

NORTH BRADDOCK

Honoring the memories of Negro League greats

Ernest "Pud" Gooden gets grave marker in North Braddock Cemetery as part of unmarked grave memorial marker project by the Josh Gibson Foundation

By Thomas Leturgey,
The Valley Mirror

Pittsburgh native Ernest "Pud" Gooden played professional baseball for several Negro League teams, including the Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Keystones in the 1920's. He wasn't a star like Josh Gibson or Satchel Paige, but a utility player for three seasons. When he died of a heart attack about eight months after his 34th birthday in 1934, the player-turned-local businessman and community leader was buried in a local, unmarked grave. He and his wife, Henrietta never had children, so his memory might have been lost forever.

Officials at the Monongahela Cemetery in North Braddock knew that Gooden, who was described in newspaper reports as "most jovial" after his playing days were over, was buried in a tidy space with a beautiful view of the Monongahela River, but the baseball player did not have a proper grave marker.

Enter the Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project, the Josh Gibson Foundation and high school history teacher and baseball fan Vincent Ciaramella. Since 2004, there has been an



An effort to locate the unmarked graves of players who never received proper grave markers or headstones led to a grave marker being placed at Ernest "Pud" Gooden's burial site. Photo by Thomas Leturgey.

effort to locate the unmarked graves of players, who for a variety of reasons, never received proper markers or headstones. A fundraising campaign to create markers was born. In 2021, the collaboration of interested parties reported finding some four dozen sites and the former players have received markers. Three of those players had markers placed in Sharpsburg. Gooden was put on the list, the marker was financed and installed in May. On July 7, the marker was officially unveiled.

Ciaramella, a Bethel Park History teacher, helped find Gooden's final resting place as part of a project with his soon-to-be 8-year-old son, Enzo. During the pandemic, the father-and-son would walk through area graveyards near their home and started looking for Pittsburgh celebrities. Then, along with his wife, Erika, they thought of looking for baseball players. "It became kind of a hobby," Ciaramella noted moments before the unveiling of Gooden's marker. And as a baseball buff, he took

to "Pud" Gooden, a light-hitting, infrequently used infielder who also fielded grounders in Cleveland, Toledo and Detroit during his three-year career. The family, then named "Goodwin," moved from rural Virginia to Homestead. "And our research brought us here," said Ciaramella. He reached out to the Monongahela Cemetery and they were helpful in locating the unmarked grave.

Chris Cox, a vice president

GIBSON: Local monument company helped with grave markers

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of the Josh Gibson Foundation, hosted the ceremony. He stood in for Gibson's great-grandson, Sean Gibson, who has been the face of the charity, but was out of town for the upcoming Major League Baseball All-Star game. Cox, who also works in Corporate Communications for the Pittsburgh Opera, noted that a local monument company was very helpful in providing the markers. And since Gooden had no children or heirs (Henrietta was even more of a social butterfly than he was), it was rather simple to post the marker.

David Switzler, a board member for the Monongahela Cem-

etry, said the sprawling cemetery was built in 1883 and created "specifically for the burgeoning immigrant population."

It's believed that Gooden is the first Negro League player to have been buried on the North Braddock hillside.

Another Pittsburgh Keystone alumnus, Dave Allen, is also buried at the Monongahela, and just a few yards away. "He will be next," for a marker, said Cox.

Ciaramella has also done research on Allen, who he suspects was born into slavery in Madison, Virginia, in 1858. Allen played seven games for the Keystone Club in 1887. Ci-

aramella realizes that the name was rather commonplace nearly 90 years ago, but he has a strong suspicion that's he's made the connection.

If so, Allen, who passed away in 1931 at the age of 73, would only be the second Negro League player known to be born into slavery. St. Louis native Sylvester Chauvin was born in 1860, five years before the end of slavery. The same Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project debuted a marker for Chauvin in Missouri last year.

Cox added that "also, of interest is that there is former Negro Leagues player named Charles

Henry "Lefty" Williams in an unmarked grave in Homestead Cemetery. The Cemetery needs a family authorization to move forward with installing one of these markers but does not have any contact information for any living relatives."

He is hoping that through this initiative, readers may be able to contact family who could help with the installation by contacting either the Cemetery or the Foundation.

"This is a way to give back to the community," said Ciaramella.