

New St. Paul baseball museum chronicles local Black history

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Charles Hallman/MSR News Michael Goldklang standing in front of a museum photo of the St. Paul Colored Gophers team

St. Paul, more than many other U.S. cities, is uniquely responsible for the growth of baseball in this country, including helping to end its nearly century-long racially exclusionary ways. The city's new baseball museum's main goal is to help tell that story.

The City of Baseball Museum, located on the third-base side of the St. Paul Saints' downtown stadium, opens May 16, the same day as the team's 2019 season opener. It is free to the general public during stadium hours as well as to fans at Saints games.

Laid out in historical timeline fashion, extending from the late 19th Century to the present, City of Baseball features an estimated 160 baseball images, 100 related artifacts, and nine interactive exhibits. Black baseball and St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood, where Black players lived during their time here, are prominently featured.

Rondo has a "cultural significance," Saints Senior VP and General Counsel Michael Goldklang told the *MSR* during the May 9 media sneak preview. "We have a photo frame of the Rondo highlights. It talks about how players would come in and stay in hotels and played baseball."

For many years, St. Paul has served as a feeder team for the major leagues, and after World War II, several future Hall of Famers, such as Roy Campanella, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and other Black baseball players played here either on the home team or with the visitors.

"Black baseball is central to the history of St. Paul," Goldklang said. "A lot of people don't know the pre-Jackie Robinson [days]. We honor the St. Paul Colored Gophers... They weren't affiliated with the Negro Leagues but played in an era preceding the Negro Leagues."

The museum's "On The Map" feature, located on the museum's floor, highlights the locations of all of St. Paul's ballparks and the childhood homes of several local baseball legends. "It's amazing to see how close Toni Stone grew up around Dave Winfield's [home] and how close that was to where Roy Campanella lived when he was on the St. Paul Saints," Goldklang pointed out.

Stone, who grew up in St. Paul, was the first Black female to play in the Negro Leagues. Campanella's 1951 World Series bat he used while playing for the then-Brooklyn Dodgers is among the museum artifacts.

"I believe Roy Campanella was the first African American baseball player in the American Association," Goldklang continued. "The Saints had the first African American pitcher, and [he] pitched for the Dodgers, too. Dan Bankhead didn't have a career like Jackie [Robinson] did, but he broke barriers just like Jackie did."

The new museum is the longtime vision of Michael's father, Saints Principal Owner Marv Goldklang. "He wanted to recognize the connection the state and this city have had with the larger story of baseball," Michael stressed. "Part of this museum is to help tell that story, and tell that in terms of how it interconnected with the City of St. Paul itself."

Asked if the City of Baseball Museum will help attract more Blacks to the downtown stadium, especially with its Black baseball emphasis, Michael Goldklang said, "If there is a way to reach out and share our joy of baseball with that community, I'd love to have that."

“The Black community doesn’t have to [be the only ones to] learn about Black baseball. I think the White community and everybody should [learn] about Black baseball.”