

Kayo Stanton: Voice of the Blackcats

ASHS Column for March 13, 2008

Jerry Simmons

Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis took down a sign honoring a prominent figure in Century's recent history. Kayo Stanton Field is hardly known to people around town any more, although it was the center of the community's identity for 50 or 60 years. Pastor Irvin Stallworth of New Life Baptist Church, housed in the old Century High School building, asked Mayor McCall about the history of the field. He asked what is the history behind it and why shouldn't it be known to the public?

It was named for one of Century's favorite sons, and here is my humble effort to clear this up.

Some history of the field itself is in order.

Century's high school ventured into football in the early 1930s. According to "Blackcats: A history of Century Football 1931-1975" by Jim Curenton, football was first played behind the Baptist and Methodist churches in 1931. In 1934, Marvin Kelly donated a parcel of land northwest of the present-day Carver-Century K-8 (the site of present-day Showalter Park) and it was used for Century's athletic teams. Football was played at Kelly Field during the daytime hours since there were no lights.



It's not clear just when the first games were played at the new high school, built in 1936. Curenton's book says of the 1941 season, "Kelly Field had not been used as a football field in two or three years." At any rate, at the end of World War II, for the first time, home games were played under lights at the field behind the new high school. Century played its first night game against W.S. Neal. A solid white ball was used to make it more visible at night. Curenton reported that since grandstands were non-existent and there were no fences as yet, crowds pressed closer and closer to the action, actually narrowing the field of play.

. The school property bordered the crest of a hill on the edge of a small swamp along Findley Branch. In the early 40s, Coach Bill Turberville took advantage of the slope. He had the boys carry each other up the hill repeatedly to build the legs and endurance of the players. Coaches following Turberville also used the slope for practice drills, and Eddie Simmons believes Coach Jay Smith made the most use of it. He had two boys race down the hill - one boy had to block them both and push them back up the hill. He would alternate two on one going up and then going down, tackling and blocking. The players battled one another, some trying to get up the hill and others trying to keep them from succeeding, with Coach Smith yelling not-too-kind words at the all the while!

By 1944 a grandstand was erected on the north side of the field. It was a wooden affair

father, Bubba Stanton, at Stanton's grocery on Mayo Street. The family closed the grocery store in 1963, and when Bubba died in 1964, Kayo took over the operation and eventually turned it into a furniture store.

"People would just drop by his store all the time and sit and talk," said former Century mayor Benny Barnes in the PNJ article. "We'd talk a lot about things going on in the community and about football."

Stanton prepared for games as if he were going to broadcast them, studying series records against Century's opposition for the week and scores against common opponents, to be shared with the fans. "He did a lot of research," David said. "He was really good at it."

His attendance record was almost spotless, even after he opened another store in Pensacola in 1979. The new store kept him out of town for much of the week in the six years it was open. But Fridays always found him in the press box.

His tenure was interrupted only once, as family ties put him in a different place in the stadium during the 1968 season. That was the senior season for David, an All-State linebacker for Century. Smith said, "He said he'd get too excited to do a good job."

But he returned to the booth the following year and stayed for the next 20 years, before illness forced him to give up announcing. He succumbed June 13, 1991.

"You can say that the whole community's lost a friend," Barnes said.

It's an opportune time to bring this up. Century's Relay for Life is to be held at Kayo Stanton Field in a few weeks. Replacing the sign commemorating the stadium in Kayo's honor not only would pay tribute to a man who was loved and respected by high school football fans; it pays homage to a time when Century was united with a common bond – its high school. And it fits in perfectly with Relay for Life's efforts to help cancer victims.

I hope you will talk to Pastor Stallworth or Paula Jernigan with your suggestions or questions.

Y'all come.