

Council asked to honor black ex-ballplayer

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BRIDGEPORT It was a picture that caught Craig Kelly's interest the one of his elderly former neighbor at the Pequonnock Apartments as a younger man.

"We were already friends," Kelly recalled of that day back in the 1970s he helped Rufus Baker and his wife bring groceries into their apartment in the now-leveled public housing project.

The photograph showed Baker crouched in baseball pinstripes, the name "Yankees" emblazoned across his chest.

"I didn't know he had a baseball past," said Kelly, a city firefighter. "That's when I found out he had played in the Negro Leagues."

Now Kelly is on a mission to make sure the city Baker called home until his death in 1992 at 74 years old does not forget him.

He has asked the City Council to ceremonially name the portion of Broad Street linking South Frontage Road and University Avenue, "Rufus Baker Memorial Boulevard."

Kelly said the site would make for an appropriate tribute because it is near both Baker's home at the former Pequonnock Apartments, as well as baseball itself embodied by the adjacent Ballpark at Harbor Yard, home of the Bridgeport Bluefish.

The City Council has referred the matter to the Public Safety and Transportation Committee for consideration. It turned out the unassuming Baker had quite a story.

A Georgia native who first came to Fairfield as a child and later moved to Bridgeport, Baker was a shortstop for the New York Black Yankees, a Negro League team founded in Harlem and relocated to Albany.

Baker was a highly regarded fielder in the days when black men weren't allowed to showcase their skills with whites.

"He was a very, very good defensive shortstop," said Michael J. Bielawa, a Bridgeport Public Library research librarian, and author of "Bridgeport Baseball," a book about the city's baseball heritage set to be published this summer by Arcadia Publishing.

But more to the point, Kelly said, is that Baker was a man of great faith who never became bitter because of the racism he experienced.

Black ballplayers weren't able to stay in the same hotels, eat in the same restaurants, or sometimes shop in the same places that white people could.

In a 1991 Connecticut Post story, Baker recalled stopping in Mississippi for a soda and having a shotgun pulled on him. In Texas, fans harassed him.

Bielawa, whose earlier book, "From FarField to Newfield," focuses on the city's native baseball Hall of Famer, James "Orator Jim" O'Rourke, says discrimination was an experience both men shared, as O'Rourke was a star in the 1800s, when there was much anti-Irish sentiment.

In that book, Bielawa tells how Baker was discovered when the visiting New York Black Yankees were on a barnstorming tour here, playing against the Colored Stars, a semipro team. He was invited to try out, and made the team.

As a Black Yankee, he played in some of the country's most storied parks, and Yankee Stadium was home. But he only played there when the regular Yankees were out of town.

He didn't exactly distinguish himself with the bat in the days when power hitting was so important. But, Bielawa said, his fielding was important because it saved so many runs.

Baker was regarded highly enough, Bielawa said, that he was among those selected to join later barnstorming tours that included such black legends as Roy Campanella and Monte Irvin.

"He must have made a mark if he was picked by Roy Campanella," Bielawa observed.

In all, Baker played about eight seasons with the Black Yankees, who disbanded in 1950, amid the integration of the Major Leagues. Baker's contract was sold, but he decided he didn't want to bother with Chicago American Giants.

Instead, he came home to Bridgeport, where he was a factory worker who played baseball in local leagues and devoted himself to youth through the Boys Club, as he and his wife had no children.

Kelly said he never knew his own father, and Baker was an important figure in his life, giving him valuable guidance in raising his own two sons.

He said that naming a street after Baker will help remind the community about a "heck of a man" and send a message that one can overcome racism to lead a meaningful life.

"Even through adversity and hard times there's light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

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