



*Tom Irwin, Sr. likes to reminisce about his days in professional baseball.*

## Tom Irwin touched all the bases

By Jim Lane

**B**aseball always has been a big part of Tom Irwin's life.

He signed his first pro contract shortly after graduating from Altoona Catholic High School, in 1933, and last year, at age 75, was still coaching in the Greater City League.

Although he played only three games in the major leagues – one of them was Bob Feller's history-making 18-strikeout performance against the Tigers – Irwin had an eventful professional career and rubbed elbows with some of the game's great names.

From Walter Johnson to Carl Hubbell, Bill Terry to Ted Williams, the Dean Brothers and the Gas House Gang to Joe Cronin and Pee Wee Reese, Jimmie Foxx to Tommy Henrich and Dom DiMaggio, Tom Irwin knew them all.

An outstanding all-round athlete at Altoona Catholic High – he won the Cohen Blanket Award as the Yellow Jackets' football MVP his sophomore year and played

on the school's basketball team that went to the National Catholic Tournament in Chicago – Irwin was signed off the Altoona sandlots by Cleveland Indians scout Bill Bradley in 1933.

"They took me to Cleveland for a tryout at old League Park. Walter Johnson was managing at the time," Irwin said. "They (Indians) gave me a scholarship to the University of North Carolina and I went there four years. In the summer, I played at Kinston, N.C., in the Coastal League. Charley Keller was there. There were a lot of college kids there, and we got paid for it, too."

That was the beginning of Irwin's pro baseball career. The Indians sent him to New Orleans in the Class AA Southern Association in 1936, and he was the league's batting champion (.324) and all-star shortstop in 1937.

"The next year (1938) I went to spring training with the Indians and they farmed me out to the old Milwaukee Brewers in the Triple-A American Association," he said.

After a big season in Milwaukee, Irwin was called to the majors by Cleveland.

"I played the last three games of the season," he said. "One of those was when Feller set the strikeout record. He tied Dizzy Dean the year before with 17, then got 18 against Detroit in Cleveland. He lost the game, though, 4-2. I remember Hank Greenberg hitting a big double off him."

Irwin's baseball career took a turn during the next couple of months.

"The Indians sent me a contract in the fall and I turned it down. I should have been holding on, but, instead, I was holding out," he said.

There were no agents in those days, but Irwin got some advice from one of his Cleveland teammates, backup catcher Frankie Pitlack.

"He told me it looked like I'd be the Indians' shortstop the next year and I should hold out," Irwin said. "Cleveland sent me another contract and I turned it down, too. Then I was traded to Boston."

*(Continued on next page)*

"In retrospect, I think I made a mistake. However, I believe everything happens for the best. I think you have to think that way."

Irwin received the same contract offer from Boston that he turned down from Cleveland.

"It was kind of a closed shop," he said. "If you wanted to play, you signed."

Boston's shortstop was Joe Cronin. He also happened to be the Red Sox manager. With Bobby Doerr hurt, Irwin played most of the spring at second base while Cronin was at shortstop.

"I remember one of the games where Ted Williams hit a home run in the ninth to beat the Cardinals at St. Petersburg," Irwin said.

The last day of spring season, Cronin called me aside and said they were farming me to Louisville. The shortstop there was a young guy by the name of Pee Wee Reese."

With Reese playing short, Irwin opened the season with Louisville at third base.

"I was there (Louisville) half the season as a utility man and I wanted to play regular," Irwin said. "I asked to go elsewhere and they sent me to Little Rock."

Irwin finished the season at Little Rock, then was sold to Newark in the Yankee organization.

At that point, Irwin decided he had had enough baseball for awhile.

"I figured I'd go on the voluntary retired list, and I got a position with the FBI in Washington," he said. "My brother, Subby, worked there and my son, Mike, later worked for the FBI, too."

Irwin played for the Bureau baseball team, but resigned from the FBI in 1942 and contacted Little Rock about returning to professional baseball.

"I opened the 1942 season with Little Rock," Irwin said. "I was there about half the year and they sent me to the Eastern League with Binghamton, a Yankee farm club. From Binghamton, I retired from baseball, came back to Altoona and got a job on the railroad, passenger braking."

The railroad wasn't always stable in those days and Irwin had his share of furloughs. It wasn't long before he was back in baseball again.

"Niagara Falls was forming a new team and Pittsburgh (the parent club) contacted me through Jim O'Donnell (former Altoona Catholic coach)," Irwin said. "They gave me \$350 for signing. That was money in the bank in those days."

Irwin said he was "36 or 37 at the time" and Niagara Falls had a young club. He made the roster, but pulled a hamstring the day before the opener.

"I opened the season anyway, but I told them I didn't think I could help them. I stuck



*Tom played shortstop the day Bob Feller set the major-league strikeout record.*

around for awhile, then I went to St. Thomas in the Canadian League. I even managed there for awhile," Irwin said.

But the railroad and his family beckoned him back to Altoona. His pro days behind him, Irwin began playing locally.

He performed with the Penn Central and Altoona Works teams against more big names in the world of baseball.

"We played the Homestead Grays with Josh Gibson, and Satchell Paige was with the Kansas City Monarchs," he said. "Grover Cleveland Alexander brought the House of David here. They had their own lights and we played a night game at the Cricket Field. I also played against Jim Thorpe and the Oklahoma Indians at the Cricket Field."

After his playing days were over, Irwin turned to coaching and managing in area leagues. He started with his sons, Tom and Mike, in the Little League. He also coached Teener ball and took his turn with 5th Ward and Eldorado Kiwanis in the Federation.

"In between time, Dick Nedimyer and I umpired in the City League – one umpire, \$2.50 per game," he said. "Later, I umpired in the AAABA. It was up to \$5 then."

"Last year, I helped (son) Tom with Belmar in the City League. He wanted me to go again this year, but I told him to forget it. I'm getting too old to be an equipment man," he chuckled.

With more than 50 years of athletics as a player, coach, umpire and father of four, there isn't much Tom Irwin hasn't seen or done. Irwin and his wife of 50 years, the former Mary Gibbons, reside on 50th Street in Altoona.

His election to the Blair County Hall of Fame is the culmination of a great career.

"I think it's wonderful," Irwin said. "It's one of the greatest things that ever happened to me."