

**Ernest Burke**  
**Negro League Baseball Player**

**Interview: November 24, 1998**  
Interviewer: Steve Buckman

**Interview location:**  
8822 Blairwood Rd. Apt. A-i  
Perry Hall, Md. 21236

**Tentative Questions**

- 1) Ernest Burke, where were you born?
- 2) As a child what recreational activities were available to you?
- 3) Tell me about your first exposure to baseball, and when you first played?
- 4) Tell me about how you became involved with the Negro League?
- 5) How did your family, friends, and acquaintances react to you, as they became aware that you were a member of the Baltimore Elite Giants?
- 6) What were the travel conditions like for your team when you played games outside of Baltimore?
- 7) How did the pay as a baseball player compare to the pay non-baseball players earned for various jobs?
- 8) In what ways did the Negro League affect the black community?
- 9) What impact did World War II have on the Negro League?
- 10) How did the Negro League players react, in 1947, to the news that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, and played in the Major League?
- 11) My final question to you, Mr. Burke, in what ways did your experiences as a Negro League player changes your future?

## Index of Interview

This interview was conducted in the home of Ernest Burke, which is in Perry Hall, Maryland.

The quality of this interview was very good, with one exception. The first two seconds of the narrator's voice were cut off, as he was describing where and when the interview was taking place.

### **Content**

**(0-5 minutes)** The first five minutes covers basic information, verbal consent, where and when Mr. Burke was born, and how he became involved with the Negro League.

**(6-10 minutes)** This portion of the interview covers playing in the Negro League, traveling, and Jackie Robinson.

**(11-15 minutes)** All-star games versus the white players were discussed, and the reaction by the Negro League players to Jackie Robinson's playing in the Major League. Also, the black community and their interest in the league were briefly mentioned.

**(16—20 minutes)** The playing season was discussed, and other employment opportunities before and after baseball were questioned.

**(21-25 minutes)** Some black players were not happy about blacks being allowed into the Major League, because this led to the Negro League soon folding.

**(26-30 minutes)** Spring training, and how players became Negro League players.

**(31-35 minutes)** The Canadian League was discussed.

## Pre-interview Biography

Name	Ernest Burke
Father's Name	Clarence Burke
Mother's Name	Teresa Burke
Birth Place	Perryville, Maryland
Birth Date	June 26, 1924
Brother	William Burke
Sister	Gertrude Burke
Children	Rosalyn Jennice Valary
Education	Completed 7th grade
Negro League	1946-1948
Canadian League	1949—1954

## Introduction / Verbal Consent

**Buckman:** Today, November 24, 1998, I, Steve Buckman, will be interviewing Ernest Burke. This interview is being conducted in Mr. Burke's home, which is located in Perry Hall, Maryland. The purpose of this interview is to learn about the Negro League through the oral testimony of Ernest Burke who played baseball for the Baltimore Elite Giants. The University of Baltimore and the Babe Ruth Museum are working together on this project.

**Buckman:** Mr. Ernest Burke, on behalf of the University of Baltimore and the Babe Ruth Museum, may we have your consent to record, transcribe, and use this interview?

**Burke:** I Ernest Burke give you permission, to grant your, ah, okay.

**Buckman:** Okay, Mr. Burke, ah, where were you born?

**Burke:** I was born in Perryville, Maryland, 1924.

**Buckman:** As a child what recreational activities were available to you?

**Burke:** Ah, when I was a child we had a stick. We rolled a rim or tire, and ah that was the only ah, any athletics that I have done, and all the rest of them in my neighborhood. I was the only black that lived in Perryville, Maryland, my family and ah that's the only recreation white or black had.

**Buckman:** Tell me about your first exposure to baseball, and when you first played.

**Burke:** Ah, I entered into the Marine Corp in 1942 — and ah, I started playing baseball in Hawaii there and we won the, the Pacific Championship, and ah, from that day forth I just kept playing, and I played such, against such men as Johnny Wrigley was in the CB's in the, in service, and he told me as good as I played I should be playing in the Negro League, which I didn't know anything about the

Negro League, and so when I got out, ah I contacted the Baltimore Elite Giants in 42 ah 46, and uh, I continued on and played for them for two years, and what made, it so good, I didn't go on the farm team. When I joined them I came right up to the first, string, team, and I played with them for two years and then I played for the Canadian League. And getting back ah, as far as the Negro League is concerned there was a lot of discrimination, a lot of times you couldn't go into restaurants to eat, ah you couldn't stay in the hotels, proper hotel not unless you were in a black neighborhood. We traveled by bus. A lot of times we had to change clothes in busses, an, and get out and play, an, and sometimes I remember even got behind a score, ab, sc, scoreboard or, or billboard and changed clothes, and to order to play, baseball. And there's a lot of parks you went to that we wasn't allowed to use the locker rooms, nd ah, showers and all that sort of thing. It was, It was bad, it was really bad, but overall we still had fun doing these things. We got in the bus, we had, we had jokers, and, guys that tell stories, and it was one big happy family. I can remember I ah, back there in those days they didn't slice bread they had a whole loaf of bread, and you'd go to the store and get a, we'd call it a chunk of bologna, but it was a, real thick piece of bologna and a onion and ate it and ah some bread. I can remember when I dug out the center of, of the bread and poured a can of baked beans in it, and take the inners, inners and, and, sop the juice up, and ate that, and then got out and pitched nine innings. I mean nine innings no reliever, no ah middle man, I pitched nine innings, and that's the way it was throughout the whole league. And ah, I don't know its just, it was just, something else, but we survived. As far as Jackie Robinson's concerned, I put him on a pedestal, although he wasn't the best ballplayer in the Negro League, but he was the best man to handle the situation when Branch Rickey picked him. He had ah, ah in ah, in college fours, fours, fours, fours four letter. Ah, he's also a Lieutenant in, in the Army, and ah, he's beer the trip and he knew what was happening and what was going on. I think he's the only black, could handle the situation, the way he did. And as I said once, I'll say it again, I put him on a pedestal, because if it hadn't beer for him there wouldn't be any blacks in the neighbor, in, in ah neg, in ah, the white leagues as of today, and all of the blacks

that's in the majors today, they should honor Jackie Robinson, and put him on a pedestal because, if it wasn't for him, they wouldn't be there.

**Buckman:** How did your family, friends, and acquaintances react to you, as they became aware that you were a member of the Baltimore Elite Giants?

**Burke:** Well I had family and friends they really ah, was happy for me, that I was playing organized baseball. Even down ah, I had the team to come up an, and ah Havre de Grace, Maryland, and play, the little small teams there, a couple of times, and ah, you should seen the people turned out, white and black I mean, ah little stadium was full of people, lined up all down the lines, and, and everywhere tha, that I came there and that the Elite Giants, that I played for, the Baltimore Elite Giants the team that I played for, was coming to Harve de Grace to play the little minor teams, and everybody said, "I never dreamed of a team like that coming hear and playing." And I was responsible for it, and that made me feel good that the people responded.

**Buckman:** You mentioned travel conditions, tell me what, what travel conditions were like when you tra, ah, played outside of Baltimore?

**Burke:** Ah when we played outside of Baltimore, ah travel conditions, like I said before, it was bad, because if we stayed, went to a small town, especially a southern town, ah and pulled up to a gas station or something like that, they would come out and say what do you niggers want here, what can I what, what do you want, and we'd say we want gas. And they'd tell us to pull over to the side we'll get you in a minute. And I can remember one time we stayed at a service station almost two hours, before they came out and said, "You niggers back the bus up here and I'll give you some gas." And we had a bus, and it hold thirty or forty gallons of gas, and we asked him to fill the tank up, and he said, "well I'll give you five gallons of gas, and get. your ass out of here, we don't want you niggers down here anyway." And that sort of things, you know, you had to hold your, hold your tongue, and ah, for people to come up and say things like that to

you. I mean it's really something else. I could never believe that people would be so harsh, and so, so evil against another man because of the color of his skin.

**Buckman:** With travel where would you stay as a team?

**Burke:** Ah, well when we went to large towns, or large cities, they had the black neighborhood, an, and they had hotels, and a lot of people didn't have hotels, they had rooms that our owners used to rent for years, and years, and years every time we went there, so it was ah, you know, ah, they knew that we were coming, so they had the rooms ready for each, for at different peoples houses. And ah, like when your down south we stayed at houses, and there's one lady that owned a farm, her and her husband, and she used to feed, it makes no difference what ball team came there, she used to feed them, although we paid for it, but it was just like, ah, I don't know, being in a camp or something like that, because they had the table set up with milk and, and just good food, and we'd go there to eat two times a day, or three times a day. And ah, you know, when we traveled we got two dollars a day for eating money. Th, people say back there in those days two dollars went a long way, but if you take two dollars today and try to eat, three meals off of it, it, is impossible for you to eat three meals, not unless you eat, the way I said you were eating, with ah, lunch meat, bologna, or, or can of baked beans and a loaf of bread, and a, onion, I've, I've ah like I've said about the baked beans, I've got a, a, a, a large piece of bologna, and a onion, and a loaf of bread, take a bite of bologna, and a bite of onion, and a si, a bite of bread, and ah, you know it a, that's the way we had to et, and that's, that's, that's the way we did.

**Buckman:** How did the pay as a baseball player compare to the pay non—baseball players earned for various jobs?

**Burke:** Well, I can speak for myself. I got three hundred and fifty dollars a month, two dollars a day for eating money, and that's no comparison to what the white ballplayer was playing. And deep down in my heart, and it proved to be true that we were much able better ball players than the white, because we played,

used to barnstorm against the, the white all-star ah teams, they used to pick up a all-star team, and we used to play. We used to beat them, sixty percent, a the games we played, and Warren Pume was the president of the, National League, and American League, and he stopped, he put a stop to it. It was an embarrassment, he didn't say that, but when he put a stop to it, it was an embarrassment for a, a bunch of black guys to come up and beat a bunch of, all—star teams, you might say. So ah, I mean that's...

**Buckman:** Do you remember some of the players from the Major Leagues that would play in these all-star games?

**Burke:** Ah, its been so long ago, it ah, I know Al Kaline, I know ah, ah, Ted Williams um, oh Christ its been so long ago I can't think of all of them, but ah, those the ones that actually stuck in my mind.

**Buckman:** In what ways did the Negro League affect the black community?

**Burke:** Ah, before, or after. Before they went to the majors or?

**Buckman:** Ah, both.

**Burke:** When we played in the Negro League before Jackie broke the color barrier, ah they supported us one hundred percent, one hundred percent. The stands was always full regardless of where you went. We had a east and west game that that we played in Chicago, Comiskey Stadium, and that stadium was packed. I mean it was standing room only, and it was packed, cause people come from all over the world, to see the all-star game there. And ah, as a, a phrase was made, ah when Jackie Robinson broke the, color barrier, says it was a damn shame for five hundred or, or eight hundred people to lose their job over one man, for to break the color barrier, because all the good ballplayers went into the Major Leagues, and that's when the, the Negro League folded. And you must remember, ah, as quiet as it. kept, it was kept, we had, ah, ah three or four white owners that owned, ah, teams in the Negro league, and ah, I wanted to press on that, you know



ah, they were out making money, and, and let us get treated the way we were, and never followed through on to help, help us one way or the other, you know. And just fortunate enough I played for a team where a black owner owned the team and ah, it was real good too, because he knew what we went through, and he's from Nashville, Tennessee, Vernon Greene, and ah, he knew what we went through, and he knew, you know, what the, situation was.

**Buckman:** Did your playing season coincide with that of the Major League?

**Burke:** Say that again.

**Buckman:** Did the season parallel with the Major League season?

**Burke:** Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. The only difference, where the Major Leagues, ah they played, you know, one or two days, and, and traveled, and, and they had their day off here, and a day off there. Well we, when we wasn't playing in a league, we played everyday, to in order to make money, so we'd get our pay. You know, and that's the way we, we played everyday, and we traveled three, four hundred miles between games, different cities, and played. Sometimes I, I know that we left, got on the bus here in Baltimore, we went to Cleveland and maybe played a doubleheader, and we left Cleveland, and maybe went to Chicago and played a tripleheader where there's two team play, you know, four teams play, you know. And leave there and go to Texas, and make this, make this circle and end up back in Baltimore. And, I tell you, riding in the schoolbus, that was no picnic. We didn't have the seats that, ah, laid back or anything, but later on in the years they got, ah, ah other buses where you had the inclining seats, you know that laid back, and ah, that was something else, that was just like getting off the floor sleeping in a feather bed. It was just that much difference, with air conditioning.

**Buckman:** What jobs did you have before being a Negro League player?

**Burke:** Ah, well, I went in the Marine Corp when I was seventeen, and I lived in Canada, for ah, quite a, number of years, so I really didn't have a job. You know, and when I came out, and I'm finished playing baseball, I worked for Henry Knots here in Baltimore City, he was a construction outfit, and I used to, ah operate heavy equipment there. And ah, I worked for him I was in the Teamsters union. I worked for them for, thirty years and retired. And right now I'm teaching professional base, ah tennis, I'm a tennis pro now. I teach it seven days a week.

**Buckman:** When did you get involved in tennis?

**Burke:** Ah, it was shortly after I retired from Henry Knot. I went to all of the best camps for them to teach me how to teach, and ah, I just went from there.

**Buckman:** Had you played tennis?

**Burke:** Well I'd played tennis, but I had never taken it seriously. I just hit the ball as hard as I could, and, and maybe just walk off the court and keep going. But I've really found it to be a good sport, and you can play it til your ninety years old, or a hundred.

**Buckman:** What impact did World War II have on yourself, and on the Negro League?

**Burke:** Well a lot of ballplayers was in the Second World War, along with me, and ah, I tell you by living in Canada for quite a long time it was kind of rough on me, because as far as segregation was concerned, and people calling you niggers and black, and you couldn't go here, and you couldn't go there. There was, it was quite an impression.. And then you take a lot of blacks, they thought I was trying to be above myself, because I had a different lingo, I, I spoke a little different, you know. Ah so ah, the whites ah, the whites didn't want me, and ah, the blacks, they were, little weary of me. I, I, I, just like I tell everybody, I was like a, a piece of meat between two pieces of bread, I didn't know what the hell, what sides I was on, you know, you know ah, you know it was kind of rough for me. But ah, in the

Marine Corp they called you nigger, and darky, cotton picker, and they didn't want you in the Marine Corp, and they said you didn't have enough brains to, to fire a rifle, but yet still we went on the rifle range and shot, expert, sharp shooter, and, and things like that, it was. I just made up my mind when I went in the Marine Corp, I volunteered for the Marine Corp, and they tried to break me, not me, all of us was in there during that particular time. They tried to break us, but we all seemed to have the same thought in our mind. We were there for a reason, and nobody was going to break us regardless of what they did to us. So ah, and that's what we did. I have a daughter who just got out of the Marine Corp. She just put twenty years in the Marine Corp, and she often says, "if it hadn't been for you and people like you, I wouldn't of been here today." And I've talked to other Marines, and other young Marines, and I give speech, speeches on the base of black Marines and told them the hardship that we went through for them to have the opportunity that they have now, and they really appreciate it, they give me a standing ovation, you know.

**Buckman:** How did the Negro League players react in 1947 to the news that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier?

**Burke:** Well, they act great. They were happy, but as I always say, ya, you know if you open up a crate of apples there always going to be one or two bad ones in there, sc, and that's the same way with the Negro League players. There's always one or two saying, "I should have made it, I should have been picked," But ah, deep down in my heart I think Branch Rickey did the right thing by picking Jackie Robinson over all of the other Negro League players. Because, ah you must realize when Jackie went, br, broke the color barrier, and he went to Montreal to play, all they wanted him to do was fight back, or call names or something, and they said well that's what you expect out of blacks. That's what you expect they can't handle the situation, and he didn't do that, and that's what broke, the color barrier. That's what went into the white ah, society that he was there. See a white society said ah, "The pass time of baseball was for whites, and whites only." And then when Jackie Robinson went up there, and broke the color barrier, they just

opened their mouths and couldn't believe it. That's the reason why they wrote threatening letters, and death threats, and, and ah, called him all kinds of names. And I can't believe that Baltimore City had treated him so bad, but you must realize that Baltimore's one of the first southern states in the state of Maryland, in the state history. So ah, it's ah, it's ah, ah barrier, you know, and so I don't know it's just, it's just unbelievable, that ah, as I said before, it's unbelievable that you see one person hate another person just because he's the color of his skin, you know. You, you take during the war, take for instance during the war, ah ah they worked side by side at Glen L. Martin putting together planes and so on and so forth. Any, any plant they worked side by side, and no sooner that everything was over, they went right back to the hate again, that's what I don't understand. I, I watch TV, ah and see where the hurricane went through or, or tornado, and you see blacks down there and the whites hand to hand, ah trying to help each other, and no sooner they get situated, they're ready to call you a nigger and, or a darky, and they won't want you in the store, they want you in the house, you know. That's what I don't understand. I never will understand it.

**Buckman:** You mentioned in the pre-interview that you played in the Canadian League, can you tell me how that came about?

**Burke:** Well, I went into the Canadian League in forty, forty—nine, and ah, I played for St. James, the St. James Braves, and ah, it was a good league up there, very good league, and we had ah, white and black that played in it, and. So he was a good league, every got along together. knew I had one manager that ah, kind of got off the peak a little bit, but ah, we over came that you know. He asked me to ah, I used a towel that the other white boys was using, and he got me a cup to drink out of, so I wouldn't drink out of the same cup, but before the season was over, I was drinking out of the same cup, and using the same towels, because the type of men was up there, ah they didn't let it ah, continue.

**Buckman:** Were the players in the Canadian League mostly Canadian?

**Burke:** No, no, no, we had a few Canadians.

**Buckman:** In what ways did your experiences as a Negro League player change your life and, and your future?

**Burke:** Well it's just like I said when I first started playing baseball, in the Negro League, I signed a contract, and I was doing something that I like and I was getting paid for it, and it ah, it made me feel good to walk into Yankee Stadium, and with all the people there, and be pitching in the Yankee's Stadium, or ah, any of the Major League ballparks as far as that's concerned. It made me feel wonderful.

**Buckman:** What type of attendances, or how many people would attend the games?

**Burke:** Ah, I'd say thirty, forty thousand.

**Buckman:** And you mentioned to me that you're doing a lot with ah, doing things with the Negro League now, and the schools, can you tell me more about that?

**Burke:** Yea, well I go to schools and give talks, and I go to card shows and sell the, the Negro League stuff. I got bats of my own that I sell. I have pictures, ah baseball cards, and ah, well just a little bit of everything of the Negro League that I have, I sell.

**Buckman:** Okay Mr. Burke, thank you very much for your time.

**Burke:** Well, thank you.

**Buckman:** I am going to turn off the tape.

**Buckman:** I'm resuming my interview with Mr. Ernest Burke.

**Buckman:** Mr. Burke, could you tell me about spring training, how, how a, a black man would go about trying out for a team, and so forth?

**Burke:** Well, each team had its own, town to spring training, a southern town, because that's where it was warm. We used to spring train every March in Nashville Tennessee. Now to order, to make the team it was just like the majors. If a scout or somebody didn't see you, and offered you, to come to Nashville, Tennessee, with the Baltimore Elite Giants, you just packed your bag and came down there and take your chances. And ah that's what it was all about. Ah, you didn't just walk on a team just, cause ah, one o the teams that was playing just walked out there and said. you, said that you want to play. You would have to perform in spring training, and showed that your ability was able enough to play in the Negro League, and ah, there was about of players that came that stayed in, in the, in the, in the, in the minors, leagues, that's what you call them ir spri, ah the scouting team was the second team to the Baltimore Elite Giants, and they would play in the southern league, until they were called up to the big team.

**Buckman:** How about, "groupies," did you have, "groupies," or did players have a, a fan base and girls that would follow them trying to perhaps ah, become involved with a player?

**Burke:** Well, some guys did. They didn't follow them, because there wasn't that much money to follow them, but ah, sure enough when you went to the same town again you probably saw the same girl. And ah, you had fans, you hd a lot of fans, and a especially a lot of kids. I used tc have a lot of kids. I'd go to a town, and ah, the kids would all gang around me, because I used to talk to them. Although I didn't make much money, I used to take them oLt and buy them ice cream and stuff like that, and talk to them, and that made me feel good. That made me feel wonderful, and ah, you know, and, and to me, it made no difference whether it was white or black. If they happened to be in the group and I was there, they went, they went just like every, anybody else.

**Buckman:** Okay Mr. Burke, You mentioned that when you were about ten you moved to Canada, ah can you tell me what it was like living in Canada, and how that compared ah, with the United States?

**Burke:** Ah, it was ah, it was quite a thrill, because ah, you never knew you were black til you looked in the mirror. And ah, everybody treated you, regardless of what color you were, everybody treated you the same. And ah, I lived with some people up there called the Maynards, and ah they had ah, three sons and two girls, and they were just like brothers to me. Matter of fact we used to call each other brothers and sisters, and they didn't get anymore than I got. I didn't get anymore than they got. We were all treated the same, and ah, it was really nice, then the second world war, world war broke out, and then I came back to the states and volunteered and joined the Marine Corp, and ah, and that was it, from there.

**Buckman:** Okay, on behalf of the University of Baltimore, the Babe Ruth Museum, and myself, I'd like to thank you for your time, Mr. Burke.

**Burke:** Well, thank you.