

Joe Martin

Blair County's first major league ballplayer left quiet legacy

By JOHN HARTSOCK

Altoona Mirror

Blair County's first major league baseball player, Hollidaysburg native Joe Martin, was never one to get the last word in an argument with an umpire. Or even the first.

Martin — who died at the age of 88 in 1964 — was the rarest breed of gentleman in a game that is played today by multi-millionaires who aren't known for either their humility or self-restraint.

Martin picked up the nickname "Silent Joe" because he never argued with an umpire about a questionable ball-and-strike call, or a play in the field.

He simply walked away, and let his performance on the diamond do the talking.

He played well enough to catch a scout's attention and was signed to an American League contract by the Washington Senators in 1903.

He was traded to the St. Louis Browns midway through that season, in a move that the St. Louis Press praised as the best move that the Browns had made in their three seasons in the American League.

Martin played 35 games with the Senators and 44 with the Browns as an outfielder, second baseman and first baseman, batting .219 with 64 hits in 292 at-bats, including 10 doubles, nine triples and 14 RBIs.

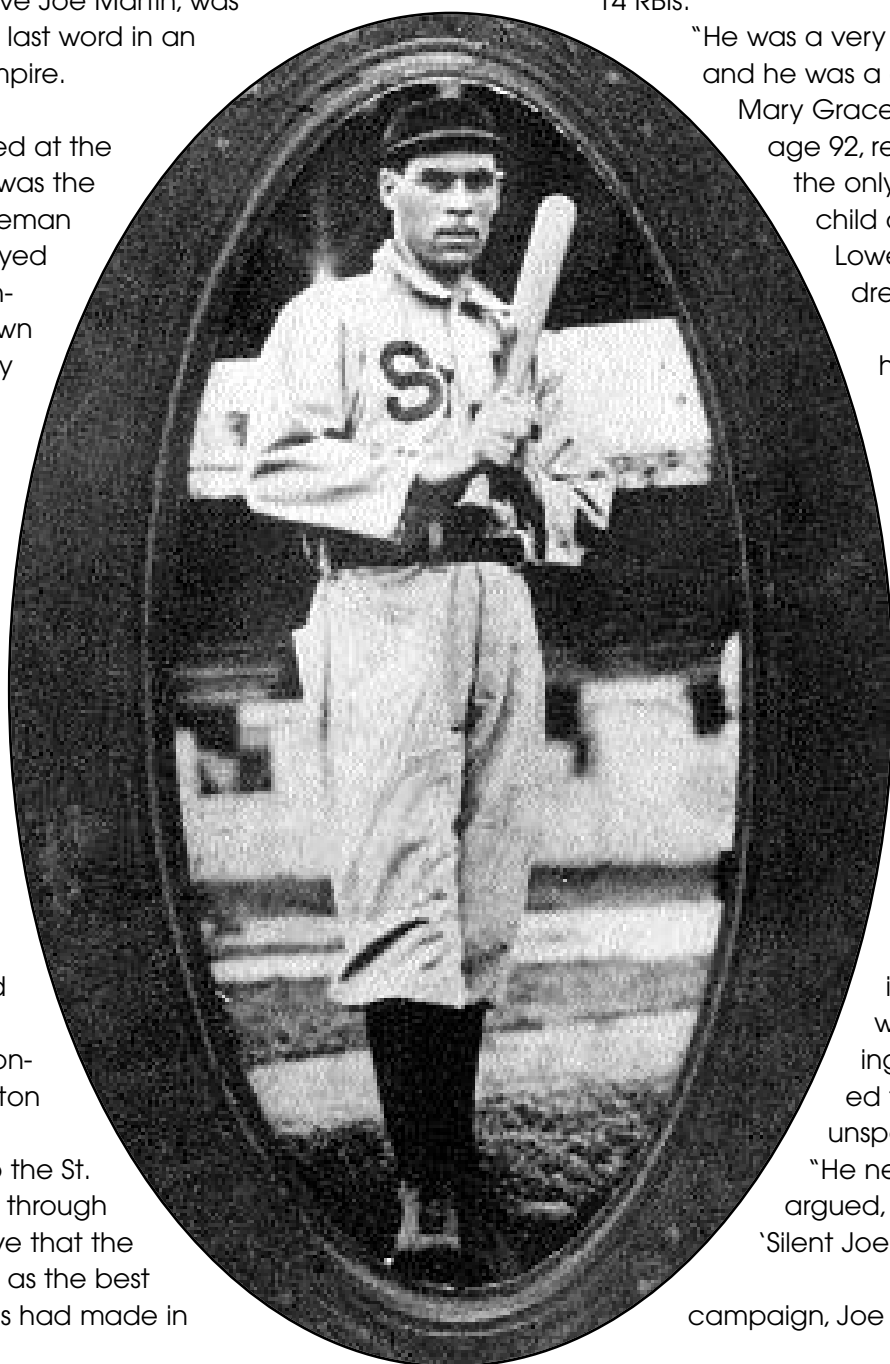
"He was a very gentle, good man, and he was a good father," said Mary Grace Langguth, who at age 92, resides in Altoona, is the only remaining living child of Joe and Clara Lowe Martin's five children.

She will accept her father's induction plaque at the 2002 Blair County Sports Hall of Fame banquet.

"He was very quiet and gentle at home, just like he was on the baseball field.

"Whenever he was playing baseball, he would always accept an umpire's decision, and never question it," said Langguth, whose father, accordingly, was never ejected from a game for unsportsmanlike behavior. "He never hollered or argued, and they called him 'Silent Joe'."

After the 1903 campaign, Joe Martin moved on to play for the Columbus (Ohio) team in the old



Joe spent the 1903 season in the major leagues.

American Association.

He also played baseball in the Tri-State League for Johnstown, Harrisburg, and Wilmington (Del.) before a baseball injury caused him a significant loss of hearing and hastened his retirement from the game.

"We were pretty small when he played in the major leagues," Langguth said of herself and her four siblings, brothers Joseph Jr., Richard, and John, and sister Regina Eger. "I remember the story of him getting hit in the head with a baseball and losing his hearing because of it.

"Today, they have (medical procedures) to take care of those kinds of things, but back then, he couldn't play any more because of the injury."

After starting his baseball career with New Bedford of the Massachusetts League in 1898, Martin moved back to Altoona when the Spanish-American War put a damper on minor league baseball.

He played on various teams in the Pennsylvania Railroad System in 1899, and in 1902; he was on the Carpenter's Independents team in Altoona when he was discovered by a scout and signed by the Senators.

After hanging up his baseball spikes, Martin worked in the Martin & Co. family feed store on Green Avenue in Altoona.

"He had a feed store on Green Avenue," Langguth said. "He sold chicken feed, and later sold livestock such as turkeys over the holidays."

Martin also worked as a painter in his later years, and at the time of his death in 1964, had 14 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Martin enjoyed good health well into his 80s. At the age of 81, he threw out the first pitch for the National Amateur Baseball Federation Tournament at the old Cricket Field.

He loved teaching the game of baseball to kids near his home on Altoona's Crawford Ave., and the youngsters looked up to him because of his major-league experience, according to Langguth.

"He used to tell all the kids in the neighborhood about playing baseball and he'd get out and work with them on their games," Langguth said. "He'd be telling them how to bat the ball and he'd be throwing the ball to them."

One of Mary Grace Langguth's four grown children, Don, 50 — who is now employed as a computer consultant in Manassas, Va. — remembers Martin as a kind grandfather who was always willing to take time to teach youngsters the game of baseball.

"He was a great guy," said Don Langguth, who was 12 when his grandfather passed away. "Even in his older years, he was always willing to play baseball or have a catch with the kids in our neighborhood."

Mary Grace Langguth will be proud to accept her father's induction award at the 2002 Blair Hall of Fame ceremony, but she'd be even more happy if he was around to accept it himself.

"I only wish he was still living," she said. "I'd give anything to see him get this award. But I'm very proud to accept it. I'm 92 years old, and I'll be only too happy to be there to accept it."

Martin bio

Sport: Baseball.

Hometown: Altoona.

Hall of Fame achievement:

Spent the 1903 season with the Washington Senators and the St. Louis Browns.

Current residence:

Deceased. Posthumous award will be accepted by daughter, Mary Grace Langguth.