

Russ Gideon: athlete and business leader

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When Russ Gideon, a black teenager from Liverpool, Nova Scotia, arrived in Calgary, there was little to indicate that he was an exceptional person who someday would be prominent in sports and a nationally known leader in his community.

Russell Gideon was born October 9, 1904, the son of James A. and Elizabeth Gideon. The family arrived in Calgary about 1912 where James was employed as a plasterer until his death about 1918. His wife passed away later in the year. Russell was first listed in the city directory in 1920 when he turned sixteen. Little is known of his early school years but by age fifteen he was working after school and later on weekends he was playing drums as part of a dance orchestra which may have generated some extra income. When he grew up he formed his own five-piece orchestra as well. I remember Russ as the popular drummer in the Hobart Cowan orchestra which played at the Varsity Hall in Sylvan Lake the summer of 1933. I as a lad slept in a bedroom beside the stage and went to sleep each night with Russ pounding his drums almost over my head.

By 1920 Russell was employed at the McDermid Drug Co. store in downtown Calgary as a delivery boy, and later as an assistant shipper, and then a shipper. (1) This is likely when he decided to become a pharmacist.

The family lived at various locations in Calgary, usually in the Victoria Park district. A former neighbour of the Gideons, Dorothy Langley (m. Freeman), recalls seeing an elderly black lady on the porch of the house who would smile and wave at her. This likely was Lela or Marjorie, members of the Gideon family. She also thinks she knew of Russell helping kids at the school grounds with their sports.

One must wonder what social and community life existed for the Gideons in Calgary. Life for a black family could not have been easy. A Calgary Herald news story in 1920 reported that Victoria Park residents unsuccessfully petitioned city council to remove "blacks" and to make the community a white-only district. (2) This was the very time and place of the Gideon family residence. Author Cheryl Foggo

describes many instances of organized actions against the black community. (3) On one occasion some American conventioners shopping at McDermid Drug turned and left when they saw a black employee; this may have been Russ Gideon. (4)

Yet the young man seemed to possess the personality and charm that surpassed any colour barrier that may have existed in Calgary.

While in the city, Gideon became very active in sports, including field and track athletics where he quickly showed his exceptional leadership capabilities. He was a member of the 1923 Victoria Athletic Club baseball team, playing the centre field position and acting as manager of the team. This team took top honours, becoming provincial champions that year. Russ rose to become captain-manager of the Calgary Dodgers baseball club in 1930. This team won the Alberta Intermediate Championship in 1929-30 and the Senior Championship 1930. But where Gideon really made a name for himself was in [football](#). In 1928 he joined the Calgary Tigers as an outside end and was probably the first black player on a senior team anywhere in Canada. (5) At the height of his career he was described as "one of the greatest tacklers in the grid sport in the west." (6) At this time, the teams in the Alberta Rugby Union, as well as the national body, the Canadian Rugby Union (forerunner of the Canadian Football League) still played the game on the ground, not in the air. Although the forward pass had been legal in the United States since 1906, it was not approved in Canada until 1929. In that year, a Drake university graduate, Gerry Seiberling, joined the Calgary Tigers as a quarterback and wrote a new page in the history of football.



Russ Gideon was described in the November 27, 1929, issue of the *Calgary Herald* as "End man of the Calgary Tigers who played a sterling game against the Edmonton Eskimos at Hillhurst park, on Saturday afternoon. He uncovered a neat tackle, and it was seldom the igloo dwellers were able to get around his side of the field."

When playing in Edmonton's Renfrew Park against the Eskimos on Sept. 21, 1929, Seiberling filled the air with passes in the final quarter. His first completed pass went to halfback Cecil McKinnon for 20 yards, making him the first football player in Canada to successfully receive a forward pass. (7) Another went to halfback Bill McLeod, a third to Russ Gideon, and a fourth to Fritz Sandstrom. Calgary defeated Edmonton, 33-8. (8)

Gideon, therefore, had the honour of playing in the first Canadian game to successfully use the forward pass, and of being the third receiver in that game. However, sometimes sports' stories become distorted with time. For example, in 1970 a Herald reporter wrote that quarterback Seiberling had fired a ball "down field to team mate Russ Gideon. Gideon caught it and this was the first forward pass thrown in Canada." (9) It was a nice compliment but not quite correct.

The first home game of the season for the Tigers occurred on Oct. 5, 1929, at Hillhurst Park (now Riley Park). Calgary defeated Edmonton by an impressive 33-0 and Gideon was proclaimed the star of the game. "Russ showed plenty of speed on the end position Saturday, " reported the *Calgary Herald*. "He uncovered a neat tackle, and it was seldom the igloo dwellers were able to get around his side of the field." (10) Another scribe stated, "Russ Gideon caught the fans' fancy with his tackling." (11) A game against the Eskimos the following week resulted in another Calgary victory, with Gideon being praised for his tackling and pass receptions.

"Gideon's name was on the tongue of two-thirds of the fans as they were leaving the park at the conclusion of the game." (12)

Gideon was back with the Tigers for the 1930 season and in the first game he was described as "Calgary's popular, colored athlete, and brilliant end performer." (13) In that game against Canada's all-star Hamilton Tigers, he scored the only touchdown when he picked up a loose ball and ran 40 yards for the points. In another game, he and the other outside end, Mel Friend, caught Edmonton players behind their goal lines three times for rouges. (14)

The popular athlete returned for the 1931 season with the team now called the Calgary Altomah-Tigers, and sometimes the Calgary Indians. Gideon put in an appearance for the 1932 season but after the first game, a scribe commented, "Calgarians who have followed Russ Gideon, the popular rugby and baseball star in these lines of sports for many years, will regret to learn that he is leaving for Boston Wednesday to take up a three-year course in pharmacy. Russ is one of the most popular athletes in the west, and that goes for any city that he has played in. He has always given of his best and has stood out, particularly in the gridiron sport, being a speedy runner and a great tackler. He will be missed by the Altomahs." (15) It was likely due to his work at McDermid Drugs that Gideon decided to take up the profession. He enrolled at the Western Massachusetts School of Pharmacy in Boston reportedly just after the school began to admit blacks.

Gideon returned to Calgary in the summer of 1933 and played one last game, this time against the Saskatoon Quakers. There he ended his career in a scoring play when he rouged an opponent at the initial kickoff." (16) But this game was just a way of saying goodbye to Calgary. As a reporter wrote, "This was his first and last appearance of the season as he is going back to Boston Tech to complete his pharmacy studies." (17)

This time he presumably stayed in the United States for he enlisted in the army in 1941, serving as a technical sergeant in the U.S. 366th Infantry Medical Corps in Africa and Italy. He was married and after the war he and his wife Lillian moved to Seattle in 1946. There he opened Madison Drugs on East Madison Street, becoming the first black pharmacist in the Seattle area. He operated the store successfully until his retirement in 1963.

Over the years, Gideon became a community and business leader in Seattle. He was a pioneer in senior housing, building the Elizabeth James House which was named for his parents; was elected as president of the East Madison-East Union

Commercial Club; and served on the boards of the Florence Crittenden Home, Seattle Urban League, and the East Madison YMCA. A lifelong Mason, he reached the national position of Sovereign Grand Commander, Prince Hall Affiliation, Northern Jurisdiction. In that post, he officiated over the 22, 000 members of the 33rd degree Prince Hall Masons north of the Mason-Dixon Line. He also was a charter member of Seattle's Central Area Kiwanis Club and a trustee at Mount Zion Baptist Church.

In 1977 and for the next eight years, Gideon was recognized by Ebony magazine as one of America's 100 most influential black citizens.

I recall that in the late 1960's or early 1970's, Russ Gideon was invited back to Calgary, possibly to perform a ceremonial kick-off at a Stampeder home game. The following day he was offered a drive in a chauffeured automobile. Asked where he would like to go he said he wanted to visit pharmacist Neil McDermid and Varsity Hall's Jack Penley. Learning that they had died he then asked to see their sons, Ken McDermid and me. Thus he did see two former friends who were both pharmacists like himself.

Russell Gideon died on September 29, 1985, and a year later, a housing facility for low income seniors and disabled residents was named the Gideon-Mathews Gardens in his honour. (18)

NOTES

The author is grateful for the additional facts uncovered by editor Hugh Dempsey.

(1) McDermid Drug Co had as many as twelve drug stores in Alberta. See biographies of Neil and Ken McDermid at Glenbow Archives, Calgary.



Russ Gideon, Calgary football player, went on to become a successful pharmacist and business leader in Seattle. He was voted one of America's 100 most influential black citizens.

(2) Cited in Calgary Herald, Sept. 1, 2005.

(3) Cheryl Foggo, "My Home is Over Jordan: Southern Alberta's Black Pioneers, " in Remembering Chinook Country. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 151-70.

(4) Information provided by Norman Sproule.

(5) This was the opinion of Greg Fulton, CFL historian.

(6) Calgary Albertan, Oct.26, 1933.

(7) Calgary Herald, Sept.23, 1929. Some reporters had trouble identifying the players. The Herald and the Albertan said the first pass was caught by McKinnon and the Edmonton Journal, Alex Mackenzie.

(8) Calgary Herald, Sept.23, 1929. The Edmonton Journal and Calgary Albertan said the Gideon pass was caught by Ralph Losie, but this was later corrected. Edmonton, not to be outdone, made a completed forward pass from Joe Cook to Richard. Both sides also had a number of incomplete passes. On the same day, two forward passes were attempted in a game between the Winnipeg Tigers and St. John's College but both failed. As the Eastern league did not start until two weeks later, the passing records were limited to the West.

(9) Calgary Herald, Nov.27 1970.

(10) Calgary Herald, Oct. 7, 1929.

(11) Calgary Herald, Oct. 14, 1929.

(12) Calgary Herald, Oct.14, 1929.

(13) Calgary Albertan, Oct. 2, 1930.

(14) Calgary Herald, Oct. 6, 1930.



Russ Gideon is seen here as manager of the Victoria Athletic Club's baseball team in Calgary in 1923. He is in the back row, third from the right. Others in the picture are, left to right front row: G. Ross, E. Musgrove, R. Martin, Ted Turner, president, H. Palfrey, E. Ingel, and S. Vickerson. Back row: Verne Manarey, coach, A. Malkin, D. Folger, C. Biles, Gideon, and R. Giffen. Insets are Harry Hutchcroft, hon. secretary, and E.L. Richardson, hon. treasurer.

(15) Calgary Albertan, Oct. 3, 1932.

(16) Calgary Albertan, Sept. 26, 1933.

(17) Calgary Albertan, Sept. 26 1933.

(18) Mary T. Henry, *Tribute: Seattle Public Places Named for Black People*. Seattle: Statice Press, 1997), 28-30.

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