

ALAN THOMAS "LEFTY" CLARKE

One of the few Blue Ridge League players to pitch prior to the Great World War (WWI) and after, Alan Thomas "Lefty" Clarke was arguably one of the most successful southpaws to pitch in the Class D League.

Clarke was actually born Allen Thomas Clark to Thomas H. and Eleanor "Ella" H. (nee Hardy) Clark (1870-1953) on his maternal grandfather, John Thomas Hardy's family home, called Huntington Farm, located in Howard County, Maryland, near the little town called Clarksville, on March 8, 1897. Some records list Clarke as being born in 1896, but his Social Security records list him as being born in 1897.

According to the 1910 census, he was one of five children, four boys, which included John H. (b. 1889), Herman W. (b. 1891), Allen T. (b.1897), Glen M. (b. 1900), and one girl, Eleanor (b. 1893). Note the spelling difference of Allen/Alan's name.

As a young teenager, Clarke would play sandlot baseball on Sundays, evidently attracting crowds of people to watch the youngster pitch. At Sherwood High School in nearby Montgomery County (MD), Clark continued to show promise on the mound, in the same mold of fellow Sherwood star athlete, and Major Leaguer, Jack Bentley.

According to the *Baseball Hall of Fame Library*, Clarke made his professional debut with the Clarksville, Kentucky club in the KITTY League in 1914 as an 18-year old pitcher. However, no statistical records could be found listing Clarke for this club.

In 1915, the 18-year old southpaw caught the attention of William "Country" Morris, who was the manager of the Martinsburg (WV) club in the newly formed Class D, Blue Ridge League. After trying out for the Champions, as Martinsburg was called that season, Clarke just made the cut as the club's fourth pitcher on the 13-player roster.

His first season in Martinsburg was unremarkable, winning seven games, while losing the same number, in 143 innings pitched, but he showed enough promise that Morris tagged the young left-hander to be a regular starter for the Martinsburg club the following season.

The 1916 Martinsburg club, who became known as the Mountaineers, featured several future Major Leaguers, including first baseman Luzerne Blue, and the most dominant southpaw pitcher the league would produce, Marvin M. Goodwin of Gordonsville, VA. Goodwin, who was sent to Morris through Clark Griffith of the Washington Senators, would provide a boon to youngster Clarke, whose development on the mound improved.

The pitching corps of Goodwin, Clarke, and right-hander Frank Colley led the Martinsburg club in a tense battle with the Chambersburg Maroons for the league pennant. The two clubs fought until the final few days of the season, before

Chambersburg came away with the league pennant, and left Martinsburg the bridesmaid for the season in a row. While Goodwin led the league with 19 victories, and Colley was close behind with 17 wins, it was Clarke, who finished with a 14-10 record, who kept the Mountaineers pennant hopes in the running until the end. Clarke, who was noted for his hard, high fastball, led the league by hitting 15 batters, while fanning 126 batters.

Clarke returned for his third season under the helm of Morris with the Martinsburg club for the 1917 season. With Goodwin now pitching in the Major Leagues, Clarke became the ace pitcher for the Mountaineers, sharing the spotlight with Colley. He led the Mountaineers with 17 victories on the mound, while fanning 132 batters, but led the league by walking 89 batters.

Though no official no-hitters were thrown in the Blue Ridge League during the 1917 season, Clarke accomplished a feat that season that was almost as remarkable as the Boston Red Sox's Ernie Shore, who tossed a nine-inning no-hitter in relief of George "Babe" Ruth that same year against the Washington Senators on June 23.

Just a week before Shore's feat, on June 15, the Mountaineers hosted the visiting Hanover (PA) Raiders at Martinsburg's Rosemont Park. "Cozy" Dolan started for the Raiders against Martinsburg right-handed hurler, "Charlie" Hough. Through the first nine innings, the game was a slugfest, as the two clubs battled to a 10-10 tie, when Martinsburg scored five runs in the 9th inning to put the game into extra innings. Both clubs changed pitchers in the 10th inning, with right-fielder, Bobbie Orrison taking the mound for Hanover, and Clarke for Martinsburg. Amazingly, both pitchers went on to toss shutout ball over the next eight-plus innings, as only five hits were recorded, both by the Mountaineers. Clarke retired the side in the 18th, and in the bottom of the 18th inning, Martinsburg's "Country" Morris recorded his league record, sixth hit, a double and scored when Lee Percy doubled to knock in Morris with his seventh run batted in to end the game. Clarke pitched nine innings of no-hit ball, walking one batter, and fanning three, in what was called the best relief performance ever displayed in the league's history. This game, which was umpired by future Hall of Fame umpire, Bill McGowan, was the second longest played in the league's early history, lasting three hours and fifty minutes.

Clarke also accomplished another rare feat that same season, against the same Hanover club, when he tossed a doubleheader shutout against the Raiders on August 11, 1917. Clarke defeated Hanover 6-0 in the first game, and came back and pitched another shutout over seven innings against the same club, 1-0. He was one of only two pitchers in the league to toss a double shutout, the other was Frederick's Eddie Hook, who matched the feat two weeks later against Clarke's Martinsburg club, tossing two one-hitters against the Mountaineers on August 30.

Despite Clarke's outstanding pitching down the stretch, and the batting of Lu Blue, George "Reggie" Rawlings, Morris and Percy, Martinsburg finished second for the third year in a row, this time behind Jack Hurley's Hagerstown (MD) Terriers, who featured

25-game winning pitcher, Earl Howard. (*note - Howard's biography can be found in the SABR BioProject*).

The Great World War interrupted Clarke's baseball endeavors in 1918 and 1919, and Clarke returned to Clarksville, MD after the 1917 season to tend to his family farm.

After missing two full seasons, some in part due to military service, Clarke returned to the Class D, Blue Ridge League in time for the 1920 baseball season. However, this time Clarke changed uniforms, following his former mentor in Martinsburg, "Country" Morris, to Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, to play for the newly former Waynesboro Villagers.

Clarke came back with renewed vigor, eager to show off his talents. Despite overseeing the operation of his family farm at the same time, Clarke would travel to the ballpark on the day he pitched, take his turn on the mound, and then return to his home. "I'm running a farm and pitching ball at the same time," he once said. "Some job, I jump on the mound, hurl nine innings, if I last that long, hop in my machine (truck), and beat it for Clarksville, near Baltimore, which is about 80 miles from most Blue Ridge League towns. I farm for two days and then hot foot it back to the Blue Ridge. Believe me gentleman I am not a loafer."

In 24 starts, Clarke won 14 games, losing eight contests. He pitched 190 innings, fanning 150 batters, and allowed a 1.80 ERA. Waynesboro battled for the league crown, but settled for fourth place, behind eventual league champ, the Hagerstown Champs.

What would happen next would be talked about for years in the towns and cities of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia. The 1921 Blue Ridge League season would belong to Clarke

Clarke returned to Waynesboro for the 1921 campaign for his fifth season in the league's six-year history. What he did would make him one of the most feared pitchers in the league, and would go down in the record books.

Clarke pitched in 34 contests, starting 31 games. He went 25-7, tying a league mark set by former Hagerstown hurler, Earl N. Howard in 1917, for the most victories in one season. Clarke, who added a curve ball to his repertoire the previous season, dominated, fanning a league record 258 batters in 274 innings of work, while shutting out eight opponents. In addition, Clarke tossed the league's only no-hitter that season against his former team, Martinsburg. His nasty curve ball resulted in a league record 29 hit batsmen, and 90 walks, but he became the most respected pitcher in the league, as it was reported very few batters would dare crowd the plate while he was pitching that season, without the fear of being "beaned" in the head by one of Clarke's pitches.

Thanks to his Waynesboro teammate, third baseman Wally Kimmick, Major League scouts had converged on Waynesboro's E-B Park that season to see the infield prospect play. What they hadn't expected was the remarkable pitching prowess of the veteran

southpaw, Clarke. Several Major League clubs expressed interest in both players, and after some negotiations with the Waynesboro club, both players contracts were sold to the National League's Cincinnati Reds.

After the end of the Blue Ridge League season, Clarke joined Kimmick on the Reds roster in mid-September. After sitting on the bench for two weeks, the two finally played together again, on October 2, 1921, as the Reds hosted the Chicago Cubs in a doubleheader at Crosley Field.

Clarke made his Major League pitching debut during the second game of the doubleheader against the Cubs, which was the final game of the season. Clarke started for the Reds, against Chicago's Virgil Cheeves, and kept the Cubs scoreless for two innings. Unfortunately, the southpaw got a bitter taste of Major League batting, as Chicago scored seven runs off him third inning.

Two fielding errors by Kimmick, a bases loaded triple by the Cubs Bill Marriott, and a run scoring double by fellow Marylander, George Maisel, was all the Cubs needed, as they defeated Clarke and the Reds, 7 to 0 in a five inning contest, called because of darkness. Only three of the seven runs were earned against Clarke, who walked two batters and fanned one batter in what would be his only Major League game of his career.

The Reds returned Clarke to the Blue Ridge League at his request for the 1922 season, where he finished 9-3, leading the league with a .750 win percentage in 25 games pitched. According to local newspaper reports, Clark had a "tired arm", and never showed the dominance he had during the 1921 season. He never got another chance to pitch in the Majors.

Clarke tried to pitch in the Class C, Virginia League in 1923, but injured his arm after pitching in just two games with the Petersburg-VA club, and asked for his release. He came back to the Blue Ridge League in 1924 to pitch for the Hagerstown Hubs, winning all five of his decisions in 10 games pitched, but injured his knee, ending his season. Clarke pitched briefly with the Chambersburg (PA) club of the same league for the 1925 season, but couldn't regain his old form and decided to hang up his spikes and was placed on the voluntarily retired list in the fall of 1925 in preference to another love of his: thoroughbred horse racing.

After his baseball career ended, Clarke became a very successful farmer and thoroughbred horse breeder and trainer in the state of Maryland. Based at his birth home, Huntington Farm, Clarke bred prize horses, Mowlee, King Mowlee, Lemmowlee, and Senator Joe among others during the mid-1930's through the early 1960's.

His love for horses ran deep. In 1939, Huntington Farm had 62 horses, and was considered the No. 1 wintering center of this part of the country. Clarke was known for ability to rehabilitate injured horses back into racing form, most notably the gelding Honey Cloud. Clarke was once quoted as saying "If I get any more horses, I guess I will have to sleep in the attic and use the bathtub for a watering trough."

On February 26, 1945, the 47-year old bachelor Clarke obtained a marriage license in Frederick, Maryland to wed 24-year Lillian Price Moric of Baltimore, Maryland. The license listed Clarke as 42-years of age.

Clarke and his wife Lillian, raised five daughters, Caroline C., Lillian E., Arlene W., Lucinda Lee H., and Alana B.

He died on March 11, 1975 at Prince Georges General Hospital in Cheverly, Maryland, three days after his 78th birthday from the effects of Parkinson's Disease. His services were held at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Highland, Maryland, and he is buried at St. Mark's Cemetery, adjacent to the church.

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Special thanks to Steve Boren and Andrew North of SABR-L for research in providing Clarke's missing professional statistics.

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