

# The Rise And Fall Of Greenlee Field

*The Inside Story of Gus Greenlee's Effort to Give Negro BaseBall Fans a Modern Ball Park, and Lost a Small Fortune When Incomplete—Construction and Poor Patronage Signed Death Warrant of a Great Venture.*

By JOHN L. CLARK

Seven years ago, 1932 to be exact, Greenlee Field, on Bedford avenue, was recognized and talked about as one of the best baseball diamonds in the United States, not excepting those used by major and minor league clubs. The structure, built of concrete and steel, cost over \$100,000, seated around 7,000 people, situated within 10 minutes walk of over 10,000 colored voters, and hailed to be a welcome answer to a long prayer of baseball fans in the tri-state district.

Today the structure is being totally destroyed. The steel is being junked, bricks destroyed, lumber and flood lights stand until an attractive bid is made. The Housing Authority, using all its vested power, selected this site along with others along Bedford avenue, for its colored colony.

Through its agents and real estate men, the Authority put a finger on the spot, named a case price. The initial offer of \$60,000 for Greenlee Field was gradually reduced to \$38,000 and the stockholders had no alternative but to accept. Nobody seems to know what happened to make the property worth \$22,000 less in the months of bargaining.

**GREENLEE'S IDEA.**  
The erection of Greenlee Field on this particular site was the idea of Gus Greenlee, popular sportsman, business man, manager of Light Heavyweight Champion John Henry Lewis, president of the Pittsburgh Crawfords and for five years president of the Negro National League.

It was due to his investment in the Pittsburgh Crawfords in 1931 that Greenlee hit upon the decision to build his own park. He had observed the high rental price charged for parks with inadequate accommodations all over the tri-state section, and concluded that an enclosed field within walking distance would be attractive to sport fans and consequently well patronized. Early in the fall of 1931 Greenlee began to look around for a suitable piece of ground.

The plot on Bedford avenue had been owned and operated by the Entress Brick Company, but this company had been hit by the depression which started in 1928 and production was way below par. Greenlee began negotiations with Dr. Toms, principal stockholder of the Entress Brick and owner of the land. Zoning restrictions were modified, and the project approved by Lincoln cemetery, situated on the west and the Municipal hospital on the east. The corporation was set up, with Dr. Toms, president; Joe Tito, treasurer, and Robert F. Lane, secretary. W. A. Greenlee, owning 25 per cent of the stock, held no office. The operating company was known as the Bedford Land Company.

Steam shovels started work in the winter of 1931 and on April 29, 1932, the Pittsburgh Crawfords played Vandergriff. The official opening, however, came on the following day and pitted New York Black Yankees against Pittsburgh Crawfords. Jess Hubbard turned in a 1-0 win over Leroy Satchell Paige. Around 5,000 people turned out on this occasion. Robert L. Vann, editor of The Pittsburgh Courier, tossed out the first ball, and the park operation got off to a good start, the crowd and the ball game meeting all expectations.

Greenlee Field operated at a profit during May, 1932. In June of the same year owners noticed a decline in attendance. The famous New York Yankees, Nashville Elite Giants, Chicago American Giants, all of these recognized attractions, failed to draw better than an ordinary payoff crowd. In searching for a reason for this decline in patronage, the owners were faced with the fact that the \$80,000 worth of steel and concrete was uncovered. This condition gave no protection to spectators in hot or inclement weather and increased the risk of damage of valuable clothes.

## DEPRESSION HURT

It will be remembered that the worst depression in the history of the United States had made its way into every city and hamlet by June, 1932. Officers in the Bedford Land Corporation were not excepted, and whatever reserve cash they had on hand certainly was not to be invested in Greenlee Field. They reasoned that if the park had been covered at that time the revenue would not have increased enough to justify the additional investment. Men and women were out of work and peeping around every corner to find the prosperity that Hoover had said would surely appear.

So, Greenlee Field continued through 1932, '33 with no further effort on the part of owners to add stands or cover. In 1934, one month prior to the Crawfords' Grays' game, in which Satchell Paige started on his way to fame by turning in a no-hit, no-run performance, Gus Greenlee's name

through with a proposition to install an awning cover for the 5,000 grandstand seats. This idea was voted down. In 1935, Greenlee, with faith in people of his race, induced other stockholders to turn over to him the park operation. Under this plan, Greenlee was responsible for all debts, and for raising needed revenue by sale of common stock to Negroes. At that time there were 15 or 20 race men in position to invest from \$1,000 to \$5,000 and still not draw heavily on their reserve. Not a single individual could be induced to join the corporation and as a result, the sale of common stock fell through.

Greenlee tried another idea in 1937. Season passes were placed on sale, giving the purchaser a grandstand seat for 25 cents if 40 tickets were purchased in advance. Through this method he expected to raise enough cash to contract for the cover and complete payment the following year. The San Domingo Stars jumping contract killed this idea, and the season passes amounted to just another loss.

These are a few of the problems and attempted solutions which one may find on the record. But we must go beyond or "off the record" for causes never accepted by any member of the corporate body—including Gus Greenlee.

## CONTROLLED BY WHITES

From a strictly Negroid viewpoint, the operating setup of the Bedford Land Company was all wrong. No colored person except Greenlee had the final say about anything at the field, and Greenlee's option was confined to baseball. Armistice Day and Turkey Day were the only football dates accorded to the man whose name the park carried. Robert Lane, secretary of the corporation, handled monies, records and rented the park. Tony Christiano, related to Joe Tito, served as groundskeeper and lookout man for Tito. The concession stand was leased to Ralph Tito, brother to Joe.

The very first issue raised in 1932 was based on hiring colored park help—ticket sellers and gate helpers. And, we are told, that on occasions when boxing was promoted during the first year, there was an attempt to disregard colored help in any capacity even to special patrolmen.

Under ordinary conditions, these issues would not arise except when unionism was involved. But Greenlee Field was set up in that particular location to cater to colored patrons—right in the heart of 5,000 colored voters, and within walking distance of another 5,000. When men and women of color made two or three trips to Greenlee Field and discovered that even that small wages paid to the required help at the park could not be re-circulated among the colored people, they made their own decision. This policy might have been approved by Greenlee, and other broadminded men, but to those who paid the freight, nothing could have been worse. And they made their own opinion felt by staying away from the field.

## TURNUED THEIR BACKS

Well, the story is over now. The people who were to be accommodated and probably benefitted, turned their backs on one of their own kind. This turnabout was not staged when Greenlee was dreaming of his field, but after he had shown that concrete business. He had invested a small fortune, and induced others to go along with the idea. Greenlee field was a reality, with some beautiful history behind it when the SOS call was sent out in 1935. But the people of Greenlee's race preferred to see the venture fail.

Nobody will be justified in rejoicing, whether enemies or friends to any members of the corporation. Not even the housing authority agents, or other representatives, who had any part in the squeeze deal that caused every stockholder to finish up empty handed. Regardless of what mistakes were made, or who made them, a purer racial interest should have been manifested to keep Greenlee Field out of the list of failures. And since there was no single individual, or group of individuals, blessed with that foresight, that courage to be a part of the thing and correct the faults, it is safe to say Pittsburgh is no place to attempt big things for Negroes.

Greenlee Field joins the list of banks, industries and other enterprises which should not be again attempted in this city for the next 100 years.