

Community

Man Who Broke Cardinal's Color Barrier in the '50s Shares Experience

▲ Now resides at city's Human Service Alliance

By DAVID L. DILLARD
Chronicle Staff Writer

In 1954, while black Americans celebrated the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, area blacks had an additional history-maker to celebrate.

Seven years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball, a 6-foot-5, modest first baseman from Greensboro became the first black to play for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Thomas Edison Alston, or "Tall Tom," is the third of four brothers who all played semi-pro baseball with the Goshen Redwings, later the Greensboro Red Birds.

"I've been playing all my life," Alston said. "We started barefooted just playing ball."

Alston now lives at the Human Service Alliance on Old Greensboro Road in Winston-Salem. The alliance is an all-volunteer organization that cares for the terminally ill, offers respite care for families with a disabled child at home and enhances health and wellness.

As a boy, he volunteered to be the batboy for the Redwings, while his older brother Leon "Shack" Alston was catcher. Next, his brother Norman was pitcher, then Tom came. Later his younger brother James played outfield, first base, and pitched.

Alston began his career as a stand-out college athlete at North Carolina A&T State University in the 1940s, where he maintained a .400 batting average for three years. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in physical education, Alston joined the Greensboro Red Birds, a black, semi-pro team.

After a short stint with the Red Birds, he played in Canada and then signed with the Class C team in Portsville, Calif.

"I did so well in Class C, that after eight weeks, I was leading the (Southwest International) league in home runs," he said. "They soon promoted me to Triple A."

Alston remembers a game in Las Vegas where the blacks had to live in segregated hotels, while white ballplayers lived in fancy hotels with red-carpet treatment.

"They were staying in fine hotels, and I wondered why we couldn't stay in their, too," he said. "It was Jim Crow back then. I didn't like it, but I didn't say anything about it."

Alston considered the trip to Las Vegas as the beginning of the end of his career. While in Las Vegas, he and a friend went sight-seeing. Never a gambling man himself, Alston wanted to go back to the hotel and rest.

Alston said he had hit a home run in the all-star game the night

before, but now he couldn't even throw.

"I was weak," he said. "All my strength was gone in Las Vegas. Something just happened to me."

He went to see a doctor, but they couldn't find anything wrong. Nevertheless, Alston continued to play at less than 100 percent. After leading the league in home runs and runs batted in (RBIs), his batting average dropped from .400 to .353, but it was still good enough to impress the San Diego Padres (an independent Triple A team in the Pacific Coast League).

Alston's average continued to drop, reaching an all-time low .244. Disappointed with his performance, he wanted to quit baseball.

"I wanted to quit because I thought I could do much better than that," he said.

After a pep talk and a chance to rest in the off season, Alston came back the next season and hit 23 home runs and batted .297. But it was his defensive work-around-first base that impressed the Cardinals. The next season, August A. Busch, of Busch beer fame who also owned the Cardinals, personally bought Alston from the Padres for a reported \$100,000.

"People were calling me Busch's boy, but it didn't make me feel bigger or better," he said, referring to the attitude of some of the

other players. "I wasn't on cloud nine. I just took it all in stride."

Alston denies being called names and having racial slurs directed at him but admits racism was heavy in St. Louis.

"Back then St. Louis was the most Jim Crow team in the league," he said. "The word 'nigger' was used by the Cardinals, but I didn't have any cat-calling. Everything has changed now."

Alston said he lost his job at first base after the first season but continued to play with the Cardinals for three more years. Shortly after leaving baseball, Alston had a nervous breakdown. He was inducted into A&T's Hall of Fame in 1972.

Old age and the on-set of prostate cancer has confined the Greensboro star, who grew up drinking penny drinks (Kool-aid) and reading the *Sporting News*, to watching his favorite past-time on television in his room at the Human Service Alliance.

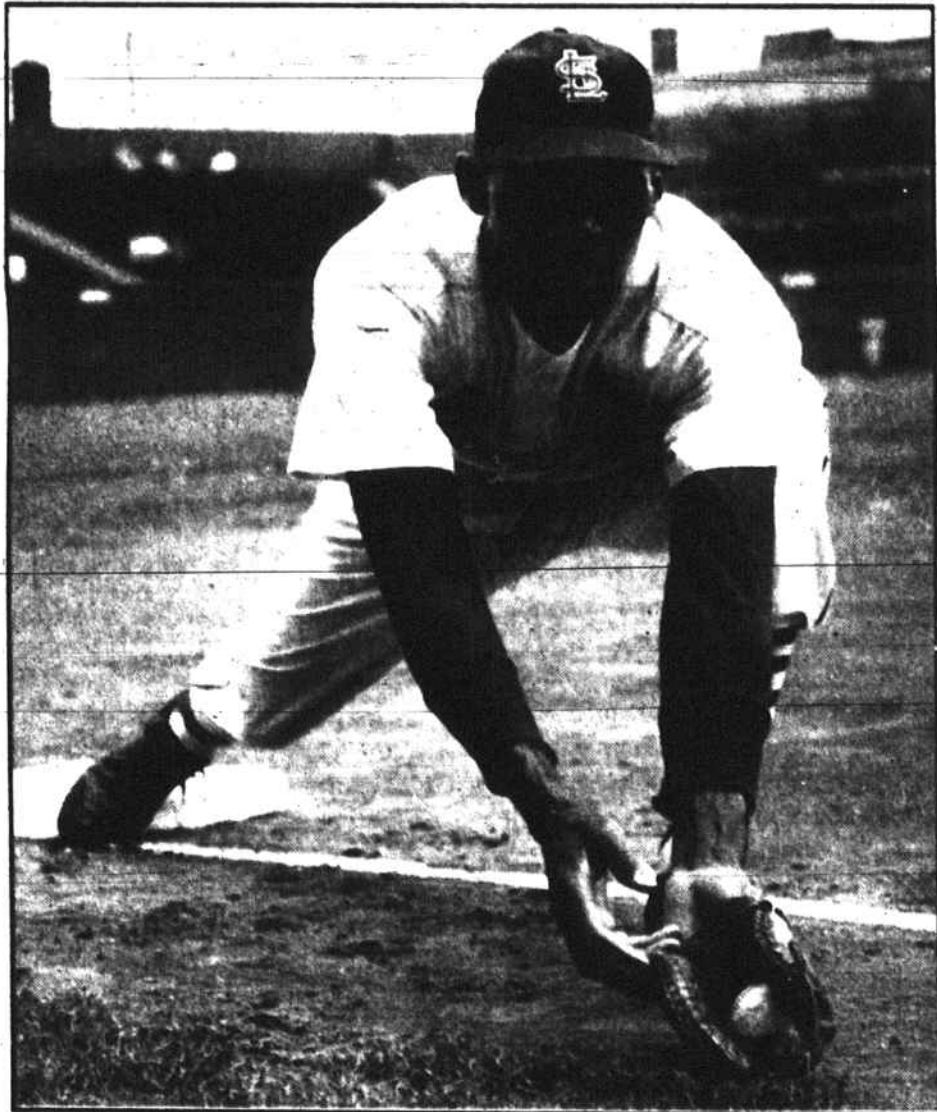
"I didn't get the chance to be the best that I could have," he said. "I just played baseball until I didn't have anymore to give."

Alston said he enjoys watching baseball and other sports. He likes Atlanta because its a team close to the area but says he has an affinity for the Cardinals.

"I still like the Cardinals as long as they win," said the former slugger, "but they don't hit enough home runs!"



Jim Karr, a fan and native of St. Louis, gets a baseball autographed by Alston.



Alston field balls at the Cardinals' 1954 spring training.

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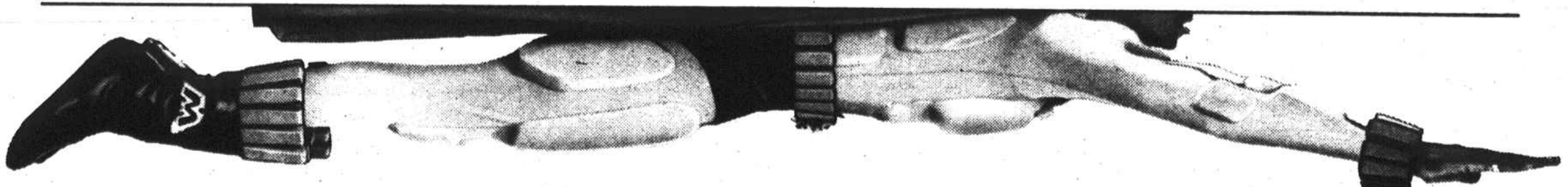
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SciCamp Moves to Hanes Mall

SciWorks, the Science and Environmental Park of Forsyth County, will hold its popular science camp at Hanes Mall in August as part of its continuing effort to reach out to the community with science education programs. Sci-Camp programs at Hanes Mall, geared toward parents and preschoolers, include "Astronomy to Zoology" and "DinoMania." Also, there are free Saturday and Sunday programs planned every hour on the half hour that include fun science demonstrations about dinosaurs, rain forests and kitchen chemistry. Special one-day programs called "Friday Science" for children entering first through eighth grades will be offered at Hanes Mall.

These two-hour workshops explore rocks and minerals, science "magic" and amazing animals with fun, hands-on activities.

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