

In May, the Detroit Tigers honored several former Negro League players before a game with the Pittsburgh Pirates in the Tigers' 10th annual Negro Leagues Weekend. The African-American men and women, now mostly in — at least — their 80s, were brought onto the field before the two teams took to the diamond dressed in replica Negro League uniforms.

The resulting meeting coverage listed the figures who were recognized during the ceremony, but the reports buried perhaps the most significant figure in the reports' list of honorees.

That would be Mississippi native Minnie Forbes, who, in the mid-1950s, became one of the few female owners of a top-level Negro Leagues team when she took over the Detroit Stars. Now, nearly six decades later, Forbes stands as the last living woman to own such a club, a status that was honored in July at the Society for American Baseball Research's annual Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference, this year's version of which was held in Cleveland.

At the conference, Forbes sat for a 30-minute panel with the event's attendees. During the session, Forbes answered a slew of questions from conference goers, but at the beginning of the Q-and-A, she made sure to note that she was originally from West Point, Miss. However, Forbes didn't dwell on that fact, quickly delving into her long career in professional African-American baseball in Michigan.

Forbes owed that career to her uncle, Ted Rasberry, who himself was a West Point native who went on to become a significant figure in Negro Leagues history. Rasberry moved from Mississippi to Michigan in 1935. About a decade later, Rasberry helped organize the Grand Rapids Black Sox, a professional African-American baseball team that briefly employed the services of legendary pitcher and hardball nomad Satchel Paige.

The squad also hired Minnie Forbes and her sisters — Rasberry's nieces who had also migrated from West Point to Michigan — to produce the team's uniforms.

"From that point on, the rest of it is history," Forbes told the audience at the Cleveland conference this summer.

That history saw Forbes gradually become involved in the administration of her uncle's hardball operations, which eventually shifted to Detroit, where, in the early 1950s, Rasberry created the last incarnation of the Detroit Stars, a franchise whose history dated to 1919 and included numerous versions over the years.

(In 1953, Forbes also became one of the countless statistical oddities of the Negro Leagues when the Kansas City Monarchs, perhaps the greatest of all the blackball franchises, played a game in Grand Rapids. For the contest, Forbes actually donned the Monarchs flannels and played third base for the Kansas City club, becoming one of a handful of women to take the field in the Negro Leagues. "It was something I wanted to do, but I was a little afraid," Forbes said of the experience.)

Of course, by the 1950s, the Negro Leagues were on their last legs, their demise caused by the mass migration of talented African-American ball players from black baseball to the Major Leagues.

But despite that fact, the players and owners of the few remaining Negro League teams bravely soldiered on, a fraternity that included Rasberry's version of the Detroit Stars.

It was with the Stars that Forbes again made baseball history. Rasberry endeavored to purchase the Kansas City Monarchs, but Negro American League rules prohibited one person from owning multiple franchises in the four-team conference. As a result, in 1955, Forbes purchased the Stars from her uncle and helmed the team for the 1956 NAL season.

"He made me an offer I couldn't refuse," Forbes said of her uncle at the SABR conference.

A May 1956 report in the Chicago Defender, the most influential of the country's African-American newspapers, reviewed the Stars' prospects for the impending season. The article briefly noted that Forbes had purchased the team, instead focusing more on the team's stacked roster.

"The Detroit Stars ... are reported loaded for the 1956 season which opens May 20," the paper stated. "The majority of last year's playing personnel is back and league officials are picking the Stars as one of the better teams in the circuit."

Forbes' ownership of the Stars lasted a single season; she sold the club back to her uncle a year later. It didn't take long for the end to come to the franchise itself. The team ceased operations in 1960, the same year the Negro American League — the last surviving conglomerations of the once-proud and thriving Negro Leagues — collapsed, ending a significant but overlooked part of baseball history.

Forbes discussed it all at the July conference in Cleveland. However, beyond the fleeting mention of her roots in West Point, didn't speak another word about her home state. In fact, during the question-and-answer session, no one from the audience quizzed her about her Mississippi origins, either.

The absence of such discussion is perhaps significant on several levels. It exemplifies how many of the African-Americans who were part of the famed Great Migration of Southern blacks to Northern cities chose to put their experiences in the Jim Crow South firmly behind them. For many, such memories quickly became out of sight, out of mind.

But the way in which Forbes didn't discuss West Point and Mississippi also reflects the possibility that, for better or worse, Mississippi, at least for much of the 20th century, simply might not have been much of a baseball state, one that for many decades failed to produce any legendary hardball players.

In fact, the first Mississippian to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame was actually Starkville native James "Cool Papa" Bell, a the legendary Negro Leagues speedster who many historians consider the fastest man in baseball history. Bell's induction into the Hall came in 1974, an event that highlighted the fact that Mississippi had failed to birth any baseball legends for so long.

While Jackson and the surrounding area have been home several Minor League Baseball franchises — including the current Mississippi Braves, the Double-A affiliate of the Atlanta Braves based in Pearl — Mississippi has never been home to anything even close to resembling a Major League team.

The same was true for African-American baseball in the state. The black hardball scene in Mississippi never included a top-level franchise, instead birthing dozens of amateur, semi-pro and lower-level professional squads over the decades. Many of them existed as barnstorming organizations, traversing the state and the entire state taking on all comers of all hardball levels, both black and white.

Still, those teams persevered despite both the lack of much of an organized league-type structure and the presence of smothering institutional and societal racism. Next week, as this year's edition of the World Series takes place, the Free Press will look at the historical African-American baseball scene in Jackson and the state of Mississippi.