

**Lost to History:
Cranford's Black Baseball Team, "The Dixie Giants"**



The following article was researched and written by Carl Leiberman, our summer 2009 intern from Cranford High School.



Ernest Tyree

In the early 1900's, there were dozens of all-black baseball teams in the United States that traveled the country playing exhibition games. By barnstorming and setting up these matches with any

available opponents, many of these teams were able to survive and thrive for decades. Some even lasted beyond Major League Baseball's color barrier being broken in 1947 by Jackie Robinson with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dixie Giants, a black baseball team based in Cranford and all but lost to history, played exhibitions against many teams in the surrounding towns.

The Giants' story begins in the late 1800's with Thomas Sperry, the famous 'S' of S&H Green Stamps, who resided in his Cranford manor until it burned down in 1912. Among his many workers at the home was a black man named Ernest Tyree. Sperry paid for Tyree's education at a culinary school in New York, and upon Tyree's return, he became Sperry's personal chef. Contrary to what was previously believed, Tyree founded and became the manager of the Cranford Dixie Giants, Cranford's own Negro baseball team. Mr. Tyree remained as Sperry's cook until Sperry died in 1913. In his will, Sperry stipulated that his servants would be allowed to live on his grounds as they had before his death, and so Ernest Tyree remained in Cranford and continued to manage the Dixie Giants.

Tyree had previously used his culinary talents to cater affairs such as Township Committee meetings, and was able to continue after Sperry's death. Capitalizing on his love for cooking, he began a local catering business and still was able to manage the Dixie Giants.

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Advertisement Tyree Caterers ran
regularly in local Cranford newspapers.

Having established a sound business, Tyree was able to turn his attention to the Dixie Giants. A talented manager with an eye for talent, Tyree established the Dixie Giants as a juggernaut. Operating out of his home, which also served as the team's locker room and social center, Tyree's Dixie Giants became one of the most talented teams in the area. Many fans came to see them play at the ball fields on Union Avenue and Elizabeth Avenue.

Because black baseball teams could only compete in exhibition matches, they frequently played the local (white) town athletic clubs, and they often bested them. This is in contrast with the Negro Leagues, which were actual baseball leagues with organized schedules. The Dixie Giants could play anyone they liked, but they had to schedule the games on their own. Among their many opponents were the Newark Eagles, Elizabeth F-O, and the Roselle, Somerville, Cranford, Garwood, Irvington and Kearny athletic clubs.



Pitcher/First Baseman Albert Harris

Going with Tyree's skillful management were a star-studded lineup and bullpen. Albert Harris, a pitcher and first baseman, was both an incredible ball player and a draw for the games. A man identified only as "Hall" was his catcher, and they were talented enough to merit frequent mentions in the *The Cranford Citizen*. Also notable was the battery (a combination of pitcher and catcher) of Peterson and Washington, which played about 1914. Isaac Baldwin, a second baseman who would later play for the Philadelphia in the Negro Leagues, was also a popular player for many years. This talented team was very successful for over a decade until they dissolved around 1930.

Because the Dixie Giants played only exhibition games, the players were amateurs despite their outstanding talents, and had to hold other jobs. Albert Harris, for example, worked as a delivery man for a local drug store. Mr. Tyree himself worked as a caterer with a "most excellent supper" and "most excellent punch" who worked at all sorts of affairs at local schools and meetings. He also catered the Giants' team receptions and balls.

Though the Cranford Dixie Giants were almost entirely lost to history, the scattered photographs and mentions in newspapers paint a picture of one of the few Negro baseball teams in central New Jersey as a talented organization and a fascinating piece of Cranford history.