



Feb. 2022

ELGIN, Texas—The City of Elgin will celebrate its Sesquicentennial in 2022. As we look forward to a year to commemorate, educate and celebrate in our community we look forward to sharing retrospectives about the community.

“Homeless Eagles” Win State

In 1956, the University of San Francisco Dons won their second consecutive NCAA basketball championship. During that two-year span, the Dons won 55 straight games. The small Jesuit school didn't have a gymnasium to host home games, which made their achievement even more remarkable. Led by Bill Russell and K.C. Jones, the “Homeless Dons,” as they were called, had to play all their games on neutral or opponent's home courts.

Seven years earlier, the Booker T. Washington Eagles of Elgin won the state basketball championship of the Prairie View Interscholastic League (PVIL), despite not playing a single game that season in their hometown. The PVIL was the governing body for academic, athletic, and music competitions for black high schools in Texas during the state's segregationist era.

Washington High, which was located on Elgin's south side, had no indoor athletic facility. The resilient members of the school's basketball team had to practice on an outdoor makeshift dirt court. According to Eagles' forward T. J. Hicks, “We felt having to play in places like Bastrop or Rockdale was more of a blessing than a burden because at least we were playing inside.” That season, Hicks was the team's leading scorer. Several years ago, when asked how many points he averaged, Hicks couldn't recall, but did smile and say, “I was hard to guard.”

The Eagles were coached by Martin McDonald, who for decades was a positive influence in the lives of young people of this community. Although Coach McDonald was known as a strict disciplinarian, he was beloved by the students of Washington High. According to starting point guard Ben Hill, “Coach McDonald was very knowledgeable about the sport of basketball.”

For the championship game, the Eagles boarded the bus once again; this time traveling to Navasota. Before a packed house, they outlasted the team from Navasota's George



Washington Carver High and returned to Elgin with the only state championship trophy a high school basketball team from Elgin has ever won.

Ben Hill, whose given name was Willie James Hill, would go on to become Chairman of the Oral Maxillofacial Surgeon Department at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. He is also the older brother of Cheryl Thomas and Theresa Scott.

It was Dr. Hill who dribbled out the final seconds of the championship game. He recalled, "When the buzzer sounded, I was so elated until I collapsed onto the floor, just overcome with joy."

In 2020, the "Homeless Eagles" were inducted into the Elgin Athletic Hall of Honor. Five players from the team are pictured on the 1946 photo that the City of Elgin has selected as a graphic for the city's Sesquicentennial Celebration.

On the 25th anniversary of their victory, the University Interscholastic League honored the 1949 team from Elgin during halftime of one of its state basketball championship games which were held at Gregory Gym in Austin, March 8-9, 1974. Below is an excerpt from the 1974 official state championship program.

Honor Teams

The 1948 University Interscholastic League state basketball champions and the 1949 Prairie League state champions will be honored at this year's tournament. In the University Interscholastic League Maydelle High School won the Conference B title, Mount Vernon High School was the Conference A Champion, and Crozier Tech (Dallas) won the AA state championship. In the Prairie View League Washington High School (Elgin) won the Conference B state championship, Arp High School was the Conference A champion, and Yates (Houston) won the AA state championship.

Members of the teams have been contacted and many will be the guests of the League at this 54th Annual State Tournament.



Washington (Elgin)

1949 CONFERENCE B PRAIRIE VIEW STATE CHAMPION - The Washington High School team members were: Leroy Charles Brown, City of Houston Bus Company, Houston; Allen James Hammond, San Antonio; Willie Jean Harrell (deceased) ; Thomas James Hicks, barber & member of USAF, address unknown; Willie James Hill, dental student, Howard University, Washington D.C. ; Herman Houston (deceased) ; Herbert James Nash, pastor, St. John Missionary Baptist Church, Beaumont ; Charles Perkins, Elgin ; (Coach) Martin L. McDonald, retired, Elgin.

Special thanks to T. Berry, native Elginite and former educator. Several books on Elgin area history, Elgin, and stories from Elgin people are available at the Elgin Public Library 404 N Main Street Tuesday Thursday 9am to 7pm, Wednesday Friday 9am to 6pm and Saturday 9am to 2pm. The Depot Museum, operated by the Elgin Historical Association manages the photography collection and archives, 14 Depot Square in downtown Elgin, open Saturdays 12 to 4 (confirm hours before arriving).

Join the celebration for the Elgin Sesquicentennial – volunteer by e-mailing community@ci.elgin.tx.us or call 512-229-3227.