

# The Celoron Acme Colored Giants

*Greg Peterson*

**M**ore than sixty black players were in the recognized minor leagues before the turn of the last century. Two of them—Moses Fleetwood Walker and his brother Weldy—also appeared in 1884 with Toledo in the American Association, which was a major circuit then.

The color line against blacks began lowering in the late 1880s and was complete after the 1898 season, with rare, and usually brief exceptions. (See Seamus Kearney's article elsewhere in this issue.) It would not be lifted until the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson in October, 1945, to play the '46 season with their Montreal Royals farm club in the International League.

This is the story of the Celoron Acme Colored Giants in the Iron and Oil League of 1898. The Iron and Oil had teams in six small towns in southwestern New York and northwestern Pennsylvania. The black team represented Celoron, a village on Chautauqua Lake adjacent to Jamestown, the biggest city in southwestern New York. Celoron's chief attraction was a large amusement park which billed itself as "The World's Greatest Pleasure Resort." Among its pleasures were thrilling rides, fireworks, balloon ascensions, a zoo, swimming matches pitting a horse against a man, and the Celoron Acme Colored Giants.

The Colored Giants were organized by a white man named Harry Curtis. Curtis promised to "have the strongest colored club in America, if we are the young-

est." His 14-man roster was as follows:

|                 |    |                  |
|-----------------|----|------------------|
| Al Baxter       | LF | Boston, MA       |
| Billy Booker    | 2B | Paterson, NJ     |
| Eddie Day       | SS | Reading, PA      |
| George Edsall   | RF | Norristown, PA   |
| William Kelly   | 3B | Chambersburg, PA |
| John Mickey     | P  | Lexington, VA    |
| William Payne   | CF | Allegheny, PA.   |
| John Southall   | C  | McKeesport, PA   |
| Walter Williams | P  | Portsmouth, VA   |
| Edward Wilson   | P  | Bellevue, PA     |
| Clarence Wright | 1B | Olean, NY        |
| Fred Collins    | P  | Bradford, PA     |
| ? Carter        | ?  | Middletown, CT   |
| ? Jupiter       | P  | Boston, MA       |

The Giants opened the season in Warren, Pennsylvania, on May 12, 1898 and promptly lost three straight games. Warren won the first, 12-8, in a game that was described as first-class except for one inning. In that inning the Celoron pitcher, John Mickey, became wild, which, together with a costly error or two, netted the Warren players eight runs. There were about 500 people in attendance. The team was described by the Warren correspondent of *Sporting Life* as having been well-received:

The Celorons drove home from here Saturday night, and leaving town they enlivened the air with singing, and they can sing as well as they can play. The Negroes are a jolly, gentlemanly crowd and an honor to the league.

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*Greg Peterson is an attorney in Jamestown, New York and also serves as chairman of the executive committee of the Class A (short-season) Jamestown Jammers (a Tigers affiliate) in the New York-Penn League.*

After their first road trip, the Colored Giants were scheduled to host Bradford. The team stayed at a boarding house in Celoron. Prior to the first home game, the manager, Harry Curtis, suggested that the two clubs be driven about the City of Jamestown on a streetcar as an advertisement for the opener. George Maltby, president of both the Street Railroad Company and the Celoron Amusement Company, agreed, and the two teams toured the city promoting the game. Unfortunately, management forgot to provide return tickets to Celoron for the Bradford players. So while the Acme Giants were driven home, the Bradford players had to hike the four miles from the streetcar barns to Celoron. According to the *Jamestown Journal*, the Bradford club thought itself "badly used." Miffed but apparently not exhausted, Bradford spoiled Celoron's home opener by winning, 15-4.

The Spanish-American War was at its height, and the headline writer for the *Jamestown Journal*, overcome by the war fever, headed the story of the game:

CELORON BOMBARDED, THEIR FLEET SUNK, AND  
THEIR FORTS DEMOLISHED.

A discouraging beginning of the season. It was not an enthusiastic opening of the baseball season: in fact, it rather fell flat. The crowd was a fairly good one...they were prepared to shout, but it was impossible to get up any enthusiasm for the team that represents Celoron...It did not seem like a home team because all members were strangers. It cannot be said that they put up a strong or fast game, however, in any respect, and they failed entirely to meet the expectations of Jamestowners.

The Celoron nine wore yellow uniforms. The final headline stated: YELLOW SUITS, YELLOW GAME.

The Acme Giants were finally successful on their fifth try. They beat Bradford, 7-6, and according to the *Journal*:

won praise and admiration from the attendants at the ball game...The strength of the Celoron players lies largely in their batting and while this does not appeal strongly to many baseball enthusiasts, it certainly is an attractive feature to the average attendant at ball games.

As the fortunes of the baseball team floundered, so did the degree of coverage by the *Journal*. The season commenced with excitement and detailed coverage including complete box scores. With mounting losses, the coverage was reduced to line scores and then mere notes in the paper, if anything. The *Journal* often com-

plained about the lack of consistency in timing and scheduling:

The manager makes no effort, apparently, to let the people know when a ball game is to be expected. Many people in the city would be present had they known that a game was scheduled.

The team, in the early going, seemed to play good ball with the exception of an inning or two each game. The *Journal* reported:

The game was a very satisfactory one with the exception of one inning when the colored Giants lost their head and permitted the visitors to score seven runs. In fact, the Giants always put up a strong game with the exception of the unfortunate habit of going to pieces at critical times.

One of the best games of the season for Celoron occurred on Memorial Day the Celoron Park was formally opened. The *Journal* stated:

The Celoron Acme Giants and the Warren team played a game of baseball...It was an old time enthusiastic baseball crowd and the enthusiasm of the crowd must have been communicated to the Celoron team, for they wrested victory from the Warren team after playing the best game of baseball that has been seen here this season.

The Acme Giants won only five of their first 16 games. The losses continued to mount and Manager Harry Curtis told the *Journal* that he had "secured at a heavy expense, Ransom Pringle, of Savannah, who, he claims, is the best colored ball player in the United States."

At the time Celoron was 6-17. Pringle turned out to be no savior. Neither did an outfielder and lefthanded hitter named Maybie, who was added later.

By early July, the Giants were planted solidly in the league's cellar and they were losing money; the prospects were dim for improvement on the field or in the box office. On July 5, the Giants lost to Warren, 12-4. The next day they defeated a team of Jamestown amateurs, 7-5. On the sixth, an article appeared in the *Jamestown Journal* as follows:

NEW BASEBALL CLUB

Celoron Giants Disband—a Strong Club Secured to Take Their Place.

The Celoron colored giants, connected with the Oil and Iron baseball league, dis-

banded Thursday. Bad playing and consequent poor patronage was the cause. George E. Maltby of the Celoron Amusement Company informs the Journal that he has engaged a team selected by C. W. Toboldt, who is to be the manager, to take the colored team's place for the balance of the league season.

The new club is selected from among the best players of the Southern League, which recently disbanded. It is composed of white men and was recruited at Louisville. It will be here to play its initial games in this league next week.

In order to fill the club dates Mr. Maltby organized a local club to go to Olean today to play the club of that city the balance of this week.

With a strong club here, as promised, Celoron will soon recover its lost ground and the patronage of the games will increase at once.

The Acme Giants final record in the Iron and Oil League was 10-37 for a .213 percentage. None of the ballplayers on the Celoron Acme Colored Giants ever appeared later with a major black team.

As for Harry Curtis, he was only temporarily discouraged. He wrote to *Sporting Life*: "I have just

returned from Jamestown, New York where I was located with my Acme Colored Giants in the Iron and Oil League wherein (despite all reports to the contrary) we were third at the time we quit." Evidently responding to complaints from a couple of players that they had not been paid, Curtis lamented, "I, myself, am out of pocket over \$600.00." But he bounced back like the born promoter he was: "I have a complete outfit and I am prepared to furnish a first class team, either colored or white, to play independent ball, or will go in any league." History indicates there were no takers.

The white team that replaced the Colored Giants in Celoron lasted not much more than a week before disbanding because of dismal gate receipts. It was a dreary postscript to the last season in which a number blacks played in the minor leagues. For forty-eight years, segregation on the professional baseball scene would be the norm.

#### Sources:

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*Only the Ball was White*, by Robert W. Peterson, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. (1970).

*Jamestown N.Y. Journal*, May 12, 1898–July 15, 1898.



### Weatherproof Ball Parks Atop Skyscrapers Foreseen by Mack, Peering Into Game's Future

*BOSTON, April 21—Connie Mack, looking more than ever like a kindly old scout master rather than leader of a world champion baseball troupe, looked into baseball's past and future today and found every prospect pleasing.*

*Then he turned whimsical and projected from his fancy a picture of the game of the future, with the ball parks atop skyscrapers, screened from the elements and reached by elevators.*

*"Baseball," said Mack, "is an imperishable part of our national life. It has thrived and will continue to thrive sympathetically with the expansion of our cities.*

*"Isn't this present prosperity apt to be the peak of popular interest toward the game?" he was asked.*

*"No. Twenty years ago they said the same thing. We had wooden stands and average crowds of 5,000. Double decked stadiums were unthought of. A crowd like that at the Yankee Stadium a week ago when we played to 80,000 was beyond the wildest dream.*

*"Why not look ahead as well as back? Perhaps toward the time when there will be baseball fields on the top of immense skyscrapers with perhaps a weatherproof dome to remove the rain hazard?"*

*"Thirty-one years ago when the American League was formed they told me I had a white elephant on my hands. That white elephant has become our mascot, and we wear it on our uniform coats.*

*"Baseball has become the greatest mass entertainment in the world from the day of its humble origin in a cow pasture at Cooperstown. It has kept faith with the public, maintaining its old admission price for thirty years while other forms of entertainment have doubled and trebled in price. And it probably never will change."*

—The New York Times, April 28, 1931, submitted by Joe Murphy