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John Heller/Post-Gazette

Elijah Miller, 99 at the time, at Knight Field in Munhall.

**Elijah 'Lucky' Miller,** a former Pittsburgh steelworker and Homestead Grays batboy, died this month at 104. His life spanned epochs. **Kevin Kirkland** got to know him for the last one.

# 'LUCKY' AND ME: A LIFE IN FULL

**E**lijah "Lucky" Miller's luck ran out at 4:05 p.m. Oct. 12.

Truth be told (and he always tried), he hadn't felt lucky for a long time. When you reach 104 years old and all your friends are gone, your memories are fading and your body is giving out, a nickname like "Lucky" just seems ironic.

And yet, if he hadn't lived so long, I never would have known him.

**I met Mr. Miller in the summer of the year he turned 100.** While I was researching the Homestead Grays, someone from the Heinz History Center mentioned that a local man who was a backup batboy for that famous Negro League team was still around. Mr. Miller appeared once for about 15 seconds on a short documentary at the History Center about the Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords, Pittsburgh's premier all-black teams from the 1920s to the '40s.

Fascinated by a man who knew Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Satchel Paige and other great ballplayers, I asked the documentary maker

**ON THE WEB**

For a video of "Lucky" at age 103, go to [post-gazette.com](http://post-gazette.com).

for a CD of his entire interview with Mr. Miller. It inspired me to do my own.

I arrived at his son Daniel's house in West Mifflin and found him dressed and ready, wearing a Grays cap and T-shirt, heavy wool pants, with a gnarled wooden cane. Worried that he would dismiss me as yet another white reporter poking around black history, I tried to put him at ease. I asked him about himself, about his childhood in Bermuda Hundred, Va.

From the very beginning, he surprised me. I had lived in Virginia for five years and had always assumed the subtle racism I saw there was much worse a century ago. No, he said, black children weren't segregated from whites in the movie theaters. No, he wasn't denied a good education in the all-black elementary school. And yes, it was true that black and white kids did not often play together, but he had welcomed two white boys who wanted to play on his sandlot team because the team was so good.

At first, I thought the passage of nearly 100 years had softened his memories, wearing away the hard edges. Now I know that was wrong. He was beginning a lesson that would take me four years and a half-dozen meetings to understand:

Don't believe everything you read in the history books. Life was not — is not — as black and white as type on a page. It is just people, and if you're Lucky, there's more good than bad.

I also discovered he was lucky in ways that he might not realize, ways that went far beyond finding a \$5 bill by the side of the road, the origin of his nickname. He was a little like a real-life Forrest Gump, a microcosm of the pre-World War II black migration.



J. Monroe Butler II/Post-Gazette

In photos for Kevin Kirkland's children's book about "Lucky" Miller, Josiah Vaughn (above) portrays the young Mr. Miller. (He earned the nickname in childhood by finding a \$5 bill rolled up in a handkerchief.)



From left: Jimmy McGill, "Lucky" and Jesse Reed, circa 1940.

He was lucky his parents encouraged him to finish school through eighth grade (many African-Americans in rural Virginia didn't in the 1920s). He was lucky to come to Pittsburgh with family (his brother) and find work at the U.S. Steel Homestead Works. Then, when the constant din of chipping hammers began to affect his hearing, he was moved from this dangerous job amid pieces of flying steel to one of the safest in the mill, transporting material around the site. He retired after 43 years in remarkably good health.

Lucky never struggled with steelworkers' other occupational hazard — alcohol. After he nearly died as a child from innocently drinking a fifth of whiskey, he avoided anything stronger than elderberry wine (he liked that because his mother used to make it). He never was one to buy a round of drinks, either. Mr. Gibson said the batboy (then in his 30s) was his good-luck charm. But he also teased him:

"Josh said, 'Here come ol' Lucky, the stingiest man alive. He's so cheap he won't even buy a bottle of pop.'" Mr. Miller recalled, laughing.

He was rarely tempted to join Josh, Satchel and the others in carousing anyway, because he worked night-turn at the mill so he could play baseball during the day. He knew his limits as a ballplayer. He wasn't a good-enough hitter to play on the mill's segregated baseball teams so he started his own integrated millworkers' team, the Homestead Red Legs. When I asked if they ever played the Grays in an exhibition game, he laughed: "We weren't a piss in the wind to them."

In his eyes, the Grays and the Crawfords weren't just Kings of the Hill, they were the baseball gods of Pennsylvania and Ohio. They were better than the Pirates of that era, who they shared Forbes Field with, and they were superstars when they played in little towns throughout the region. Since Mr. Miller

couldn't miss work to travel with the Grays to other parts of the country, he never experienced the racist taunts and whites-only restaurants and hotels the team faced elsewhere.

I know he wasn't perfect. He could be very stubborn and sometimes cross with his daughter Ruth and her husband, Joe Hines of Freedom. When they told me that Mr. Miller's favorite meal was drumsticks — only drumsticks — from Kentucky Fried Chicken, I brought him some for lunch, though I knew he didn't eat lunch. Surely he would make an exception?

"No," he said firmly, "I don't eat lunch, just breakfast and dinner. I'll eat 'em later." And he did, calling for his KFC when they tried to serve him something else for dinner at the nursing home.

He was never rude to me, answering questions even though I had asked them before. At first, most were about the Negro Leaguers he had known, what they said, how they played, what they were like. Mr. Paige told him he learned his pinpoint accuracy throwing rocks at chickens. Cool Papa Bell said he became a speedster because he hung around with some shady characters.

Each time he answered a question, he showed me a little more of himself. Before long, I was much more interested in Lucky than the famous ballplayers he knew. It was the reason I decided to write a children's book about him, based on the stories he told me.

★ ★ ★

**When he became sick earlier this year,** I hurried to create a mock-up of the unpublished book so I could read it to him at the nursing home. I explained that since his family had so few photos of him, I had illustrated it with images I found on the internet or in books about black baseball.

"They aren't your pictures," I said, "but I hope they look like you."

I thought he didn't hear me. On the first page, he looked at some kids in a photo taken in the Hill District in the early 1900s and pointed to one: "I remember that little girl. What was her name?"

I reminded him that these were just random photos and kept reading. When we turned to a page with a teenager riding in a Model T, he pointed again: "That's me!"

I stopped correcting him after that. I changed my mind that day: No illustrations. I would use old photos as background and pictures of real children to portray Lucky.

One day this summer, PG photographer John Butler and I took some photos of 15-year-old Joel Akrie of Chartiers City at the wheel of a 1916 Model T like the one Mr. Miller drove as a teenager (without a license). And several weeks ago, Mr. Butler took some photos of his 8-year-old grandson, Josiah Vaughn of Crafton, dressed in knickers, pretending to find the crumpled \$5 bill that earned Lucky his nickname.

When Mr. Miller died, he had color photos of each boy in his room at West Penn Hospital's hospice ward.

"Look at me," Josiah had joked as he danced near the West End Overlook the day of the photo shoot. "I'm 'Old-Fashioned Man.'"

Elijah was an old-fashioned man — so old-fashioned that he believed his 104 years on this Earth were part of God's plan, though he couldn't imagine what it might be.

I don't claim to know either, but I do know I was blessed to call him a friend. And if you'd rather call me lucky, well that's OK, too. I knew the original.

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