

# Elston and Me

The Story of the First Black Yankee

Arlene Howard with Ralph Wimbish

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# Foreword

by Don Newcombe

To say what type of human being Elston Howard was, I would have to start with Jackie Robinson. Jackie was a person I always described with three letters—M-A-N. Elston Howard was the same kind of person Jackie Robinson was. He was a MAN.

Elston and I were good friends. We were opponents only on the baseball field. We only got to see each other in spring training or when the Dodgers and Yankees played each other in the World Series. We had a couple of confrontations while he was with the Yankees, and he hit some bombs off me.

I often think back on how it was for Elston when he first joined the Yankees. They didn't want a black man on the Yankees even though the Dodgers had Jackie and had broken down the color barrier. The Yankees didn't want Elston, because of the innate prejudice at the time on that ball club and in that organization. And when Elston came, what he had to go through is somewhat the same as what Jackie had to face. I felt for Elston, because he was by himself to a degree. Larry Doby, of course, had broken the color barrier in the American League in 1948, and it should have been easier for Elston when he came along in 1955, but it wasn't.

He was an outstanding baseball player, an outstanding person, a man who made history. Elston should have been given more publicity in New York, the biggest media market in the world. They seemed to want to hold him down when he first got there. And Elston had to prove himself over and over again.

Elston hit two home runs off me in the World Series. In 1955, he homered off me in his first World Series at-bat. The pitch I threw in 1956

was a fastball, and just a case of getting it in the wrong spot. In that 1956 series, you know, I had good luck with Mickey Mantle. I struck him out twice, but Yogi Berra hit two home runs and Elston, of course, hit one. He was one of the greatest competitors I ever faced on the field, and we became good friends.

Elston Howard was a class act off the field as well. He moved into an area in Teaneck, New Jersey, he and his wife, Arlene, and their family. And he was respected and was one of the first black people to move into that community. Believe me, thinking back on my career and my life, I often thank God I was given the chance to play with people like Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella and given the good fortune to play against people like Elston Howard. They were class people.

But there's more to it than being a renowned person with a uniform on or standing on the stage and doing whatever you do with your talent. It's what you do when you leave that stage or leave that arena that tells in my opinion their true character. Do you sign autographs for kids? Do you stay away from drugs? Do you stay away from abusing alcohol? Do you care about people? That's the type of person I am talking about, and the category that I put Elston Howard in. I thank God I was able to pass Elston Howard's way and have a chance to know him as a person—much the same as I did with Jackie Robinson.

—Don Newcombe, courtesy of Tom Reed, Members Only Television

# Foreword

by Yogi Berra

One of the great things about the Yankees was being part of something special and playing with great players. We always pulled for each other; there were no jealousies, only great teammates. That's why I'll always treasure the friends I made in my seventeen years with the Yankees—especially Ellie Howard.

Ellie was truly one of the greatest guys I ever knew. We became very good friends, as did our wives. For years, Ellie and I would often eat and even shop together—so did Carm and Arlene, who were very good pals. I remember they used to laugh at the clothes Ellie and I would buy on the road.

Ellie was a high-class guy, and a darn good ballplayer. We had several things in common—we both came from St. Louis, were catchers, and made room for each other moving to the outfield. I don't remember Ellie ever griping or complaining about anything. I knew he faced some prejudice in spring training and probably felt a burden as the first black Yankee. But Ellie never caused any controversy—he was always pleasant to be around.

When Ellie first came up in 1955, no one on the Yankees really cared that he was the first black on our team. It wasn't a big deal. What mattered was that he was a good man who could help our team. When a bunch of us went out to eat, we'd always make sure Ellie came along. I think he felt comfortable as a Yankee. Moose Skowron, myself, Phil Rizzuto, Mickey Mantle, all of us loved Ellie as our teammate.

I was still going good in '55—I won the MVP that year—but Ellie as a rookie was too good to keep out of the lineup. So Casey Stengel put him in

left field. And it stayed that way for a few years. Bill Dickey used to work with Ellie, like he had done with me years earlier, and I think that helped. By 1960 they started putting me in the outfield more and Ellie behind the plate. He was the complete catcher—he did everything great. I remember Ryne Duren, who had bad eyesight, couldn't see Ellie's hand signals so Ellie would signal the pitch by the number of crouches he'd make.

Ellie had a lot of smarts and would've been a great manager. He really knew the game; he knew how to handle people. When we coached together with the Yankees, I know everyone respected his knowledge.

If you were Elston Howard's teammate, you were a friend for life. In my museum at Montclair State University, one of my favorite pictures on the wall shows me with Ellie as he happily shared in the occasion of my two thousandth career hit. That was really special. So is one of those inscribed bricks that Arlene was the first to buy when we built the museum. The brick lies directly in front of the museum and says, "Elston Gene Howard." If there were room, I'd add, "A great Yankee. A great friend."

—Yogi Berra

# Preface

by Ralph Wimbish

*A man of great gentleness and dignity . . . One of the all-time Yankee greats . . . American League MVP in 1963 . . . Winner of two Gold Gloves . . . A fitting leader to be the first black player to wear the Yankee uniform . . . If indeed humility is a trademark of many great men—Elston Howard was one of the truly great Yankees.*

Among the monuments at Yankee Stadium honoring the baseball greats who have had their uniform numbers retired by the New York Yankees, there is a plaque. This is where you will find the testament to the spirit of the late Elston Howard, the first black Yankee.

Arlene Henley Howard was his wife, and this book is their story. Maybe Arlene, too, deserves a plaque, for together, she and Elston made history. Theirs was a partnership in which Elston committed his life to baseball while Arlene raised their three children and remained the driving force in his career. A lady of elegance, she herself showed amazing dignity back in the turbulent 1950s and 1960s, when black wives were new to baseball. Even then, Arlene was never afraid to speak up about the injustices she saw around her.

The Howard home was Arlene's ballpark, and she was the star. With Elston often away on road trips with the team, she kept their household together, raised three beautiful children, and even handled Elston's contracts. Her challenges were compounded over the years by the burden of diabetes as well as the need to care for their youngest daughter, Karen, who was born with cerebral palsy.

As the years went by, the challenges became greater. Health problems eventually resulted in the untimely deaths of Elston and two of their children. It is to Arlene's credit that she coped admirably with each



tragedy. When Elston passed away in 1980 at the age of fifty-one from a rare heart disease, a condition she feels was brought on and hastened by the years of suppressing his emotions, she was suddenly cast in the role of family breadwinner. Immediately she involved herself in the family's fledgling printing business and transformed it into a successful company that earned millions of dollars.

Arlene has never forgotten the days in St. Louis, her hometown, where she and Elston grew up and fell in love. She remembers when the Yankees thumbed their noses at integration with an all-white lineup, years after Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier. The Yankees responded to public criticism by claiming they were waiting for the right man, a black man of great moral character. Arlene's husband, Elston Howard, was that man.

In 1955 Elston became the first black to play for the New York Yankees. He was one of their most popular players—a winner who played in ten World Series and on nine All-Star teams. He played for the greatest team of all time, the 1961 Yankees. When his playing career ended, he so much wanted to be baseball's first black manager, but he was denied that opportunity.

It's a shame Elston does not have a plaque in baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Having a plaque of his own at Yankee Stadium and his number, 32, retired is not enough. There are only thirteen catchers in the Hall of Fame. Arguably, catching is the most important defensive position on the baseball field. Elston always said the catcher controls the game; he's the only player who has the entire field in front of him, and he calls every pitch. Yet at Cooperstown catchers remain the second-least-represented position, ahead of only third basemen.

Defensively, when you list the great catchers of the game—Johnny Bench, Roy Campanella, Bill Dickey, and Yogi Berra—Elston Howard ranks among the best of all time. He caught in more than one thousand games, and his .993 career fielding average remains among the highest at his position.

Similarly, his lifetime hitting statistics compare favorably to several players in the Hall of Fame. His career batting average (.279) is better than Phil Rizzuto's, Pee Wee Reese's, and Roy Campanella's.

Of all the great men to wear the Yankee pinstripes, he was the proudest of them all. Unlike some of his teammates, Elston truly lived up to the Yankee mystique. With remarkable temperament, restraint, and courage,

he was the Jackie Robinson of baseball's most storied franchise. No Yankee ever carried himself with more dignity. No Yankee had greater respect for his teammates or love for his wife and family. And no one loved being a Yankee more than Elston Howard.

Now, more than twenty years after his death, Arlene feels it is time to tell their story. I was fortunate to know Elston when I was a little boy growing up in St. Petersburg, Florida. He was the greatest of my childhood heroes, one who actually slept at our home because he was barred from staying in the same spring-training hotel as his teammates. My father was the local NAACP leader who spoke out against the Jim Crow laws. Whenever he could not find Elston a decent place to sleep, he invited him to stay at our home, and I feel privileged that Elston Howard slept in my bedroom.

Throughout Elston's life, he never let his anger and frustrations get in the way of being a New York Yankee. Arlene likes to say he never got his due. She's right. He was a great man. A family man. A courageous man whose heart belonged to baseball. A man who belongs in the Hall of Fame.

# *Introduction* ❖ *The Funeral*

Arlene Howard

The call came right about midnight. The man on the phone—he must have been a doctor—asked me if I could come back to the hospital. I said, “OK, I’ll get ready,” but then the voice said, “Hold on just a minute, maybe you don’t have to come.” I felt helpless, waiting there on the phone for a good minute or so. The voice finally returned and told me there was no need to come. My husband had passed away.

His death really was no surprise. The date was December 14, 1980, more than a year after Elston had been diagnosed with myocarditis, a rare disorder in which a virus attacks the muscles around the heart. Elston had been in Columbia Presbyterian, a New York hospital, for about a week. We were considering a heart transplant, but time had run out.

There was no time to cry. The next day I knew I had to make funeral arrangements. Elston had said if anything ever happened to him, do it quickly. He once told me the most ridiculous thing at a funeral is where they wait for a week before they bury you. He thought it was ridiculous to wait around. Elston said if it ever happened to him, he wanted to be buried the next day like they do in the Jewish religion. But I couldn’t arrange it that fast. I wanted to allow my family and Elston’s family to get here. He deserved that much. He deserved a funeral like Jackie Robinson’s in 1972.

I called a good friend of mine, Daisy Batson, to help me with the arrangements. Years before we had owned an art gallery together and had lived on the same street when we first moved to Teaneck in 1958. I had a very good friend, Dr. Robert Ross Johnson, whom Elston and I knew socially. Since we didn’t belong to a church at the time (I was Methodist, Elston was Baptist), he was our choice to handle the funeral

service. I called our good friend Marian Logan. She was a friend of Duke Ellington's; she told me he wrote "Satin Doll" for her. Marian was known as "Jackie Robinson's sister" and played a major role in the arrangement of Jackie's funeral. That's the reason I called her. She agreed: Elston should have the best at his funeral. Why not? He was the first black man to play for the New York Yankees.

That Monday afternoon, Daisy went with me to Campbell's Funeral Home, and we made the arrangements. I called Marian back and told her I wanted to do this thing as soon as possible. Marian suggested I call the minister at Riverside Presbyterian, the same church where Jackie's funeral was held. Marian got a hold of Rev. George Thomas and made all the arrangements, lining up the choir, the pallbearers, things like that. The funeral service was set for Wednesday. I talked to Cedric Tallis about arranging the pallbearers. Mr. Tallis was the Yankees' general manager and had known Elston since the early '50s when Elston played in the minors at Kansas City. George Steinbrenner called and asked if there was anything he could do.

The previous year I had gone to Thurman Munson's funeral after he died in a plane crash, and I remembered how eloquently Bobby Murcer had read from Ecclesiastes at the service. I called Bill White—he and Elston were very good friends—and asked him to read the Scripture. I called Rev. Johnson, and he coordinated everything between the church and all those who would speak at the service.

On Tuesday my youngest daughter, Karen, was brought home. Then twenty-one years old, Karen had cerebral palsy. We'd sent her away to the Woods School in Pennsylvania, the finest boarding school in the area for young people with disabilities. The day after Elston died I called the school, but it was Karen's teacher who had to be the one to tell her that her father had died. I know she took it very badly; she loved him very much.

Our other two children, Cheryl and Elston Jr., had rushed home to Teaneck. Cheryl, then twenty-two, was on the road in Detroit performing with the road company of the Broadway play "They're Playing Our Song." Elston Jr., then twenty-five, had a job selling insurance in Miami. It was very tough for him, because he had left home and gone to Florida a few weeks before without telling me or his father. By leaving home, he had broken his father's heart, and Elston Jr. never got to apologize to him.

My sisters, my nephews, my mother, they all came. I remember my mother saying, "Yeah, I gotta be there." My sister Loyette was on her way

to Hawaii, so she couldn't make it. She told me she wanted to remember Elston the way he was: always smiling, so full of life.

On Tuesday afternoon, I got a call from the Yankee front office. Several of the players wanted to come early before the wake later that night. I said OK. By Wednesday morning, the day of the funeral, nearly all of my family was here and Elston's father, Travis, of course. It's interesting, I never thought about calling or including him in the service because he really had no part in Elston's life. He was a prominent educator in Missouri, but had never married Elston's mother. Travis never acknowledged Elston's existence until he became a major-league baseball star. He was nowhere in sight when Elston was born, but now here he was at our doorstep. Travis arrived the day before the funeral. In the house, we had no room for him, so Elston Jr. took him to a hotel nearby in Hackensack. That's where he stayed.

My oldest sister, Martha, and her family drove from St. Louis with my mother and didn't arrive until just minutes before the funeral. The limousines and hearses were outside when they drove up. There was no time to say hello. All they could do was get into the cars. Martha wanted to view the body, but the funeral home director said it was not possible. It was a cold, rainy day, but on the way to the service the sun broke through. I remember the big church, the service, walking down the aisle with Karen in the wheelchair, and looking at all the people there, including baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn and Mike Burke, the former Yankee president. I remember seeing Dave Winfield come in; the Yankees had just signed him to a big contract. My godson from Florida, Orion "Skipper" Ayer, Jr., got to the church just as we were getting to the cars. I remember all the cars. Police cars from Hackensack and Bergen County were everywhere. We had a police escort.

At the church, the closed casket was flanked at the altar by a huge blue floral wreath in the shape of the Yankees' NY logo and a portrait by Pablo Carreno, a good friend of Elston's who had also done a painting of Roberto Clemente. We had sold a lot of his paintings at our gallery. Opera singer Robert Merrill sang "America the Beautiful." The pallbearers were Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, Monte Irvin, Ernie Banks, and Bill Dickey, every one of them a Hall of Famer. Many of Elston's Yankee teammates and friends were there: Phil Rizzuto, Dick Howser, Billy Martin, Bernie Miller and his wife, Fran. New York Governor Hugh Carey was there. So was Congressman Charles Rangel.

Whitey Ford, one of Elston's favorite teammates whom Elston had once dubbed "Chairman of the Board," was the first to speak. "When I found out late Saturday night of Elston passing away, I just stayed up all night," he said. "I didn't go back to sleep. I walked around the house, looked at pictures of Elston and me and our other teammates. I went through scrapbooks, and I just went back in time from 1955, when I first met him, and I thought of some of the bad times we've had and some of the good times.

"Some of the bad times, I guess, his first year with the Yankees, 1955. We won the pennant, two years before that we'd won five World Series in a row. I know Elston was dying to get that World Series ring, and we lost to the Dodgers that year. But the following year we came right back and won. Another thing I think Elston felt very sad about was a year or two after he joined the club two of his real close friends left the Yankees, Phil Rizzuto and Billy Martin. I think that was a low time in his life. Another time I remember, 1960, and the World Series in Pittsburgh, which we lost in seven games. I remember Elston getting hit by a pitch in the sixth game, early in the game, not being able to finish that game out, and then missing the seventh game, which we lost. Probably the only time I've ever seen Elston mad at an opposing player.

"The good times I try to remember: Elston was the Most Valuable Player in 1963. And then I think of him winning his first World Series in 1956. I think of him winning the Babe Ruth Award for the Most Valuable Player in the [1958] World Series. Those were the good times."

Whitey looked at the children and me and spoke about the time in 1962 when he and his wife and kids filmed a TV commercial for oatmeal with our family. He remembered how difficult it was because our kids wouldn't eat it. The kids refused to eat the oatmeal until we had thrown a bunch of bananas and sugar on it.

"Yes, he was quite a ballplayer," Whitey said. "But I think all his teammates over the years admire him more for the way he carried himself in hotels and on planes and on the trains. He just was such a gentleman, always carried himself well. I think his teammates—you have to remember he had hundreds of teammates on the Yankees in his long career—they admired him for the great courage he had, especially early in his career. I don't think even the fellows on our team back in 1955 and 1956 realized how tough Elston really had it. But he got through and he just did a great job. I think the big thing was his pride in being a Yankee, and no one exemplified it more than he did.

“So much dignity, so much class. Elston, we love you. We will pray for you and your family always. Number 32, rest in peace.”

Reggie Jackson was the next speaker. He said there was “a certain kind of respect that radiated from Elston Howard. I am sure he was perused and scrutinized, selected by God, and selected by people on this earth to be the first [black] Yankee.

“Yes, he was a man of class. And one that taught and continued to teach and touch the younger generation that’s his people, such as myself, what it meant to speak at the right time, to say the right things when it meant the most. How to be a positive influence, no matter who you associated yourself with, no matter what color you were. He was truly a person who I felt transcended any kind of particular denomination, and that’s really the highest tribute I feel I can pay someone.”

Bill White spoke of Elston’s “great dignity and inner strength. A lot of people figured that Ellie fought for Ellie, but quietly he was responsible for many changes. He was a fighter in his own quiet way.” White then read from Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven, a time to be born, and a time to die . . .”

Robert Merrill sang “The Lord’s Prayer.” Rev. Johnson touched many hearts when he said in his benediction, “America is a better place because Elston Howard walked this land. Thank God for the joy of memory.”

I don’t remember whose idea it was, but I will never forget the funeral procession. You couldn’t see the end of it, dozens of cars, all with their headlights on from the church, winding around Yankee Stadium, stretching the length of the George Washington Bridge and on to the cemetery in New Jersey. At the funeral site in Paramus, we didn’t stay long. There was a large bunch of red roses, and I took them and gave them out individually to close friends and family.

For weeks and weeks, I was really numb. I lost seven or eight pounds because I couldn’t eat anything and I couldn’t sleep. It’s the strangest thing when you can’t sleep. I was so angry that he had died so young. We had so many good times. We had gone through so much together. There were tears, but I wouldn’t cry in a crowd of people. When people would see me they would say, “What a strong person,” but I did what I had to do. What alternative is there?

Lionel Reison, a partner in the Elston Howard Printing Company, thought it would be a good idea to get me involved in the business. Then one weekend we went to Atlantic City, just to get away from home, and that’s when the house was robbed. It was about three months after the fu-

neral. The robbers took all of Elston's jewelry, including his World Series rings, eight or nine of them. They took the one he had on his hand the night he died. It was the first one he got in 1955, and he always cherished that one the most. That was the one he always wore. None of the stuff taken was mine, just his. It was just there in our bedroom. I had left everything the way it was. Even after Elston died I never picked up any of those things. I never got rid of anything in his closet. It was at least two years before I did.

The doctors said a rare heart virus was responsible for Elston's death, but I believed he died from a broken heart. All those years he was never appreciated. Deep inside he never thought he was given credit for all he had accomplished. It was Elston's dream to be a major-league manager, baseball's first black manager. It was his vision, and he felt he was eminently qualified. But that dream of his never came true.

Jackie Robinson told me years ago how much he respected Elston because Elston had a tougher road to the majors than he. Jackie played for the Dodgers, a team that had sought him out, and Branch Rickey, the general manager, fully supported him. Elston had no such support from the Yankees. He grew up believing he had to be better than anyone else, and so he was. And he did it for the New York Yankees, the winningest team in baseball, a team that did not really want him. Five years after the Yankees had signed him, when Elston was twenty-six years old, they buckled under to local pressure in 1955 and reluctantly made him their Jackie Robinson.

The Yankees signed him in 1950, but always came up with an excuse to keep him in the minors. Unlike most major-league teams, the Yankees were in no hurry to integrate. They were winning without black players, so what did they need Elston for?

Buck O'Neil, Elston's manager in the Negro Leagues, wrote a book entitled *Right on Time*. In Elston's case, the timing was wrong. Five years earlier, he would have been one of the greatest players in Negro League history. Five years later, I believe undeniably he would have been one of major-league baseball's greatest players and one of its finest managers.

Elston's road to the major leagues is paved with wonderful memories, but there were plenty of bumps along the way. The journey started in a single-family household with a hard-working mother. It all began in St. Louis.



# 1 Compton Hill

*Arlene and Elston always seemed to complement each other. She was the fire; he was the ice.*

—Bill White

I was three years old when my father, Nathan Henley, picked me up and kissed me good-bye. It was 1936 and our family was living in Brownsville, Tennessee, a small town about eighty miles northeast of Memphis. My father was a tall, stubborn man who loved his family more than anything in this world. The country was in a depression. He knew there had to be a better life somewhere, anywhere but Brownsville. He was a sharecropper on a huge farm owned by my mother's father, Oliver Johnson. He was a Methodist minister. He told us stories about the time he saw Abraham Lincoln in a parade when he was a kid.

My mother was named Mattie. She, too, knew there had to be a better life someplace else, so she allowed Nathan to go off on his own. One morning he set off on foot for St. Louis, vowing to find a better job, a better place to live, with better schools for his children. He had no suitcase; only a pair of boots, overalls, and the shirt on his back.

In those days, St. Louis was nothing but one big factory. Smokestacks produced a thick haze that hung out over the Mississippi River; paradoxically, the same factories were a beacon of light to thousands of black people from all across the South. They saw the smoke as some sort of signal, an invitation not to be turned down. So they came any way they could, by train, by bus, by car, even by foot, from the cotton fields of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, all with hopes of finding a better life.

A steady wave of black emigrants found their way to Compton Hill, a soot-splattered neighborhood on St. Louis's south side, its narrow streets

packed with scores of industrial sites, corner churches, and rows and rows of red-brick tenement houses. The air was filled with the pungent smell of the Portland Cement and Scullin Steel plants. The neighborhood bustled with sweatshops and cluttered marketplaces; a constant grinding noise came from the railroad yard across LaSalle Street. To those with dreams, Compton Hill was home.

I was the fourth of Nathan Henley's five children. First there were my older sisters Martha and Loyette. Then came Nathaniel, myself, and baby brother Edwin. It was not easy for our mother to raise us while our father was away, but she managed with the help of my grandparents and Uncle Gilbert and Aunt Mary. With my father gone, my mother grew anxious, but all she could do was wait. About a week after he left, we got a letter postmarked from St. Louis. My father wrote to say he had found a job at a steel mill on the south side of town. On his first day there he had been standing outside the Sheffield Steel plant with a bunch of other men looking for work. A man came outside and began looking them over. He pointed to my father and said, "You there, in the back, come on up here." Just like that, my father had a job.

It took about two months, but my father eventually saved enough money to send for us. We came by train with everything we had. We stayed with Auntie Louise, my father's sister, in a three-room apartment on ChoctEAU Street for a few months until we got a place of our own at 1206 Theresa Street in the Compton Hill section of town.

My father had to work two jobs. He'd get up every morning at five and go to work at Sheffield Steel. At four in the afternoon he would go straight to his second job at the Century Foundry; he didn't come home until eleven. Every night around seven o'clock my brothers and sisters and I took turns taking him his dinner. Pot roast was his favorite. He would always have a big smile on his face when he'd see us arrive with a big basket of food. My mother worked, too. She had a part-time job as one of the salad girls at Lemon's, a fancy restaurant on the south side of town.

When he wasn't working, my father enjoyed being home. He was very concerned that we do our schoolwork and stay out of trouble. He also loved baseball. He occasionally would catch a St. Louis Stars game down at the Dust Bowl at Market and Grand, but he loved listening to the Cardinals on the radio. The Cardinals always had a good team; it seemed like they were in the World Series every year. I would listen to the games,

too, just to please him, and that's how I became a baseball fan. I listened to Harry Caray, knew all the stats and batting averages. My father thought I was so smart.

He was especially happy when he heard the news about Jackie Robinson. To say Jackie Robinson brought a lot of pride to the black community is an understatement. Breaking the color barrier was a big thing in St. Louis. He was a role model like no other in black America. Teachers at our school constantly talked about him in our classrooms. If you showed up late for class, the teacher would say, "Jackie Robinson wouldn't be late." If you misbehaved, the teachers would say, "Jackie Robinson wouldn't act like that." And we believed every word.

In 1947 when Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers came to St. Louis for the first time to play against the Cardinals, it seemed like Sportsman's Park was jam-packed with just as many black faces as white ones. Black schools were closed. Local shops on LaSalle Street shut down early. It was like a big holiday.

Growing up, I didn't go to many baseball games, but I went to that game with my girlfriend Betty. We sat in what was known as the "knot-hole" section. We had heard so much about Jackie Robinson that I just had to go. We cheered when he ran out onto the field and every time he came to bat. When the game was over, we all waited for him outside the visiting locker room, as if he were a movie star. When he came outside, everyone began to cheer and ask for his autograph. As he made his way toward the team bus, I was able to slip right up next to him. I looked him in the eye and he looked back at this tall, skinny girl who had asked him for an autograph. I am sure he would have signed one for me, but I didn't have any paper or anything for him to write with. It was somewhat embarrassing, but it made him smile.

I never liked school, but my grades were good and I worked on the newspaper at Vashon High School. History was my favorite subject, but even back then I questioned how it was written. It was all this talk about freedom, but it didn't mean anything because it just wasn't true. We had segregated movies, segregated schools, hotels, and neighborhoods. Everything was segregated.

Before I graduated, my father died in 1950 of pneumonia. He was a diabetic. He went to work one Friday, came home that night, and didn't get out of bed the next two days. We took him to the doctor early Monday and he died that night. He was forty-eight years old.

After the funeral, we moved to the west end of town, into a two-story, red-brick house on Ridge Street. I needed to get a job and so I did—at Citron's drugstore in Clayton, a high-class white suburb. I worked at the soda fountain. My sister Martha worked there, too. I enrolled at Harris Stowe Teachers College, though I wasn't too crazy about the idea of becoming a teacher. In those days, teachers were not allowed to get married. Like most girls, I wanted a wedding ring.

My father was always very protective of his girls, and back then we were known as the Henley sisters. We became very popular with the boys. Martha had many boyfriends, but she settled down and married a nice young man named Moses Hart in 1950. They are still married today. Loyette had her boyfriends, too, and she made her money working as the regular babysitter for the Reverend Carroll Chambliss. He was a navy chaplain who moved into our neighborhood shortly after the war. Years later his son, Chris, would play first base for the New York Yankees.

I had my share of suitors, boyfriends who for the most part were what I would call "jive cats." You couldn't take them seriously. Then one night in the fall of 1953 I met someone different. His name was Elston Howard.