

RICKWOOD TALES

Rickwood Calendar 3/5/21 to 6/5/21:

- **March 6:** Rickwood Field SABR Chapter [Meeting](#) (11:30AM to 1:00 PM)
- **March 6, & 20-21; April 3-4, 14 & 20:** Miles College baseball games at Rickwood (See Miles' [website](#) for times)
- Birmingham High School baseball (See our [website](#) for dates & times)

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/>



NO RICKWOOD CLASSIC FOR 2021

The Birmingham Barons released the team's 2021 schedule a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, a date for the Rickwood Classic did not appear. Despite the best efforts of the Barons and MLB, which has taken over the operations of the minor leagues, the game cannot be played due to COVID-19. Games at Regions Field will be played

with the health and safety of the players, fans, and employees of the Barons as the utmost priority. The protocols in place made scheduling a single game at Rickwood Field an impossibility this season.

The Friends of Rickwood are hopeful that the Barons will

return for the 24th annual Rickwood Classic in 2022 once the pandemic has subsided. With the loss of the Classic, the Friends have again lost one of the largest revenue sources used to maintain and restore the ballpark. Please consider a donation today on our [website](#). Thank you!

WHO ARE THE FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD? PART 3: HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD! RICKWOOD FIELD GOES TO THE MOVIES

In the past installments on the origins of The Friends of Rickwood, some of the founding members of the group, Coke Matthews, Tom Cosby, and Bill Cather were very gracious in sharing memories of their exploits, trials, and ultimate successes in preserving Rickwood Field from the wrecking ball. Unsung heroes, Chris Fullerton and Dr. Cleveland Hammonds were also given long overdue credit for their efforts in making the organization a success. This installment focuses on some of the movies filmed at Rickwood.

Perhaps the first notice to the public there was a group of people attempting to restore Rickwood Field was an article by Nancy Bereckis, which appeared in the *Birmingham Post-Herald* on January 19, 1993. There was no mention of "The Friends of Rickwood", just the Rickwood Task Force. Terry Slaughter, Coke Matthews, and Tom Cosby were quoted

in the story and a photograph of them accompanied the piece. The stated goals for 1993 were ambitious and included: a new grandstand roof, plans to have historians document the facility so any major renovations would be as accurate as possible, along with the development of a master plan.

The story revealed a few ideas to make Rickwood viable. Some of the thoughts floated in the article became reality and others never made it to fruition, such as holding a pre-Olympic exhibition baseball tournament. The idea of filming parts of a baseball movie was not mentioned, however.

By February 25, 1993, staff writer David Knox of *The Birmingham News* reported that Rickwood had been named to the National Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service. The inclusion on the National Register was an enormous step in Rickwood's restoration and *Baseball America*

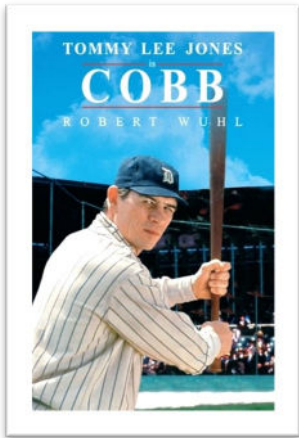
also reported the story. Rickwood and the band of people trying to save it, now had credibility, a bit of prestige, and perhaps more importantly, much-needed national publicity. This attention attracted the eyes of Hollywood.

Rickwood's first flirtation with Hollywood was a swing and a miss. When Penny Marshall's assistants scouted for locations to film "A League of Their Own" they visited Rickwood and decided against filming because of the park's dilapidated roof. However, the profile of the ballpark had been raised and it soon garnered the attention of Ron Shelton, the director of "Bull Durham". Shelton decided to film the baseball scenes at the park for his movie "Cobb", which starred Tommy Lee Jones as the title character with Roger Clemens and Jimmy Buffet as extras. Initially, the grandstand roof remained

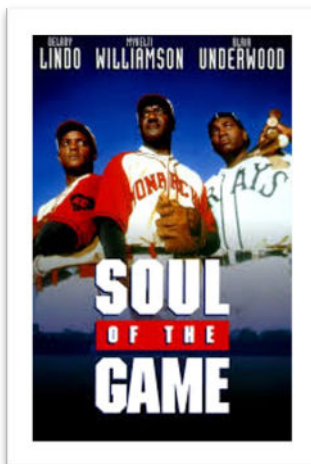
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HOLLYWOOD CALLS ON RICKWOOD

[Continued from Page 1]



“We couldn’t find a dry place to stand, and back then, a pack of dogs still lived at Rickwood. So, when we turned on the lights there were 4 or 5 dogs asleep around the pitcher’s mound.”



an impediment to filming. Coke Matthews recalled, “The new roof, louvers, and paint, were eventually part of what we promised Shelton to get the ‘Cobb’ deal done. He had flown an advance crew in on a Friday night, and with no notice and they asked to see the park. The two memories I have are: It was pouring down rain and gaping, rotted holes in the roof created a hundred waterfalls. We couldn’t find a dry place to stand, and back then, a pack of dogs still lived at Rickwood. So, when we turned on the lights there were 4 or 5 dogs asleep around the pitcher’s mound. It really scared the chewing tobacco out of all of us as we imagined the next day’s headlines. Fortunately, Shelton was an old ballplayer himself and he felt and saw the history of the place.”

Shelton’s vision for the ballpark created the right feel for the baseball scenes. The existing signs in the outfield were replaced with period signs including Ajax Tires, *The American Boy Magazine*, and Burma-Shave. The signs were designed by Ted Haigh, who also created signs for “A League of Their Own” and “The Natural.”

The excitement created in the local papers and the sudden national attention opened doors to businesses. This allowed the Friends to solicit financial help for needed repairs in order to make “Cobb” a reality. The grandstand roof was repaired because All South discounted roofing materials, and the Celotex Corporation generously donated general materials. Daniel Iron, Stringfellow Lumber, Brasfield & Gorrie, and Vulcan

Painters bent over backwards to help bring Rickwood back to life for the movie and the community. This included the construction of a left-centerfield scoreboard.

Notably, the early baseball films at Rickwood predate the Barons’ return to the park. “Cobb” was released in 1994 two years before the first Rickwood Classic. Although many baseball fans did not “discover” Rickwood until the Classics began, the movie projects at the ballpark gave Rickwood a financial shot in the arm at a critical time in the history of the Friends’ efforts to preserve the park.

Shortly after the release of “Cobb,” a commercial shoot for [Baby Ruth candy bars](#) was filmed at Rickwood. Things were certainly on the upswing for the Friends, which was remarkable after only two years as a fledgling organization. The publicity and hard work by the members culminated in successful fundraising efforts.

“Soul of the Game” was a 1996 film produced by HBO and directed by Kevin Rodney Sullivan. The film explored the story of the Negro Leagues shortly before the major leagues integrated in 1947. The movie featured Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Jackie Robinson as rumors swirled as to who would be the first black major leaguer. Many of the baseball scenes in the movie were filmed at Rickwood in 1995.

According to Matthews, his interactions with the producers of this movie were different. “They kept wanting to change Rickwood to make it look ‘authentic’. We had a hell of a time convincing them that when Mays, Paige, Gibson, et. al.,

played at Rickwood in the 40’s – this is what it looked like! No need for set decorations!” Once convinced, production ran smoothly.

However, the Friends allowed one significant change to Rickwood during the filming of “Soul of the Game,” which still exists. During Rickwood’s heyday, the press box was on the roof of the park. In an effort to replicate Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., the producers added a press box directly under the roof. Tom Cosby recalled, “It would have never occurred to us to change the placement of the press box from the roof to underneath the roof – it had never been there before. But we instantly liked the aesthetics. When we realized that being protected by the roof would add to its longevity and would reduce the risk of the press box one day crashing through the roof, we ‘permanent-ized’ the movie set version after filming.”

The new press box was much larger than the previous one, which made it more suitable for baseball. In fact, the first Rickwood Classic took place just two months after the release of “Soul of the Game.”

In May 2012, Hollywood returned to Rickwood with the filming of the Jackie Robinson biopic “42”. This movie will be featured in a future story in *Rickwood Tales*. However, the subject of our next installment is the Rickwood Classic, which began 25 years ago on June 12, 1996.

- Joe DeLeonard & Jeb Stewart

[This story will continue in our next issue]

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

There really is nothing like maintaining and restoring an old ballpark. Over the winter, Rickwood’s field lights started having trouble. An electrician came and the problems he identified with transformers and pole-mounted contactors were too numerous to name. Suffice it to say, we learned that the entire system will need a major overhaul to allow night games at the park in the future. The good news is that the lights are working for now.

In January, we got some good news. The Friends of Rickwood received a proposal from the American South Baseball League, which is a 12-16 team, professional, winter development baseball league entering its inaugural season in October of 2021.

The ASBL is planning to schedule a 60-game season and would like Rickwood Field to serve as one of its main ballparks. Stay tuned for updates about this exciting opportunity.

In our September newsletter, we expressed optimism that the Rickwood Classic would return this summer. With the release of the Barons’ schedule, we are sad to report that there will not be a Classic in 2021. However, with reports that case counts are dropping nationwide and the ramping-up of vaccine distribution, we are hopeful Rickwood will return to its place on the Barons’ schedule next year. The players are sure to enjoy playing on our new infield, which the Friends replaced in October!

Like the Classic, the 2021 Southern Association Conference would have been scheduled for March 6, but has been canceled due to COVID-19 protocols and will be re-scheduled. We will announce the new date for the SAC on our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).

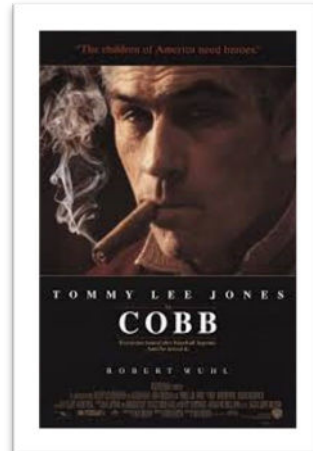
The winter is always a slow time at the park as we get ready for next season. The field was winterized in Octo-

ber. We took down the fencing along the infield and had a workday in early February where we scraped and painted the rails. Many thanks are owed to Ben Powell, Wayne Trammell, Drew Wojcik, Sophie Cosper, and Leigh and Kathy LaChine. The new fencing was installed in time for the start of the baseball season.

Miles College began its schedule on February 16; the Birmingham City Schools started games on February 23; and Randy Ferguson’s game to support research for blindness was held on February 27th. There are 18 games scheduled for March!

This will be my last column as Executive Director of the Friends of Rickwood. Gerald Watkins will be taking over as our interim director. I plan to stay involved with the Friends in preserving America’s Oldest Ballpark. Until we see you at Rickwood, stay safe!

- Clarence Watkins



“With the ballpark still closed for major events, including the 2021 Rickwood Classic, and most rental opportunities, we are counting more than ever on the support from our long-time donors.”

BECOME A FRIEND OF RICKWOOD



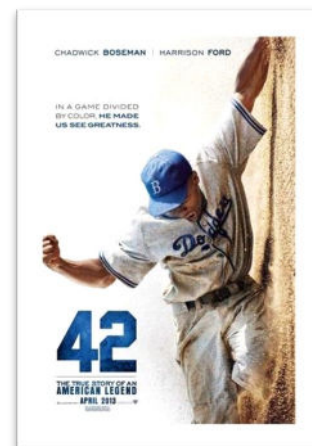
The Friends of Rickwood is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization, which was formed in 1992, and is dedicated to preserving America’s Oldest Ballpark. Anyone can become a Friend of Rickwood by making a donation to the Friends.

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 dona-

tion; (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).

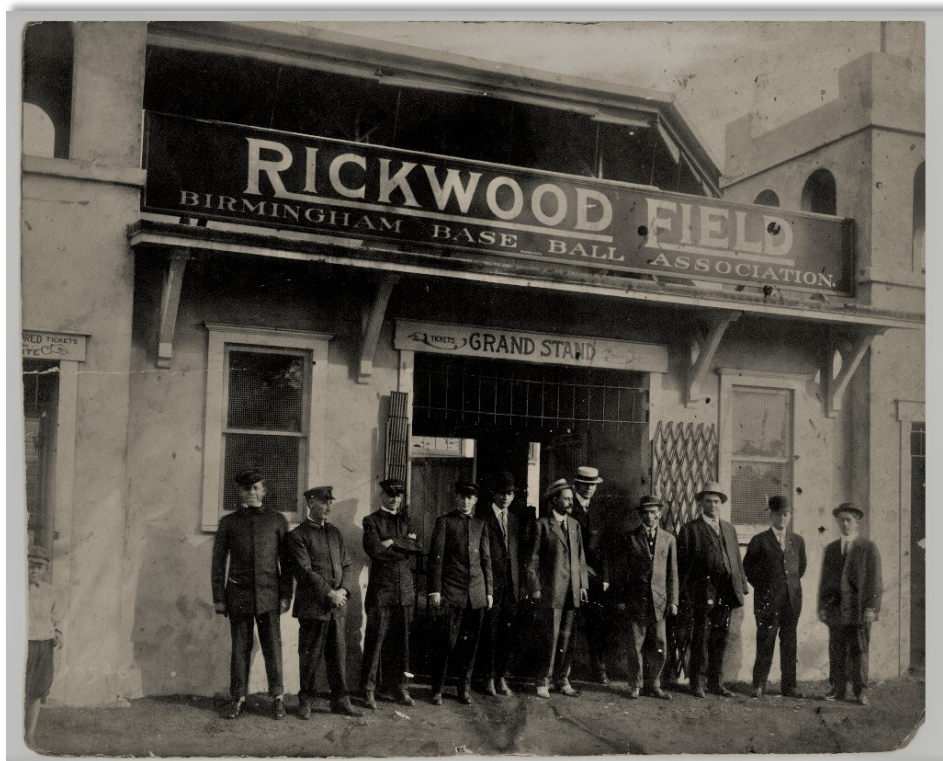
To donate, please visit <https://rickwood.com/donate-to-rickwood-field/> or write us at:

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



DID YOU KNOW?

“These are the two known images of the original front entrance to the ballpark, where fans would have passed through the gates to get into games.”



Even with the thousands of games played at Rickwood Field, we are still amazed whenever someone uncovers a photograph we have never seen. The picture on the left comes courtesy of Bob Cargo of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

On August 18, 1910, Rickwood Field opened to great fanfare as the first ballpark in the south with a concrete and steel grandstand. These are the two known images of the original front entrance to the ballpark, where fans would have passed through the gates to get into games. These pictures predate the construction of the iconic Mission-Style stucco arcade in 1928.

Not much is known about the photo on the left, except that the woman wearing white was named Tiny Blake. She was married to Sam Blake and the Blakes were lifelong friends of Bob Cargo's grandparents. If anyone has more information about this photo or has photos of the ballpark to share, please contact us through our [website](#) or using our [Facebook page](#). Thanks!

COMMUNITY SUPPORT: 2020 RECAP

CITY BUDGET SQUEEZE ADDS EMPHASIS TO PRIVATE DONATIONS

The pandemic wreaked havoc with our event and fundraising schedule, wiping out the Rickwood Classic, most of our park rentals, and even the annual Baseball Beer and Bengay gathering. This affected private contributions as well. When the City budget for the park was significantly reduced, donations took on even greater importance. With most of our events cancelled, our friends in the community had only three avenues for supporting our mission of keeping America's Oldest Baseball Park alive: Making a donation, becoming a Member, and/or purchasing Rickwood merchandise (or all three!). Thanks to our Rickwood faithful, the 2020 total exceeded \$20,000.

2020 Donors

\$1,000 or more

Doug Friedman
Coke Matthews
Allen Yielding

\$500 - \$999

Bill Cather
Mike Warren
Woody Webb

\$100 - \$499

Jenny Baker
Matt Bauman
Jeff Burkle
David Camp
Joe DeLeonard
Randy Ferguson
Donald Haw
Mark Hoos
Eamon Joyce
Laura Mattes

Roberta Mendonca
Paul Nagrodski
Mike Newton
Ben Powell
Jeb Stewart
Wayne Trammell
Jeff Underwood
Dan Weinrib
A. H. Woodward
Marie Woodward
Robert Woodward

2020 Members

Adam Trammell
Alan Brothers
Bill Chapman
Billy Sandford, Jr.
Brad Barnett
Brian Jackson
Carter Hawkins
Charlesy Trammell
Christine Fry
Dave Chase
David Salters
David Tew
Don Hines
Donald Seaman
Elbert Deon King
Frank McCray

Frederick C. Bush
Ian Andrew Kellogg-Clarke
Jennifer Crump
Jo Broadwater
John Alsobrook
John Longo
John Rundles
John Sturges
Josh Reeves
Josh Rosen
Kathy Burelson
Ken Samuelson
Kent Lupton
Matt Bauman
Matthew Henshon
Missy & Matt Burchart

Nancy H. Renz
Phillip Neuer
Rick Woodward
Robert Downing
Robert J. Rickwood
Robert Rogers
Roberta Mendonca
Rockwell Hoffman
Ron Macintosh
Sawyer Trone
Stephen David Boutwell
Terrell Dunn
Tom and Johanna Berres
Hunter Fikes
Victor Sloan

“With the ballpark still closed for major events, including the 2021 Rickwood Classic, and most rental opportunities, we are counting more than ever on the support from our long-time donors.”

Thank you to all of our supporters! With the ballpark still closed for major events, including the 2021 Rickwood Classic, and most rental opportunities, we are counting more than ever on the support from our long-time donors. Please go to www.rickwood.com to make a gift, become a Member, and/or purchase our logo merchandise today. Thanks again.

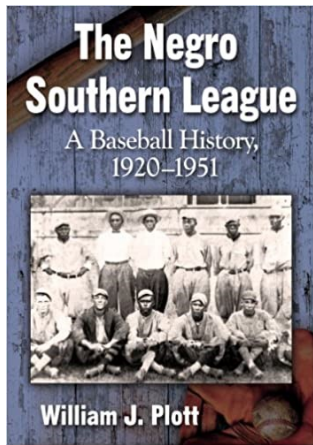
The Friends of
Rickwood

Rickwood Field
1137 2nd Ave W
Birmingham, AL 35204
205-999-5742

Email:
cwatkins5@charter.net



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



THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY: *The Negro Southern League*

The Negro Southern League has long been overshadowed by the Negro American and National Leagues when historians discuss Negro League baseball. This is partly true because the NAL and NNL included more northern franchises, which were located in larger cities. This meant they had more reliable newspaper coverage than their southern counterparts. Additionally, for most of its history, the NSL was considered a minor league by sportswriters who often derided NSL members' failure to provide timely game summaries and attendance figures needed for accurate reporting.

However, there was nothing minor about the players who made their living playing for NSL clubs. Five future Hall of Famers got their first taste of professional baseball in the NSL, including Leroy "Satchel" Paige (Chattanooga Black Lookouts, 1926-27), Willie Mays (Chattanooga Choo Chos, 1948), George "Mule" Suttles (Birmingham Black Barons, 1922-23), Norman "Turkey" Stearnes (Nashville Giants, 1920-21), and Hilton Smith (Monroe Monarchs, 1932). Other future Hall of Famers, such as Willie Wells and Willie Foster, made appearances in the NSL during their playing days.

In [*The Negro Southern League: A Baseball History, 1920-1951*](#), Bill Plott tells the colorful and often complicated history of the NSL from its origins until its quiet demise three decades later. He gives three dimensions to players such as Forrest "One-Wing" Maddox, who lost his left arm just below the shoulder in a childhood accident, but became a star pitcher, speedy outfielder, and great hitter for several teams during a decade in the NSL. Another, William H. "Cat" Mays, played for the Black Barons in 1935. Upon seeing the natural talent of his teenage son Willie, Cat regularly drove him to Chattanooga on weekends, where he played outfield and shortstop for the Choo Chos, possibly as early as 1947.

Thanks to his painstaking research, Plott uses available game reports, box scores, and line scores, to piece together the story of each season, including the standings and statistical leaders, as he documents the league's history in a well-organized, chronological fashion.

Plott also confirmed that the NSL had major league status in 1932 as it was the only Negro League that was able to successfully operate the entire year. That season, in particular, had more confusion than any other given the number of members and associate members of the NSL, as well as several independent teams who barnstormed with NSL clubs. Plott cuts through the confusion by cross-referencing a wide-variety of newspaper reports to provide an accurate account of the entire campaign.

Throughout most of its existence, the NSL followed a familiar path. The owners would meet in the winter to determine the clubs in the league and prepare a first-half schedule. Each season would begin with much fanfare in the spring, and a first-half champion would typically be crowned by early summer. In the second half, however, the league's stability would often devolve, as some clubs would disband, while others would be added, and most began to favor barnstorming contests rather than scheduling league games. Deciding a champion would often take a back seat to the scheduling of an all-star game after the season. However, the top NSL teams would sometimes meet in a playoff series to settle the title. More often, the champions would be announced in the pages of newspapers, which inevitably caused some disputes, but Plott was able to determine the league champion for most NSL seasons. His appendices are particularly useful in providing information such as rosters, no-hit games, playoff results, and a list of title winners.

The NSL came to an end largely because organized baseball integrated in 1947. African-American newspapers understandably shifted their focus to black players in the big leagues. Sportswriters and fans seemed to forget about leagues like the Negro Southern League. Fortunately, Bill Plott has immortalized the league for all of us. *Negro Southern League* is a great read.

- Jeb Stewart

