Baseball in Beaufort County--
An Old Timer Remembers

Mr. Cecil Slade--still ready to bunt a man down.
Cecil Slade is in his middle seventies now, many years past the time of his playing prime when he was one of the best baseball pitchers in Beaufort County, or, for that matter, eastern North Carolina. But his memory of the grand old game, the American pastime, is fresh and vital.

So some of us from Life on the Pamlico, including Mr. Slade's son Gary, drove to his Washington, N. C., home to talk to him about his activities in baseball. We found a small, wiry man—pleasant and animated—who was eager to share his memories with us.

He told us of the primitive conditions under which he played in grammar and high school. He told us of the early "match games" in Beaufort County. Before one such game in the 1920s, a bootlegger took him out in the woods and gave him a drink. He played so well that the man showed him his still. But, unfortunately, Mr. Slade drank too much before the next game and was unable to play.

He told us of the great ballplayers from the area, from the legendary Jim Brown of St. Louis Cardinal fame to the Perry boys, Gaylord and Jim, from Williamston.

Most of all he told us of his love for the old game and for the men who played it long ago.
Gary Slade with his mother and father.
I was born and raised in Pamlico County, a little place called Whortonsville, yessir, just a little hole in the road. I played high school in a place you might've heard of--Stonewall. That's where I finished school at was at Stonewall. In high school we didn't play anything except basketball and baseball. Didn't mess with football whatsoever then.

Did you have some real good coaches there that helped you, that taught you how to play?

Well, yes, sir. I had some. In elementary school, just the principal, you know. [We were] just a bunch of small kids, you know. He kind of looked after organization. When I went to Stonewall to high school, at that time the agricultural teacher was the coach and manager of the high school team, see. He trained me through that.

In the early 20s, during and just after his highschool days, Mr. Slade told about one of the most impressive pitchers he ever saw.

Before I come here [Washington] from where I come from we won the county championship. There we had a man, and there's never been a man in the big leagues could throw a ball no harder 'n he could. He was the only man I've ever been afraid of.

What was his name?

Roland Styron. He was from Pamlico County, Hobucken.

What kind of style of pitching did he have that made him so good?
Well, it was overpowering speed. You couldn't get up to that plate. You were in danger if you dug in. Sometimes you could set your spikes on certain pitchers, but you couldn't do it with him 'cause he was fast. He went to Richmond to try out with Richmond and he got up there and he said he could make more money at home selling fish—at that time, you know. He didn't care whether he played or not.

Another ballplayer impressed Mr. Slade at this time.

One team in Pamlico County, they called Messic, North Carolina, and they were the most balanced team I've ever seen. I mean they all loved to play ball, and the old story was told down there one year that they weren't going to have ball down there that year. Of course, it [Messic] was just a hole in the road, see, and they said that the man planted his crops [where they played]. And the boys tore it up and made a ballpark out of it anyhow. That's what was told. I don't know if it was true.

They had a man [at Messic] that I honestly believe could've caught just as good as any New York Yankee could, and he could hit that ball! He still holds the record in New Bern, North Carolina, hitting the longest ball that's ever been hit in New Bern.

What was his name?

His name was Joe Morris. He was a catcher.

How good was he?

Oh, goodness, you better not try to ever leave anywhere off first base! You were in danger of being picked off first base! He stayed cocked and ready all the time. And I never saw anybody steal second off him.

He threw it real strong?

Yes. His brother Will was a pitcher, and he pitched to him and he had good control. And B. Carawan, he was the one played shortstop, and I never seen a man faster on shortstop than he was. And all the rest of 'em—they had nine good men. Now Hobucken, where I was just talking about Roland, they just had an average crew. I mean, you know, you were subject to see an error at anytime, but you didn't see no errors with Messic. I mean, I wouldn't say none. There might be one now and then, but it was very rare.

But Messic didn't have a pitcher as good as Roland Styron?

No, no. I think the reason he was so good—amongst us, of course, he had overpowering speed. In other words, there weren't nobody that dug in on him. I saw him hit a man at my home one time. It hit on the handle of the bat and hit him in the jaw. He had a time, you know.

Was he a real big fellow?

Well, no, he was about six feet, but he was muscled. I mean, he was all muscle.

Did he throw anything else besides the fast ball? Curve ball or anything?

I think he depended on his overpowering speed all the time. You got a certain place in the pitcher's box. Roland, he stood with his left foot on there and when he came over
with his windup, he stepped forward.

Was he left handed or right handed?

Right handed. Boy, did I love to play that stuff [baseball]. If he [Roland] had just had my will to play. He just didn't care a thing about it. I'd of went somewhere [with Roland's ability]. I don't know if I'd played or not, but I would've sure went!

Mr. Slade remembers that playing baseball at school was in sharp contrast to today's well-equipped little leaguers and high school players.

We kids, when we started going to school, we didn't have a baseball. We'd take socks, old socks, unravel 'em and put [fishing] net lead into 'em and wrap 'em and it was just as hard as a baseball. We had some bats and course some were home-made bats and stuff that people would make, you know.

The catcher was not well-equipped in those days.

Robert Horton caught for us, and he didn't have a thing but the mask and mitt, no chest protector nor knee guards. That was back in them days.

His high school team, Mr. Slade remembers, was one of the best ball clubs he ever played on.

I believe we had just as good a ball club in high school as they had in the Coastal Plains [league] because that Glen Woodard, you just couldn't get one by him. And we had a good steady ball club. They'd holler and tell me bring it out here, we want it out here, see!

After finishing high school in Stonewall, Mr. Slade moved to Washington, N. C. in 1928.

I came here after I was grown and married and went to Norfolk and came back, see. I've heard this story; now how true it was I don't know. But old man Kugler here was 'bout the wealthiest man in Washington then. And they built a field that's called Kugler Field out there, and they were having paid ball then. I never saw a game 'cause the field was already built and established when I came here, see, but they claimed they closed it because they didn't have enough attendance to pay the players. Now, that's the hearsay.

I had an uncle living here in Washington offered me a good job [in 1928] and I said, well, I'm not going back home, so here I've been ever since.

And then you got involved in the county baseball?

Well, they didn't have any county league then. Let me say this to you. In all fairness, it's what you call match games, you know. You might never heard of it in your time.

No.

Well, a match game is like this. In other words, say you're in Belhaven, and I'm here. And probably I'd say, we'll go down there and play a game, see, no league whatever. 'Course it would a mattered of whoever won, Belhaven or whether we won. And that's the way it was when I first came here. 'Course I played all over this county, everywhere back 'n forth.

Was there a fairly organized Washington
team, or did different people play at different times?

Then there wasn't no organized team.

So in them games you just sort of called up somebody, your special friends, and got together?

And played ball! It's just like I say: we were down here to Belhaven. Belhaven would play Washington, see, and we'd pick up the best players and all we could get and play down there in the afternoon. They might put in the paper the score and who won. I mean, there was no league or nothing at all. *Course anybody could play that could play ball.

Why don't you describe how one of these match games would be. How many fans would you have there and did you go on a bus?

We had cars to take the players and stuff. Like when we went to Aurora, well, we'd have enough cars to take all the players' stuff, and there'd be a few people that come early. See, they'd probably come down there to play and, of course, around Aurora all the people would gather around the field.

Would you have stands?

No, there wouldn't be any stands. There'd just be old plank seats, you know, like that, just around the edge. Most of 'em [fans] stood up. And then the way we'd take in for the gate anything, well, nobody got any pay, you know, for the play.

Did you have some kind of uniforms?

Not at first they wouldn't.

In those early games, you really just wore what you had?

That's right.

Did you have spikes then?

Oh yes!

But nobody paid to go to those match games?

No. I think, Captain, 'bout how hard times were. We didn't even have soft drinks. We would have a match game there at home when I played for Whortonsville. They'd get a barrel and make a barrel of lemonade, see, whole barrel of lemonade, and it was all free, you know. People would buy the lemons and sugar and stuff. I mean, you know, if anybody wanted to drink something. And the way it would be then, well, some of the people might take a hat and go around like in church, you know, and pick up where people wanted to give anything and whether they didn't. Wasn't too much to give in them days, tell you the truth.

About how many people would you have at the match games?

Well, I'd say somewheres around a hundred. *Course [back] then there weren't nowhere hardly no money circulating. Nobody had automobiles like they have now, just a few people. I remember when I was a boy, there were two cars in the whole place where I lived. These people were kind of wealthy. That was back in the Model T days. Back in [those days] you didn't have too much way to go, unless you
went horse and buggy or horse and cart, stuff like that. But there wasn't nowhere to go. At least there was church, you know, but there weren't no where else to go.

'Course on Sunday people were so religious they didn't want you to play on Sunday down there [in Pamlico County].

Is that right? Sunday they didn't want you to play?

No, not down in the country. Now, we played Sundays here [Washington], and all now, but that was [after] having church and everything. And we wouldn't have our parks then; we didn't have fences around 'em, not where you were playing like that. They had, you know, foul ball lines, and all, left field and right field, where the ball was gonna go. But if a man hit it, if he hit it in fair territory, he could keep right on running long as the man didn't get the ball in. I tell you something I believe that's changed: there was more fighting and brawls. Oh, yes, sir! Was nothing to get in a fight! There used to be a Syrian over at my home who loved to fight at ballgames.

Why would a fight start? A disputed call?

Yes, something like that. See, one start up, and they'd get together and gang up and all, and they had some fist fights, stuff like that.

As we were talking about fights at the match ballgames, Mr. Slade remembered one involving a catcher. But he had a time remembering the man's name.

He was one of the best catchers I ever saw, and he was just about the size of Joe Morris. And that was Charlie—what was his name? I'll think of it directly, captain. 'Cuse me, I'm thinking.

That's all right.

Charlie Elks! That was his name 'cause he was the one that I saw square off with Dupree Toler. You know, Dupree was a good fighter. He always loved to come around, you know, and start something. He was always going around having these gettogethers, you know, and fighting and everything. He was supposed to be one of the best men there was around 'cause he was pretty rugged.

We were playing ball and there weren't even no league over there and Charlie was catching. And Dupree came out there running his mouth, you know, inviting this one and that one and the other. And Charlie threw up his hand back of the plate to hold time, see, and pulled off his gear and confronted him. Dupree didn't bother him either.

He let him alone?

Yes, he let him alone 'cause Charlie was a lot bigger than Dupree. I mean, he was taller.

Despite his reluctance to discuss his own achievements, Mr. Slade told us what it took for a smaller fellow like him to succeed as a pitcher.

When you pitched, what was your best pitch?

Well, I tell you, Captain, my best pitch was an out drop.
Would that be like a curve?

Curve and drop too. I couldn't throw much of an in [drop]. I could break it a little bit but not too much. Well, at that time an out curve breaks in, see, and an in curve breaks out [a right handed pitcher throwing to a left handed batter]. And I could throw. It takes speed to throw one of them pretty well [in curve], and I didn't have too much speed. I never could throw one of them too well, but I could throw a good out curve and good out drop and a straight ball. Where I got mine [outs] was—not bragging on myself—I had perfect control. I had a catcher one time say he could hold that mitt anywhere he wanted to and I could throw the ball anywhere he signaled for it.

Would you study the hitters to know, to try to get a good idea what to throw to them?

Yes, sir. You had to, especially after you'd played 'em one or two times. You had to.

Would you do things like change speeds?

Not too much, no, sir, not too much. I, once in a while, tried to throw a knuckler, but I never was never very good at throwing a knuckle ball. I couldn't control it very well.

Unlike many pitchers, Mr. Slade was also a good hitter. He told us of an honor that an early coach gave him, an honor that few pitchers receive.

I had a lot of folks, when we were playing ball in Pamlico County, say good God Almighty, look at that kid out there on the mound.
Mr. Slade swung a pretty good bat for a pitcher.
And I was brought up pretty good. In fact, this man [his first coach, Mr. Johnson] he finished Mississippi College—he gave me a white sweater with that name on the back of it. I was asking my wife the other day whatever happened to that sweater. He loved me to death 'cause he trained me. I mean, talked to me and told me what to do. And I could throw them balls, and I'd listen pretty well. I loved to play so good!

He even had me batting second in the lineup! The pitcher's always supposed to bat last, see, and I asked him what was the reason, but I was a pretty good bunter, see, but I weren't too good a runner. We had a boy—his nickname on the team was Hot Ziggety. And I don't believe any player on the Coastal Plains team could beat him playing shortstop, and he could throw, snap of his arm like that to first base. He didn't have to rare back. They put him as leadoff man, see, and I asked him, I said, "Mr. Johnson, why the hell you batting me in second place? You know I can't bunt and ever make it down to first base." He said, "You ain't got to make it down there." He said, "If you bunt the ball fair, Glenn will be on second base. They'll never get him!" Said, "Ain't nobody fast enough to get him." He said, "We'll be in scoring position and then the hitters come up and probably get him in!"

In his career as a ballplayer, Mr. Slade played with and against many outstanding baseballers in eastern North Carolina. His son Gary, himself a fine ballplayer, urged his father to pick an all star team from the area.

At one time I [Gary] had gotten him to pick an all star team. Do you remember those all star teams?

Yes, I remember some of 'em.

Would you pick Roland Styron as pitcher?

Well, I'd put him substitute pitcher. I'd put Joe Morris catching and his brother Will pitching. Will didn't have overpowering speed, but he had a lot more headwork than Roland had.

What was his main pitch?

Well, at that time probably an out curve.

Who would you put from Beaufort County?

Oh, Dominic Andreoli. He was a pitcher. He had a lot of speed, but I batted against him. In fact, I hit a homerun on him. I reckon he let me do it. He loved to play. He had other kinds of balls besides that, and he could throw next hardest to Roland as anybody I've seen. Fact, he went over there to New Bern and played in that Coastal Plains League, you know, years ago.

How about outfield?

You mean Beaufort County?

That's right.

Garbo Tetterton. I don't know what his real name is. He was a good runner and a good hard worker and all. The only thing about him, he was right smart-mouthy all the time.
Didn't you say something about Fred Potts?

Yes. Fred Potts didn't play much when I came around here. I don't know why. He was probably working or something another. Fred Potts played center field, and he was the best in Washington at that time.

He was real fast?

Yes, sir, he was fast enough that he could've played this Coastal Plains League all right if it'd been going at the time. Fred is a little bit older than I am. And I'm 75. Fred lives right here in Washington now. I see him occasionally. He was good, and they had a fellow down here at Core Point was another pitcher, Milan Nixon. He was just as good as Dominic. Only thing about it, he didn't have the headwork that Dominic had. I mean he just rared back and threw it.

Coastal Plains League, that's a professional league?

Yes. That was professional. We never had it here. Like I say, it come to Greenville, Ayden, Kinston.

They [Washington] had a solid ballclub. They wasn't a man on there that couldn't play good ball. Now that Bill Whealten was an outfielder, and in later years he become a pitcher. He pitched for New Bern in Coastal ball. That's where Joe Morris was when he hit that ball while he was catching for New Bern. I believe he could've caught just as good as any major league catcher there was. He and his brother, they worked together, and I guess they knew each other pretty well. He was a big man too; he was probably 'bout 6'2" and, being strong, he could throw that ball just like the pitcher threw it to him from the mound to second base.

Now, you saw some like Jimmy Brown and some of the Williamston players.

Them Morris boys were just as good as Jimmy Brown was. In fact, they were better 'cause they could hit the ball further. They got a plaque up there now says longest ball ever hit in New Bern Park, see, and that was Joe Morris I was telling you about. He was a catcher.

Who was the toughest guy you pitched against to get out?

I'd say Garland Edwards.

What was so difficult about him?

Well, he was a good ballplayer. He played good ball, and he could tag it pretty well.

He have a good eye?

Yes, sir.

If your control wasn't quite right on a pitch, he'd pop it?

That's right.

What if something was a little bit out of the strike zone?

Well, he had a pretty good eye for that. See, in other words, he didn't do too much swinging like a lot of 'em would. He was 'bout as good as I pitched against.
Did you ever see Gaylord and Jim Perry play?

Oh, yes! Yes, sir, we went over there [Williamston] to a game to see them play. That boy pitched that day, and Williamson, they really tore that other team up. I forget what the team was, good ballplayers. I seen them pitch. They're good ballplayers!

When I first come around here, their daddy was a pitcher. But he just pitched in this Beaufort County League. I can't think of his name. The old man was a good pitcher, their daddy, in this kinda ball. Now I don't know what he'd a been in higher [leagues] like them boys are.

I[Gary] want you to tell us a little bit about Jimmy Brown. He played for the Cardinals in the World Series, didn't he?

Yes.

Was he from around here? He's from Bath, isn't he?

He was from Jamesville, I think. But he lived at Bath for a while.

But what I was wondering was what kind of player was he. You saw him play, and I didn't.

Well, I saw him play in Williamson. He was outstanding. In other words, he could play shortstop for 'em, and he was just as good as you'd see anywhere. Nothing didn't get away from him unless it was completely clean hit, see.

Real fast?

Yes, he was real fast.

Was he a small fellow or big?

Well, he was a medium sized man, I'd say.

What kind of hitter was he?

He was damn good. He wasn't no home run hitter, but he got a lotta hits. And that counts for a ballclub too, when you got somebody that can hit, and they can kind of spray hit if the pitch is not too bad. I've seen hitters could do that, I mean, if the pitcher's not too strong. Now if you got a stronger pitcher, you got to hit whereever you can, but sometimes a pitcher ain't that strong.

You say that if a pitcher is not that good, you can hit the ball where you want to?

In most cases, yes, sir.

Jimmy Brown was that kind of hitter?

Yes, sir.

After his playing days, Mr. Slade remained active in the game. With his good friend Harvey Wright, he managed and coached in the local county league.

Gary was telling me that you did coaching later on in the county league here in the 1950s.

Yes. I had a manager with this league here, Harvey Wright.

Did you coach too?
Well, Harvey Wright was mostly the coach. And I was the manager. In fact, I got the club together. It was just like the Coastal Plains League. You were allowed to carry just so many players, see.

Cecil Slade (right) and Harvey Wright with their county league team—1950s.
What teams were in the league?


This was in the 50s?

Yes.

Then, you started working with younger players?

Yes, sir. Well, my boy [Gary] played on there too, see. I was way past the age to play then.

How did you enjoy working with younger players?

Oh, Lord! I got the best kick out of that! I went down here to Vanceboro, below Vanceboro, and got a brother battery, just as good as, better than, anything. Got a brother battery to play for us. They signed up, and then I found a boy at Bayboro, North Carolina, and he was offered to go to Florida to try out for a major league team. I had him, and Robert, a pitcher, and Milan--you know how good Milan was--for a catcher. He was the best catcher in the circuit.

What give me the laugh so good, Bobby Andrews [another manager in the league] loved to play good as I did. But he was mouthy, so that night when we were signing up in the league, he said, "I swear! What you getting in our league for?" Said, "Don't you know you ain't got nothing to even compare with we boys!" I said, "Well, we'll see. Somebody's got to get beat. Might as well be us."
Ha, ha, ha!

All them ballplayers, the boys that come from down there [Bayboro]—one couldn't talk plain, played shortstop for us, Shady Ray. And we had a team there! And Milan was just as good as that Joe Morris was. You'd better not look like you wanted to go to second base on him, and he could hit the long ball. He was a long ball hitter!

And we went there. Other words, we were winning games right along. So we went out here to Old Ford to play a game. And they went over here to E.C.U. [East Carolina University] and got a pitcher and one or two other players over there. They told us that day, "We got your number now." I said, "Might as well be me. Somebody's got to lose." I think we beat 'em six to one. I know Milan hit one over right field fence. Seem to me it was six to one. We did! We had a good solid ball club. Every position. And these boys here were good hitters.

Who was this team you beat? Where were they from?

Oh, they were right in this community, Old Ford. But they would go to Greenville and pick up a player. We were allowed to pick up who we wanted. Douglas Crossroads down here, this Roy Sullivan out there, he was a big boy and a good ballplayer. And they had a team pretty well matched us. The had them two brothers, Morgan and Terry Harris. They had a good ball club. Pete out here, Pete Winstead played for them. They had a good ball club.

At the end of the series we went down to Pinetown, and Pinetown had a good ball club.
They all had a good ball club, but I just had a little more ball club than they did. And

"I wish I was as good a Christian as I was a ball-player."

we come out on top. Had the playoffs and stuff. And we won the series that year. But this boy Mickey Smith was playing for Old Ford. And Mickey was a darn good ball-player. He hit a homerun off'n this boy that had a chance of going up [to the majors]. And I called him outside and talked to him a little. He said he won't do it no more, said that's the last time. In fact, I don't think Mickey ever got a hit off'n him after that first time. He just threw the ball, you know, and Mickey was pretty good.

At the conclusion of our talk with Mr. Slade, it was obvious to us all that he has a genuine love for the great American game of baseball. However, his final remark to us suggests that baseball is not the only thing in his life nor, indeed, the most important thing. He said, "I wish I was as good a Christian as I was a ballplayer."