

Time for Basketball

Hometown Ramblings

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Contributing Columnist



Kirksey was a happening place when I was a child. My brother and I attended Kirksey Elementary School and our church was right next door. Our granddaddy, Hal Smith, ran one of the three country stores within walking distance of both facilities.

Our family, like many in rural western Kentucky, was interested in and involved with numerous activities going on all around us. Some of my fondest memories revolve around special events at school and church. There were always fun things to do with our friends and most of the time, our parents had as much fun as we did.

I was reminded recently of how special those days were when our neighbor, David Emerson, showed me a couple of pictures from his days of playing basketball for the Kirksey Eagles in 1968. Before the county schools consolidated, the games were played against the other rural schools of Almo, Dexter, Faxon, Lynn Grove, New Concord and Hazel. Basketball was a big deal and the gym would

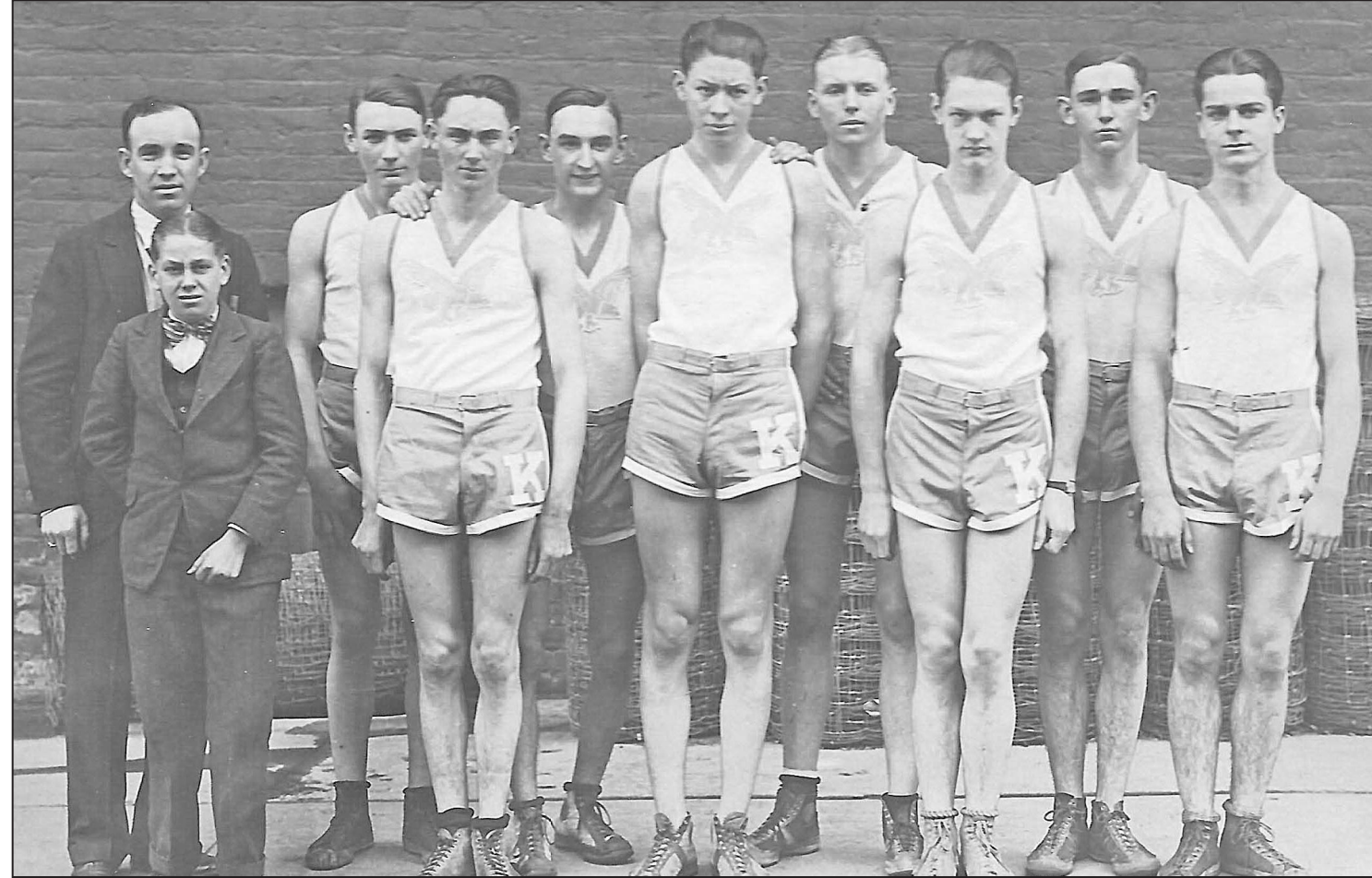
be packed with students, parents and grandparents as we all cheered on our home team.

The players were often mentioned in the Murray Ledger & Times, touting their prowess at play. Even though it was elementary school, David's winning team was mentioned as follows:

Kirksey came out on top in elementary basketball action Friday night. The final score was Kirksey 32, Faxon 21. Darnell was high man for Kirksey with 14 points followed by Emerson with 6 and Lords, Carson and Parris with 4 points each. High men for Faxon was Ferguson with 10. Others scoring for Faxon were Duncan 4, Denim 3, Morris 2 and Coney 1.

David's picture and his pride in playing on the team reminded me of my granddaddy Hal's days as the captain of the Kirksey Eagles in 1931.

Growing up, I often marveled at how that tall, skinny kid with knobby knees in the middle of the picture could actually be the same person as the rotund teddy-bear of a man that



The 1931 Kirksey Eagles, front row, from left, were Macon McCuiston, Tom Adams, Hal Smith, Ray Stark, Frank Patterson. Back, from left, were Coach Harry Potts, Lurwin Cain, Ben Harrell, Bill Venable and Harry Guier.

I adored. The one who was always chomping on a fat cigar as he held court at Smith's Grocery.

A man of few words, Hal never bragged about his proficiency on the court, but I knew

he kept up with local, regional and state basketball games. I'll never forget learning that he and his team were pretty darn good, winning the county championship in 1931. In fact, the Kirksey

Eagles basketball team had quite a history of placing well in his era.

The 1935 and '36 teams went to the state tournament for the playoffs. In both instances, they

were defeated in the first round by the eventual state champions. Not bad for a bunch of rural kids from the Jackson Purchase.

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Photo provided

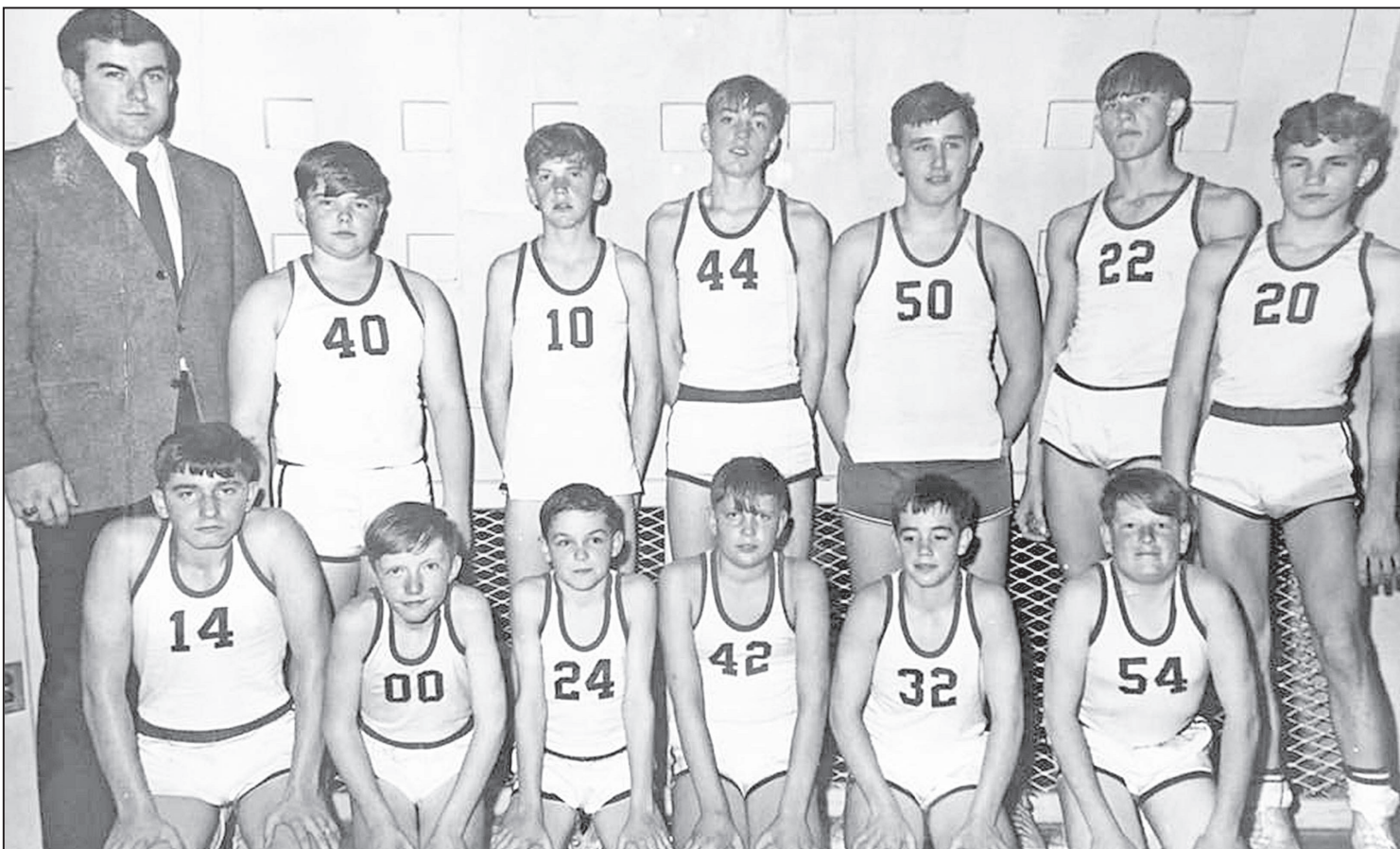


Photo provided

The 1968 Kirksey Eagles were, front row, from left, Daniel Feagin, David Emerson, Barry Rose, Danny Darnell, Tommy Vance, and Myron Smith. Back, from left, were Coach Jerry Wallace, Kerry Baker, Phillip Darnell, Donnie Beamon, Andy Armstrong, Randy Tucker and Jerry Don Tucker.

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Incidentally, the 1935 team included, Howard Bazzell, Ned Washer, Dick Adams, Macon McCuiston, Lloyd Cunningham, Novice Copeland, Boyce Dixon and Clovis Bazzell. Their coach was a former player from the 1927 team, Bearl Darnell. They were beaten by Danville 33-19 in the first round.

The 1936 team was made up of the same players (Bazzell, McCuis-

ton, Washer, Copeland, Dixon, and Billington) with the addition of a few others with the last names of Pierce, Wilson, Rogers, and Brewer. One of their younger players who went along on the trip was Doris Ezell. They had won the district tournament with a 29-0 record but were overcome at the Sweet 16 by Corbin, losing 27 to 24.

I'm guessing there were several fund raisers held in the community to help the young men pay for their trip to Lexington. I can only imagine the pride of everyone in the Kirksey community as they rooted for our team.

Leading up to the 1936 state tournament, the International Relations Club of Murray College brought two of the outstanding high school basketball teams of Western Kentucky to Murray for a match in the College Auditorium. The Brewers Redmen and the Kirksey Eagles played in a benefit game.

I couldn't find the results of that match but regardless of who won, I'm sure it was a fast-paced game with both sides cheering like crazy. As these games were held in the midst of the Great Depression, basketball was surely a welcomed form

of entertainment, a great distraction for local folks.

More than 80 years later, as we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic, basketball will once again be a great distraction for local folks. The 2021 Boys Sweet Sixteen State Tournament is scheduled for March 31 through April 3 and the girls games are scheduled for April 7 through the 10th. Just like Kirksey back in the day, teams across Kentucky are gearing up for fierce competition.

It's a Kentucky tradition with deep roots and a lot of pride. ■