

Monte Irvin

Better late than never

By Harvey Frommer

His Hall of Fame plaque says: "Regarded as one of Negro Leagues' best hitters. Star slugger of Newark Eagles won 1946 Negro League batting title. Led N.L. in runs batted in and paced 'miracle' Giants in hitting in 1951 drive to pennant. Batted .458 and stole home in 1951 World Series." And that is just part of his fabled story.

I was born Montford Merrill Irvin, kind of ironically, a month after Jackie Robinson was — February 25, 1919, the seventh child of Cupid Irvin and Mary Eliza Henderson, in Haleburg, Alabama. My family of six boys and four girls moved to Orange, New Jersey, when I was 7 years old.

Sports became a way of life for me at the Park Avenue School, track and field, soccer, baseball. In fifth and sixth grade, I was able to throw so very hard that the coach made me the pitcher when we had really tough games. I was the shortstop for other games. I played all the time, every day, everywhere, every sport, earning 16 varsity letters.

During those years I also played with a local team called the Orange Triangle. It had some really great athletes; some older guys who were out working in the world. Our team was all black, but we played white local teams, Essex County teams. To get money for balls and bats and to pay the umpire, we passed the hat. There were some blacks in the audience, but most spectators were white people who came regularly.

Growing up I was a fan of the New York Yankees. Maybe it was because of how good the team was or because of the Newark Bears, the top and excellent Yankee farm team. They had great stars. They also had knothole game admission, free. We got seats far from the

field. But we still saw terrific baseball played there at Ruppert Field.

I aspired to play in the Negro Leagues. That was all I could do. In those days I could have had no thought, no dream of ever playing in the major leagues. I remember in 1936 I was playing so well (I hit .666 in high school playing shortstop, first base), that one of our teachers, a friend of Horace Stoneham, who owned the New York Giants, told him, "We've got a kid here who you should take a look at."

They looked. I learned later that a report came back: "Monte Irvin is everything you said he is, but the time is not yet right for him. There is no way we can sign him for the New York Giants. We will have to pass because we would not be able to get the other owners to go along."

So in 1937 I signed to play only road games with Abe and Effa Manley's Newark Eagles in the Negro Leagues. I was not offered a bonus. Abe Manley said, "Bonuses only spoil players; if you work yourself up to a good salary, you'll appreciate it more."

Since I was then an undergraduate on an athletic scholarship at Lincoln University in Chester, Pennsylvania, to protect



