

Burr Oak scandal raises concerns about lost Negro League players

By Paul Ladewski

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In the lobby of Burr Oak Cemetery hangs a list of former Negro League players, which serves to promote the southwest suburban Alsip grounds and pay homage to the significant athletes laid to rest there.

It is that connection that Dr. Jeremy Krock and the Society for American Baseball Research would like to think spared the remains of 20 Negro League figures from an alleged scam, one in which an estimated 300 graves were dug up then the plots resold at a \$300,000 return.

In 2004, Krock began to coordinate the Grave Marker Project, a SABR-inspired initiative that led to the purchase and placement of granite markers at the unmarked graves of 12 Negro League dignitaries at the cemetery.

“We had such presence at Burr Oak Cemetery in the last five years, I don’t think they would have disrupted those,” Krock told the Chicago Baseball Museum. “I’m pretty confident of that, actually.”

Krock spoke of a positive relationship with former cemetery manager Carolyn Towns and was stunned to hear that she might have been behind the scheme. He described Towns as “a woman of great faith” that displayed a respect for history and an appreciation for SABR projects.

“Carolyn helped us an incredible amount,” said Krock, who had been in frequent contact with her over the years. “She gave her time and that of her staff and made markers available at a very reasonable cost for charity. She arranged for two memorials that we had for players there. She did it all.”

Of more immediate concern were nearly 100 deceased Negro League players that remained unaccounted for in the Chicago area.

“I would go to Burr Oak Cemetery with a list of names, and they would say, ‘No, they’re not buried here,’” recalled Krock, a Peoria-based anesthesiologist. “Is it because their remains were destroyed? That’s what concerns me most.

“I mean, for 300 graves to be affected out of the 100,000 there, the chances are slim that we lost one. But there’s always that possibility.”

The list of unknowns includes Hall of Fame outfielder Pete Hill, who played with the Chicago American Giants for eight seasons. In 1951, Hill died in Buffalo before his remains were transported to Chicago for burial.

“Burr Oak Cemetery is the first place that you think of,” Krock said. “Several times I tried to locate Pete Hill there but never could find him.

“I checked about him last spring, shortly after Ms. Towns was fired, and they did not have a listing for him. Was it because he wasn’t buried there? Or is he buried in a mass grave now? I’ve searched most African-American cemeteries in the Chicago area but have been able to locate him.”

It will take days if not weeks before the grave markers can be confirmed. Last week the FBI began to search for human remains spread over the 100 acres of land, which Cook County Board President Todd Stroger referred to as “the largest crime scene that’s ever been had in Illinois.”

“I won’t get in that line right now,” Krock said. “I don’t think that’s our place, what with it being a crime scene and thousands of people searching for relatives. It’s best to let the thing settle down for awhile.”

In June, 2008, SABR dedicated its most recent marker at the grave site of Franklin Mann, a former Chicago American Giants player. Previously, it had done so for players James (Jimmie) Crutchfield, Roosevelt (Rosey) Davis, John Donaldson, Paul Hardy, Guy Ousley, William (Jack) Marshall, Othello Strong, James (Candy Jim) Taylor, Theodore (High Pockets) Trent, umpire Robert Garrett and sportswriter Daniel Burley.

Family members were responsible for the markers of William (Willie) Cornelius, Elwood (Bingo) DeMoss, James McCurine, John Phillips, Clarence Powell, Armand Tyson and Woodrow Wilson (Woody) Williams, while that of Alec Radcliffe went undesignated at the request of relatives.

“Because we’ve been at Burr Oak Cemetery so often, I don’t think anyone would disrupt the markers that we put in the last few years, but I could be mistaken,” Krock said. “Hopefully, I’m not overconfident.”