Arthur Lee (Artie) Wilson (1920-2010)

Arthur “Artie” Wilson was a professional baseball player who was a longtime Portland resident. Playing for the Pacific Coast League for most of his baseball career, he was the first African American player hired on an integrated team, the Oakland Oaks. “He was an impressive gentleman,” Reverend Leroy Haynes of the Allen Temple Christian Methodist Church remembered in 2011. “I saw in him a man of purpose, a man of destiny.”

Artie Wilson was born on October 28, 1920, in Springfield, Alabama, to Martha Wilson and Lonnie Hicks. He grew up in Tarrant City, Alabama, and worked for the American Cast Iron Pipe Company in Birmingham. In 1938, he married Tommie Glenn; the couple had one child, Jean Arthur.

While employed at the pipe company, Wilson joined the company’s baseball team. His talent earned him the position of shortstop with the Birmingham Black Barons, a Negro League team, from 1942 to 1948. During his last year with the Barons, the team competed in the Negro League World Series, and Wilson became the last professional baseball player to bat over 400 (.402). That year, Wilson mentored the young Willie Mays, who played for the team.

In 1949, both the New York Yankees and the Cleveland Indians wanted to sign Wilson. Commissioner Happy Chandler awarded his rights to the Yankees, who then sold his contract to the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League (PCL). Wilson often heard racial slurs and taunts. "People used to yell at you,” he told the *Oregonian* in April 1997. “They'd call you every name in the book." Billy Martin heard the slurs and invited Wilson to be his roommate when they were on the road. In 1950, the Oakland Oaks won the PCL championship, and Wilson won the PCL batting title with a .348 average; he led the league with 47 stolen bases.

In 1951, Wilson had a brief stay with the New York Giants, but he asked to be released from his contract when he knew he would not get the playing time he wanted. For the next sixteen years, he played for PCL teams—the Oakland Oaks (1949-1950; 1951), the Seattle Rainiers (1952-1954; 1956), the Sacramento Solons (1957), and the Portland Beavers (1955-1956; 1961)**.** By the time he retired in 1962, he had won six batting titles, had over 3,000 hits, and had maintained over a .338 batting average in more than 1,900 games.

In 1949, Wilson married Dorothy F. Daniels; they had two children, Zoe Wilson Price and Artie II Wilson. The family settled in Portland in 1955, and Wilson worked for nearly fifty years in the customer service department of Gary Worth Automotive. He was a member of the Gladstone/Oak Grove Kiwanis and served as a trustee, choir member, and Sunday school volunteer at the Allen Temple Christian Methodist Church.

In 1989, Wilson was inducted into the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame and was named to the Pacific Coast League Hall of Fame in 2003. In 1997, he and many other former Negro League players received $7,000 to $10,000 a year in an expanded pension plan. On May 13, 2007, the eighty-seven-year-old Wilson threw out the first pitch when the Yankees played the Mariners in Seattle. He died at the age of ninety on October 31, 2010.

Written by Greg P. Jacob

Further Reading:

Moff, Larry and Jonathan Kronstadt. *Crossing the Line: Black Major Leaguers 1947-1959.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996.

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