

# RICKWOOD TALES

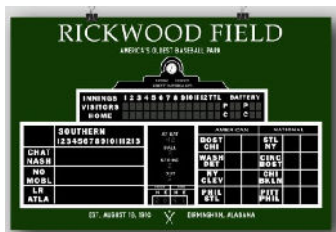
## Rickwood Calendar 12/4/20 to 3/4/21:

- Feb. 16: West Alabama v. Miles (2:00 PM)
- Feb. 20: Morehouse v. Miles (DH) (1:00 PM)
- Feb. 24: UAH v. Miles (3:00 PM)
- High School Baseball games at Rickwood (see [Rickwood.com](http://Rickwood.com) for dates / times)
- Please like our Facebook Page for updates about the ballpark, including the public reopening at: <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood.com>

## Get Your Rickwood Gear!

- Caps, t-shirts, posters, books, and other Rickwood merchandise are available for purchase on our website. We have some great new items, which we are excited about. Please visit our online shop to browse and order:

<https://rickwood.com/shop/>



## THE WICKED COVID CURVEBALL

Rickwood Field has been closed for most of 2020, essentially sidelining our ability to raise important funds needed to maintain and refurbish America's Oldest Baseball Park. We had no choice but to cancel the Rickwood Classic, our clinics, our tournaments, college games, and all of our corporate

events - while at the same time, the expenses of operating our historic treasure are draining our dwindling reserves.

In baseball talk, COVID 19 is a wicked curveball. But with apologies to the pitchers out there, we need our batters to step up

for a late inning rally. So, please go to bat for Rickwood Field by making a one-time tax-deductible gift at <https://rickwood.com/donate-to-rickwood-field/>

THANK YOU!

## WHO ARE THE FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD? PART 2: UNSUNG HEROES WHO HELPED SAVE AMERICA'S OLDEST BALLPARK

In our last edition, the origins of The Friends of Rickwood Field introduced some of the founding members of the organization, along with early recollections of how it was formed. This installment continues with how the park was saved from further decay and even possible destruction. Along the way, some of the unsung heroes will be introduced. These people played key roles in the improvement of the park.

Tom Cosby and Coke Matthews both explained one of the first key tasks, which needed to be done by the embryonic organization. "I think forming the fundraising committee that was chaired by Chris Womack of Alabama Power was key and involved influential people like Miller Gorrie. I have one of the original campaign brochures somewhere," Cosby reminisced. "It wasn't that successful, but it made a mark in corporate Birmingham." Matthews added a cautionary note that "the idea that somehow a then 80-year

old, decaying, roofless, teamless baseball park on Birmingham's westside was worth any trouble at all was beyond far-fetched. It was stupid. That we are talking about this 30 plus years later suggests at some level that we did indeed take on and succeed in convincing 'the public' that Rickwood was worth saving."

According to Cosby, Rickwood was worthy of preservation for a couple of reasons. "It was the oldest ballpark in America - and we couldn't let another (Birmingham) Terminal Station happen ever again. I think the public concluded after the Cobb movie was filmed there and they could see - with movie sets and all - how beautiful a properly restored vintage baseball park could be and what that would mean to civic pride."

By this time, there had been some improvements to Rickwood by the Birmingham Park and Recreation Board, but the

enhancements were sort of piecemeal and haphazard with little regard to architectural or aesthetic tastes. While the field was still being used by the city schools for baseball, as well as football, Cosby believed Rickwood's grandstand was close to being razed. "It could have been knocked down in 1992 and I don't think there would've been much of an outcry."

Matthews was realistic about the restoration project. "For those who envisioned a multi-million-dollar renovation, with massive tourism, Ferris wheels, and a return of the Birmingham Barons, we have not succeeded. We realized early on that though our appetite was strong, we were really just a bunch of old guys, 'ate up' with nostalgia and baseball. And in the minority."

He added, "I do not believe we ever thought we wouldn't succeed, once we got our expectations matched with reality."

[Continued on page 2]

## THE FRIENDS' UNSUNG HEROES

[Continued from Page 1]

Although Rickwood escaped the wrecking ball in the early 1990s, and the Rickwood Classic was a tipping point in creating a new generation of fans, both Cosby and Matthews are quick to point out that efforts to preserve the ballpark will never end. "Of course, it is never 'saved,' it will always continue to be a battle against deterioration and gravity," Cosby emphasized. Matthews added, "Not saved, just not destroyed. Still useful."

There was luck involved in preserving Rickwood. Legendary GM Branch Rickey was fond of saying "Luck is the residue of design." The luck was the timing of Comiskey Park's razing, which made Rickwood the oldest professional ballpark. The design was accomplished by several men who had vision to form The Friends of Rickwood. Then, they added an additional step—action by some unsung heroes.

Certainly, the Friends had a lot of help in the early days as a fledgling organization. There was one person, who had a clear vision for what the ballpark could be. Dr. Cleveland Hammonds, Jr., former Superintendent of Birmingham Schools was instrumental in getting an appropriation to replace the roof on the ballpark. "He was a fearless friend of Rickwood before it was so fashionable to love Rickwood," remembered Matthews. He even proposed city high school teams adopt the names of Negro League clubs and wear throwback uniforms during games.

Dr. Hammonds left Birmingham in 1994 and eventually became a professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He died in September 2010. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Hammonds, who had the foresight and an understanding of the old

ballpark that few others could see.

Roughly a year or so before the first Rickwood Classic, the old press box on Dr. Hammonds' roof needed to be removed. Constructing a completely new press box proved impracticable for the Friends. However, Rickwood's first executive director, Chris Fullerton, came up with a great solution. He advocated constructing a gazebo press box, similar to the one on Rickwood's roof when the park opened in 1910. Today, Fullerton's gazebo still adorns the roof of the mother church of baseball.

Fullerton was another early unsung hero of Rickwood. His name is sometimes overlooked in the history of The Friends because his time associated with the organization was relatively short. However, the quality of that time was an exemplary example of production, accomplishment, and a can-do spirit of optimism to work through all kinds of adversity.

Perhaps the best person to describe Fullerton's importance to the early days of The Friends of Rickwood and the park is Coke Matthews. "Not too long before the first Rickwood Classic in 1996, Chris called Slaughter Hanson and offered to volunteer, to do anything, everything. He called and called. He drove over from Mississippi and begged," Matthews recalled.

Recounting Fullerton's unbridled enthusiasm for Rickwood and his desire to be part of the revitalization effort, Matthews continued, "he had just finished his master's thesis on the Birmingham Black Barons. He was all-in. Of course, he had no money, no place to live, [and] no sense whatsoever, but we loved him from day one. He volunteered 24/7 for months leading

up to the [first] Classic, [sometimes] sleeping in his car at Rickwood or wherever someone would take him in."

There was no denying the incredible dedication Fullerton felt toward the restoration of the old ballpark. However, there was a tragic unforeseen event that would cut short Fullerton's time with The Friends. Matthews explained, "After the stunning success of the Classic, we felt we had enough money to at least give him a small contract. However, he was killed in a car accident running 'one last errand' right before the second Rickwood Classic in 1997. It is still one of the saddest moments any of us have ever experienced."

Fullerton's master's thesis, which he authored at the University of Mississippi, eventually became one of the early books on the ballpark and its importance in the Negro Leagues. *Every Other Sunday: The Story of the Birmingham Black Barons* was completed and published after his death.

The gazebo press box, which sits on the roof as a result of his suggestion, will always honor his memory. The Friends gathered on the roof during a driving rainstorm when the bas-relief of Fullerton was dedicated and sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." The inscription on the plaque in the gazebo states, Chris Fullerton "inspired all who knew him with his passion for life, for music, baseball, and Rickwood, his own field of dreams."

[This story will continue in our next issue]

- Joe DeLeonard & Jeb Stewart

*"Chris Fullerton  
inspired all who knew  
him with his passion for  
life, for music, baseball,  
and Rickwood, his own  
field of dreams."*

## FROM THE RICKWOOD ARCHIVES



Photo Credit: *The Birmingham News*, 1953.

Several years ago, the Friends of Rickwood purchased over 2,000 vintage baseball photographs from *The Birmingham News*. The pictures are truly remarkable, and many have not been seen in decades. The Friends are excited to begin unveiling

many of the photographs in the newsletter as well as on our website and social media pages.

In the photo above, baseball fans will no doubt recognize Phil Rizzuto (L) and a bemused Yogi Berra (R). The duo starred for the New

York Yankees during an incredible five straight world championships, a streak which began in 1949. This photo was taken during breakfast at the Tutwiler Hotel as the Yankees were in town to face the Barons in a exhibition game at Rickwood Field on April 6, 1953.

*“The Friends are excited to begin unveiling many of the photographs in the newsletter as well as on our website and social media pages.”*



Photo Credit: *The Birmingham News*, 1953.

With Manager Casey Stengel looking on, the Bronx Bombers won the game over their Double-A affiliate, 6-2. The Yankees would go on to win the World Series in six games over the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The Barons finished in fourth place in the Southern Association with a 78-76 record. After defeating the pennant winning Memphis Chicks in the playoffs, the Barons lost to the Nashville Vols in five games in the SA Championship round.





Rickwood's infield was replaced in October and will be ready for baseball season in 2021.

*“On May 21, 1948  
Walt Dropo of the  
Barons blasted a home  
run that traveled 467  
feet...”*

## DID YOU KNOW?



On May 21, 1948 Walt Dropo of the Barons blasted a home run that traveled 467 feet, which helped defeat the Mobile Bears 3-1, and struck the original outfield wall of the ballpark. The spot was marked by an X shortly thereafter and a plaque stands there today.

**“DUSTING ’EM OFF”: FROM THE DESK OF  
THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Rickwood Field is not only the oldest professional baseball park in the United States, it is one of the few parks, which was around for *both* the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918 and the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020. With news of vaccines on the horizon, we remain hopeful that the Rickwood Classic will go forward in the spring.

Speaking of history, did you know Rickwood played a role in the Women’s Suffrage movement? On the fifth anniversary of the park’s opening on August 18, 1915, the Barons honored the movement with “Suffrage Day”. Women from Birmingham and Bessemer played an exhibition game before the Barons faced Chattanooga. Owner Rick Woodward and Barons Manager Carlton Molesworth wore equal suffrage banners in support of women’s voting rights. Reporter Edith Sparrow covered both games for *The Birmingham News*.

In November, Rickwood was selected to receive a historical marker honoring the ballpark’s role in Women’s Suffrage. Hopefully we’ll have more information in our next newsletter.

Rickwood has been closed since March, but restoration efforts have continued. The replacement of the conference room roof was completed over the summer, and we have received estimates to replace grandstand louvers and outfield billboards.

In October, we replaced the entire infield. This involved hiring a company to lower the field to a normal level and then replacing the grass, pitcher’s mound, and home plate. The Friends are happy to report the work has been completed and the playing field will be in fine shape for baseball next season. We are looking forward to the 24th Rickwood Classic.

Last year, the Barons and the Friends had planned to honor the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Negro Leagues. We expect this will take place in 2021. In addition, SABR’s prestigious Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference is scheduled for **July 29-31, 2021** at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Birmingham. For more information, visit <https://sabr.org/malloy>. We will have additional updates on the conference in

our March newsletter. However, Rickwood has already played an important role in honoring Negro League history in 2020.

In early October, a film crew came to the ballpark to shoot footage for use in a series about the Negro Leagues, which was shown during MLB playoff games aired on TBS and TNT. As it got close to darkness, the cameraman flew his drone into a cable out in center field knocking the camera off the drone. Later when we turned on the field lights for the night shots, the transformer over third base blew. Such are the challenges of an old ballpark!

Nevertheless, the four-part series, which is entitled “Field of Dreams ... Deferred” was a success and included some tremendous footage of our ballpark. The entire series can be watched by visiting: <https://tinyurl.com/y2vaskve>

Until next time, please stay safe until we can see you at the ballpark! Happy Holidays from the Friends of Rickwood!

- Clarence Watkins

*“On the fifth anniversary of the park’s opening on August 18, 1915, the Barons honored the movement with ‘Suffrage Day’.”*

## BECOME A FRIEND OF RICKWOOD

The Friends of Rickwood is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization, which was formed in 1992, and is dedicated to preserving America’s Oldest Ballpark. Anyone can become a Friend of Rickwood. **Thanks to all our members!**

We have four levels of membership for individuals and each level will receive a certificate, a window sticker, and 10% off Rickwood merchandise: (1) Level 1 is a “Little Leaguer” for a \$10 donation; (2) Level 2 is a “Rookie” for a

\$25 donation; (3) Level 3 is a “Veteran” for a \$50 donation (and also gets a patch); and (4) Level 4 is a “Gold Glover” for a \$100 donation (and also gets a Rickwood shirt).

To join, please visit <https://rickwood.com/membership/> or write us at:

**The Friends of Rickwood  
Rickwood Field  
1137 2nd Ave West  
Birmingham, AL 35204**





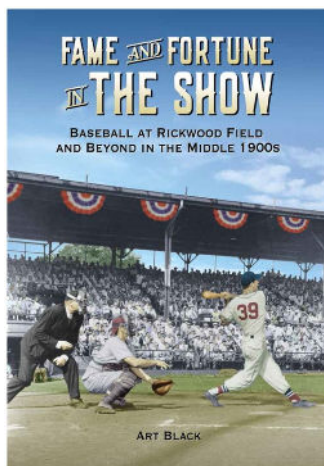
The Friends of  
Rickwood

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<https://www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood/>



## THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY: *Fame and Fortune in The Show*

Great books often inspire sequels. For whatever reason, it is exceedingly rare for any sequel to live up to the billing of the original. However, Art Black's *Fame and Fortune in The Show: Baseball at Rickwood Field and Beyond in the Middle 1900s* is the perfect follow up to *Showdown at Rickwood: Ray Caldwell, Dizzy Dean, and the Early Years of America's Oldest Ball Park*.

Once again, Black transports the reader to Birmingham's past, this time in the mid-1930s. He expertly weaves the story of the city, the nation, and the world, against the backdrop of baseball at Rickwood Field. Walter, a character who we met as a boy in *Showdown*, is now a newspaper reporter, who Black assigns the job of documenting all the details. Birmingham and the nation slowly move out of the Great Depression and begin rapidly hurtling toward the Second World War. After so much glory in the late 1920s through 1931, the Barons became a second-division club in the Southern Association for the rest of the decade. Owner A.H. "Rick" Woodward installed lights at Rickwood Field in 1936, which served as a reprieve in terms of his enjoyment of the game; however, he finally sold the club to the Cincinnati Reds in 1938.

By the mid-1940s, restaurateur Gus Jebeles purchased the Barons. Before the 1947 season, Jebeles made the most important decision in his tenure as owner. He hired Eddie Glennon to serve as the Barons general manager. Glennon had grown up in Philadelphia and his father was good friends with Athletics' owner Connie Mack. Glennon was the A's batboy in 1909 and became Mack's protege. Mack had helped Rick Woodward design Rickwood Field in 1910, and now Glennon created the blueprint for the franchise's success. As the Barons GM, Glennon proved to be the energetic answer to the team's problems and his story becomes the central narrative of *Fame and Fortune*. Glennon brought radio broadcasts of the games back to Birmingham's airwaves, renovated the ballpark, and his team set an attendance record at Rickwood in 1948 as an incredible 445,926 fans attended games. The indefatigable Glennon served as GM for 15 years, twice being named minor league executive of the year, as the Barons won Southern Association pennants in 1958 and 1959, SA playoff titles in 1948, 1951, and 1958, and Dixie Series championships in 1948, 1951, and 1958.

Black tells the story of Glennon's years as GM of the Barons through the players' eyes as he crafts thorough biographies of power hitters Walt Dropo, Gus Triandos, and Norm Zauchin, colorful journeyman hurler Bobo Newsom, the troubled Jimmy Piersall, and popular Joe Grzenda. The big-hearted Glennon finally left Birmingham after the Southern Association collapsed in 1961. Rickwood sat empty for two years. However, the Barons were soon reborn as a new member of the integrated Southern League in 1964, and Black retells the exciting pennant race that season at the end of the book. For his part, Eddie Glennon worked as a sales manager for the Atlanta Braves before dying suddenly in 1968 at the age of 67.

Black also recalls the glory of the Birmingham Black Barons, who dominated the Negro American League during the 1940s winning pennants in 1943, 1944, and 1948. Unfortunately, the Black Barons lost to the Homestead Grays in the Negro League World Series in each of those seasons. However, Black's tireless research uncovers interesting new information about Piper Davis, Artie Wilson, and Willie Mays, as well as legendary Satchel Paige, who played for the Black Barons in the late 1920s.

*Fame and Fortune* is a triple play. The book is wonderfully researched, well-written, and Black is an excellent storyteller. Hopefully, Black is planning to make the series into a trilogy.

- Jeb Stewart

