

County baseball sports rich tradition

Self-appointed historian Joe ‘Boy’ Willis digs deep to compile accurate records

BY J.J. SMITH
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HARKERS ISLAND — “Baseball, almost alone among our sports, traffics unashamedly and gloriously in nostalgia, for only baseball understands time and treats it with respect. The history of other sports seems to begin anew with each generation, but baseball, that wondrous myth of 20th century America, gets passed on like an inheritance.”

Those words, spoken by author Stanley Cohen, may as well be Joe “Boy” Willis’ mantra.

The Harkers Island native is exhaustively documenting the history of Carteret County baseball before it is lost to future

generations.

“The reason I’m doing this is because I’ve had friends that have died, and their stories died with them,” said Willis. “We are losing so many stories with these gentlemen passing away. There was no written documentation of the past games and leagues, and today we have detailed data on games, statistics, which players played on which teams, etc.”

“We now have the ability to read the stories of every player that played in these leagues and can pass them down through the generations.”

Willis told some of those stories last Saturday during the reunion of 45 past Carteret County baseball coaches at the Core Sound



Joe “Boy” Willis gives a presentation on Carteret County baseball history last Saturday at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum. Willis has collected 6,500 pages of information on past teams, players, coaches and games. (J.J. Smith photo)

Waterfowl Museum.

He regaled the crowd with tales of some of the best players to ever play in the county. Men such as Morehead City’s James Webb, Beaufort’s Jack Gardner and Davis’ Elvin Davis, all who played in the 1940s.

He also spoke of the great 1953 Atlantic team that won the county championship.

“That team featured some of the best talent this county has ever seen,” said Willis. “John Hamilton, who was a great hitter and catcher, Don Willis, a great pitcher, Gary Morris, Jack Rose, Buddy Willis, Johnny Willis and Joe Willis. There were four or five players on that team that could have gone pro, but they didn’t want to leave Atlantic. As funny as that sounds, there has probably been 40 to 50 guys over the years that have chosen Carteret County over profession-

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Atlantic won the 1953 Carteret County League Championship by defeating Newport in a three-game playoff. Members of the team were, left to right: front row, Joe Willis, Roy McKamey, Grover Willis (manager), Harry Gerock, Myron Willis (batboy), Julian Willis, Braxton Taylor; back row, Bryan Salter (scorekeeper), John Hamilton, Buddy Willis, Gary Morris, Johnny Willis, Rodney Taylor, Rodney Smith, Don Willis and Jack Rose. (Photo courtesy of *The Mailboat*)

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al baseball.”

Over the past four years, Willis has collected nearly 6,500 pages of information, filling five books, that thoroughly covers the Tidewater League (1947-1951), Salt Water League (1952-1957), East Coast League (1960-1962), Seashore League (1974-1977) and a number of high schools from the 1940s through 1971.

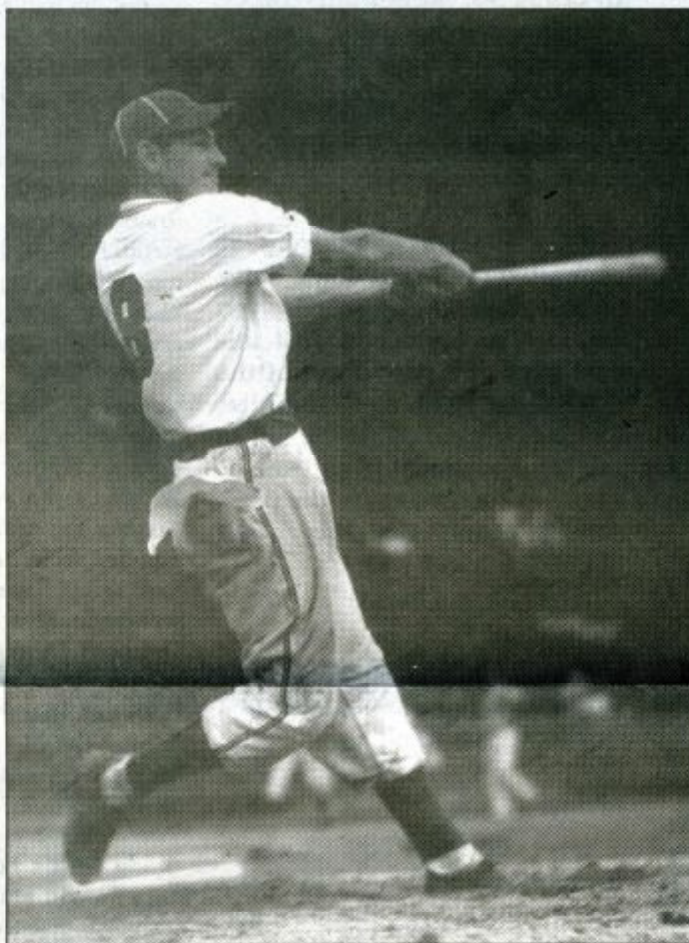
“I’d say we’ve barely scratched the surface,” said Willis. “In reality, we are just getting the word out. It’s our goal to collect all the information on all the high schools, junior leagues, senior leagues, pony leagues and little leagues from Newport to Cedar Island all the way back to the 1930s.”

Willis, who has made over 400 telephone calls and videotaped 70 people to collect the seemingly unlimited information, has received 50 telephone calls from those wishing to tell their stories or provide stats or photos since the Saturday event.

The baseball reunion on Saturday was the third such event that Willis has organized, with the first coming in 2005 and the other following in 2006.

However, the focus on coaches at this year’s reunion holds a special place in Willis’ heart.

“This is just a great day to celebrate our coaches from the past 40 or 50 years,” said Willis. “We want to thank them through their players and teams and give back to them and let them know that we recognize the



Jack Gardner, pictured here sending a ball deep into the outfield, was considered one of the best hitters in Carteret County in the late 1940s. Along with Joe Hill and Footsy Palmer, he made up the “Murderers Row” for the 1948 Morehead City Tidewater League team.

work – the time, money, energy, resources – they’ve put into the lives of young people.”

One of the coaches on hand at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum was Fred Bartholomew, who invested in the life of Willis years ago.

“I’ll tell you the truth, I don’t know if I would have even finished school without baseball and Fred Bartholomew,” said Willis. “There’s really no telling what would have become of me without those two things in my young life.”

Willis went on to earn a baseball scholarship at Chowan College, and later played at Atlantic Christian College before returning home to teach at East Carteret. There he led the 1970 East Carteret baseball team, with standouts Paul Damren and Dallas Wayne Arthur, to a co-championship. He has since enjoyed a highly successful business career.

“The lessons I learned on the baseball field at a young age, I took into the field of business,” said Willis. “I went into the computer business and set up three different companies using the same techniques that I learned in baseball.

“In fact, I may not have taken on a project of this magnitude, but like I said, I received good training from my coach Fred Bartholomew, who taught me that I can do anything.”

Bartholomew is one of 163 coaches that Willis has identified among those in Carteret County baseball history.

The next step is to raise money to put all of the information on the Web site at www.carteretcountybaseball.com.

Willis, who now resides in Atlanta, Ga., also hopes to develop a Carteret County Baseball Hall of Fame in the future.

“We are in the discovery process at the moment,” he said. “We are looking at setting up boards and committees and such.”

With Willis at the helm, the baseball history of Carteret County will probably never be forgotten.