

Papa was named to manage the Kansas City Monarchs' B team in 1948, the agreement being that he would get one third of the sale price for any player who was developed by him and sold to the majors. He had two prospects in mind for the Browns. "But the Browns didn't want them," says Papa, shaking his head. I then went to the Cardinals, and they say they don't care, either, and I think to myself, My, if they don't want these boys, they don't want nobody." The Monarchs eventually sold the pair: Ernie Banks and Elston Howard. "I didn't get anythin'," says Papa. "They said I didn't have a contract. They gave me a basket of fruit. A basket of fruit! Baseball was never much for me makin' money."

Life began all over for Papa. He took a job at the city hall in St. Louis as a custodian and then a night watchman. For the next 22 years the routine was the same, and only now and then could he go to a Cardinal game. He would pay his way in and sit there in the sun with his lunch long before the game began; to those around him who wondered about him, he was just a Mr. Bell, a watchman. He would watch those games intently, looking for tiny flaws like a diamond cutter. He never said much to anyone, but then one day he was asked by some Dodgers to help Maury Wills. "He could run," he says. "I wanted to help." He waited for Wills at the players' gate and introduced himself quietly.

"Maybe you heard of me," Papa said, "maybe not. It don't matter. But I'd like to help you."

Wills just looked at him, as Papa became uneasy.

"When you're on base," said Papa, "get those hitters of yours to stand deep in the box. That way the catcher, he got to back up. That way you goin' to get an extra step all the time."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Wills, who went on to steal 104 bases.

"Well, Papa smiled, "that's the kind of ball we played in our league. Be seein' you, Mr. Wills. Didn't mean to bother you."

After that year Papa seldom went to the ballpark anymore. He had become a sick man, and when he walked, his arthritic left side seemed to be frozen. There was just his job now. In the afternoons he would walk up to the corner and see what the people were up to, or sit silently in his living room turning the pages of his books of pictures: all the old faces with the blank eyes; all of those many different, baggy uniforms.

Nights were spent at city hall, making his rounds, listening to the sound of radio baseball by the big window, or just the sound of the hours when winter mornings moved across the window. When it was icy, he would wait for the old people to come, and he would help them up the steps. Often, say about three a.m., he would be looking out the window, out across to the park where the bums would be sleeping, their wine bottles as sentries, and he would wait for their march on the hall. They would come up those steps and place their faces up against the window, next to his face and beg to be let in where it was warm.

"We're citizens, old Bell, let us in," they would yell.

"I know," Papa would say.

"It's cold out here," they would say.

"I know," he would answer.

"No, you don't, you. . . ." And Papa would just look away, thinking how cold it was outside, trying to think of all the things that would leave him indifferent to those wretched figures. Then it would be that he sometimes would think of baseball, the small things he missed about it, things that would pop into his mind for no reason: a certain glove, the feel of a ball and bat, a buttoning

of a shirt, the sunlight. "You try to get that game out of your mind," he says, "but it never leaves ya. Somethin' about it never leaves ya."

Papa Bell is 70 now [he died in 1991, at 87]. He lives on Dickson Street in North St. Louis, a neighborhood under siege: vacant, crumbling houses, bars where you could get your throat cut if you even walked in the wrong way, packs of sky-high dudes looking for a score. They have picked on Papa's house a couple of times, so now when he feels something in the air, hears a rustle outside of his door, he will go to the front window and sit there for long hours with a shotgun and a pistol in his lap. "They don't mess with Papa anymore," says his friend Tweed, looking over at Papa sitting in his city hall retirement chair. "It's a reclinin' one," says Tweed. "Show'im how it reclines, Papa."

Now the two of them, Tweed and Papa, who sits in his chair like a busted old jazz musician, torn around the edges but straight with dignity, spend much time together in Papa's living room. They mull over old boy scores, over all the clippings in Tweed's portable archives. They try to bring continuity of performance to a man's record that began when nobody cared. They assemble pictures to be signed for people who write and say that they hear he will be going into the Hall of Fame; the days are sweet.

"Can't believe it," says Tweed. "Can you, Papa? Papa Bell in the Hall of Fame. The fastest man who ever played the game."

"Ain't happened yet," cautions Papa, adjusting his tall and lean figure in his chair.

"Tell me, Papa," says Tweed. "How's it goin' to feel? The Hall of fame . . . mmm, mmm."

"Knew a fella blowed the horn once," says Papa. "He told me. He say, 'Ya got to take the gigs as they come.'"