

Monte Irvin (MI)

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interviewer Harvey Frommer

This is an interview with Monte Irvin for the book Growing Up with Baseball by Harvey Frommer. It's an oral history. And, I'll us, Monte Irvin whatever you give me, unless you tell me that it's off the record. But, it's a non-controversial book, so there's no problem there.

MI- Yeah.

OK, we're going to zoom back to your growing up years. For the tape, where did you grow up and when?

MI- I was born in Haleburg, Alabama but when I was seven years old my family moved to Orange, New Jersey so I lived in Orange, New Jersey and grew up there from 1927 until 1984. At that time I retired from the Baseball Commissioner's office and moved to Florida. I've been here in Florida for fifteen years, so I've been retired for fifteen years.

How do you spell Haleberg?

MI- H-A-L-E-B-U-R-G.

Do you have any memories of baseball at Haleburg?

MI- No, just a few memories. I remember on Saturday when the farmers finished working they would gather in the field and draw out a diamond, you know, mark off a diamond and play baseball. And then after the game, they of course, would serve lemonade and hamburgers, barbequed chicken and so on. That part I remember.

And you as a kid, I guess?

MI- Yeah.

And you would just be watching them.

MI- Yeah, I enjoyed watching them.

What is your earliest memory of playing baseball?

MI- It was in grade school. After I went to school in Orange. My first competition, or first team that I joined was a soccer team. Of course, our coach, he coached soccer and baseball and basketball. I played soccer so well that he asked me to come out for the baseball team in the spring. Which I did and I liked it very much and I was a pitcher on the team. I was in about the fifth grade or the sixth grade at that time.

Do you remember any thing in terms of a glove or a ball or the uniform? Did you have anything like that? The name of the team?

MI- Well, I played for the school. I can't remember whether we had uniforms or not. I don't think we did, being in grade school. I don't think we had uniforms. Of course, we did have bats and balls. You know, simply because I could throw so hard, I had a real good arm, I was a pitcher. If we had a real tough game, I would pitch that game. Other times when we played, we had another pitcher and I played shortstop, so I grew up as a pitcher first and a shortstop second. And later on, of course, I was a catcher. But, after I graduated from grade school and got into high school, there was a local team called the Orange Triangles, a very popular athletic club there in Orange, called the Orange Triangles. And they had some really great athletes, guys who participated, have gone to school and did not go to college but still were in the area working and so on and we played, you know, games that started at the central playground would start at six o'clock. And just about everybody, you know, participated, and when I say participated, they attended the game. What we'd do, of course, in order to get money for balls and bats and pay the umpire, we passed the hat. We'd always do very well. You know, make enough money so that we didn't have to go into our own pocket. Now, the audience, of course, at that time was some blacks, but mostly were white people. They really enjoyed the game. They would regularly attend.

The participants were black, or they were integrated?

MI- No, the team was black, all black, but we'd play white team, white local teams. Essex County teams. Of course, they don't do that any more but the area is know for its great athletes. And the fellow who taught me how to play and motivated me, he just dies last year. He was 90 years old. He was one of the greatest athletes of New Jersey ever produced. His name was Jesse Miles.

Could you characterize him a little bit as somebody who was a mentor for you?

MI- Yeah, he was a local hero. Four sport, all-stater. You know, basketball, football, baseball, and track. He was all state. It didn't happen again until I came along. He graduated around 1928 and then I came along. But he was the kind of a guy who was a capable, intelligent, a motivator and had a knack of getting along with just about everybody.

He was your baseball coach?

MI- The manager.

The manager.

MI- Last year he passed away at 90 years old.

Can you spell his last name?

MI- M-I-L-E-S.

I just want to have that. You're aware then that the major leagues was closed off to blacks, I'm sure.

MI- Yeah.

But did you have a dream of becoming a major league player in those growing up years?

MI- Well, I had a dream of becoming not a major leaguer, good enough to play in the Negro Leagues. Because at that time, we couldn't aspire to become a major leaguer because it was closed. Of course, that wasn't open until Jackie Robinson in 1947. But, my memory in 1936, I was playing so well that one of my teachers, who was a friend of Horace Stoneham, who was the owner of the Giants, said we got a kid over here that you guys should take a look at. At sure enough they did. I found out later that the report came back and he was everything you say he was or is. But, the time is not yet right for him, so we'll have to pass because we couldn't get the other owners to go along with it. Now, that was 1936.

Wow.

MI- I hit .666 in high school, in 1936. I was pitching, playing shortstop and playing first base. I played everywhere.

So, Paul Robeson had come before you also.

MI- Before me.

Was he one of your heroes?

MI- I didn't know much about him. He was, in a way, but I never did get a chance to see him play even though my high school football coach also graduated from Rutgers. And, Paul Robeson is a fellow who came out as an All American.

Yeah, Robeson was allegedly one of the greatest athletes ever.

MI- He was.

So you really...and also the Newark Eagles were there, right?

MI- Well, yeah. At that time in '36...

The International League.

MI- The Newark Eagles came to Newark and played there at Rupert Stadium and that was the home of the Newark Bears, affiliated of course, with the New York Yankees. We would play in Rupert Stadium when the Bears were on the road. We became good and

they were, of course, in '37, they had the greatest International League club ever.

Probably the greatest minor league club.

MI- Yeah, minor league club, and we asked them, you know, a lady that owned that club was named Effa Manley, and we said to her, you know, we're good, let's play a series of games and donate money to charity. But, they refused because they said they had too much to lose, if we had won. One game, why not let you guys play? So, they wouldn't take that chance.

During your high school years, you did play on integrated teams, did you not? In high school.

MI- Yeah, totally integrated, yeah, totally.

You didn't feel prejudice in your high school years or your grammar school years?

MI- Well, of course, they wouldn't let no more than two play at one time, you know, on a high school team or the football team, at that time. But, we tried to perform so well so that later on there was more than two. No more than two, one or two on the football team or on the basketball team and that was the way it worked at the time. That was the procedure throughout the whole state, throughout the whole county. We're talking about in the integrated schools.

Um huh.

MI- Now, I'm saying the basketball players, one sometimes two baseball players and the rest had to be white. Football team, the same thing, maybe one or two. But then you know as things changed later on, you know, it was more than one or two. Of course, you know, after the Civil Rights movement, sometimes the whole team was almost black.

Right.

MI- And that's the way it is now.

Yep. Did you go to any major league games in your growing up years?

MI- Yeah. First of all I used to go down and see the Bears play. They used to have what they call a knothole gang.

You were so close to Orange.

MI- Yeah, maybe twenty minutes, half an hour from Newark and we'd go down during the summer and you know, maybe once a week or something, see them play. That was a regular program that we had. Then, of course, Jesse Miles, this manager of our team, would take us over to see the Yankees play. See the Giants play. So, I got a chance to see Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio and all those fellows. Mel Ott, Bill Terry,

while I was still in school.

Did you have a favorite among them?

MI- Well at the time I was a Yankee fan. I liked the Yankees because of Lou Gehrig. And one time they came over to the school and gave a talk. Lou Gehrig, who at that time lived in New Jersey. So, he came over and gave us a motivational talk and so on and I saw how great he looked, what a handsome fellow. That inspired me to become a baseball player. A baseball player, and of course, in football I was a big and strong, you know, bigger than the other kids and stronger than they were and just as fast as anybody. So that made in natural for me and of course, I ran track. I threw the javelin, shot put, and discus. I held a record in the javelin for about thirty years. Some fresh kid from Trenton high school broke it after.

What did your parents think of you, this incredible bursting athletic talent?

MI- Oh, my father, particularly my father encouraged me. My father used to come and see us play. My mother came once or twice. He was very proud. My brother, my older brother Bob, he was a great pitcher. My mother never had a chance to see him play because the team that he played with played on Sundays. So, some nine years later when I started to play with the Eagles, there were changes, so she did get a chance to see me once or twice. But my father was right and he was a regular fan. In fact, I would take him with me when I went to play. Both when I played in the International League with Kansas City and when I was starting to play with the Giants. He used to go along with me. One time I remember, after a tough game, we were celebrating in the clubhouse...

What was your father's name?

MI- C.A. Cupid Alexander. He was about 5-10, weighed about 160. My mother was just a little taller than he was and heavier.

Her name?

MI- It was Mary Eliza. So, I grew up to be six feet two and so I came from like an athletic family because my other brothers, they played a little. My brother Bob, the one I was talking about, my mother wouldn't allow him to play on Sunday. He was just a great pitcher. But, you know, at the time he couldn't make that playing baseball, so he became a professional chauffeur. My two younger brothers, Cal, C-A-L, his name was Calvin Coolidge Irvin. He was one of the greatest basketball players that ever came out of the state of New Jersey. I had a brother Bill who went to a university in Virginia. Virginia State University. Cal went of course, went to Morgan State in Baltimore for two years and he graduated from the University of Illinois. So, we had an athletic heritage in the family.

And throughout.

MI- It continues until today.

Were you middle class economically?

MI- Oh no. We were products of the Depression. We didn't have very much but we had a close family.

So, why did your parent move up to Orange?

MI- Because the playing field wasn't level at all in Alabama. My father knew that in order to get some kind of equality and justice, he had to leave. So, he and my sister and my brother, they went first and came first to New Jersey and later they sent for the rest of the family. We still have relatives there now.

What did he do for a living there?

MI- He was in charge of maintenance at Becker's Dairy. B-E-C-K-E-R. Becker's Dairy. He was in charge of taking care of the horses and at that time milk was delivered by horse and wagon.

Horse and wagon.

MI- Eventually, he retired and he worked at a chemical plant in Newark. Of course, in 1963, at the age of 87, he passed away. And then in 1970, at the age of 87, my mother passed away. But they stood behind us and encouraged us 100 per cent.

The Newark Eagles. How old were you when you started playing for them?

MI- Well I started when I was still in high school. In 1938, I graduated.

Had you been white, Monte, you would have been just grabbed up.

MI- Oh sure.

How did that make you feel? Angry, or that was just the way it was?

MI- Ah, you know, you're angry. You're not bitter but you rueful for the fact that you didn't get a chance at that time. Particularly since I was better than anybody else. But, anyway, I got a scholarship to make it. So, during the summer, I had changed my name and started to play ball for the Newark Eagles under an assumed name so that I wouldn't lose my athletic scholarship.

What was the name?

MI- Jimmy Nelson. Jimmy Nelson. So, I was Jimmy Nelson because my friend, who liked us too well, I played with and against, was catcher. He had a great build and was a good receiver so he was the perfect model, a white fellow, so I took his name. I played in '37, '38, and '39 under the Jimmy Nelson name. Of course, I wouldn't play at home. I would

only play with it on the road. At home, I'd work out and go take a shower and come sit in the stands. But, on the road, they'd let me play.

Who was on that Newark Eagles team?

MI- Well, they have Lloyd Wells, a Hall of Famer. Ray Dandridge, Hall of Famer. Leon Day, who's a Hall of Famer. Later on, Larry Doby. Don Newcombe. We had a hell of a club. Biz Mackey will probably get into the Hall of Fame this year on the Veteran's Committee. And, we had another guy who should be in the Hall of Fame. His name was Dick Lundy. He became my manager, too. So, I can't forget Mule Suttles, who was our first baseman at the time. So we had a great team to a lot of people. We were a great force in the community and you know, on a Sunday, everybody would come to see us play. On opening day we would always have a full house, which held about 22,000. And Joe Lewis, or Lena Horne, or Ella Fitzgerald would throw out the first ball, always. It was just a great time, a great time for Newark, the Newark Eagles, and a great time for us, because you know, I got a chance to play for a little money. At the time, the top salary was about \$200 bucks a month. Which you could do a lot with \$200 a month. At that time, the average working man was making \$15-20 a week. So, we're ahead of what the average person made. So, we could say that playing baseball was better.

It probably was. So, you stayed with the Eagles part-time and then...

MI- Yeah, then, in '39 I left Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in mid-term and started full-time now with the Eagles. So, I played with the Eagles from 1939 until 1948. So, I played ten years. In 1949...(tape ends)

-Transcribed by J. Thomas Hetrick, January, 2006.