

Archives Find Solves Mystery Of Blackburn's One-Armed Baseball Player

by Tom Emery
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CARLINVILLE - A discovery of long-forgotten articles in the Blackburn College archives solved a lingering, and surprisingly controversial, mystery of the school's history.

The story involves a one-armed baseball player at Blackburn from a century ago, and in recent years, debates have erupted over his identity. One popular belief was that the player was Pete Gray, who played for the St. Louis Browns in 1945 and has since become a part of American sports lore.

However, the mystery was recently solved when Lynn Armstrong, the reference librarian of Lumpkin Learning Commons, uncovered documents as part of her ongoing search of overlooked material in the College archives, located in Lumpkin. Armstrong found a scrapbook reference to Robert Allison, a Blackburn student in the late 1910s, who had lost his left arm in a coal mining accident in Pennsylvania.

Armstrong forwarded the information to Dr. John Comerford, the former Blackburn President, who turned up an article in the December 1919 edition of *American Magazine*. That feature, entitled “My Empty Coat Sleeve,” was written by Allison, a 25-year-old baseball and football player at Blackburn who was studying to become a lawyer.

Allison’s left arm was severed at age nineteen in his job as an electrician in Pennsylvania. Left with an uncertain future, he considered his options and decided to further his education. A friend told him of “a little prairie college out in...Illinois, where young men and women with plenty of grit and gumption, but not much ready cash, are given a chance to work for their education.”

That college was Blackburn, which had introduced its now-famous student Work Program in 1913. Allison wrote that “perhaps you’ve never heard of it, but it’s got the biggest heart...of any institution of learning in the country.” He added that Blackburn consisted only of “two old brick buildings, two retired Pullman sleeping cars used as dormitories, and a two-hundred-acre farm. Yet that little college is putting one hundred young men and women on their feet each year.”

Allison promptly joined the football and baseball teams, “getting my share of home runs.” A right fielder, Allison caught fly balls in his gloved right hand, tossing the ball in the air as he threw off the glove, then catching the ball before it dropped to the ground. He was then able to throw the ball back to the infield.

One fan remarked that “it’s worth a dollar to see Allison catch a fly. I have never seen anything like it. I have been watching him this season, and he hasn’t an error charged against him. His playing would be a credit to any two-handed amateur.”

Incredibly, Allison longed for a return to his old job, and landed a position with a local mine in Carlinville. He would rise at 1 a.m., work at the mine for several hours, then return to Blackburn to attend classes by mid-morning, spending his afternoons studying. He proudly noted that he earned \$225 a month – three times his salary before his accident.

The inspiring story of Allison brought an end to a topic that sparked friendly, though heated, debates at Blackburn for years. Some employees and alumni believed that Gray, who batted .218 in 77 games for the Browns in his lone season in the majors, had attended Blackburn, though there was no evidence to support that claim.

Gray was not listed in any past Blackburn catalogues, and his professional baseball history did not include any stints with minor league teams in the surrounding area. In addition, an acclaimed 1995 biography of Gray made no mention of Blackburn or Carlinville, and officers in the St. Louis Browns Historical Society, when interviewed, had not heard of any connection of Gray to Blackburn.

Despite the lack of evidence, the Gray legend became an emotional issue in some circles at Blackburn, and spirited discussions sometimes arose between believers and non-believers. Past employees in Lumpkin reported that patrons became agitated, and argumentative, when told that Gray had not attended Blackburn.

Some believe the legend of Gray arose from a mural depicting the history of Blackburn that was painted in 1953. The mural, which formerly hung in Hudson Hall and now in Bothwell Auditorium, shows an array of Blackburn historical figures, including what appears to be a one-armed baseball player. Undocumented research by Blackburn students in the early 1990s claimed the figure was Gray, apparently based on the legend.

Allison, the one with the true identity, later attended Illinois State University and Illinois Wesleyan, where he earned a law degree. He subsequently spent years as a member of the Illinois House from Pekin before retiring in 1954, the same year he was defeated in a Republican primary for Congress.

Robert Allison died in a duck blind while on vacation in Louisiana on Dec. 31, 1959.