

Rudy Laskowski and the Keokuk Kernels of 1952 – 1953

By Steve Smith

Keokuk had been out of organized baseball for 2 years now and Doc Logan wanted a team. Doc had been involved in Keokuk baseball for over 30 years, since 1918 in fact. Keokuk had pioneered the “Farm Club” in 1931 when Doc was the President of the Keokuk Indians. The St. Louis Cardinals sponsored the 1931 Keokuk Mississippi Valley League champions. He saw night baseball come to Keokuk in 1931 – one of the earliest installation of lights. After being out of organized baseball since 1935, Doc had gotten the Pittsburgh Pirates to sponsor Keokuk in the Class C Central Association in 1947, 1948 and 1949 with future major leaguer Gus Bell as a star attraction in 1948. But the Pirates dropped their sponsorship at the end of the 1949 season. There was no organized baseball in Keokuk in 1950 and 1951.

Through Doc’s efforts, in the fall of 1951 Keokuk was awarded a Class B 3-I League franchise for 1952 and at the winter minor league baseball meetings in December 1951 in Columbus, Ohio, Doc hired Rudy Laskowski to manage the team. Although a significant effort was made, especially overtures to the St. Louis Browns and Bill Veeck, there would be no major league affiliation forthcoming in 1952 so it was up to Rudy to put a ball club together without major league assistance. Rudy’s charges were to win and put “fans in the stands,” not necessarily in that order. But in 1952 winning at the minor league level was much more important then it is today. In 1952, player development was important only in how much money could a player’s contract be sold for – either to a major league club or to a higher classification minor league club. So now you ask: who the hell was Rudy Laskowski and why are you writing about him?

Research has shown that Rudy was a baseball lifer, a good player and good manager and a good man who players respected. And Rudy did the job he was hired to do in Keokuk. In 1952, Rudy’s Keokuk Kernels drew 64,931 fans to Joyce Park. This was exceeded by the 76,405 fans Rudy’s 1953 team drew. Even though Rudy’s teams finished in 5th place in 1952 and in 7th place in 1953, the attendance for those two years were the two highest figures in all the years Keokuk was in organized baseball. And Keokuk was never really a baseball town in terms of attendance. Reading through the *Daily Gate City* over the years, it was consistently mentioned that attendance was poor and how the Keokuk franchise was in dire financial straights. The 7th place 1953 Kernels team outdrew the 1955 Keokuk Kernels who put together a 92-34 record and were named the 30th best Minor League team of all-time. And they outdrew them by almost 30,000 fans! (Of course, one shouldn’t be so short-sighted not to recognize there were other outside influences at work here such as the advent of televised baseball.)

So it’s interesting to take a look at Rudy Laskowski and his teams of 1952-53. It’s interesting because Rudy himself had a long and varied baseball career – his stop in Keokuk being for two short years of that career. He brought many exciting and fascinating players to Keokuk (although a few more pitchers would have helped the won-lost record). And he had a significant impact in that he integrated organized baseball in

Keokuk in the post-Jackie Robinson era. Keokuk's last black ballplayer was the great Bud Fowler in 1884. So for over 60 years, there were no black ballplayers in Keokuk organized baseball. Yet in 1952 and 1953, Rudy was not shy at all about bringing in black ballplayers. An examination of the 1952 and 1953 seasons shows that Rudy truly was trying to win and that was all he cared about.

So Who Was Rudy Laskowski?

At 36 years of age when hired to run the Keokuk ballclub and be the playing manager, Rudolph J. Laskowski would have spent more than half his life in baseball if he had not taken time out for four and one half years in the Army during World War II.

He was born in Chicago on March 25, 1915, and attended Lane Tech High School in Chicago. Both Rudy and his older brother Walter were all-star players in the Chicago Public League. While in high school, Rudy and Walter signed professional contracts to play in North and South Dakota during the summer. The following spring, the school found out about this and declared both ineligible for the high school team. Knowing they wouldn't be able to play baseball for Lane Tech, both Rudy and Walter quit school the next day. Rudy started his baseball career at the age of 17 as a shortstop for the Knoxville Smokies in the Southern Association in 1932 and was the youngest player in the history of the league. Walt started his career in 1932 with Waterloo IA of the Mississippi Valley League.

In 1933 he went to Little Rock of the Southern Association, the next year to Milwaukee of the American Association and in 1935 he was signed by Toledo of the same league. According to the Professional Baseball Player's Database, Rudy played for Peoria-Ft. Wayne of the 3-I League in 1935. After suffering an ankle injury, he returned to Chicago and served as batting practice catcher for the Chicago Cubs. In an item which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* of August 22, 1935, it was reported that "Rudy Laskowski, the Chicago lad who performs as batting practice catcher for the Cubs, met with a slight mishap before the first game. He was cracked on the side of the head by {Augie} Galan's bat and had to be taken away for repairs. Nothing serious."

He began the 1936 season with Dayton of the Mid-Atlantic League but in late August was signed by Davenport-Rock Island of the Western League who took him on as a replacement for their injured catcher. Immediately prior to the signing by Davenport, Rudy had been catching for the Chicago Mills, apparently a semi-pro team. (According to various sources, Rudy played for Dayton, Davenport and the Chicago Mills during 1936. The exact sequence is not entirely known.) The following year he played third base for Tyler of the East Texas League. At the age of 21, he made his first all-star team in the East Texas League. He was subsequently named to six other all star teams. Rudy had six years of professional playing experience before getting his first managerial job with Panama City of the Florida-Alabama league in 1938 at the age of 23. Rudy led his team to a 55-75 record, good for 5th place in the league. The next two years 1938 and 1939, Laskowski went to Pensacola of the Southeast League as a catcher. In 1940, he played with Montgomery, Alabama of the same league.

An Army enlistment took him out of baseball in 1941. He was in the initial landing with Eisenhower off French Morocco on October 24, 1942. He spent 586 days of front line duty with the 25th infantry of the Third Division. He saw action in French Morocco, Northern Africa, Sicily, Italy, France and Germany. He received 13 battle stars and the Croix de Guerre. While overseas, Rudy took time out from his front line duty to write *The Sporting News* and send a picture of him and his buddies in Italy. This picture is still in the archives of *The Sporting News* today. Rudy was wounded during the war as columnist Arch Ward of the *Chicago Tribune* noted in his December 10, 1943, column that "Rudy Laskowski, former catcher for the Milwaukee Brewers, who called himself modestly "the second Gabby Hartnett" is recovering from wounds suffered in the North African campaign." It was later proven that despite Rudy's assertion, he was not the second coming of Gabby Hartnett. However, Rudy had organized a baseball team while in the Army.

After his discharge from military service in August 1945, the White Sox signed him for a month and a half although he never got in a major league game during this time. (What is not clear is in what capacity he was signed – player or bullpen catcher – and whether or not he was actually added to the White Sox roster.) In 1946 he played for Little Rock and Waterloo. {In 1952, *The Daily Gate City*, as had the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1951, reported that Rudy played for the White Sox in 1945 although he never did get in a major league game.) Pensacola beckoned again in 1947 and he signed on as catcher and manager. In late 1947, former Yankee scout Jimmy Hamilton became part owner of the West Palm Beach team in the Florida International League. Jimmy signed Rudy as the player-manager for the 1948 season. In the middle of the 1948 season, Rudy left the West Palm Beach team because of "jangling nerves and insomnia" as reported by the *Saturday Evening Post*. Rudy sat out the 1949 season (although in July 1949, he placed an ad in *The Sporting News* stating he was interested in purchasing a minor league team) and returned to West Palm Beach in 1950 and 1951 as player-manager. He was replaced as manager during the middle of the 1951 season and finished the season as a player for the St. Petersburg Saints of the same league.

At the time of his Keokuk hiring, Bill Veeck, at a press conference in Quincy, Illinois, was asked if he knew the new Kernels manager. Veeck was quoted as enthusiastically saying "without qualification, Rudy will do an excellent job. Everybody will like him and players hustle for him." Bill Norman, St. Louis Browns 1st base coach was quoted at the same meeting "I watched him operate {in West Palm Beach} and I know Keokuk will be more than pleased. Rudy is good at developing talent." Veeck was further quoted as saying "I'll do the best I can to send some players there for the club." And Veeck did in fact send five players to Rudy in 1952 as quoted by Harry Lee in a *Daily Gate City* item on February 1, 1952. {Their names were not listed in the newspaper item and I have not been able to verify the names of those players.}

Laskowski was an all-around athlete but his off the diamond recreation was bowling where he held a 195 average and golf which he played in the high 70's. {During his career Rudy entered many bowling and golf tournaments. He also ran a bowling alley in

Chicago which he purchased in the winter of 1946-47.} At the time of his Keokuk hiring, Rudy was married with two children, Rudy Jr., four years old and Dave, eight years old. Rudy had married Charlotte Schuch of Chicago in 1947.

Rudy was introduced to the Keokuk fans at a January 1952 meeting attended by 700 to 800 persons at the Keokuk Senior High Auditorium. Also in attendance and speaking at that meeting were St. Louis Cardinals' announcers Gus Mancuso and none other than Harry Caray himself. Rudy told the audience that he believed that prospective baseball players have a much better chance of hitting the big time if they are trained properly at an early date. Because of this he intended to inaugurate a baseball school for youngsters in Keokuk in the summer. (We don't know exactly what Harry told the audience or whether he had a Budweiser courtesy of Doc Logan.)

On January 23, 1952, Rudy signed his first player, Pitcher Elliot Deitch. He purchased Deitch from Tallahassee of the Alabama-Florida League where Deitch was 7-5 in 1951. {Deitch was released on May 10, 1952 after appearing in one game for the Kernels.} By early February, Keokuk had 12 men on the roster when Rudy announced the signing of Pedro Ballester and Avelino Canizares. This was significant because they were the first black ballplayers signed to a Keokuk contract since 1884. Here is how the *Daily Gate City* announced the signings on February 7, 1952:

Negro Infielders Signed by Kernels

Two Cuban Negroes have been signed by Manager Rudy Laskowski for the Keokuk Kernels Business Manager Harry (Kim) Lee said today. The signing of these two will bring the team to 14 members thus far.

Both of the players make their homes in Havana, Cuba.

Artie (sic) Canizares, 30 year old limited service second baseman has been playing winter baseball in his hometown and was purchased from the Cienfuegos (sic) Cuba ball club. He is five feet eight inches tall and weighs 163 pounds.

The other is Pedro Ballester, a 21 year old limited service third baseman. Ballester played last year with a Sherbrooke, Canada, club of the Provincial League.

Both players hit .294 last year.

Rudy went to great lengths to recruit a team. In The Sporting News issue of January 30, 1952, the following item appeared:

Free Agents Wanted
to play in
Class B Ball
Contact
Rudy J. Laskowski, Mgr.
2912 Berwyn Avenue
Chicago, Illinois
Keokuk Baseball Club
Member of the Three-I League

Unfortunately, no records have been uncovered which show the results of the advertisement. It would really be fun to know what players responded to the ad.

Then prior to the start of the season there was an unexpected setback. Harry (Kim) Lee had been hired at the 1951 winter minor league meetings in Columbus OH by Doc Logan to be the business manager. A resident of Hollywood CA, Lee came to Keokuk with a splendid record as a business manager of ball clubs in the Arizona-Texas and Georgia-Florida leagues during the prior two years and, since his arrival in January, had been working hard to stir up interest in baseball throughout the area. However on the day after the announcement of the signing of Ballester and Canizares, it was announced that Lee was arrested for shoplifting at the local Benner Food Store, had been found guilty of petty larceny after a trial in Keokuk Superior Court and had resigned his position. Maybe Doc Logan didn't pay him enough to cover groceries.

On February 15, Steve Alan, local radio broadcaster, was announced as his replacement. Steve, whose real name was Chet Andrews, had been born in Poland but grew up in Chicago. He served in the Navy during WWII as a radar officer. Following the war, he entered radio broadcasting and at the time of his appointment was sports director and program manager for KOKX, the local Keokuk station.

The 1952 Season

Rudy took the Kernels to St. Petersburg FL for spring training. Undoubtedly the reason for St. Petersburg was that Rudy had played for St. Petersburg of the Florida International League and had many acquaintances there. Spring Training began in late March and by the end of April Rudy and the Kernels were headed to Keokuk.

One of the players that Bill Veeck had assigned to Keokuk was Ralph Palmer, a 19-year old who had played with the Chicago Giants of the Negro American League. Although Palmer never made it to Keokuk, he did pitch in an exhibition game vs. the St. Petersburg Saints in St. Petersburg before breaking camp.

And what was it like on the way to Keokuk in 1953. The Kernels were scheduled to play exhibition games in Waycross GA and Fitzgerald GA. The trouble was that the black players were not allowed to play in Waycross and Fitzgerald.

The season began in May and it was cold weather in Keokuk. On May 9, 1952, a photo of a number of players running sprints at Joyce Park appeared in the *Daily Gate City*. The caption states that “***Cubans Avelino Canizares, Pedro Ballester and Art Pennington were not present. Too cold.***” Of course, Art Pennington was not Cuban.

Let's take a look at the team that Rudy assembled for the 1952 season:

C – Ed Calderone/Ted Tate

Ed Calderone was a journeyman catcher who had two seasons in organized ball when he signed with the Kernels. Ed hit .219 with 1 homer and 30 RBIs for the Kernels in 75 games as the regular catcher. At the end of June he suffered an injury and was out for a month or so. He came back to play a little at the end of the season. In the meantime, the catching was done by Bob Jarmon and Ted Tate. Jarmon was another journeyman catcher who played with Quincy at the start of the season, then signed with Keokuk when Calderone was hurt. He was released by Keokuk on July 9, 1952.

Nothing is known about Ted Tate except that he played 48 games and hit .225. Calderone said of Tate in 2004: “That kid couldn't hit a ball out of the infield or throw anyone out. I never got to know him – maybe he was a nice guy.” Tate did play minor league ball through 1959 and his batting record verified Calderone's observation (about not hitting a lick – not about being a nice guy.) It should be noted that Tate did out-hit Calderone in Keokuk - .225 to .219.

1B – Harry Anderson

Harry Anderson had been in organized baseball since 1946 and played in the Florida State and Florida International Leagues in 1949-50-51 so Rudy would have been very familiar with him. Harry played in 121 games in 1952 batting .260 with 5 home runs and 64 RBIs. Little is known about Harry or his pre or post baseball career but Harry had a very attractive wife as her picture appeared in the *Daily Gate City*, the picture being taken at Miller Huggins field at spring training in Florida.

2B – George Handy

George Handy was apparently the only player that Keokuk did not own the contract of. Rudy Laskowski was to say before the start of the 1953 season that if George Handy had been with Keokuk the entire season of 1952, the Kernels would have finished much higher in the standings. George began his career in 1947 by hitting .326 with the Memphis Red Sox of the Negro Leagues. By 1952

he was with Miami Beach of the Florida International League. Miami Beach optioned him to Keokuk early in the season where he took over the 2nd base job. In 53 games, George batted .303 with 6 HR, 25 RBI's and drew 33 walks. He scored 45 runs in the 53 games. Miami Beach then recalled him which put a large dent in the Keokuk attack. The second base position was then taken over by Pedro Ballester and then later on in the season John Kall.

3B – Pedro Ballester

Not a whole lot is known about Pedro Ballester. Miguel Ballestro, as he was known in Cuba, was a light hitter who could play any infield position. In 1948, his only season in the Negro Leagues, he played shortstop for the New York Cubans. He entered organized baseball in 1951 with Sherbrooke of the Canadian Provincial League and signed with Keokuk for the 1952 season. It is not known what connection Ballester had with Rudy Laskowski. Playing in 121 games for the Kernels, he began the season at third base where he played for the first month of the season. On June 1, he switched positions with Avelino Canizares with Canizares moving to third and Ballester to shortstop. He played shortstop exclusively until early July when Canizares was released and Bob Harmon was signed to play shortstop. For the remainder of the season Pedro was in the lineup every night bouncing between second and third in Rudy's unstable infield alignment. Pedro played organized baseball through the 1955 season but after that there is no record of him in organized baseball.

SS – Avelino Canizares

Avelino was one of the great Cuban shortstops. He was 25 years old in 1945 when he came to the United States and played for the Cleveland Buckeyes where he hit .314 at the plate and in the field served as the glue to help the Buckeyes win the pennant during his only full season in the Negro Leagues. That season he was compared to Jackie Robinson and Artie Wilson. Prior to and after 1945 Avelino had played with many Cuban teams and in the Mexican Leagues. In 1950 he returned to the U.S. with Sherbrooke in the Provincial League. After his stint with Keokuk he returned again to Mexico.

Although a great player, Canizares was clearly near the end of the road in Keokuk. He hit only .222 with little power. He started the season at shortstop then was moved to 3rd base early in the season. He was released by the Kernels in July 1952. Bob Harmon took over at shortstop for the remainder of the season.

LF – Joe Schmidt

The 34 year-old veteran leftfielder played in 120 games for the 1952 Kernels banging out 138 hits and driving in 96 runs. Joe had begun his career in baseball in 1937 taking time out for Military Service from 1942-45. The highlight of Joe's career was a .441 batting average with Duluth MN in 1939, the 8th highest

average in baseball history. Joe never made it to the majors probably because of military service during the prime of his career. Although over 30 when he came to Keokuk, he was a very productive player for the Kernels. In 1953, he left the Kernels to play for Mt. Vernon IL of the Mississippi Valley League so as to be closer to his hometown of Belleville IL.

CF – Rudy Johnson

Rudy manned the centerfield position for Keokuk in 1952 and 1953. Playing in 119 games in 1952, Rudy batted .315 with 141 hits, only 26 of which went for extra bases with 23 doubles, 3 triples and no home runs. Rudy won the “Most Popular Player” balloting by the fans at the end of the season. However, the Most Valuable Player without a doubt was Art Pennington.

RF – Art Pennington

Man, what a player!!! Maybe the best ever in Keokuk minor league history. The following quote is from Catcher Ed Calderone: “We had a good team, not great – except for Art Pennington. He reminds me so much of Mickey Mantle. He was the best ball player I’ve ever played with.”

All “Superman” did for Keokuk in 1952 was lead the Three-I League in hitting with a .349 average. In 116 games, Art banged out 149 hits, scored 126 runs, 89 RBIs, 17 doubles, 10 triples and 20 home runs. Art also received 100 bases on balls. He led the league in total bases with 246.

Left fielder Joe Schmidt in a 2003 letter said of Art Pennington: “What a good hitter, fielder and what an arm.” And that comment came from a fellow who once hit .441 himself.

Art was 29 when he joined the Kernels in 1952 according to the Negro League history book. Art had played for the Chicago American Giants compiling batting averages of .299 in 1944 and .359 in 1945. In 1950 he hit .370. Art had a lifetime batting average of .336 in his 8 years in the Negro Leagues. Art was a switch hitter and was a versatile player in the Negro Leagues although playing mostly in the outfield.

Art clearly had one of the best seasons ever, if not the best, for a Keokuk player. Art returned to Keokuk in 1953 but that is another story to be discussed later.

P – Normand (Goose) Gosselin

On January 25, 1952, it was announced that the contract of Normand Gosselin had been purchased by the Kernels. Gosselin, a veteran righthander was 25 years old, 5’11 ½” and 178 pounds and had been in baseball since 1947 winning 19 games twice but never advancing above Class C. He had a record of 9-1 with an

ERA of 4.17 with Sherbrooke Quebec of the Class C Provincial League in 1951. The purchase of Gosselin would be a seminal event in the timeline of the 1952-53 Kernels as the “Goose” would be the team leader in innings pitched in both 1952 (196) and 1953 (195). 1953 was Gosselin’s final year in organized baseball.

P – Melvin Nee

Melvin Nee pitched 74 innings in 19 games with the 53 Kernels. He made 6 starts and completed 3 of them. Melvin was signed in early June and released in late July. Melvin began in organized ball in 1942, then spent 2 ½ years in the Navy before resuming his baseball career. A baseball veteran by the time he came to Keokuk, Melvin had begun the 1952 season in Oklahoma City. He was released by Oklahoma City but the owner was a friend of Rudy Laskowski so he asked Nee if he would go to Keokuk and pitch which he did. In a letter from Melvin Nee, he stated that he liked Rudy and that he was a good guy to play for. Nee had known Laskowski from the Florida International League days (where Nee pitched a perfect game in his first start) when Nee played for Miami and Rudy managed West Palm Beach. Nee also noted in his letter that “Keokuk paid me \$500 a month. \$250 under the table.” It is not clear whether the total was \$750 (which might explain why they released him a month later) or whether the \$250 was part of the \$500 a month. Or maybe his 5.96 ERA was why he was released.

Looking at this lineup it is a veteran team and an aging one. But they were experienced ballplayers. Remember it was Rudy’s job to win games not to develop players. Without a major league affiliation, he was handicapped when it came to signing good young talent.

Rudy’s Kernels finished 5th in 1952 but Rudy came back for another year. He promised a winner and he delivered the best year attendance-wise of Keokuk baseball even though he didn’t deliver a winner on the field.

Rudy as a Player in 1952-53

Rudy was a playing manager. And was he! In 1952, he appeared in 14 games as a catcher and 36 games as a pitcher. He went 11-9 in 186 innings. He was second on the staff in innings pitched trailing only Goose Gosselin with 196.

In 1953, he got his catcher’s jones out of him but he appeared in 39 games as a pitcher. And he started 21 of those games. He was the third highest pitcher on the staff in terms of innings pitched with 179 behind only Norm Gosselin and Armando Diaz. No other pitcher had more than 85 innings pitched. Now Rudy was not the best pitcher in 1953 but he went to the mound on a pretty regular basis. In fact, in terms of appearances, only Armando Diaz with 40 exceeded the 39 by Rudy. Rudy may not have been his own best pitcher but he was pretty dependable. In 1953 Rudy led the league in the following categories:

Most Games Lost 15
Most Opponents Runs Allowed 154
Most Hits Allowed 256
Most Home Runs Allowed 28
Most Earned Runs Allowed 124

Rudy's ERA of 6.23 was not the worst in the league; Jack Schlarb from Evansville posted a 7.18 ERA in only 74 innings to cop that honor. Rudy was probably not the worst pitcher in the league, but he did what he had to do. His mound offerings were often described in the newspapers as "soft stuff." The fact that Rudy – not a pitcher by trade – pitched 186 and 179 innings on the mound in the two year period demonstrates either (or both) (1) how difficult it was to find quality pitchers if you didn't have a major league affiliation or (2) how miserable all the other pitchers on the Keokuk pitching staff were.

The 1953 Season

In the March 11, 1953, edition of *The Sporting News*, the following item appeared: (March 11 seemed a little late to be looking for players as spring training was getting underway.)

WANTED...
FREE AGENT
By Keokuk Baseball Club, Keokuk, Iowa, member Three I League.
Contact:
Rudy J. Laskowski, Mgr.
2400 18th St. No
St. Petersburg, Florida
or
BUSINESS OFFICE
KEOKUK BASEBALL CLUB
Box 22 - Keokuk, Iowa

Rudy again took the club to spring training in St Petersburg. However, prior to spring training, Rudy was the victim of a holdup. In late February, Rudy planned to travel from his Chicago home, where he ran a bowling alley, to Peoria IL for a baseball dinner. Rudy didn't make the dinner. On the night before the dinner, as Rudy was closing up his bowling alley, a hoodlum stuck a gun in his back and demanded the day's receipts of \$780. He was tied up by the robber and didn't get loose until found by the janitor.

Let's take a look at the 1953 team:

C – Gilberto Valdivia

Not a lot is known about Gil Valdivia except that he had played many years in Cuba. He briefly played with Syracuse in the International League in 1944, then to the Mexican League from 1945-1948 (indications were that Valdivia played in the outlaw Mexican League during this time) and then with Havana of the Florida International League from 1949-1951 and then to St. Petersburg of the Florida International League in 1952 and the start of the 1953 season. Gil was added to the Keokuk roster on May 14, 1953. Gil most certainly was another of Rudy's Florida International League connections. Gil played in 93 games for the Kernels and batted .245 with 3 homers and 33 RBIs. He was described by the *Daily Gate City* as a "grand backstop." Gil went back to the Mexican League in 1954 which apparently was his last baseball stop.

1B – Harry Anderson

As in 1952, Harry Anderson began the 1953 season in Keokuk and played in 56 games at which point Harry asked to be released due to financial reasons: maintaining two homes, one in Florida and one in Keokuk, was simply too expensive. Harry returned to St. Petersburg of the Florida International League for the balance of the season and retired from baseball after the season. Harry hit .269 with 3 homers and 31 RBIs for the 1953 Kernels. Don Davenport (29 games) and Don Burson (12 Games) shared the first base position for the rest of the season.

2B – Carlos DeSouza

Carlos De Souza was another player who Rudy knew from Florida. Carlos played with the Tampa Smokers of the Florida International League from 1948 to 1953. He began the 1953 season with Tampa but then came to Keokuk in mid-May taking over the second base position from Arnie Fritz who was batting a cool .106. Fritz was sold to Berger TX two days after De Souza arrived. De Souza batted .259 and led the league in stolen bases with 37. He was also voted the most popular player by the fans for 1953 edging out Rudy Johnson, the 1952 winner by one vote.

3B – Third Base by Committee

In 1953, Rudy was really having trouble finding a third baseman. The season's starter, George Verespy, jumped the club after 12 games to play and manage for Owatonna in the outlaw Southern Minnesota league. Bob Harmon, his replacement, was running a gas station in his hometown of Evansville IN. Bob felt that running the gas station was more important than playing baseball – at least he made more money at it. In fact, the *Daily Gate City* wrote "Harmon, incidentally did his best to help Keokuk to the point of taking a loss of a couple of hundred dollars in his business while wearing a Kernel uniform." So Rudy turned to a former Rose Bowl Quarterback. Don Burson, former Northwestern star in

football and baseball, was best remembered as the man who quarterbacked Northwestern's 1949 Rose Bowl team to a 20-14 victory over California. Rudy had known Burson since Burson had played for Rudy's 1950 West Palm Beach team in the Florida International League. Burson hit .209 with 1 homer in 39 games for the Kernels. Late in the season, Rudy Johnson even played some 3B for the Kernels. Third base was a pain-in-the-neck for Rudy Laskowski all year.

SS – Bitsy Mott

Elisha "Bitsy" Mott was 34 years old when he came to Keokuk in 1953. He had been in baseball since 1939 and had spent part of the 1945 season with the Philadelphia Phillies as the regular shortstop where he hit .221. Bitsy never made it back to the majors. He spent the years 1947 through 1952 with Tampa, St. Petersburg, Havana and West Palm Beach of the Florida International League where he met Rudy. Both played together with West Palm Beach in 1951. Bitsy was known throughout Florida as a hustler and a colorful player. Upon Mott's signing with the Kernels, *The Daily Gate City* quoted Rudy: "He's a fine addition to the club. He can really keep a ball club together. He's a steady player." However, the *Gate City* also noted that "Mott batted .183 last year, barely above his own weight.....Like his batting average, Mott's extra base hitting wasn't impressive in 1952.....A rather small man, he hit no home runs {in 394 ABs}." Bitsy's signing was in line with much of Rudy's club building strategy: signing aging baseball veterans who were close to being over-the-hill or should we say past their prime.

Bitsy hit a little better for Keokuk in 1953 at .193 in 321 ABs. Bitsy left the club in early August. As the *Gate City* reported "In a telephone call to the *Gate City*, the former major leaguer said he just wished to return home. Mott wished the club well and said that he hoped they made the first division and got into the playoffs. 'I'm leaving with no ill feelings towards anyone and appreciate the friends I have made here. I'm just tired and I'm going home.'" Considering that Bitsy's batting average was Itsy Bitsy, there were probably no hard feelings on Laskowski's part when Bitsy left.

Bitsy played briefly in 1955 and 1957 but Keokuk was really the last stop of his long baseball career. But then Bitsy's luck turned when his sister married Colonel Tom Parker, the business manager for Elvis Presley and Bitsy became a security guard for Elvis and a member of the "Memphis Mafia." Bitsy also appeared in five Elvis movies, playing a sergeant in "G.I. Blues" and a state trooper in "Wild in the Country."

After Elvis died, Bitsy loved playing a clown for children. Bitsy passed away in Brandon FL in 2001 at the age of 82.

LF – Rocky Carlini/Rudy Johnson/Neb Wilson

Very little is known about Emil “Rocky” Carlini other than the basic baseball record. His first year in organized ball was 1945. He bounced around the minors until 1953 when he signed with Keokuk. He played in 104 games for the Kernels batting .261 with 10 home runs and 55 RBIs. He played one more year in 1954 with Port Arthur TX of the Evangeline League. Nothing is known of his post baseball career. He did not play in any league where his path would have crossed with Rudy so maybe he was one of the free agents who answered Rudy’s *Sporting News* ad.

Nesbit (Neb) Wilson was a slugger with a nickname of “Big Hack” which probably was a tribute to a mighty swing. At 228 pounds, malt beverages were never a stranger to Neb. He had been in baseball since 1940 with time out for 3 years in the service. In 1950, Neb had hit .355 with 35 homers and 163 RBIs for Pensacola in the Southeastern League. In 1952 he played for St. Petersburg, Rudy’s old club, which undoubtedly got him a connection with Rudy somewhere along the line. He began the 1953 season with Macon where he clobbered 10 home runs before coming to Keokuk on July 5th. He fulfilled his promise in Keokuk. In 65 games for the Kernels Neb socked 17 home runs with 70 RBIs while batting .333. In 1954, he was back in St. Petersburg with Rudy. Although hitting over 300 homers and driving in over 1,500 runs in the minors, Wilson never made the majors. In fact, the only time Wilson ever played for a team not in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida or Louisiana was the half season in Keokuk and a brief stint with Denver of the Western League in 1951. Maybe “Big Hack” just liked living large in the South.

CF – Rudy Johnson/Nat Peeples

Eulas (The Clown) Jackson was supposed be the centerfielder with Carlini in left and Pennington in right. At least that’s what the *Gate City* said on April 30. Jackson, who was called the “Clown” due to his antics on the basepaths, lasted 3 games and then was cut from the team. This seemed to be a strange situation as Jackson was highly touted in the newspapers prior to the season. To be cut so early in the season just doesn’t seem to resonate with the reporting. It seems that something else was happening here but hasn’t been uncovered yet. (Speculation would be that too many blacks were on the Keokuk team.) So it was Rudy Johnson again in centerfield. Rudy played 125 games in 1953, so basically he played every game for two years. And he still hasn’t hit a home run in 921 ABs over the 2 seasons. However, he did bat .290 with 63 RBIs in 1953. In a 2005 interview with Business Manager Steve Alan, he called Rudy Johnson “a nice guy and a good little ballplayer.”

Nat Peeples! According to the Negro Baseball Leagues history Nat “split....the 1950 season between the Kansas City Monarchs and the Indianapolis Clowns and his duties between catching and the outfield....and still hit for a .302 average for the year while demonstrating uncharacteristically good speed for a catcher.” For Keokuk he played CF and batted .331 and was the only Kernel to be named to the

1953 Three I League All-Star Team. He was purchased from the Pueblo CO club and inserted into the lineup shortly after the sale of Art Pennington's contract to Cedar Rapids.

RF – Art Pennington/Rocky Carlini

The 1953 season began with Big Art in rightfield. It was expected that he would pick up where he left off in 1952. And he did. But on May 23, Art was suspended by Rudy for “general insubordination” as it was announced in the *Daily Gate City*. A few days later on May 28, Art was back in the lineup. But then the next day, it was announced that Art was sold to Cedar Rapids, also of the Three-I League. Why would you sell a player of Art's caliber to your league rival? It didn't make sense. The *Daily Gate City* stated that Art had fallen into a disagreement with Manager Rudy Laskowski. In 2004, I interviewed Art Pennington. I asked him what he and Rudy disagreed about to the point where he was dispatched from the club. Art's response was that there was no disagreement. He loved playing for Rudy Laskowski. It was Doc Logan, President of the Keokuk Baseball Association, who wanted him gone. Art stated that the reason he was sold was one of simple racial prejudice.

Shortly after Art left, the Kernels acquired Nat Peeples who took over the centerfield job with Rudy Johnson moving to left and Rocky Carlini taking over the rightfield position.

P – Charlie Cuellar

In April of 1953, the Kernels announced the signing of Charlie Cuellar in the *Daily Gate City* as “a veteran righthander who was with the Chicago White Sox during a portion of the 1950 baseball wars.” It was all true. Cuellar had been in baseball since 1935 and was at least 35 years old. His major league career had consisted of relieving in 2 games with the White Sox in 1950 compiling a 33.75 (Yes, readers, that is 33.75) ERA.

Cuellar had begun his career with Decatur of the Three-I League in 1935 and now he was to be with his final team in an outstanding 18 year career. Cuellar had spent the years 1947 – 1951 with Tampa, Lakeland and St. Petersburg of the Florida International League where he undoubtedly got to know Rudy. In fact, Cuellar managed the Lakeland team for part of the 1950 season. Cuellar had been a pretty nice pitcher in the Florida International League winning 15-17-17 games in 1947-48-49. Upon the signing of Cuellar, Rudy was quoted “Charlie's a fine pitcher and I feel he'll really be a great help to the squad. He's a veteran in every respect and should really find the Three-I League to his liking.” When he came to Keokuk, Cuellar had won over 200 minor league games. Charlie was also described by the *Gate City* as a “fancy dresser and good looking.”

Cuellar was the opening day hurler for the Kernels and started a second game on May 9. He did not make another appearance until June 7 so it would appear that he was possibly injured during that time. Charlie apparently went back to Florida during this period as the June 6 *Daily Gate City* reported “Hurler Charlie Cuellar came straight to Keokuk instead of meeting the team in Terre Haute. Charlie intended to be on hand for the final Phillie game but was picked up for speeding in a small town in Mississippi and spent 6 hours in the clink. Southern hospitality??”

Probably the highlight of Charlie’s stay in Keokuk occurred on July 10, 1953, when Charlie faced the Burlington Flints and Pitcher Johnny VanderMeer at Joyce Park. Yes, folks, that is the Johnny VanderMeer of double no-hit fame who was the playing manager for the Flints. Charlie was up to the task as he shut Burlington out 9-0. Although this was a couple of over-the-hill pitchers, it still must have been a lot of fun to see a couple of former major leaguers go at it on the mound at Joyce Park. Only the 779 fans who were in attendance can claim they saw this matchup.

For the 1953 season Charlie went 5-4 with a 4.14 ERA, making 12 starts and pitching 76 innings, averaging over 6 innings a start with 4 complete games. He was released on August 5, the reason undetermined as Charlie had been a pretty effective hurler for the Kernels. Keokuk was his last stop as a player in organized baseball. (An interesting item is that Charlie began his career with Decatur of the Three-League in 1935 and ended it with Keokuk in the Three-I League in 1953.) In 1954, Charlie became the manager of the Tallahassee team in the Florida International League.

P – Bob Loddecke

Joining the club in July was Bob Loddecke, a veteran pitcher. Loddecke had just been released from the Brooklyn farm system. Corresponding with Bob in 2005, Bob said that Rudy had called him when he was released by the Dodgers. He had played against Rudy’s team in 1951. Bob said that “you had to be ready to play for Rudy: you would relieve one day and start the next.” After his professional baseball career ended, Bob went on to play softball for many years. He was inducted into the St. Louis Amateur Hall of Fame in 1985. Bob also pitched batting practice for the St. Louis Cardinals for many years beginning in 1955. Bob pitched in 23 games for the 1953 Kernels starting 4 games and relieving in 19. He had a 2-6 record with a 5.51 ERA.

The 1953 Kernels finished 7th but provided some interesting moments and some interesting characters and drew the largest attendance in the history of Keokuk baseball. The large attendance was probably one of the main reasons that the Cleveland Indians sponsored the Keokuk Kernels in the Three I League for the next 4 years.

One of the more amusing moments of the 1953 season was on May 26 in Burlington. In the bottom of the 6th inning, Keokuk Pitcher Nick Pappas loaded the bases with a base on balls and Rudy felt that was enough for Pappas. Apparently feeling that his last pitch that loaded the bases should have been a strike and the third out, Nick became angry and tossed the ball over the right field fence upon being taken out of the game. Nick Pappas was released by the Kernels on May 28 – 2 days later. I guess it wasn't so amusing from Nick's perspective.

Marshall O'Coine was a rather ordinary player for the 1953 Kernels. Rudy undoubtedly hired him since O'Coine was a veteran pitcher having played against Rudy in the Florida International League. O'Coine pitched in 8 games with a 3-1 record before leaving the team to either (1) be a city draftsman in his hometown in Georgia or (2) to play semi-pro baseball in Minnesota. Both reasons appeared in *the Daily Gate City* so take your choice. O'Coine did, in fact, play for Rochester of the Southern Minnesota League. The thing about Marshall O'Coine was his nickname: "Eagle Beak" as the *Daily Gate City* anointed him. Can you picture O'Coine even if you have never seen a picture of him? Baseball nicknames ain't what they used to be!

Rudy made good on his promise to look at the local kids. He signed up 4 of them during the two years he was in Keokuk: Leo Tigue of St. Peter's High School in Keokuk, Tom Azinger of Montrose, Bob "Ratz" Williams of Keokuk Senior High, and Jack Jones of Keokuk Senior High.

As the pitching situation with the Kernels was close to desperate, Leo Tigue, a pitcher, was signed in early July of 1952. Leo started 4 games and relieved in one before being released on July 24, 1952.

Following Leo was Tom Azinger of Montrose who was signed in early August of 1952 shortly after Tigue was released. Azinger made 5 starts for the Kernels and stayed with the team through the end of the season. Tom played with Middleboro of the Mountain State League in 1953 going 0-2 before calling it a career.

Ratz Williams was a starter on the Keokuk Senior High basketball teams of 1951-53 who went to the state tournament two years in a row. Ratz was signed early in 1953 by the Kernels and was sent to Hannibal of the Mississippi-Ohio Valley League where he went 0-1 before being released. He never pitched for the Kernels.

Late in the 1953 season, the Kernels signed local Keokuk star Jack Jones. Jones had starred for Keokuk Senior High in football and basketball and in American Legion baseball. He was signed by the Kernels as a utility infielder after playing for the semi-pro Carroll (IA) Merchants earlier in the 1953 season. The *Daily Gate City* noted that "Laskowski signed the 18 year old Keokuk youth to help strengthen {the Keokuk} forces for the rest of the season. Both Don Burson and Bob Watson will leave the club next week to take up high school coaching duties. Burson's last game will be at Peoria August 27 while Watson will leave after the game the following day." Such were the fortunes of a minor league manager in 1953. Jones batted .114 in 17 games with the

Kernels, then went to spring training with the Cleveland Indians in 1954 where he states that his claim to fame is that he roomed with Roger Maris during spring training. There is no record of Jones playing organized ball in 1954.

Sometime in late August 1953, Johnny Kall, who played for the Kernels in 1952, came to Keokuk on vacation. Johnny had played for the Kernels in 1952 and married Billie Banks of Keokuk. But at the end of the 1952 season, he retired from baseball to run his welding shop and moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Upon arriving in Keokuk to visit his wife's family while on vacation, he found that Burson and Watson had left town and Rudy was in need of infielders for the last week or so of the season. So Rudy asked Johnny to suit up and he did. He was added to the roster on September 1 and played in 8 games for the Kernels batting .111. The .111 average convinced him to resume his welding career the following year.

Rudy looked everywhere for baseball talent. The saga of Willie Jones is an example of Rudy's eye. The April 27, 1953, issue of the *Daily Gate City* states that Willie Jones was discovered on a St Petersburg golf course by manager Rudy Laskowski. According to the *Daily Gate City*, Rudy, an excellent golfer, (who in his later years often golfed with Al Lopez in Tampa FL) was playing in the 1953 St. Petersburg Open. Willie Jones, later described by the *Daily Gate City* as the "promising 16 year old Negro sandlotter", was Rudy's caddy. As the story goes, Willie found out who he was caddying for and asked Rudy for a tryout. Rudy consented and brought Willie to spring training. However, Willie's Keokuk baseball career consisted of a couple of pinch hitting appearances and on May 14, 1953, he was optioned to Grand Forks where he batted .235 with no home runs and no RBI's. 1953 was apparently Willie's only year in organized baseball.

One of the real fine things that Rudy did was establish a Cuban connection which could also be called "opportunity." The connection though was not with the youth of Cuba but with the veterans: Gil Valdivia, Charlie Cuellar, Avelino Canizares, Pedro Ballester, Raul Villiamea, Armando Diaz, Amancio Ferro, Germain Pizarro and Carlos DeSouza had all seen their better days as ball players by the time they arrived in Keokuk. {It has not been firmly established that Villiamea, Pizarro and De Souza are Cuban. Cuellar was of Cuban heritage but, in fact, was born in Ybor City FL and passed away in Tampa. He was often referred to in the newspapers as Cuban.} But we have to give Rudy a lot of credit for bringing these Cuban players to Keokuk as it must have been very difficult for the players themselves due to the language barrier and just the fact they were in Keokuk where there were few, if any, people like themselves. I am sure that was not a positive situation in 1950s America.

Business Manager Steve Alan called Art Pennington Keokuk's Most Valuable Player not only for his on-the-field heroics but because he also spoke Spanish and served as the interpreter when Steve, as business manager, had to talk to the players. Fifty years later Alan recalled questioning one of the Cuban players about the nine dependents he claimed for income tax withholding purposes. Alan said the lad named his parents, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews. Alan did not say if he allowed the claim.

Likewise, Rudy brought in many black players: Nat Peeples, Pedro Ballester, Avelino Canizares, Art Pennington, George Handy, Germain Pizarro, Willie Newman, Ralph Palmer, and Eulas Jackson (the list is not all inclusive). Again, give him credit for creating the opportunity for these players. It has been documented that Clarence Hall, “a well built Negro” was recommended to Rudy by Mamby Brooks, a former Negro League player in Kansas City. Art Pennington doesn’t really remember where he met Rudy; he just remembers him being around at ball games. My presumption based on my research is that Rudy cultivated many contacts throughout the game including Negro Leaguers such as Mamby Brooks.

Keokuk was not an easy place for a black or a Cuban to be in the 1950s. Ask Jim Mudcat Grant who played for the 1955 Kernels. In the book “**Where have you Gone Vince DiMaggio**”. Grant discusses his abysmal treatment at the hands of the Keokuk team photographer. Grant is quoted in the book: “From the time the Keokuk team photographer said “You black boys do strange things to the lighting”, I was ready to explode.” In the recent book, “**The Black Aces**”, Grant frankly states: “In Keokuk they didn’t want you in some places if you were black.” This feeling was confirmed in an interview with Art Pennington where he states that he believes he was sent from Keokuk to Cedar Rapids in 1953 because team president Doc Logan did not want him on the team because he had a white wife. Pennington stated that while this was the feeling of Doc Logan, it was not the feeling of Rudy Laskowski who Pennington praised as a good manager. In interviews Art has stated that Keokuk was a prejudiced town.

Grant played here 3 years after Rudy arrived. Rudy was truly the groundbreaker in this regard. Based on my research, I truly believe that Rudy Laskowski had only one thing in mind: to win ball games. Furthermore, in all of my research, I have never heard in an interview or read in print one negative thing about Rudy’s conduct as a manager.

The 1952-1953 Keokuk Kernel teams were truly melting pots.

Short but Sweet

So the Rudy Laskowski era in Keokuk was short but sweet. It didn’t produce a winning baseball team but it did produce a positive baseball atmosphere in Keokuk, the two best years of Keokuk’s baseball attendance life. And it produced some good players, some interesting players that left a legacy to Keokuk baseball. Rudy proved that baseball in Keokuk was alive and well under the right circumstances and it undoubtedly led to the Cleveland farm club years of 1954-1957.

And let us not forget Rudy’s contributions to bringing black ballplayers to Keokuk for the first time in the post-Jackie Robinson era. So let’s end with a salute to Rudy – a real fine baseball man.

Epilogue

In researching Keokuk baseball history, it appears that the largest crowd ever for a minor league baseball game in the City of Keokuk was on August 16, 1953. It was a record crowd of 4,883. At the time Keokuk was in 7th place in the league standings. It was Industry Night in Keokuk. The local industries had bought out the game. Oh yeh, and at the game, Tigie Motors gave away a brand new Plymouth. It was won by Ed Downey of Donnelson. And you had to be present to win!

After the conclusion of the 1953 season, Keokuk secured a working agreement for the 1954 season with the Cleveland Indians. Rudy Laskowski was not retained by Cleveland but became manager of the St. Petersburg team in the Florida International League in 1954.

Rudy Laskowski passed away on June 8, 1993, in Bradenton FL. He is buried in the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell FL.

Doc Logan resigned as president of the Keokuk Baseball Association at the conclusion of the 1952 season.

I have come across no written record which would show that Harry Caray ever returned to Keokuk. Caray had made the January 1953 trip to Keokuk under difficult circumstances. He had planned to fly to Quincy where he was to be met by a Keokuk group but planes were grounded in St. Louis by fog and he had to drive all the way, returning to St. Louis after the banquet with Mancuso.

Art "Superman" Pennington and Jack Jones were the only members of the 1952-53 Kernels to return to the 2004 Keokuk Baseball Reunion.

Keokuk played in the Three-League as a Cleveland Indians farm club from 1954 to 1957. From 1958 to 1961, the Keokuk Cardinals played in the Class D Midwest League. In 1962, the Keokuk Dodgers began the season in Keokuk but in late August the team folded and finished the season as the Midwest Dodgers playing in Dubuque IA.

The last game at Joyce Park was August 2, 1962. Keokuk beat Cedar Rapids 6-1 in the second game of a doubleheader. Steve Anderson threw the last pitch striking out a Cedar Rapids pinch-hitter by the name of Willis Kuse. There has not been an Organized Baseball team in Keokuk since that game.

Appendix

Attached is a complete roster of players for the 1952 and 1953 Kernels. In preparing this roster, every box score in the *Daily Gate City* was reviewed. It is believed to be complete.