



Leonard Hill looks through an old faded scrapbook his mother started putting together when Hill was signed to play for Ban Johnson Baseball in Liberal in May of 1955, shortly after Hill had graduated from Turpin, Okla., High School. Hill went on to play for the Bee Jays until mid-season 1957.

By LARRY PHILLIPS

On Saturday evening, June 4, 1955, Leonard Hill stepped onto a baseball field in Liberal, Kan., not realizing he would become a part of the town's history – he was an original Bee Jay player 55 years ago in their first game.

Though the 18-year-old third baseman went 3 for 5 at the plate that night, the Bee Jays lost to Lyons 7 to 6.

Hill didn't hit as well Sunday night in a 4-2 loss to Pratt, going 0 for 4, with the Bee Jays losing both games of their inaugural weekend openings. "BJs Get 24 Hits But Fail to Win Either Opener" glared the headline in Monday's Southwest Daily Times.

It was not an auspicious start to a franchise that would eventually build a storied, winning tradition throughout the next half decade.

But it was a start to an Oklahoma boy's dreams of playing summer baseball that ended three

years later with mixed emotions – wonderful fun and painful injuries.

Leonard Hill was born Aug. 7, 1936, in the Oklahoma Panhandle town of Turpin. He graduated from Turpin High School in May of 1954, where he excelled at basketball and baseball – and a smidgen of football.

“They used to play football in Turpin back in the ’20s and ’30s, but then some kid over in Hooker (Okla.) got killed (playing football), so a lot of these schools out here – like Hooker, Tyrone, Turpin – dropped football,” Hill said. “In the early ’50s, they started up some six-man football – even little Baker (Okla.) had started it.”

Turpin’s kids and their parents harangued school officials enough that they finally gave in.

“They started six-man football in Turpin when I was a senior – so I played one year,” Hill explained. “They didn’t start eight-man football until ’58.”

The highlight of his senior year was when he and his team made it to the state basketball tournament in the spring of 1954.

“We had a heck of a team that year,” Hill said. “We were 26 and 3 that year. We won the first two games by about 15 points each.”

Unfortunately, Turpin lost in the championship game by one point. But Hill must have impressed the college scouts, because he was offered a full scholarship to Phillips University in Enid, Okla.

But there was a full summer before college started, and Hill wanted to play some baseball.

He had made the acquaintance of a coach from Alva, Okla., who was recruiting in the area, and Hill asked him if he knew “where a fella could play some summer baseball?”

“He told me Dodge City was looking for a shortstop, so I called up there to coach Doll, and me and another buddy from Turpin went up there and tried out,” Hill said.

“Well, I looked like a million dollars that day, so they kept me on, but I’d never played shortstop in my life,” he continued. “I played that summer with Eddie Sutton, Jim Maskus and his cousin and Rex Patterson.”

It was that fall of ’54 when Hill was chasing after a loose ball and when he extended his glove to snag it, he hit a wall and injured his left wrist. No X-rays were taken of the injury, but a chiropractor twisted it around and back and forth before wrapping it in a piece of tape.

“He said, ‘I believe I got it in place,’” Hill said, adding the wrist continued to bother him for months at Phillips.

“I came home for Easter in ’55 and my dad took me for an X-ray and it was broken, but by that time, the pain had gone away, and I just went on,” Hill said.

When Hill returned home after his freshman year at Phillips, he heard the news that Liberal was forming a baseball team called Ban Johnson Baseball and a date for tryouts was announced.

“Back then, they couldn’t take but six kids outside of a 100-mile radius – that was for any team in the league,” Hill said. “They had to play local kids.”

Of the 70 young men that tried out for the B-Js, as they were then identified, only 15 were signed on to play for the team. Two additional players from “outside” were to arrive the following week. Though they were touted in the media, they didn’t make it onto the team after a few weeks, according to Hill.

Several local businessmen were instrumental in getting the Bee Jays started, though Hill can’t remember them all. He does recall Oscar “Doc” Rinehart worked for Panhandle Eastern Pipeline and W.A. Shuffleberger was a local electrician.

“They got a lot of Panhandle Eastern people and they had donated the pipe and got welders to build the lights out at the old Fairgrounds Park,” Hill said.

And others, such as Mr. Fleeners, who owned a furniture store and Mr. Emory Chaffin, the hardware man, often drove the players to games across the state.

“There was no team bus,” Hill said, with a chuckle. “We’d get two in the front and three in the back of a car and off we’d go.”

In that first year, 35 games were scheduled throughout western Kansas between June 4 and Aug. 21. There were teams from Dodge City, Garden City, Hutchinson, Larned, Liberal, Lyons, Pratt and Salina.

Things were going good that first year, and Hill admitted the ball players were treated somewhat like celebrities. Though they were not paid to play ball, they all got jobs through local businessmen – like at Panhandle Eastern or a furniture store or with the city or the county. Hill worked for the city.

He even had a sly grin on his face when he admitted the young girls followed the players around.

“Our games were at night and we usually went and ate supper afterwards,” he said. “There was this cafe on the northeast corner of the town square in Great Bend where we always went.

“One of the reasons was because there were always a bunch of girls there,” Hill said with a smile, adding none of the Bee Jays were married.

He had first gone to the eatery when he played for Dodge City the summer before, and he met a pretty gal from Lyons by the name of Shirley Knight at the cafe in Great Bend. After he started college at Phillips, he discovered she was enrolled there, as well.

“I got to know her pretty well – she was really good looking,” he said. “Anyway, about four or five years later, here was Shirley Knight in the movies.”

In the middle of July 1955, Hill was playing first base when an errant throw caused him to reach out in front of the base runner. When the player hit Hill’s glove, there was a pop. His left wrist had broken entirely – at the location of his old, mistreated injury he had sustained a year earlier.

“I was in a cast for six months – not six weeks, but six months,” Hill said. “I had gone so long without getting that first bone fixed up that they had to put a couple of steel pins in there to put it back together. They didn’t know if it would ever grow back right.”

The following year, the Bee Jays hired a coach from Norman, Okla., and Hill made the team, again. He played the entire schedule in the summer of 1956, and most of the season of 1957. But the old wrist was becoming a handicap.

“I just never did hit well after that,” Hill said. “Heck, I wasn’t that good with a bat in the first place.”

Hill is a retired school teacher and now lives in Liberal, but through it all, one gets the sense it was a short but fabulous ride for a young man raised in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

“It was a lot of fun,” he said. “It was really a good time.”