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Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

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From the CSHOF Archives

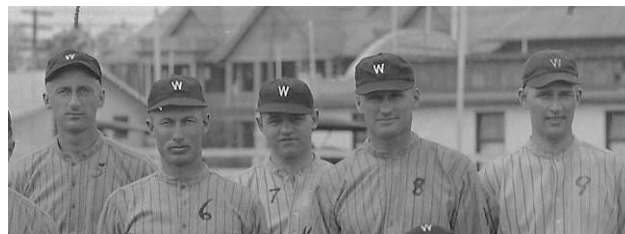
Leon Carlson, Local Man Who Died Yesterday, Ran To Mound To Face Ruth – Fanned Him

By Frank Hyde, *The Post-Journal*, September 16, 1961

Leon Carlson, who died yesterday, once actually ran to the mound to get a crack at Babe Ruth – and then struck him out!

The affable, angular Carlson laughingly told the story many times during his mellowing years. “What an experience... what a greenhorn I was,” he added without rancor.

Actually, Carlson was no “greenhorn.” He was a more than passable country pitcher who worked his way up through the minors to Washington in 1920. But he couldn’t field his position and he readily admitted many times “that took me out.” So he was up “for a cup of coffee” as they say around the baseball firesides.



Leon Carlson, far right (9), at 1920 Washington Senators spring training at Tampa. Fellow Jamestownner Eric “Swat” Erickson, far left (5), was also on the squad. Next to Carlson is Baseball Hall of Famer Walter “Big Train” Johnson (8). Beside Erickson is Baseball Hall of Famer Sam Rice (6).

But few men of brief major league tenure could claim equal distinction. Carlson pitched relief in just three games, but in two of them the first man he faced was Babe Ruth!

Washington was playing the Yankees in the Polo Grounds the first time Mr. Carlson and Mr. Ruth tangled. Walter Johnson was on the mound for the Nats. It was an unusual day in many respects, for this was one of the few times The Big Train was getting his lumps.

“So they called me in from the bullpen for my first major league appearance,” Carlson related to the writer three decades later. “I was so scared I started to walk real slow, then some bull-voiced fan in the upper tier yelled, ‘Run, you jughead, run!’ So what did I do? Why I ran, much to the delight of the crowd. Sam Rice came over, grabbed me by the arm and said, ‘To h... with them, walk in.’”

So Leon walked in, then got his second shock. The bags were loaded and at bat was the mightiest of them all, the Bambino himself.



Among the teams Leon Carlson played on while a youth in Jamestown was this squad known as the South Sides. Back row: Joe Wilkerson, George Sigular, Harry Hultquist, LEON CARLSON, Allan Reid, Viking Carson, Carl Ostrom. Front row: Dixon (or Dickson), Floyd Wall, Harry Carlson, Fred Chinstrom

“Brick Owens was umpiring behind the plate,” Leon related. “He walked out, looked at me intently for a moment and asked, ‘Scared?’ ‘Brick,’ I replied, ‘I’m so scared I don’t even know where the ball is going.’ Owens laughed and said as he turned away, ‘You’re to be commended for admitting it.’”

Val Picinich was catching for Washington. He also came out. ‘Know who that is up there?’ he queried, nonchalantly letting loose a stream of tobacco juice. Leon admitted he knew right well, and then “went on shaking” as he put it. ‘Well keep it down and away from him - make him hit it into the ground – don’t try to strike him out,’ he advised.

Ruth swung and missed, took a ball, swung and missed, then let one go by. “Str-r-r-ike,” roared Owens. The Babe knew it. He didn’t say a word, just turned and mince-stepped his way back to the dugout.

But that isn’t the end of the story. “The buttons were bursting right off my shirt when I went into the dugout,” he related. ‘So that’s Babe Ruth?’ I asked. ‘Yeah stick around long enough and you’ll get acquainted,’ someone drawled. “And I got acquainted all right – two days later. Believe it or not, I came in to face Ruth again under almost the same conditions except the bases were not loaded. I gave him one low and outside as Picinich had advised before. Ruth let it go, dug in a little, and waited. I came in with another one, a little higher. Ruth swung. It was gone. That was the longest homer I ever saw.”

Carlson, who did his baseball reminiscing in later years over the president’s desk at Laco Roofing and Asbestos Company in Falconer, pitched the first game for Jamestown in the old Interstate League. The late Billy Webb was manager and Leon beat Warren. He had a no-hitter for seven and a third innings.

In later years he pitched for Hagerstown in the Blue Ridge League, Rockford in the Three-I, Mississippi City in the Delta Loop and Springfield in the Eastern before going up to Washington.

“One day,” Carlson explained, “an old-timer called me aside and said, ‘Son, if you don’t learn to get down off that mound and handle ground balls you might as well quit.’ I never could master it, so I quit. In later years, after he died, I recalled that old-timer as a real nice guy who gave me some good advice.”

(CSHOF Note: Carlson pitched in 3 games for the Senators in 1920. He successfully fielded both ground balls that were hit to him, earning two assists and no errors.)

And Jamestown people who knew Leon Carlson will recall him, too, and feel another “real nice guy” has passed on.

CSHOF Postscript

In addition to Leon Carlson, age 25, and Swat Erickson, age 28, another Jamestown was on the spring training roster of the Washington Senators in 1920. Otto "Dutch" Greenae, 24, a promising young catcher, was invited to the Senators camp on the recommendation of Erickson. According to a newspaper account from April 2, 1920, Greenae "failed to get in shape and did not come up to expectations" and was given his outright release when Washington manager Clark Griffith acquired Ricardo Torres. Dutch Greenae was expected to return to Chautauqua County to "play for the Portland-Brocton combination."

In fact, Greenae caught for Portsmouth (VA) in 1920 and Richmond (1921) in the Virginia League. In 1923 he was at Newark (NJ) in the International League. Salisbury (MD) of the Eastern Shore and Baltimore of the International were his teams in '24. Shamokin (PA) of the New York - Penn League had him in 1925 and he closed his pro career in 1926 splitting time between Albany (GA) and St. Augustine (FL) of the Southeastern League. In six seasons of minor league ball he appeared in 368 games and hit .256 in 1038 at bats.

Greenae was born in Renovo, PA, 28 miles northwest of Lock Haven, in Clinton County, on May 1, 1895 and died in Cassadaga, NY, January 14, 1937 at the young age of 41. The CSHOF will sincerely appreciate any other information about Mr. Greenae.



Otto "Dutch" Greenae is standing third from left in the back row with Swat and Leon at the 1920 Washington Senators spring training site in Tampa, Florida.