

**INDIANAPOLIS CLOWNS PHOTOGRAPHS  
CA. 1943–1976**

Collection Information	1
Historical Sketch	2
Scope and Content Note	3
Contents	3

Processed by

Barbara Quigley  
20 May 2017

Revised 18 November 2019

Revised August 2024 by Matt S. Holdzkom

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department  
William Henry Smith Memorial Library  
Indiana Historical Society  
450 West Ohio Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

[www.indianahistory.org](http://www.indianahistory.org)

## **COLLECTION INFORMATION**

**VOLUME OF COLLECTION:** 4 folders of photographs

**COLLECTION DATES:** Ca. 1943–1976

**PROVENANCE:** Purchased from Robert Edwards Auctions in New Jersey, in 2004 and 2017; Toni Stone photo purchased from Swann Auction Galleries in New York, in 2018; Collector’s cards purchased from eBay in 2002.

**RESTRICTIONS:** None

**COPYRIGHT:**

**REPRODUCTION RIGHTS:** Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained from the Indiana Historical Society.

**ALTERNATE FORMATS:**

**RELATED HOLDINGS:**

**ACCESSION NUMBERS:** 2004.0351, 2017.0154, 2018.0138; 2002.0295

**NOTES:**

## HISTORICAL SKETCH

The Indianapolis Clowns, a baseball team that played in the Negro American League, came to call Indianapolis its home beginning in 1943. The team began in 1929 as a barnstorming group based in Miami and was first known nationwide as the Ethiopian Clowns. Although the team played serious baseball, it was best known for its showmanship and flamboyant style. The team was considered to be baseball's equivalent to basketball's Harlem Globetrotters. Barnstorming the country during the 1930s and the early 1940s, team members bolstered attendance by sometimes playing in grass skirts and painted bodies, and used such names as Selassie, Mofike, Wahoo, King Tut, and Tarzan. Once the Clowns were admitted to the Negro American League, they toned down their comical antics.

The Clowns were the best-known black league team to play in Indianapolis, but not the first. The first formalized black league, the Negro National League, incorporated in 1920 with teams in six Midwestern cities, including the Indianapolis ABCs. The Clowns actually divided time between Indianapolis and Cincinnati during the 1943 through 1945 seasons.

Some remarkable players were with the Clowns over the years, including future home run king Henry Aaron, who made his Negro League debut with Indianapolis as a teenage shortstop in 1951 and then played second base in 1952. Aaron missed regular Negro American League play, however, because he joined the team the season after the league suspended action and resumed a nationwide schedule of barnstorming. In 1953 Toni Stone, the first woman to play professional baseball, joined the Clowns at second base, replacing Aaron. She was talented enough to bat .243 while appearing in about 50 of the Clowns' 175 games that season.

Following the demise of the Negro League structure in 1950, the Indianapolis Clowns continued their barnstorming show across the country until disbanding in the early 1970s.

### Sources:

Baseball Reference ([www.baseball-reference.com](http://www.baseball-reference.com)). Accessed 20 May 2017.

Crawford, Aimee. "A Literary Home Run Helped Toni Stone, Baseball's First Woman Player, Find a Stage of Her Own" [https://www.espn.com/espnw/culture/story/\\_/id/27020181/a-literary-home-run-helped-toni-stone-baseball-first-woman-player-find-stage-own](https://www.espn.com/espnw/culture/story/_/id/27020181/a-literary-home-run-helped-toni-stone-baseball-first-woman-player-find-stage-own) Accessed 18 November 2019.

*The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, edited by Bodenhamer, David J. and Robert G. Barrows. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994: 186–187, 300–302. General Collection: F534 .I55 E4 1994

Indianapolis Clowns baseball card of Richard "King Tut" King (<http://www.number5typecollection.com/2012/05/1976-laughlin-indianapolis-clowns.html>). Accessed 20 May 2017.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of three photographs of Indianapolis Clowns baseball team members. One is a team photo, without identification, ca. 1943, in the format of a real photo postcard. Another photograph shows three identified Clowns players standing by the team bus, ca. 1948. There is also a publicity photo of Toni Stone in uniform, posing with a bat in 1953.

Also included in the collection is a set of 42 collector's cards produced by cartoonist Robert G. "Bob" Laughlin for Fler in 1976. Each card features a different person or aspect from the Indianapolis Clowns' history, with explanatory text on the reverse.

## CONTENTS

### CONTENTS

Real photo postcard of the Indianapolis Clowns, ca. 1943. Shows 17 men in baseball uniforms and two men in suit coats. No one is identified. [The player in front on the left appears to be Richard King, a.k.a. "King Tut."]

Three Clowns in baseball uniforms standing by the Indianapolis Clowns team bus: Manuel Godinez (pitcher), Reynaldo "Verde" Dreke (center field), and Andres Mesa (right field). Photo by Ernest C. Withers of Memphis, Tennessee [1948]. [On the back of the photo the players are identified as Manuel Godines, Reinaldo Verde, and Andres Mesa. The year 1947 is also written on back; however, according to baseball-reference.com, the only year that Andres Mesa played for the Clowns was 1948.]

Publicity photo of Toni Stone in uniform, posing with a bat, 1953. [Full name: Marcenia Lyle Stone, 1921–1996]. Stamped on back: Cleveland Press / Aug 14 1953 / Reference Dept. [Negative was retouched.]

Indianapolis Clowns collector's cards 00-12 [two of the cards are unnumbered]

Indianapolis Clowns collector's cards 13-26

Indianapolis Clowns collector's cards 27-40

### CONTAINER

Photographs, Folder 1 of 4

Photographs, Folder 1 of 4

Photographs, Folder 1 of 4

Photographs, Folder 2 of 4

Photographs, Folder 3 of 4

Photographs, Folder 4 of 4