
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Emporia State's own Jackie Robinson

Let me tell you about a remarkable photograph in the archives here at Emporia State, of the school's first baseball team.

Taken in 1898, the photo is in black-and-white, and it shows 12 serious-looking young men in old-fashioned uniforms, holding bats and mitts. The team's shortstop looks relaxed and confident, and as he stands shoulder-to-shoulder with his teammates, there's a ghost of a smile on his face.

What is remarkable is that this young man with the enigmatic smile is black.

The student's name was Gaitha Page. In 1899, he and John R. Smith became the first black students to graduate from Kansas State Normal, now ESU.

Page was born in Tennessee, just 15 years after the end of the Civil War, the son of former slaves; his mother was the daughter of the man who had owned her. By 1897, Page's family had migrated to Kansas, and after graduating from high school in Topeka, Page applied to the Normal — a training school for teachers — at Emporia. The day before Page was to enroll, he sought the advice of a respected teacher and friend near his hometown, and was discouraged from applying.

"He at once informed me that I would never make it," Page recalled years later in a first-person account. When pressed for a reason why he would fail, Page's friend confided that it wasn't his ability or his character, but the color of his skin.

Undaunted, Page enrolled anyway.

"To my surprise and gratification, I was welcomed with enthusiasm and unfeigned interest," Page wrote. Encouraged by this reception, he asked whether there was a color bar at the school, and he was assured there was not.

Page soon encountered hardships of another kind, however; he arrived in Emporia with only 75 cents in his pocket. He borrowed textbooks because he didn't have the money to buy them; he worked as a janitor at the courthouse and a local church, and during the coldest winter in Kansas history he had frozen beans for "breakfast, dinner and supper."

A natural athlete, Page was recruited for the baseball team, but before the first game he was called into the office of one of his

instructors. Professor Chrisman, who taught History of Education, was blunt.

"(He) told me he was not in favor of a colored man on the team to represent the school," Page recalled. "I was stunned. I asked him if he thought I was unqualified. He said there was no doubt about that, but he just didn't think it good to have a Negro on the team."

When Page told the team's managers, a movement was quickly organized to keep their star shortstop. Both faculty and students came to his defense, and Page stayed on the team, going on to play Manhattan, Winfield, Ottawa and Baldwin. Emporia had the best college team in Kansas.

Later, Page said, Professor Chrisman apologized.

After graduation, Page returned to Topeka, to begin a long career in teaching. He died in Kansas City, Kan., in 1970, at the age of 90.

In 1999 — the 100th anniversary of the graduations of Page and Smith — Emporia State honored them with a special commencement ceremony.

We owe a lot to these first minority graduates, for challenging the status quo, for teaching us who we were and by giving us a glimpse of who we might become.

Their story is inspiring because they wouldn't allow their thirst for education to be denied, even in the face of hardship and racism. They are the kind of students who led us from a century of slavery to a century of freedom, and the kind of students we continue to need to build bridges to our future.

Today, we welcome with enthusiasm and unfeigned interest students of every ethnicity and from around the globe. We pride ourselves in our diversity, while celebrating our sense of community. We are a family, united by mission and dedicated to the proposition that the only limit to an individual's potential is ability.

And we still have a great baseball team.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
