

During the spring of 1994, I trailed Michael Jordan during his Minor League Baseball adventure. Much more eventful was taking Negro Leaguer Lyman Bostock, Sr. to his sanctuary of memories. Since my 1994 visit, Rickwood has been restored and hosts the annual turn-back-the-clock "Rickwood Classic" featuring the Birmingham Barons.

April 17, 1994----

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. Another world away from the new dreams of Michael Jordan stands the oldest ballpark in America.

Construction on courtly Rickwood Field, on Birmingham's west side, was completed in August 1910, just 10 days after old Comiskey Park was dedicated.

Almost every baseball legend played at Rickwood, from Babe Ruth, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson and Ty Cobb to Satchel Paige, Reggie Jackson and Hank Aaron.

A few weeks ago director Ron Shelton ("Bull Durham," "White Men Can't Jump") filmed scenes for his fall release "Cobb," starring Tommy Lee Jones, at Rickwood.

Rickwood is a feisty old dame in her golden years. Though the Class AA Birmingham Barons left in 1987 for the affluent suburb of Hoover, her time is far from up.

Almost to underscore that point, the 33-foot center-field scoreboard is punctuated on top by a Bulova clock. The manual scoreboard has been renovated. The stadium's 9,100 seats have been scrubbed down. Period-piece outfield signs remain from the "Cobb" film.

And if you're lucky, you'll walk into Rickwood during a sweet spring afternoon and find ex-Pittsburgh Pirate Bob Veale tending to the mound.

A Birmingham native, Veale is the Rickwood groundskeeper a couple of times a week. Veale, now 58, began working at Rickwood at age 7.

Although Rickwood is currently used only for local high school games, Veale's proud of how he carefully sculpts the pitcher's mound.



That's the way it is 'round Rickwood. The Birmingham Black Barons were charter members of the Negro Southern League in 1920. They started playing at Rickwood in 1924, alternating weekends with the White Barons.

"When the White Barons played, I'd be in the concession stand selling drinks or whatever," recalled Veale, pointing to a distant crevice of the stadium. "You weren't

allowed to come out because of the social structure of the time. But when the Black Barons played, I'd be all over the place. Ball boy. Bat boy. I had a chance to get out on the field."

Lyman Bostock Sr. played first base for the Black Barons between 1940 and 1946. His son, Lyman Jr., starred for the Minnesota Twins and California Angels before he was shot to death in 1978 in Gary, Ind.

A native of Birmingham, Bostock, 76, still lives a few miles from Rickwood. To understand what the park really means, just talk Bostock into taking a drive to Rickwood.

"There used to be a lumber yard over there," Bostock said as the stadium came into view. He pointed to an empty lot behind the right-field fence. "We'd get up there on roofs and trees and try to see the game. I was 12 years old. Oh, I have so many memories. I got a hit off of Satchel Paige the first time I saw him. Right here. He threw what we called aspirin tablets. He could throw the ball wherever he wanted. Underhand. Sidearm. Overhand. All the same pitch."

Rickwood depicts a time when the stars fell on Alabama. You sense their spirit in the golden infield dust.

While still a high school student in nearby Fairfield, Ala., Willie Mays took time off from classes in 1948 to lead the Black Barons to the Negro American League championship at Rickwood.

One time Jimmy Piersall got ejected from a game and retreated to the Rickwood roof, where he squirted the crowd with a water pistol until he could be coaxed down.

Bostock walked through the dark, damp tunnel that leads to the sun-drenched field. Veale had just finished manicuring the mound. Suddenly there was a twinkle in Bostock's eyes.

He was young again.

"We need someone playing here," he told Veale. "It's hard to get people to Hoover. That's pitiful. This is a real ballpark; it's not a plaything. This is something."



Lyman Bostock Sr.

Indeed, Rickwood has some impressive dates in her future. The International Olympic Committee is considering holding preliminary tournament games at Rickwood because of its history, availability and close proximity to Atlanta. And the Cuban national team is itching to play in the venerable ballpark.

Dr. Billy T. Marsh is athletic director for Birmingham city schools and oversees daily operations at Rickwood. "You know how they say kids don't have a sense of baseball history today?" Marsh asked. "Not here. We had a team come in from the county, and they all brought their camcorders and cameras."

A tattered 1947 Sporting News baseball guide sat on Marsh's desk. Below his office, sleeping in the sun near first base, was the unofficial Rickwood mascot, a mangy 12-year-old Doberman the Rickwood staff calls "Dog." Simple and direct.

That's the way it is 'round Rickwood.

After napping at first, Dog lazily got up, walked directly to second base, stretched out and closed her eyes. It was like watching Hector Villanueva move.

"Dog has been here as long as we have, and as far as we know, she never goes outside the park," Marsh said. "Whenever a ballgame starts, she'll hide. We won't see her until the game is over."

Dog is fighting uterine tumors, and Marsh, Veale and other friends of Rickwood have pooled their money for treatment. "We're trying to preserve her, too," Marsh said.

Built in seven months for \$75,000, Rickwood got its name from Barons owner A.H. "Rick" Woodward, who also owned a Birmingham iron company. Woodward used Forbes Field in Pittsburgh as a model for his park and even imported Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics to lay the field out.

Woodward and Cobb were hunting buddies - for a while. "Woodward had a hunting preserve down in South Alabama," Marsh said. "He invited Cobb there. Cobb shot more than the limit that Mr. Woodward established. They got into an argument. Cobb told him who he was. Well, Woodward told him who he was. And (Cobb) wasn't welcome anymore."

Rickwood had a resurgence in 1967 when Birmingham native Charlie O. Finley, a former Rickwood batboy, brought the Oakland A's Class AA affiliate to town. Reggie Jackson, Joe Rudi and Rollie Fingers all cut their teeth at Rickwood. Birmingham became a White Sox affiliate in 1986.

The Barons left Rickwood in 1987 because the city of Birmingham couldn't match the financial enticements of Hoover, a 25-minute drive from the historic ballpark. Hoover Metropolitan Stadium is a state-of-the-art, \$14 million steel-and-concrete park in the middle of nowhere.

Yet an exodus to the suburbs is common throughout minor league baseball. Tonight the Barons launch a three-game series at another new stadium in Zebulon, N.C., about 20 miles east of Raleigh.

"If a kid from this neighborhood doesn't have transportation, he's not going to see the Barons," Marsh said. "It's that simple."

Lorenzo "Piper" Davis, 76, managed Willie Mays on the Black Barons. His daughter, Fay, recalled the glory of Rickwood as if it were yesterday.

"I never got to go to the ballpark with Dad," she said. "I always had to go with the ladies. But one time I begged and begged and I got to ride the bus. After the game the bus would go downtown. People would actually line the streets from Rickwood (to) maybe halfway downtown. They'd just wave at the bus, wave at the players. And I wanted to wave, too."

Jack McDowell started the last game for the Barons at Rickwood Field on Sept. 9, 1987. They lost 5-4 to Charlotte in the second game of the Southern League

Championship Series. A crowd of 2,392 attended the game. Around these parts, the world will never quite be the same.