city of Norton understood the significance of the championship baseball game it was about to host and the whole town got to work, beginning with the little league organizers and its sponsors. The Norton Municipal Stadium, home of the Class D Braves, was altered to fit little league specifications. A picket fence was erected around the outfield with any ball hit over it good for a home run. The game would be six innings long. There would be no admission fee, but donations were strongly encouraged. Two of the Mountain States League's professional umpires, Mr. Tirek and Mr. Rumpf, agreed to participate.

And those were just preparations for the game itself.

When the Charlottesville boys arrived Saturday morning, they found every downtown window decorated with welcoming signs. Short convivial remarks were made at the Hotel Norton, the boys going from there to a picnic at the American Legion Cabin, sponsored by the Norton Junior Woman's Club. At the picnic, Mayor Ball joined Dr. Litton in welcoming the visiting team. A parade down Park Avenue started after lunch, led by the Norton Band, with all the players ferried in convertibles and followed by floats. Somewhere between picnicking, parades and practice were gallons of ice cream sodas, free movies, swimming, a radio interview and press photos.

A cynical observer might suspect a bit of recreational or culinary sabotage on the part of Norton. How, one wonders, could those Charlottesville boys be expected to play a good game after all that food and hectic activity?

The answer is that they didn't. Charlottesville lost 12-3 in what Carroll Tate called "an easy game," with pitcher Bobby Lively striking out nine and holding the visitors to five hits and two runs. Catcher David Woods got the first hit for Norton and followed that with a home run and a pair of singles. He drove in four runs. Preston Miller and Bobby Lively also had a pair of hits each. Preston Miller, when asked about his big game, said it was an easy one because Norton had the better team and more adrenaline because of the challenge Charlottesville had thrust on it.

And Charlottesville, he added, was stewing about the black players more than the Norton teams ever had.

When the last of the Charlottesville batters struck out, the ecstatic Norton All Stars hefted pitcher Lively to their shoulders and carried him off the field to receive the championship trophy from Virginia Lt. Governor Lewis Preston Collins (who, ironically, was a renowned segregationist). After the game, a banquet for 90 was held at the Hotel Norton and following that, the now exhausted boys attended a double header between the Class D Braves and the Morristown Red Sox.

The Norton All Stars had little time to recover from their victory because three days later they were off via a Capital Airlines DC-3 to Clarksburg, West Virginia, and from there to Fairmont, driven in special cars. For this game, Bill Kanto and Lann Malesky were on the roster.

If this had been a feel-good movie, the All Stars would have returned home with another trophy. Sadly, this was not to be because they met up with Fairmont's 12-year-old pitching machine, who in the last two games of the tournament struck out 35 and gave up only two hits in 14 innings. Against him, the All Stars lost 9-0 in a no-hit, no-run game. Robert Stump, with a wink, speculates that Fairmont exceeded the age limit for little league, claiming the players were at least 6'5" each and had beards. With mock solemnity, Judge Stump adds, "I was an eyewitness, hopefully credible." Then he chuckles, "They were big'uns and they whipped us good."

Seventy years later, the adult heroes of this story are long gone. Of the young heroes, whose skinny limbs hit and fielded and ran the bases, the African American players are gone as well, their own memories left untold. But the remaining players and others recognize the event as a seminal one on the hard journey toward what was right, all inspired by an ordinary man who did something extraordinary.

Nancy Litton is the youngest daughter of Charles Litton, and she was born well after his little league adventures. She says her father never talked about that year and the unusual chase for the championship. As to his principled stand against racism, she says, "It wasn't something that was a banner on his wall. It's just the way he did things." She believes that part of the impetus was Dr. Litton's love of his hometown and his hopes for it. "Norton was our home, whether Southside or Highland Avenue. He wanted good things for the town. He wanted it to be good place to have a family, to have a business, to live his life." Perhaps more important is the fact that he was a man who saw people as equals and passed that on to his children. "We were never encouraged to look at people through a specific lens. Everyone was welcome in our house," she says. Nancy Litton thinks of her father less as a man who intentionally championed political causes and more just one who loved sports and thought everyone who wanted to play should have the chance to play.

Preston Miller looks back on Dr. Litton as showing real character. "He wasn't necessarily a liberal-thinking person, he was just a fair-thinking person." Robert Raines believes that Charles Litton and his enthusiastic allies had seen a lot of the outside world during the war and developed strong convictions as to how things ought to be.

Bill Kanto agrees that war and events in the larger world might have shaped the thinking of all the men involved. After all, he points out, in 1951, the times were changing. “Truman had integrated the military in 1947. Jackie Robinson had started in the major leagues in the same year. By 1950, almost all the major league teams had an African American player.” Kanto believes the summer of 1951 helped set the stage for his hometown to accept what was coming in terms of civil rights. “Baseball was leading the way to integration,” he says.

Finally, as Lann Malesky put it, “Charles Litton and his fellow organizers simply decided that the decent thing was to let all of us kids play baseball together. They made that choice and they never looked back.”

But it was not just letting black kids and white kids play baseball together. It was standing up to Charlottesville and the little league organization at large in a fight to keep the black players on the team for the championship. As Bill Kanto says, “After we had played together for a season, they weren’t going to turn those kids off the team. They got their backs up and wouldn’t let them be thrown off. Their allegiance would not allow that. Their code of ethics wouldn’t allow it. Their moral fiber wouldn’t let them give in.”

There is a photograph of the 1951 Western Little League Champions getting ready to board the plane to West Virginia. The boys are representative of their times, all saddle shoes and pleated pants. Harold Mitchell is sitting in the front—small, like Robert Stump described him—and he is holding on to one corner of the sign identifying them as the state champs. Johnny Blair is on the steps to the plane with the arm of David Woods draped casually over his shoulder. On his other side, Joey Maiolo leans in, both boys laughing as if sharing a joke.

What makes this photograph striking is that Harold and Johnny are not separated, not off to themselves, not posed together. Rather, they are ensconced among their teammates, essential parts of the cohesive victorious whole. After the photograph was taken, the Norton All Stars boarded the plane, having made history.

The 1951 Virginia Little League Champions and the City of Norton invite one and all to join them for the dedication of a historic marker commemorating the events of that year, that shining year when a little town stood behind five local visionaries and a group of blessedly colorblind boys, to do not what was easy, but what was right.

*The celebration will begin at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday June 11, 2022, on Park Avenue in downtown Norton, across the street from Old Dominion Power.*