

Williamsburg and the Globetrotters

(Sources: Journal Tribune articles and Bob Hanson's book "As It Was Then and Is Now")

This series of events started February 11, 1929, when Abe Saperstein of the Harlem Globetrotters called from Chicago. He said that he had an open date on February 14, 1929, and would like to play the Williamsburg Independent team who at the time enjoyed a six year record of 75 wins out of 95 games played.

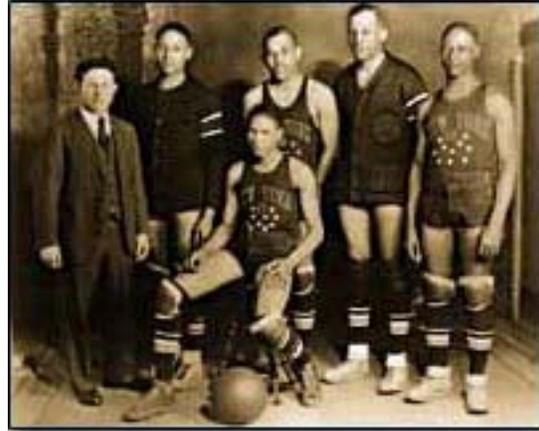
The Harlem Globetrotters were only three years old and making their first road trip. They were guaranteed a hundred dollars and a percentage of the gate. Williamsburg had three days to advertise the event.

In 1929, the powerhouse of basketball in Iowa County was the Williamsburg Independent team which was a project of Gus O'Donnell. The Williamsburg team of 1929 included Tommy Jones, Jimmy Driscoll, Wayne Stake, Mark O'Donnell, Earl (Irish) O'Neill, Adolph Ahrens, Floyd Manor, Francis O'Donnell, Harold James, Harold Hopkins and Gus O'Donnell.

The night of the game arrived but the big problem was getting the Globetrotters into town. Highway 149 from Highway 6 was newly graded, and being readied to pave – it was all mud. The Globetrotters were driving a big old Packard touring car, and word came to town that they were stuck a mile or so north of Conroy. Williamsburg went to the rescue, but it was about nine o'clock before the game started. The game was played to a packed house in the armory, located above Smith Garage where Uhlmann's furniture store is today.

The Globetrotters had a little man named Runt Pullins; he was a fancy ball handler and dribbler. Runt would show off by dribbling through his legs. The Globetrotters hadn't yet developed their clowning act, which gave them the opportunity to slow the game down and rest. It was a hard run and shoot game and that night the Williamsburg Independent team defeated the Globetrotters 21-20.

These were segregated times and Gus O'Donnell discovered that the Globetrotters hadn't had a bed or a hot meal since they left Chicago. Gus contacted Mrs. Gillam who ran the Commercial hotel down next to the railroad and told her the situation. She had empty beds, so she put all five ballplayers and Abe Saperstein into



The Harlem Globetrotters of 1929



The armory was on the top floor of the Smith Motor Garage



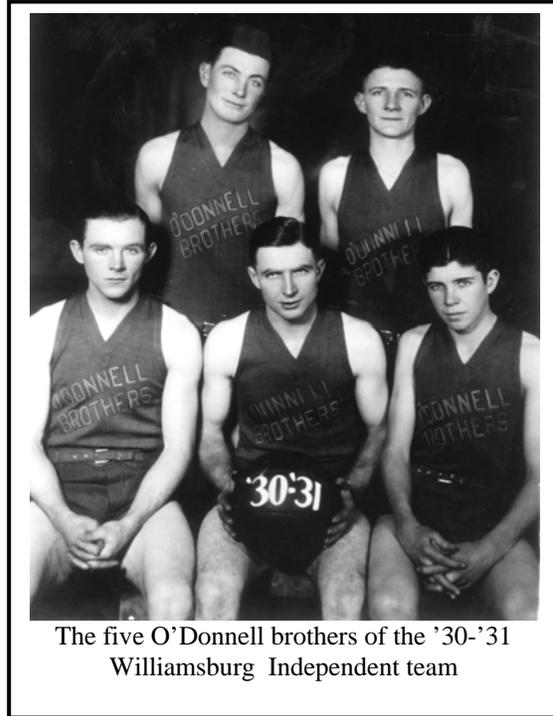
Mrs. Gillam

them. That night after the ballgame, she fixed them a hot meal, and the next morning before they left, she fixed them a big breakfast.

When the Globetrotters left they had a special place in their hearts for Mrs. Gillam and Williamsburg. They headed west to Nebraska and beyond, but on their return to Chicago, they stopped in Williamsburg again to stay with Mrs. Gillam. From 1929 to 1932, they played Williamsburg a total of 4 times at the armory. In 1947, they played Williamsburg again at the grade school gym, but this is not the end of the story.

In the '50's, Dr. D. F. Miller had become a driving force in Williamsburg. He was the local doctor and president of the school board. In 1957, the Williamsburg had completed a new high school and gymnasium. The gym would seat about 1,200 people, but Dr. Miller wanted to get a big name team to dedicate the gym. It was suggested that they get the Globetrotters, but by then, the Globetrotters had become a world-wide attraction. Miller said, "They won't come here. They won't play in a place with less than 15,000 seats."

Gus O'Donnell and Dr. Miller called the Globetrotter organization, and a lady answered the phone. Gus said he would like to speak to Mr. Saperstein. The lady said, "Mr. Saperstein is in conference and will be there for quite a while." So Gus said basically that if Mr. Saperstein knew Gus O'Donnell from Williamsburg, Iowa was on the phone – Gus didn't get to finish because the lady interrupted him. "Mrs. Gillam," she said. "Hang On."



The five O'Donnell brothers of the '30-'31 Williamsburg Independent team

It turned out that everyone in the Globetrotter organization knew the story of Mrs. Gillam and Williamsburg, Iowa. In just a few seconds Abe was on the phone. "Gus," he said, "How are you?" That was the start of the conversation. After they visited a bit, Abe said, "I suppose Mrs. Gillam is gone after these many years." Gus told him, yes, she was gone. After a bit more, Abe said, "Gus, what do you need?" Gus explained the situation, telling Abe how few people the new gym would seat. Abe ignored it. "When do you want us to come?" Gus turned to Miller and told him what was up, and when should they come? Miller was flabbergasted and finally stuttered, "Whenever they want to."

Then Abe asked who they were going to play. Miller didn't have an answer to this either. Abe said, "We'll bring the Philadelphia Sphas. I'll have the girls set this up, get the advertising together, and send it to you. Gus, you and I will have a great visit, but I'll miss Mrs. Gillam." So the Globetrotters came again in 1958 for the sixth time and dedicated the gym to an overcrowded school gymnasium.