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This is a piece dedicated to Oil City's 150-year anniversary, which is right up my alley because as you might have guessed by now, I kind of like history.

So...I forget what it was that I was looking up, but, as usual, I started running into these other things, all of which made me think: These guys who played sports for Oil City 100 years ago have long been forgotten. Nobody knows who they are anymore, which is just kind of too bad. Now, I have written about Jack Cleaves on route8rivalry.com. The former Oiler starred for Princeton's national championship team in 1922. (And, I firmly believe would have been drafted had he played today.) More about him later.

There are others – including two basketball players I never heard of until this past week – and I've lived in Oil City for 50 years!

Their names are Donald "Babe" Kennedy (Colgate) and Orson (tongue-in-cheek "O.J.") Graham – not to mention Graham's younger brother Mortimer (both Allegheny).

Not only are their names not of the household varsity around here today, but even their colleges make no mention of them if you google them.

For me, it started with a letter written by city resident William F. Gilliland that the Oil City Blizzard ran on the sports page on Feb. 2, 1951.

Gilliland, a 1915 OCHS grad, starts off by chiding the sports staff about its coverage of the local basketball star of the day – Dutch Burch. (Are you kidding me?)

Kennedy and Graham ruled

"It is rather amusing sometimes to read your articles about the star athletes of Oil City High School. With all due respect to Dutch Butch, Bill Lilly (football star in the early 1930s) and others who were real good, nevertheless you have to go back a few years further to find the real stars of Oil City High School," Gilliland begins in his missive.

Then he goes on to talk about Kennedy and the Graham, who happen to be his cousins. He later mentions Cleaves "the greatest football star Oil City ever had"; Howard Alexander; Stew Wilson; the Seep brothers, Joe and Art; and Ray Vaughn, the subject of an article here about six months ago who was a big star at Colgate.

"Yes," wrote Gilliland, an upstanding citizen who lived on Petroleum Street back in the day, "to find the real stars of Oil City High, you will have to go back to 1916 and beyond."

I will say that 70 years after his letter, it is too bad that people never heard of the athletes he was talking about.

So, I tried to find out more about them, especially after Gilliland wrote this: "In basketball there was never an equal to Orson Graham or Babe Kennedy, both of whom were way ahead of any that the Oil City High School ever had and both went on to receive plaudits of sports writers from all over the country...Both were picked as the national champions at guard and forward in their college days."

That last sentence made no sense to me – national champions at guard and forward? – but it piqued my interest.

Kennedy died in Colorado in 1968 at the age of 76. His father, John, was an Oil City councilman. After starring at OCHS, he went to Colgate (like Vaughn) and played four years. And not only was Kennedy captain of the 1915 team, but he scored 242 points – a school

record that stood for 30 years. The Red Raider were 14-3. The year before, Kennedy led Colgate with 185 points in 15 games. But I saw no mention of him on the Colgate web site. Orson Graham died in Erie in 1955 at age 61. The headline on his obituary listed him as "O.J. Graham" – a name for which he was NOT known as an athlete, I'm guessing. Graham was captain of the Allegheny basketball team, which, his obit said "was a runnerup for the National Collegiate championship." Couldn't find anything about a national championship runnerup squad on the Allegheny web site.

Both Orson (1912, 1913) and his brother Mortimer (1920, 1921) lettered in football for Allegheny. Mortimer is in the school's Hall of Fame for football, but Orson is not for either sport.

You can go home again

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, these stars of the early 20th century were still alive and would occasionally make a return visit to their hometown. And they were all successful in life.

Orson Graham was a lawyer, Kennedy was a rancher in Arizona and Howard Alexander traveled to all sorts of foreign countries representing General Motors. Also, Dale Lash, who scored 28 points in the 1918 game in which Al Foster netted 51, played basketball at Springfield College and was a coach and athletic director in New England.

Now getting back to Alexander, who visited Oil City in 1968, and couldn't get over how different the city looked. "Only the hills haven't changed," he told The Derrick. Not only was he impressed with the new high school on Lynch Boulevard, he thought the four-lane highway between Oil City and Franklin was an "improvement."

Alexander kicked 23 extra points for the 1916 Oilers, but played in only eight games his junior and senior years, mainly due to Pandemic I in 1918. He was born in Cooperstown and lived in Oil City only during his high school days. He went to Delaware and played football and basketball and ran track and still (in 1968) was an avid Blue Hens football fan.

Another old-timer who made it back to town was Dick O'Neil, a Los Angeles resident who talked to The Derrick about the 1907 squad. The Oilers had "ringers" on the team in years before that, but they weren't over age 20-somethings. They were high school-age boys who simply weren't enrolled in school. They played because Oil City didn't have enough actual students to field a team.

O'Neil – the school librarian – played fullback and coached for four years. (Oil City's first paid coach was Bill Fountain, starting in 1918.)

The "tandem" play was an Oil City favorite in 1907. One of the burly tackles would drop back, grab the fullback (O'Neil) around the waist and heave him over the line. "It was quite a throw as I weighed 180," O'Neil told The Derrick.

That team included Harry Nunn (Colgate), J. Henry Quirk (Penn State and a future Oiler coach) and Percy Lancaster, Oil City's first black athlete and the first black in U.S. history to serve as a district attorney. Lancaster went to Duquesne and did his lawyering in Michigan.

Back to Cleaves

Back to Cleaves, who later was in the oil business, mainly out of Bradford. He died in 1968 at the age of 68 and is buried in Grove Hill Cemetery.

His 1922 Princeton Tigers weren't supposed to do anything that season, but they went 8-0 and were named national champs by two outlets. The big game was at the University of Chicago – the first to be broadcast coast-to-coast on radio. His 100-yard TD pass in the final minute before 31,000 was the difference in the 21-18 decision.

Against Colgate, he saved the Tigers with an 80-yard pick six, and a 30-yard reception to set up a field goal in a 10-0 victory.

Cleaves was a money kicker and fullback. Wrote one sports writer before the Chicago game, "He is a great line plunger as well as a fleet open field runner."

After the season, a number of area Princeton men – from Oil City, Franklin, Titusville, Clarion and Butler -- gave him a testimonial at the Venango Club.

The girls liked him, too, even before his collegiate heroics.

Marjorie Hannon Donnelly wrote in a letter that was published in a column by Joe Szafran on Jan. 11, 1969: "Jack Cleaves was the sports hero of all the girls. We freshman girls used to walk down the alley (in) back of the Cleaves home (West Front Street) and gaze in awe at the basketball setup in the backyard and also, I guess, to try to catch a glimpse of Jack and his handsome brothers."

Surprised me that people had "basketball setups" in their backyards as early as World War I. Speaking of alleys.