Wendell Smith and the Integration of Major League Baseball

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Abstract:

This thesis explores journalist Wendell Smith's role in the reintegration of Major League Baseball in 1947. It places Smith's contributions into the context of the Civil Rights Movement and examines Smith's actions in relation to the journalism standards of his time.

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This thesis is dedicated to my daughter, Lilian Jane Sanchez.

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Introduction

In an early column by Wendell Smith's for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Smith wrote of black baseball's need for a "Good-will Ambassador." Major League Baseball had a vast publicity machine, Smith explained, dedicated to aiming the spotlight at young players. Smith used the example of a fictional baseball player, young "Johnny Jones," a rookie player for the New York Yankees. "The day that Johnny Jones walks on the field with the rest of they Yankees," Smith wrote, "almost very [sic] fan in the stand knows about him. They take great pride in the fact that they know everything about the boy's life and record. He is watched with particular interest because of that fact."[1] Little did Smith know, there was a black baseball player like Johnny Jones, one named Jackie Robinson. Wendell Smith would be instrumental in introducing Jackie Robinson to the world.

Much has been written about Jackie Robinson, the pioneering black baseball player who broke modern baseball's color line in 1947 when he signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. But comparatively little has been written about Wendell Smith, an equally pioneering writer for the black weekly newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Historians Brian Carroll, Chris Lamb, Glenn Beske, David Wiggins, and Jules Tygiel have all studied Smith and his contributions. Smith suggested Robinson to Dodgers' President Branch Rickey, and he spent Robinson's first season in Major League Baseball traveling with the Dodgers, keeping Robinson company and finding him food

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[1] Smith, Wendell. "Smitty's Sport Spurts." Pittsburgh Courier 12 March 1938, 17.

and accommodations when no integrated services were available. With his weekly newspaper columns, ghostwritten newspaper column for Jackie Robinson and a book ghostwritten for Jackie Robinson at the end of the 1947 season, Smith helped to shape the image of Robinson into what it is today. Wendell Smith was a racial pioneer, pushing baseball integration along publicly, while quietly working behind the scenes to improve conditions for players and black reporters. By mainstream journalism standards, Smith's dual role, and his Dodgers salary, were conflicts of interest. But Smith viewed himself as a member of the "fighting press." For him, helping Jackie Robinson had to "make the grade" first and foremost. Smith wouldn't have had it any other way.

Chapter One

The Making of a Crusader

Wendell Smith was born on June 27, 1914 in Detroit, Michigan. His father, John Smith, immigrated to Detroit from Canada and worked his way up from an early job as a dishwasher to work as a chef for automaker Henry Ford. Smith moved easily through two social circles, interacting with both black and white people.[2] When Smith was ten years old, his father began bringing him to yearly social events at the Ford mansion. Smith would later reminisce about playing baseball with Ford's children:

> It was like a castle. In the summers I was there once a year. I knew the Ford kids, Edsel Benson and Henry. We played ball together. The first time I met Mr. Ford, my father said, 'Mr. Ford, this is my son, Wendell.' Mr. Ford shook my hand, patted me on the back and said, 'He's a fine looking boy, John. What does he want to be when he grows up?'[3]

Smith told Ford that he wanted to play baseball, a goal that appeared to be within his reach. By all accounts, he was an excellent all-around athlete, playing both basketball and baseball at Southeastern High School, where he was the only black student in attendance.[4] For the most part, Smith's youth was unmarred by racial incidents. When he was 16 years old, however, he was

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[2] Lamb, A Conspiracy of Silence, 82

[3] Lamb, A Conspiracy of Silence, 83

[4] Lamb, A Conspiracy of Silence, 83

cut from his American Legion team, allegedly due to his race. There are unsubstantiated claims that it was Henry Ford himself who exerted his influence to get Smith put back on the team. Smith was also forced to deal with segregated accommodations when his team travelled on road-trips.[5]

At the end of his high school baseball career, Smith was the winning pitcher in a 1-0 playoff victory for his American Legion team. After the game, Wish Egan, a scout for a Major League Baseball team, the Detroit Tigers, approached Smith to say that he was impressed with Smith's pitching ability. Egan lamented that he was unable to sign Smith to a contract, because of his race. Instead of signing Smith, he signed Smith's catcher, Mike Tresh. He also signed Smith's opponent, the losing pitcher in the game.[6] This was Smith's first serious brush with racial prejudice, and the shock of it encouraged him to become a journalist. Smith would later say that "[It] broke me up. It was then that I made the vow that I would dedicate myself to do something on behalf of the Negro ballplayer."[7] Smith kept in touch with his former catcher and followed Tresh's Major League career with some interest. Years later, when the color line was still unbroken, Smith wrote, with no trace of bitterness, that:

> We have taken a personal interest in his chosen vocation, because down through the years we have been the closes of buddies and have always confided in each other. Years ago while still in knee pants we

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[5] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 10

[6] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 49

[7] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 50

> exchanged our dreams and ambitions. Mike wanted to be a major league ball player, yours truly a gentleman of the press.[8]

Mike Tresh spent 16 years in major league baseball. Smith went off to West Virginia State College, a traditionally black college in Charleston, South Carolina, where he was elected captain of both the basketball and baseball teams and wrote for the school newspaper. He graduated in 1937 with a Bachelor's Degree in Education.[9] The October after his graduation, he got a job at the Pittsburgh *Courier*, which at the time was the largest black newspaper in the country. Smith began his tenure at the *Courier* as a general reporter. He earned seventeen dollars a week for his efforts and dedicated himself to learning the skills necessary to become a successful newspaper columnist.[10] In addition to his reporting duties, Smith assisted with the paper's layout and captioned photos. After a year on the job, Smith was promoted to assistant sports editor when Chester Washington was promoted to Courier business editor.[11]

In February of 1939, Smith suggested to management that the *Courier* take a more active role in advocating the desegregation of professional baseball. Smith would later say that his superiors at the Courier were supportive of his plan. "I suggested a campaign for the admittance, the

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[8] Smitty's Sport Spurts, Jan 27, 1940:17

[9] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 10

[10] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 83

[11] Lamb, Baseball's Whitewash, 6

inclusion of Negro ballplayers in the big leagues. The paper picked up on it. Everything seemed to think it was a very good idea."[12] Other reporters from the *Courier,* including Ches Washington, Alvin Moses, and Rollo Wilson, worked on the campaign, but Smith was by the far the most zealous of the *Courier* reporters.[13] Smith quickly developed his voice and a writing style that prompted historian Jules Tygiel to write that "Smith ranked among the nation's best sportswriters. He could be bitterly sarcastic and vitriolic in his rage against Jim Crow, yet lyrical in his descriptive prose."[14] In 1940, Wendell Smith was promoted to *Courier* sports editor.[15]

The Origins of the Negro Leagues

Jackie Robinson is often credited as the first black player to sign a contract with a Major League Baseball team, but he had a predecessor. In 1884, Moses Fleetwood Walker caught bare-handed for one season with the Toledo Blue Stockings. Walker was the first black player in organized, professional baseball and he would be the last black player until Jackie Robinson in 1947.[16] In a move that presaged future attitudes from the mainstream media, when Walker left organized baseball at the end of the 1884 season, most reporters reacted positively.[17]

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[12] Lamb, Baseball's Whitewash, 6

[13] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 6

[14] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 35

[15] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 155

[16] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 11

[17] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 12

In 1867, the first formal baseball organization, the National Association of Base Ball Players, was formed. The NABBP bylaws specifically prohibited black players. When the association reorganized in 1871, its members decided not to make the color line official. Instead, it was understood that teams would not sign black ball players. This marked the start of the so-called "gentleman's agreement."[18]

There were several unsuccessful attempts to start a separate league for black baseball players, but the first black league with long-term staying power was the Negro National League, founded in February of 1920 at a two-day meeting in Kansas City (the Negro American League was later founded in 1937). The driving force behind the creation of the new league was Leland Giants' owner Andrew "Rube" Foster. Black newspapermen played a central role in the Negro National from the start, attending the very first league meetings and drafting league paperwork and assisting with team rosters. *Pittsburgh Courier* Publisher Ira Lewis served as the first league secretary.[19] Black newspaper writers trumpeted their active participation in the league, with a writer from the *Chicago Defender* boasting that:

> The newspapermen had the day at the meeting.... No manager had aught to say about the players. They were selected on account of their RELATIVE STRENGTH to each team. The newspapermen will

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[18] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 13

[19] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 17

form an arbitration board to settle all disputes and act as publicity agents for games.[20]

Black papers and the negro leagues had an unconventional relationship from the start. Most black newspapers lacked the resources to dedicate reporters to individual games, so they often relied on the teams themselves to self-report their results. Losing teams usually neglected to send in their results and box scores, which made keeping statistics nearly impossible. Teams that were savvy about providing stories and box scores usually received the most copy as a result. Many owners were given direct access to the sports pages, in the form of bylined columns[21]. Reporters were never discouraged from holding dual roles in journalism and baseball. *Chicago Defender* sports reporter David Wyatt, for example, also served as the official scorer for the Leland Giants[22]. This active participation in a story would be considered a conflict of interest by modern day journalism standards, but was considered to be a natural partnership at the time. Reporters provided a patina of respectability to the owners, many of whom made their money running numbers' games and gambling operations.[23]

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[20] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 36

[21] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 74

[22] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 28

[23] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 37

The Rise of the Black Press

In the early 1920s, many blacks saw segregation as inevitable. Black baseball executives and newspapermen were proponents of Booker T. Washington's views on self help. As an enterprise primarily owned and managed by black men, the Negro National League was a great source of community pride. Additionally, because newspaper writers viewed black baseball as a business first and foremost, their coverage of the league originally focused on attendance and profit numbers instead of the on-field action, and the team owners were depicted as the primary characters instead of the ballplayers.[24] The Negro National League was more than just a game. It was, as media historian Brian Carroll put it, "a potential model for economic success throughout the black community.[25]" Black owners often lacked the necessary capital to purchase land and build stadiums, so they were forced to seek out the assistance of white partners. Most of the ballparks that Negro National teams played in were owned by white men, who ran the park concessions and who would often act as booking agents, taking a large cut of the profits. For these white businessmen, black baseball was less of a calling and more of a business and they tended to prioritize profits over community and hired support staffs that were predominantly white.[26]

Back issues from black newspapers are of great importance to historians, because they provide an alternative narrative to the majority point

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[24] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 76

[25] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 73

[26] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 13

of view portrayed in white, mainstream newspapers.[27] The black press traditionally held down two important roles in the black community, providing an activist voice, while unifying the community.[28] Black newspapers began to appear in greater numbers in 1861 and continued to thrive until the 1950s. Initially optimistic at the start of the Civil War, over a hundred black papers were founded between 1861 and 1877 and their owners were often outspoken advocates for social reforms.[29] Publishers continued to create new newspapers, with a hundred more black papers created between 1877 and 1890, but these papers were often ephemeral in nature, with their owners unsure if they would last to publish their next issue. With the rise of Jim Crow, many editors found it necessary to tone down their rhetoric, accepting segregation as inevitable and working within the prevailing racial system. Some editors continued to fight for equal rights, but many of their peers chose to push for a more placatory Booker T. Washington approach.[30]

Much like baseball, the newspaper industry was one of the few business areas where black entrepreneurs could attain a large measure of success. Blacks were also principle owners at banks, insurance companies and many entrepreneurial blacks ran numbers games.[31] Black reporters faced many of the same challenges as the black businessmen, community leaders, and athletes that they were writing about. Jim Crow laws often interfered with

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[27] Carroll, This is IT! 154

[28] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 303

[29] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 63

[30] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 64

[31] Carroll, Content Analysis, 65

their reporting, and discrimination prevented them from obtaining jobs at white, mainstream papers. Black reporters were usually silent about their own mistreatment. Even after the desegregation of Major League Baseball, black journalists often lacked the same opportunities to advance in the mainstream world that their crusading had provided for black baseball players.[32]

Beginning in World War I and building up steam as America headed into World War II, black newspapers began to more actively protest the unequal treatment of blacks in America and to speak out strongly about racial incidents. A new crop of black journalists, men who began their careers around the same time as the formation of the Negro National League, questioned the unflinching acceptance of segregation and began agitating for black rights and freedoms.[33] These crusading reporters redefined what it meant to be a black journalist and often inserted themselves into their own stories, taking up campaigns and actively working to improve conditions in America. These newspapermen viewed themselves as a "fighting press," with a duty to work with and on behalf of their community. Because they were working towards a common goal, this partnership was not viewed by the reporters as a conflict of interest.[34]

The Pittsburgh Courier and the Double V Campaign

Initially optimistic about their ability to contribute to the fight against fascism, black servicemen soon discovered that prejudice in the american

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[32] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 36

[33] Lamb, What's Wrong with Baseball, 191

[34] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 73

military was de rigueur.[35] On January 31, 1942, the *Courier* published a letter from Jams G. Thompson, a black man who wanted to enlist in the army, but who wondered why he should sacrifice himself for a country that treated him like a second-class citizen:

> Being an American of dark complexion and some 26 years, these questions flash through my mind: "Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?" "Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow?" "Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war? Will Colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past? These and other questions need answering; I want to know, and I believe every colored American, who is thinking, wants to know.[36]

Thompson proposed that "colored Americans adopt the double V for double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within."[37]

Encouraged by Thompson's letter, the *Courier* kicked off its Double V campaign. A key component of the campaign was the integration of America's pastime, baseball.[38] White America may have viewed baseball as the "great

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[35] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 167

[36] Letter to the Editor, Jan 31, 1942

[37] Letter to the Editor, Jan 31, 1942

[38] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 169

leveler," but these reporters were determined to show that the game was closed off to a large segment of the population.[39] By the time Wendell Smith was hired by the *Courier* in 1937, the paper had already established itself as an important advocate for change. As a fellow crusader, Wendell Smith fit right in.[40]

Wendell Smith's Interview Series

On February 19, 1939, Wendell Smith interviewed the president of Major League Baseball's National League, Ford Frick, in Frick's suite at the William Penn Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. Smith asked Frick, point blank, why there were no black players in major league baseball and Frick replied that:

> Many baseball fans are of the opinion that major league baseball does not want Negro players, but that is not true. We have always been interested in Negro players, but have not used them because we feel that the general public has not been educated to the point where they will accept them on the same standard as they do the white player.[41]

Frick, as historian Chris Lamb has pointed out, was being "disingenuous." The leadership of major league baseball had the ability to open up the league to black players any time they wanted. They simply chose not to.[42]

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[39] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 15

[40] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 50

[41] Pittsburgh Courier, February 25, 1939

[42] Tygiel, Baseball's Whitewash, 2

Frick blamed the color line on the general public's inability to accept black players, on the "social problems" that would bubble to the surface when a team traveled to the deep South for games, and on the problems that it would create if teammates couldn't eat together and use the same hotels during road trips.[43] Frick's statements about the color line were consistent with a major league baseball party line that stated that there were no black players in baseball because players and managers would never consent to it.[44] Baseball owners tended to place the blame on players, managers, and fans. They would also claim that black players lacked the talent to succeed in the big leagues, or that there were no black players interested in playing Major League Baseball.

Smith would later say that "It was this biased theory that inspired us to dig down deeper to rip open the seams of big league baseball and get the testimonials and opinions of the cream of the National League players."[45] Over the course of several months, Smith conducted interviews with at least 40 major league baseball players and eight managers. Because he was unable to obtain an MLB press card, Smith conducted the bulk of his interviews in the lobby of the Schenley Hotel, where visiting players stayed when they came into town to play the Pittsburgh Pirates. Smith would generally lead off by asking "Have you seen any Negro baseball players who you think could play in

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[43] Pittsburgh Courier, February 25, 1939

[44] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 139

[45] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 139

the major leagues?"[46] According to Smith, three quarters of the men that he interviewed favored integration.

Five months after his conversation with Frick, the *Courier* began publishing the results of Smith's interviews. The majority of the men that Smith interviewed were in favor of integration, perhaps because Smith was selective about who he interviewed. Players and managers listed several black ballplayers who they thought could make it in the major leagues. The most common negro leaguers suggested were Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, but there were many other players suggested as well. Some of the men didn't know of many players by name, but they almost all vouched for the quality in the negro leagues. In some cases, Smith suggested names to the men he was interviewing. And, if they offered up excuses for why integration wouldn't work, he reasoned with them.[47]

Wendell Smith and the *Courier* were proud of his series and trumpeted his results. Smith would later say that "It was a revelation, because the baseball owners had been constantly saying that the major league ballplayers would not play with Negro ballplayers."[48] Smith's story had its greatest impact in the black community, which already favored integration. The *Courier* had the highest circulation numbers of any black newspapers, and its actual readership was higher than its circulation numbers generally indicated. People passed on their copies of the paper when they were done reading it and would

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[46] Lamb Conspiracy of Silence, 138

[47] *Courier* articles

[48] Lamb, What's Wrong with Baseball, 191

also read their copies aloud to illiterate friends and family members. Smith's greatest hope for his interviews was that they would be picked up by the white dailies. Unfortunately for Smith, most white papers ignored the story or buried it in the back pages of their sports sections. It wasn't until years later that papers began reprinting his results, using them as proof that there was support within baseball for integration.[49] Major league baseball never officially acknowledged Smith's series, but it did become a rallying point within the black community.[50]

One newspaper that did reprint Smith's articles was the *Daily Worker*. Black and communist journalists had an uneasy relationship, but in this particular case, Smith was pleased to have his columns acknowledged. In a letter to the *Worker's* Lester Rodney, Smith wrote:

> I take this opportunity to congratulate you and the Daily Worker for the fine way you have joined with us on the current series concerning Negro players in the major leagues, as well as all your past efforts in this respect. Incidentally, in the future, perhaps we can work out something similar to the present series together too. In the meantime, I wish you the best of luck and admire you for your liberal attitude.[51]

Wendell Smith and Lester Rodney would later have a rather public falling out, but in 1939, Smith was pleased to have the support of his fellow writer.

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[49] Lamb, Baseball's Whitewash, 17

[50] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 12

[51] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 152

The *Courier* series was groundbreaking, because it was the first time that a large number of major league players and managers went on the record in support of integration. Media historian Chris Lamb has theorized that Smith may have intentionally set himself up for success by only interviewing the players who he assumed would favor ending the color line. Lamb also believes that some of the players who went on record in favor of integration might have done so for political reasons, and not because they wanted to play with black ballplayers.[52]

Smith's interviews were an important component of his meteoric rise through the black press. He would later acknowledge that "It really got me on my way and gave me a name in the sportswriting."[53] This was an exciting time for Smith and his fellow black sportswriters. "People were becoming more conscious of this question. The public, the general public, was on our side. And baseball began to find itself mildly on the defensive. The owners began making excuses."[54] The *Courier* played up Smith's columns, disseminating them far and wide. In introducing the "revolutionary" series, *Courier* writer Chester L. Washington Jr. wrote that:

> Every club owner in the national league will be sent copies of the statements of their managers and stars on the question of letting down the bars for colored players. And after reading them we're convinced that they won't be using the big league players again as an alibi in

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[52] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 152

[53] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 154

[54] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 51

> trying to explain why the sepia stars aren't given a chance to play their parts in baseball's big-time show[55]

Washington wrote in a later column that Smith's work was being read by William Harridge, president of the American League, and that he'd received word from Pittsburgh Pirates publicist Jimmy Long that the Pirates organization was reading the series as well.[56]

The most immediate result of Smith's work was that *Courier* publisher Ira Lewis leveraged the series to get a delegation of black newspapermen onto the agenda at the baseball owners' annual meeting in 1939. Lewis presented Smith's findings to the owners, saying "Gentlemen, there is a wealth of baseball talent out there and contrary to what people say, we believe these men can play major league baseball and that the majority of the players would tolerate them on their teams."[57] Unfortunately, the black journalists' delegation didn't have the impact that they had hoped for. Several historians have suggested that Lewis was sabotaged by baseball commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis, who added Paul Robeson to the delegation at the last minute, ostensibly to talk about his experiences in football. Many believe that Robeson was invited to discredit the publishers and link them to communism. The meeting only lasted twenty minutes, and none of the baseball executives asked any questions.

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[55] 'Sez Chez' July 15, 1939

[56] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 151

[57] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 50

An Impromptu Dodgers Tryout

On April 6, 1945, two communist reporters, Joe Bostic of the *People's Voice* and Nat Low of the *Daily Worker,* along with Jimmy Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier* arrived at the Dodgers' wartime spring training camp in Bear Mountain, NY. Accompanying Low, Bostic, and Smith were two negro league veterans, Terrie McDuffie, and Dave "Showboat" Thomas. Bostic's group first met with Dodgers' assistance Robert Finch, who met their demands for a tryout for McDuffie and Thomas with the reply that the day's schedule had already been set, and that Dodgers' policy was to refuse tryouts for players who hadn't been invited to camp.[58] The reporters then asked to see Dodgers' president, Branch Rickey, and repeated their demand for a tryout for McDuffie and Thomas. Bostic's delegation referenced the recently-passed Quinn-Ives Act which mandated non-discrimination in hiring in New York State. They threatened to sue if McDuffie and Thomas weren't give a tryout.[59]

Rickey was angered by the surprise tryout because, as Chris Lamb put it, Rickey "hated surprises and he hated Communists."[60] His hands tied, Rickey agreed to a tryout the next day and promised to attend their workout personally. The two men returned for a session that lasted approximately 45 - 60 minutes.[61] Bostic later said that "Rickey went berserk almost, with fury. We went into the dining room at the Bear Mountain Inn and he told me that

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[58] Wiggins, Glory Bound, 99

[59] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 135

[60] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 250

[61] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 255

he did not appreciate what I had done."[62] Unbeknownst to the reporters, Rickey was in the process of choosing a negro league player to sign for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey believed that, in order for his plan to succeed, he needed to conduct the proceedings with absolute secrecy. By showing up unannounced, the communists nearly forced Rickey to show his hand. As the men were leaving, Rickey turned to Bostic and said, "I'm more for your cause than anybody else you know, but you are making a mistake using force. You are defeating your own aims." Rickey never spoke another word to Bostic again.[63]

Wendell Smith viewed this impromptu tryout as nothing more than a publicity stunt. Bostic later admitted that this was basically true, but argued that his delegation made an important statement. In bringing forth a black player who expressed interest in playing Major League Baseball and forcing a team to say yes or no to them, Bostic's aim was to shine a light on a color line that lurked in the shadows. He wrote that "It was the psychological breaking of the conspiracy of silence. The real problem was that the press ignored [the issue of integration.]"[64] Bostic picked the Dodgers for his ambush because they had finished with a 63-91 record in 1944 and could conceivably have used talented black players to sure up their roster[65]. Unfortunately for Bostic, there was a dearth of talented black players who were both able and willing to join

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[62] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 45

[63] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 46

[64] Lamb, Blackout, 36

[65] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 252

his party. Bostic asked ten or twelve players to join him, before McDuffie and Thomas agreed.[66] Both men were well past their prime, with McDuffie listed as 32 years of age and Thomas as 34. Most historians agree that they were probably even older than the ages given for them in the newspaper. Even Wendell Smith, the perennial "sepia" booster, pointed to several of the players' shortcomings:

> I am not pointing out the flaws of these two colorful Negro players to belittle them, nor to belittle the selection of Messrs. Bostic and Smith. I am simply attempting to show that Mr. Rickey, the astute owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, can very easily say these men are not qualified to be major leaguers.

While McDuffie and Thomas were throwing pitches and shagging balls, Wendell Smith was finalizing plans for a major league workout of his own. Unlike Bostic's scheme, however, Smith's tryout had been over a year in the making.

The Boston Red Sox Take a Pass on Jackie Robinson

In 1944, Boston City Councilor Isadore Muchnick threatened to take Sunday baseball away from the two local major league teams, the Boston Red Sox and the Boston Braves.[67] Boston's blue laws required the teams to obtain special permits to play baseball on Sundays, and Councilor Muchnick threatened to block the permits if the teams didn't agree to grant tryouts to

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[66] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 45

[67] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 261

black baseball players.[68] In response to Muchnick's demands, the Red Sox organization stated that no black player had ever requested a tryout. After reading about Muchnick's threats in the black press, Wendell Smith got in touch with the councilman and stated the obvious: there were, indeed, many black players who would be interested in trying out for a major league baseball team. But by the time Smith got in touch with Muchnick, the 1944 baseball season was already in full swing, too late for a tryout. Years later, when interviewed about his collaboration with Muchnick, Smith claimed that blocking the waiver had been his idea, and that he convinced Muchnick to go along with his plan in order to court black voters. This has beome the prevailing narrative about Muchnick's role, one that is ultimately unfair to Muchnick, who was a deeply conscientous man and a crusader in his own right. Historian Howard Bryant has thoroughly disproved the notion that Muchnick's plan was a political stunt. Muchnick's district in Mattapan is now predominately black, but at the time its demography was overwhelmingly white.[69]

A year later, in March of 1945, Muchnick once again threatened to block the waiver.[70] In response to Muchnick's threats, Red Sox general manager Eddie Collins contacted him to assert that they hadn't held tryouts because no black player had requested one:

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[68] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 12

[69] Bryant, Shut Out, 38

[70] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 13

> It is beyond my understanding how anyone can insinuate or believe that all ballplayers, regardless of race, color, or creed, have not been treated in the American way as fas as having an equal opportunity to play for the Red Sox.[71]

Collins went on to state that the Red Sox would give a tryout to any black player who requested one.[72] After receiving Collins' letter, Muchnick contacted Smith and asked him to select some negro league players to bring to Boston. Collins agreed to hold a tryout on April 12th. Smith selected three players: Sam Jethroe, Marvin Williams, and Jackie Robinson. Robinson was a relative newcomer to the Negro Leagues, but as a four sport standout athlete at UCLA, he was well-known to the black press and public.[73] At the time of the Red Sox tryout, Robinson had only played five games for his Negro League team, the Kansas City Monarchs. Smith chose Robinson for less tangible reasons.[74] In an interview years later, Smith admitted that Robinson, who was better known at the time for his football prowess, was not the best available player from the Negro Leagues. He'd picked Robinson because he was a college man who had played on integrated teams and barnstormed against major leaguers, because he'd been an officer in the army, and because "He was the best player at that time for this situation."[75] Smith passed over the two best-known players in the Negro Leagues, Josh Gibson and Satchel

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[71] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 261

[72] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 261

[73] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 14

[74] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 16

[75] Holtzman, Jerome Holtzman Baseball Reader, 186

Paige, to select young, everyday players who would have the staying power to to work their way through the minor leagues before, hopefully, moving up to major league baseball.[76] Smith made all of the travel arrangements and the *Courier* paid all of the men's bills.

Robinson, Jethroe, and Williams were all under contract to Negro League teams, so they timed their arrival in Boston in order to minimize disruption to the start of their season. They arrived in Boston on April 11th and planned to attend the tryout the next day. If the men weren't signed to a contract, they could then return to the negro leagues. What they weren't planning for was that the Red Sox would stonewall them. The planned tryout on April 12th never happened.[77] Robinson confided in Smith that "It burns me up to come fifteen hundred miles to have them give me the runaround."[78] Fuming, Smith wrote an angry column about the Red Sox' obstinacy, reminding his readers that:

> This is Boston, cradle of America's democracy, where the tattered and torn liberty-loving 'Rebels' if the colonies fought off the Red Coats in 'every middlesex, village and farm.'[79]

Smith recounted the story of Crispus Attucks, a black patriot who died during the Boston Massacre, going on to compare the Revolutionary War with a different war, World War II which was being waged in Germany:

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[76] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 136

[77] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 16

[78] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 17

[79] Smith, Smitty's Sports Spurts, April 21, 1945

> It's the same story, only cast in a different setting . . . against a different foe. White and black Americans are fighting side by side on the Western front. They fight together by the light of the moon, and their blood flows freely across the cobblestones of 'every middlesex, village, and farm,' in the land of the 'Gray Coats' of Germany.
>
> That is history . . . And that is a fact. And, I am here in the cradle of Democracy. . . Here in staid old Boston, where Revere rode and Attucks died, trying to break down some of the barriers and wipe out some of the intolerance they fought to obliterate more than 170 years ago. I have three of Crispus Attucks' descendents with me.[80]

Because the Courier printed weekly, Smith's impassioned plea wasn't published until after the tryout had already happened. Instead, it was a column in a mainstream paper, the *Boston Daily Record,* by a white writer, Dave Egan, that finally got the players their chance. Egan lambasted the Red Sox and their manager:

> Here are two 'believe-it-or-not-items,' exclusively for the personal enlightenment of Mr. Edward Trowbridge Collins, general manager of the Boston Red Sox. He is living in anno domino 1945, and not in the dust covered year 1865. He is residing in the city of Boston, and not in the city of Mobile, Alabama... therefore we feel obliged to inform you

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[80] Smith, Smitty's Sports Spurts, April 21, 1945

> that since Wednesday last three citizens of the United States have been attempting vainly to get a tryout with his ball team.[81]

In response to Egan's column, the Red Sox finally consented to a tryout.

On April 16, Smith drove the ballplayers to Fenway Park, where they met up with Muchnick and got ready to play baseball.[82] Fenway was crowded with baseball hopefuls. Boston's white, mainstream reporters were likely aware of the scheduled tryout, but none of them bothered to attend, and Smith never wrote a full wrapup. As a result, most accounts of the tryout were written and published long after the fact, when time had influenced the interested party's memories.[83]

A decent indicator that the Red Sox didn't take the tryout seriously is that they used local high school players to pitch batting practice to the three ballplayers, a move that Smith called "demeaning." Robinson would later say that “It would be difficult to call it a tryout because they had these kid pitchers throwing. I sort of laughed within myself at what I felt was the uselessness of the venture. I didn't feel anything would come of it."[84] The players worked out for about 90 minutes. Of the three men at the tryout, most accounts credit Robinson with the best performance.[85] As he would later

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[81] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 18

[82] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 11

[83] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 19

[84] Lamb, Blackout, 37

[85] Stout, Tryout and Fallout, 20

write in his autobiography, Robinson didn't have high hopes for his future in Boston:

> "...I had been grateful to Wendell for getting us a chance in the Red Sox tryout, and we put our best efforts in. However, not for one minute did we believe the tryout was sincere. The Boston club officials praised our performance, let us fill out application cards, and said, "so long." We were fairly certain they wouldn't call us, and we had no intention of calling them."[86]

While the tryout was ultimately unsuccessful, Chris Lamb has posited that it heralded a new era of black journalism, one where black writers were willing to take a page from the communist writers' playbook and openly confront major league baseball on the issue of the color line.[87]

Smith had hoped for some good publicity as a result of the tryout. Unlike McDuffie and Thomas's trout with the Dodgers, the Boston media was given plenty of advance notice by Smith, who sent out press releases ahead of time.[88] Unfortunately for Smith's plans, the combination of Roosevelt's death and an unknown Red Sox press ban meant that the men never received any meaningful coverage. Discouraged, he canceled plans to pursue a similar tryout with the Boston Braves. Almost as an afterthought, Smith sent a telegram to Branch Rickey in Brooklyn to let him know how the tryouts had

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[86] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 29

[87] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 265

[88] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 263

gone. Rickey suggested that Smith stop in Brooklyn on his way back to Pittsburgh. Little did Smith know, his impromptu telegram was about to change baseball history.[89]

Chapter Two

Branch Rickey's Bluff

The day after Wendell Smith's unsuccessful tryout in Boston, Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey held a press conference to announce a new black league, the United States Negro Baseball League. Rickey talked at length about the serious problems plaguing the current leagues: their disorganization, money woes, and lack of reliable results.[90] He promised that his new league would be the answer to all of these problems. The flagship team of this new league would be his own team, the Brooklyn Brown Dodgers, who would play their home games at Ebbets Field when his major league Dodgers were on the road.[91] Dashing the assembled reporters' hopes that he was about to announce steps towards baseball's integration, Rickey decried the communists who had showed up at his training camp as "agitators and opportunists." Several of the black writers walked out of the press conference in protest. Ludlow Werner, editor of the black paper the New York Age later wrote "My aching back! Did you ever hear such double talk from a big pompous ass in your life? I predict that'll be a cold day in hell when

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[89] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 137

[90] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 268

[91] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 52

that big windbag puts a Negro in a Brooklyn uniform."[92] Many of the assembled writers speculated that Rickey's announcement was a ploy to avoid the provisions of the Quinn-Ives Act.[93]

If the reaction to Rickey's announcement appears to have been particularly vehement, it can easily be explained by a painful history of white owners' meddling in the negro leagues. In 1922, white mogul Nat Strong, owner of the black team the Royal Giants, created the Eastern Colored League. The principle owners in the ECL were all white and they bypassed the black business community in order to hire white employees as ticket takers and umpires. Strong successfully kept black-owned negro league teams out of New York City.[94] The ECL also attempted to sign away the best players from black owned teams. The ECL folded after just five seasons, but the black community still remembered its tenure with great bitterness. The black reporters at Rickey's press conference were understandably skeptical about what a new, white-dominated league might do to the negro leagues.

Still smarting from his poor treatment in Boston, Wendell Smith was vocal during Rickey's press conference about his unhappiness. Rickey asked Smith to meet with him after the conference and, once they were meeting in private, suprised Smith by complimenting him on all of his hard work, both in arranging the Boston tryout and with his newspaper columns on integration. Rickey then asked Smith if he could recommend good players for his United

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[92] Lamb, Blackout, 37

[93] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 47

[94] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 78

States League.[95] Smith, a shrewd man with strong journalistic instincts, reasoned from the tone of their conversation that Rickey was asking about more than just a new negro league. He asked Rickey what the recommendation was really for, but Rickey dodged his questions.[96] Smith decided to recommend Jackie Robinson, an answer that startled Rickey, as Smith would later recount in an interview:

> When I said, 'Jackie Robinson,' Mr. Rickey raised his bushy eyebrows and he said, 'Jackie Robinson! I knew he was an All-American football player and an All-American basketball player. But I didn't know he was a baseball player.[97]

Smith assured Rickey that Robinson was the man for the job. "He's quite a baseball player. He's a shortstop."[98] Rickey expressed some hesitance about Robinson's temperament, referencing an incident where Robinson was erroneously court-martialed for refusing to yield his seat to a white man on an army bus. Robinson was subsequently acquitted of all charges and given an honorable discharge. Smith quickly vouched for Robinson's temperament, telling Rickey that Robinson did not have a history of antagonism.[99] Rickey agreed that Robinson's response to unfair treatment showed the necessary

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[95] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 26

[96] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 52

[97] Holtzman, Jerome Holtzman Baseball Reader, 187

[98] Holtzman, Jerome Holtzman Baseball Reader, 187

[99] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 272

"spirit" for the trials that awaited him[100]. In a later autobiography, Robinson described the meeting thusly:

> Incidents like [the Red Sox Tryout] made Wendell Smith as cynical as we were. He didn't accept Branch Rickey's new league as a genuine project and he frankly told him so. During this conversation, the Dodger boss asked Wendell whether any of the three of us who had gone to Boston was really good major league material. Wendell said I was. I will forever be indebted to Wendell because, without his even knowing it, his recommendation was in the end partly responsible for my career. [101]

Rickey planned to sign several black players to minor league contracts, so that he could have an advantage in signing the best players ahead of the other major league teams. Rickey would then develop these players with the help of his extensive minor league farm system. He needed one outstanding player, however, to be the first black player in the major league. This player needed to have superb baseball skills, but he also needed what Rickey considered the ideal personality for the task. Rickey needed a ballplayer with a very special temperament, but even he acknowledged that there were “just not very many such humans"[102] With reasoning similar to Smith's, Rickey decided that he needed a player young enough to spend a few seasons in the

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[100] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 59

[101] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 29

[102] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 58

minors and still be in good form when called up to the Dodgers. This player would have to possess a certain level of maturity, however, in order to withstand the abuse that would likely be heaped upon him. Rickey's plans were also hampered by the fact that many of the top black players were still serving out their service in the army.[103] Jackie Robinson appealed to Rickey, because he had a college degree, a rarity among players at the time, and because he had experience playing with white teammates. Furthermore, Robinson's off-field habits meshed well with the man who bore the nickname "the Deacon." Robinson, like Rickey, was a Methodist who didn't drink or smoke. He'd dated the same girl, Rachel Isum, exclusively for several years. His ascetic habits didn't make him very popular with his negro league teammates, but they endeared him to Branck Rickey.[104]

Twenty five years later, Smith said of their meeting, that "We talked a long time about the respective merits of the players I took to the tryout. He was primarily interested in Robinson [because] he was already a known name."[105] At the conclusion of their interview, Smith promised to keep their conversation out of the *Courier.* He also promised not to tell Robinson that scouts from the Dodgers would be following him around for the duration of the 1945 baseball season. When asked about the secrecy, Smith later said, "I knew that would ruin the whole thing. When we talked on the telephone, we

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[103] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 58

[104] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 64

[105] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering 137

didn't use [Robinson's] name. He was 'the man from the West.'"[106] Rickey also asked Arthur Daley of the New York Times to keep Robinson's name out of the paper as a personal favor. In Smith's case, his desire to see baseball integrated subsumed his role as a reporter.[107]

With the United States League as his cover, Rickey sent out three Dodgers scouts: George Sisler, Clyde Sukeforth, and Wid Matthews to comb the negro leagues for just the right player. He told them to pay particular attention to Robinson, but he never let on what they were really searching for.[108] The scouts had an inkling that something was out of the ordinary, because Rickey instructed them to buy tickets like fans would, instead of using their credentials to get into ballparks.[109] Rickey's scouting quickly turned up the fact that Robinson was known for having a temper, a result of his previous court-martial as well as his willingness to stand up against everyday racism. When questioned about Robinson's temperament, Smith attempted to smooth things over, later saying "I didn't want to tell Mr. Rickey, 'Yes, he's tough to get along with.' A lot of us knew that." Smith contacted Robinson and told the ballplayer that he needed to be on his best behavior at baseball games.[110] Rickey later decided that Robinson was being held to a higher standard because of his race:

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[106] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering 137

[107] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 52

[108] Lamb, Blackout, 37

[109] Tygiel, The Jackie Robinson Reader, 66

[110] Lamb, Blackout, 38

> If he had done the things people are criticizing him for as a white player he would have been praised to the skies as a fighter, a holler guy, a real competitor, a ballplayer's ballplayer. But because he's black his aggressiveness is offensive to some white people."[111]

Smith and Rickey stayed in contact throughout the 1945 baseball season. Smith would later admit that he was willing to do whatever Rickey asked, as long as the final outcome was the end of the major league color line. Smith said of his relationship with Rickey, "I think that's why we got along as well as we did.[112]" Smith used his resources as the Courier sports editor to send Rickey the Monarchs' schedules and any results that had been reported to his paper. He also let Rickey know what hotels the Monarchs were staying at.[113]

In August, Rickey finally sent Clyde Sukeforth to Chicago with explicit instructions to speak with Robinson and then bring him back to New York, the scout realized that something was up. Sukeforth quickly warmed up to the young player, "The more we talked, the better I liked him. There was something about that man that just gripped you. He was tough, he was intelligent, and he was proud."[114] With Robinson temporarily sidelined by a sore arm, Sukeforth took the opportunity to bring him back to New York.[115]

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[111] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 63

[112] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 138

[113] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 138

[114] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 65

[115] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 65

In August of 1945, Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson met for approximately three hours in Rickey's office in New York City. At the conclusion of their meeting, Robinson signed a contract with one of the Brooklyn Dodgers' minor league farm teams, the Montreal Royals. The terms of the contract were initially kept a secret.[116] Robinson received a signing bonus of $3500 and then, once he signed a public deal with the Royals, he would earn a monthly salary of $600. Rickey made him promise to keep the news between himself and his mother and serious girlfriend, Rachel.[117] Rickey also made Robinson promise that he would spend three years holding his tongue in the face of the abuse that he was sure to face.

Robinson had been initially suspicious about being asked to travel all the way from Chicago to New York for the meeting, but even he was shocked to be offered a contract. He later told Wendell Smith that "It took me a long time to convince myself that Rickey was not just making a gesture."[118] Rickey was upfront about the difficulties that Robinson would face as a trailblazer. In a later autobiography, Robinson wrote that Rickey said:

> We can't fight our way through this, Robinson. We've got no army. There's virtually nobody on our side. No owners, no umpires, very few newspapermen. And I'm afraid that many fans will be hostile. We'll be

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[116] Lamb, Blackout, 8

[117] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 67

[118] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 66

> in a tough position. We can win only if we can convince the world that I'm doing this because you're a great ballplayer and a fine gentleman.[119]

The two men spoke for three hours. Rickey role-played all of the difficulties that Robinson was likely to endure, getting right up in the ballplayer's face and yelling at him to see if he could be rattled.[120] At one point, Robinson famously quipped, "Are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?" Rickey responded, "Robinson, I'm look for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back."[121] At the conclusion of their discussion and after a few moments of contemplation, Jackie Robinson made his decision:

> Mr. Rickey, I think I can play ball in Montreal. I think I can play ball in Brooklyn. But, you're a better judge of that than I am. If you want to take this gamble, I will promise you there will be no incident.[122]

A month later, on September 1st, with some prompting from Rickey, Wendell Smith referenced his first meeting with Rickey in his weekly "Sports Beat" column. In talking about the tryout of Terrie McDuffy and Dave "Showboat" Thomas, Smith wrote that Rickey had "'looked them over' and then decided they weren't good enough for his Dodgers." He went on to report that "After talking with [Rickey] privately for an hour in his office and being exposed to

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[119] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 32

[120] Tyigel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 66

[121] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 33

[122] Tgiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 67

his ideas and opinions on this question, I have no other alternative. He seems to be a deeply sincere man."[123] By now, Smith was well aware of Robinson's contract with the Royals.[124]

On October 23, 1945, Hector Racine of the Montreal Royals announced a press conference to be held at 5pm in the Montreal offices at Delormier Downs. Branch Rickey stayed in New York City with the Dodgers, but his son, Branch Rickey Jr., was in attendance. Racine announced that the Royals had signed Jackie Robinson to a minor league contract, both because of his playing abilities and because it was the right thing to do. Racine reiterated that Robinson would have to earn his place on the Royals' roster during spring training in 1946. After a moment of "stunned silence," the room erupted. When asked about his feelings, Robinson told the assembled reporters that he felt like "a guinea pig in baseball's racial experiment."[125] To anyone who hadn't been following closely, which included many of the white, mainstream sportswriters, Robinson's signing came as a great shock. To the black press, which had been working tirelessly towards this goal, Robinson's contract was the culmination of decades of work.[126]

The popular narrative of the Robinson story is that Branch Rickey, the principled lone-wolf went out on a limb to sign Robinson. It's a story that Rickey took great pains to encourage and the mainstream media perpetuated

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[123] Smith, The Sports Beat, Sep 1, 1945 pg. 16

[124] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 276

[125] Lamb, Blackout, 43

[126] Lamb, Blackout, 39

it widely. Black and communist writers, however, were far more likely to put the Robinson signing in its proper historical context. The white press was more likely to go negative, printing stories about major league players and managers who were skeptical about Robinson's chances.[127] The mainstream press was, for the most part, wholly unenthusiastic about the signing.[128] The black press, on the other hand, was ecstatic. The *Courier* put the signing on the front page of their October 27th edition. Wendell Smith wrote that it was an "event of far-reaching racial progress." He also celebrated the Courier's role in the signing, quoting Robinson as saying "I know I have a job to do and I'm proud to do it. I'm very grateful to The Pittsburgh Courier for the part it has played."[129] After the Royals announced that they had signed Robinson, there was a marked shift in coverage at the black weeklies from the negro leagues to Robinson and his tenure with the Royals.[130]

Before Robinson could play for the Royals, he would have to complete spring training at the Dodgers' facility in Daytona Beach, Florida. Daytona Beach was one of the more progressive cities in Florida, but it was still the deep south. On December 19th, Smith sent Rickey a letter mentioning that he would be covering spring training for the *Courier* and offering his services. Rickey wrote back on January 8th to ask Smith if he could get to Florida before the start of spring training and find a place for Robinson to stay, along

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[127] Lamb, Blackout, 44

[128] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 292

[129] Smith, Baseball 'Color-Line' Smashed! October 27, 1945

[130] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 139

with another negro league player that he had recently signed, pitcher Johnny Wright. Rickey enlisted Wendell Smith's help, writing to him in a letter:

> It is my understanding that you will be able to stay in Daytona Beach during the training period of about four weeks. This whole program was more or less your suggestion, as you will recall, and I think it had a good point because much harm could come if either of these boys were to do or say something or other out of turn.[131]

Both Robinson and Wright would be barred from staying at the Riviera Hotel with the rest of their team. Smith knew a family in Sanford, Florida that the players could stay with. He also offered to act as their chauffeur.[132] Smith was honored to be of assistance:

> I am most happy to feel that you are relying on my newspaper and me, personally, for cooperation in trying to accomplish this great move for practical Democracy in the most amiable and diplomatic manner possible. Now, Mr. Rickey, I want you to feel as though the publishers or the Pittsburgh Courier and I are a distinct part of this undertaking. We do not want you to take all of the responsibility with regards to help[ing] to strengthen these boys spiritually and morally for the part they are to play in this great adventure.[133]

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[131] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 53

[132] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 309

[133] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 53

Smith also stayed in contact with Robinson, assuaging the ballplayer's fears about how he would fare in the minor leagues. Robinson wrote to Smith that he was worried about his fielding, but confident that he would bat well:

> The few times I faced [major league pitcher Bob] Feller has made me confident that the pitching I faced in the Negro American League was as tough as any I will have to face if I make it at Montreal...[134]

Feller would later be taken to task by the black press for his comments about Robinson's ability to succeed in organized baseball. He would not be the last person in baseball to publicly disparage Robinson.

Spring Training, 1946

To the casual observer, the story of Jackie Robinson's historic breakthrough into Major League Baseball begins in 1947, when he first signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. But the real story began a year earlier, in 1946, when he integrated the Dodger's International League farm club, the Montreal Royals. Robinson's introduction to white, organized baseball began at spring training that year. Historian Chris Lamb's book, Blackout, focuses on that seminal spring training and its importance in the greater context of the fight for integration in America. Lamb argues that Robinson's entrance into Major League Baseball was one of the first instances of a major American institution desegregating. For those who were paying attention, Robinson's

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[134] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 300

signing heralded a sea change. For those who ignored the bigger picture, a grouping that includes most members of the mainstream media, Robinson was a sports story and nothing more. Lamb argues that the white dailies' ignorance of civil rights is one of the major reasons that mainstream America was so caught off-guard by the civil rights movement.[135] Robinson scholar Jules Tygiel posits in his book, Baseball's Great Experiment, that spring training in 1946 presaged the modus operandi of the civil rights movement a decade later. Robinson and Wright, two black pioneers, challenged the status quo and refused to accept segregation. With the support of white champions, they stood pat in the face of discrimination, at great personal risk. Robinson and Wright needed Branch Rickey to provide them with an opportunity, and they relied on reporters from the North to shame Southern officials when they attempted to flout the law.[136]

When Jackie Robinson set off for spring training from Pasadena, California with Rachel Isum Robinson, his wife of three weeks, he was unaware that they were heading to an area of the country experiencing high levels of racial upheavals. In the time period immediately after WWII, veterans returning from service often found that asserting the rights that they had ostensibly been fighting for resulted in violent backlash.[137] A few days before they started their trip, a race riot in Columbia, TN was touched off when James Stevenson, a black navy veteran, got in a fight with a white

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[135] Lamb, Blackout, 7

[136] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 118

[137] Lamb, Blackout, 6

storekeeper.[138] The atmosphere in the south was tense, but the Robinsons, who had been enjoying their time as newlyweds, were unaware of the situation.[139] On February 28, 1946, as the Robinsons got ready to leave for the airport, Jackie's mother, Mallie, handed them a box of fried chicken to eat on their trip. Rachel was wearing a three quarter length ermine coat, a wedding gift from Jackie, and they were both in good spirits. Neither of them understood the necessity of the fried chicken. As Rachel would later say:

> I did have some trepidation about entering the South for the first time. But dressed in my wedding finery and escorted by my strong, handsome, talented husband, I couldn't foresee the need for the odorous chicken as we parted from Mallie. I was focusing my hope that whatever the circumstances, Jack would land a desperately needed job and win a place in the starting lineup.[140]

What should have been an easy trip to Daytona Beach soon became a travel nightmare as the Robinsons found themselves bumped off of planes and buses in favor of white passengers, relegated to "colored" seating on buses, and barred from restrooms, hotels, and restaurants. It took the Robinsons 36 hours to get to Florida.[141]

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[138] Lamb, Blackout, 9

[139] Lamb, Blackout, 12

[140] Lamb, Blackout, 5

[141] Lamb, Blackout, 18

When the Robinsons finally arrived in Florida, Wendell Smith was there to meet them at the bus station, along with *Courier* photographer Billy Rowe who would also be spending spring training with them. Robinson, who was angered by the shoddy treatment they had received on their trip, expressed his frustration to the two reporters, thundering "I never want another trip like that one."[142] Smith quickly moved to calm Robinson down, reminding him to focus on the task at hand and to remember the bigger picture.[143]

Rowe announced to Robinson, "I'm your chauffeur." Robinson, still riled up from the indignities he had face on their trip, fired back "I've had better chauffeurs and I've had better cars."[144] The Robinsons, Smith, and Rowe drove home to the house of local pharmacist Joe Harris. Harris was a civic leader, often referred to locally as the "Negro mayor of Daytona Beach." His house was a nice one and provided a welcome distraction from the fact that the Robinsons would not be allowed to stay at the same hotel as Jackie's white teammates.[145] That night, Rachel went to bed early and Jackie stayed up talking to Wendell Smith and Billy Rowe. Robinson confessed that he was unhappy with the situation and wanted to go back home. Rowe would later write that:

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[142] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 54

[143] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 54

[144] Lamb, Blackout, 19

[145] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 54

> He told Wendell and me, flat out, 'Get me out of here.' ... We told him, 'You can't do that.' But he was in no mood to listen. He wanted out and that was that. We told him if he did that, he'd blow the whole thing, and he said, 'Just get me out of here!'

Robinson recounted the indignities that he'd faced during his travels with Rachel. He'd been referred to as "boy" and they had both been treated badly. He pessimistically decided that he was never going to get a fair tryout from the Royals, so he might as well give up and go home. Smith and Rowe admitted that it was going to be hard for Robinson, but they reminded him that he was suffering so that other blacks would have better opportunities in the future. As Rowe put it, the men "talked all night. That calmed him down. We tried to tell him what the whole thing meant, that it was something he had to do."[146] Robinson woke up the next day feeling better about the situation, although this would not be the last time that he would want to quit.

In 1946, Daytona Beach was known as a city with a more open attitude than its southern counterparts. A burgeoning black middle-class provided a strong black community. Behind the scenes, Branch Rickey had worked with Daytona Beach authorities to ensure that Robinson and Wright would be permitted to play with the Royals at the local baseball field. It was still the south, however, and local Jim Crow laws would be in effect outside of the Dodgers' facilities. Because World War II was winding down and men were

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[146] Lamb, Blackout, 19

leaving the armed services in droves, the Royals had a larger than average contingent of prospects. There wasn't enough room for all of them in Daytona Beach, so Rickey planned to start training in nearby Sanford. After cutting enough players, they could then move back to Daytona Beach. Sanford was far less tolerant --it had a local Ku Klux Klan contingent-- but they would only be there for about a week.[147]

Their second night in Sanford, a white man came to the house where the cohort was staying. Speaking with Smith on the front porch of their house, he announced that he spoke for 100 local whites when he threateningly said "We want you to get the niggers out of town." Panicked, Smith phoned Branch Rickey for advice. Rickey told him to leave immediately for Daytona Beach.[148] Smith gathered the other men together and told them to pack up their things. Smith wouldn't go into the details of why they were leaving, so Robinson assumed that he'd been cut from the team. As he and Rachel packed, he seethed silently. Once the party was safely in their car, heading back to Daytona Beach, Wendell Smith told them the truth. The people of Sanford had threatened them if they didn't leave town.[149]

The Dodgers never released any information about the incident in Sanford, and Wendell Smith didn't write about it in his column. Branch Rickey, in consulting with Smith and others, made the decision to keep the incident under the radar. Rickey had already determined before the start of

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[147] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 310

[148] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 54

[149] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 106

spring training that he wouldn't fight any Jim Crow laws in Florida. His biggest fear was that hearing about what happened in Sanford would inspire other communities to act in a similar fashion, and that Robinson and Wright would ultimately be left without any facilities where they could sleep, eat, or play baseball. The incident in Sanford was difficult for everyone involved, but it did provide the cohort with an enhanced sense of camaraderie and a determination to see things through. Rachel Robinson would later say that:

> What it did for us, was not only enlighten us and open our eyes to what things were going to be like, but it also mobilized a lot of fight in us. We were not willing to think about going back. It gave us the kind of anger and the rage to move ahead with real determination.[150]

On April 7, Robinson, Wright and the *Courier* men returned to Sanford, this time to play a game against the Saint Paul Saints. Robinson played well for two innings, getting to first on a fielder's choice, stealing a base, and scoring a run. He also played well defensively. During the third inning, Sanford's chief of police arrived and informed the Royals that, not only would Robinson not be allowed to finish out the game, he was not allowed to stay with his team in the dugout. He would have to leave the ballpark.[151]

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[150] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 107

[151] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 109

Local towns refusing to let Robinson play became a pattern throughout spring training. In every city where the Royals attempted to field exhibition games, local officials enforced segregation laws which prohibited interracial competition.[152] Rickey, who had originally announced his intentions to avoid conflict by leaving Robinson and Wright behind when local officials requested it, eventually changed his mind. After the first such incident, he announced that the team would play as a unit, or it wouldn't play at all. With all of the national media attention focused on his team, he decided that anyone who barred the men from playing would have to suffer the public relations fallout.[153] Smith wrote, of Rickey's decision to cancel the games, that his squads "struck back defiantly and indignantly at biased authorities."[154]

There were no further major incidents during spring training, but Robinson and his companions continued to suffer through shabby treatment. Robinson was cut off socially from the rest of his teammates, partially because he was barred from the restaurants where they went out to eat. Wendell Smith and Billy Rowe were barred from all of the Grapefruit League press-boxes, with the exception of the Royals' home field in Daytona Beach. They usually sat with Rachel Robinson in the black section of the bleachers.[155]

The Royals got most of their game-time by scrimmaging against their big league brothers, the Brooklyn Dodgers. After the first game between the

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[152] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 317

[153] Tyigel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 110

[154] 'Robinson Plays No Game,' Rickey's Answer to Dixie, PC April 13, 1946 pg. 26

[155] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 55

two teams, the Harris Family let Rachel use their kitchen to cook a special dinner. Wendell Smith and Billy Rowe, their "newspaper friends," were invited to share in the celebration.[156] This was a happy moment for the Robinsons, but it didn't last long. Spring training was difficult for Robinson, who failed to get a hit in his first seven plate appearances and who had a four game streak with no hits. He was able to compensate for his hitting problems with smart base-running and speed. Rachel chalked his poor performance up to stress and the feeling that a large weight was on his shoulders:

> Jackie couldn't perform well that spring, because the pressure was unbearable.... He was trying too hard, he was overswinging; he couldn't sleep at night; he had great difficulty concentrating.[157]

To make matters worse, Robinson was also suffering from a sore arm, the result of trying too hard when forcing his throws. The white press cut him very little slack. At least one article about spring training implied that the only thing keeping Robinson on the Royals' squad was the fact that he was black and, thus, Rickey's pet project.[158] For the most part, writers from the mainstream dailies ignored Robinson. Following the pattern that had now been established, if they did write about him, it was generally in baseball terms.

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[156] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 45

[157] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 117

[158] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 4

Robinson confided in Smith that the outsized reaction that he got from his black fans was putting undue pressure on him:

> I could hear them shouting in the stands, and I wanted to produce so much that I was tense and over-anxious.... I started swinging at bad balls and doing a lot of things I would not have done under ordinary circumstances. I wanted to get a hit for them because they were pulling so hard for me[159]

Smith would later admonish fans to keep their jubilation in check.

> The guy who is so stimulated by the appearance of Robinson and Wright in Montreal uniforms that he stands up in the stands and rants and faves, yells and screams before they have even so much as picked up a ball is the guy who will be cheering them out of Organized Baseball, rather than in.[160]

Thanks in no small part to Wendell Smith's dispatches about Robinson, circulation at the Courier went up by about 100,000.[161] By the beginning of the baseball season in 1947, circulation was up to 250,000, the *Courierˆs* highest total ever.[162]

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[159] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 115

[160] The Sports Beat, April 20, 1946 pg. 26

[161] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 112

[162] Tygiel, Fountain, Under the March Sun, 55

The 1946 Montreal Royals Season

When the Montreal Royals opened their 1946 season on April 18th on the road against the Jersey City Giants, Wendell Smith sat in the press box, a bundle of nerves.[163] His fear soon turned to jubilation, as Jackie Robinson hit a towering home-run in his second at-bat. Smith wrote about the experience that "Our hearts beat just a little faster and the thrill ran through us like champagne bubbles."[164] Of Robinson's performance that day, Smith wrote that he was the "newest and most spectacular satellite to blaze across the International League baseball heavens."[165] The Giants customarily sold a lot of tickets for their home opener, but even by their usual standards it was a large crowd. The official tally was 52,000 tickets, double the stated capacity of the ballpark.[166] Robinson was impressive in his debut, a feat duly noted by the New York Times: "Eloquent as they were, the cold figures of the box score to not tell the whole story. He looked as well as acted the part of a real baseball player."[167] The Jersey City crowd was measured in its reaction to Robinson, neither wildly supportive nor openly hostile.[168]

That year, Montreal broke its own home attendance record. At away games, they trebled the number of fans from their previous season. Jackie Robinson was a big factor in their attendance, but Jules Tygiel has pointed out

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[163] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 5

[164] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 5

[165] PC, Jackie Robinson Sensational in Opening Game April 27, 1946 pg. 26

[166] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 1

[167] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 7

[168] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 5

that there were other reasons for their increased ticket sales. World War II was over, and attendance was up all over baseball. People had more disposable income and they were using it on leisure pursuits in general. The Royals team in 1946 was a great baseball team, winning 100 games on their way to garnering the Little World Series, and fans were excited about the team as a whole, in addition to their excitement over Robinson. People had more money to spend on baseball, but a primary motivator in spending it was to see Jackie Robinson play.[169] The 1946 Montreal Royals, according to Tygiel, were one of the greatest teams to play in the minor leagues. Consequently, the people of Montreal loved them. And they loved Jackie Robinson as well. His teammate, Al Campanis, later said that "The Canadian people loved him. He would prepare a show for them. He'd be on first base and he'd hear the chant 'Allez!' Steal that base.'"[170]

Black fans went to great lengths to see Jackie Robinson play, but they could get carried away with their enthusiasm. Black writers like Wendell Smith warned fans to keep their jubilation in check, lest they create problems and give bigots cause to say that having a black player on the team caused problems.[171] At the same time that writers were warning fans to behave, they were waxing excitedly about Robinson in their newspaper columns. Black columnists were genuinely excited about Robinson and it shone through in

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[169] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 130

[170] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 125

[171] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 131

their writing. It also didn't hurt that stories about Robinson tended to sell a lot of papers.[172]

Spring Training, 1947

In an effort to avoid the problems his team encountered in Florida the year before, Branch Rickey decided to bring the Royals and the Dodgers to Cuba for spring training in 1947.[173] Wendell Smith, who would spend the entirety of the 1947 season looking after Robinson, travelled with the players to Havana.[174] Rickey decided that the ideal situation from which he could promote Robinson to the Dodgers would be if he convinced the other Dodgers that Robinson was essential to their team. He hoped that they would come to him and request that he promote Robinson. Moving training to Cuba was part of this grand plan. It would be far more expensive than training in Florida, and the logistics were a nightmare, but the people of Cuba were fanatically devoted to baseball and used to interracial teams. Rickey hoped that large, supportive crowds would sway Robinson's future teammates.[175]

From the beginning, there were problems. Robinson was angered when he discovered that he and his fellow black prospects, Roy Campanella, Don Newcompe, and Roy Partlow, along with Wendell Smith, would be staying at segregated facilities. He was further enraged when he discovered that the decision to put the black players in inferior lodgings was made by Branch

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[172] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 132

[173] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 164

[174] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 56

[175] Carroll, This is IT! 158

Rickey, and was not at the behest of the Cuban government. Rickey had been so concerned with avoiding racial conflict on his teams that had given little thought to how the accommodations might be viewed by his black players. As Robinson put it, "I thought we left Florida to train in Cuba so we could get away from Jim Crow."[176]

Out off the four ballplayers and Smith, only Campanella spoke any Spanish. The men stuck closely together, but they felt isolated from both the Cubans and from their other teammates. Smith, who was never far from Robinson, later admitted that "At times we almost went berserk because none of the employees spoke English.[177]" The food was far richer than what the men were used to, and it wasn't prepared under the most ideal of conditions. All five men suffered from food-related illnesses at least once during their trip. To make matters worse, the crowds that Rickey had anticipated never materialized. The Cuban Winter League was just wrapping up its playoffs when the Dodgers arrived, and the spring training games paled in comparison.[178] Not only did the Dodgers not rise en masse to demand that Robinson be promoted, Rickey and manager Leo Durocher had to actively put down a player revolt when several members of the team tried to band together to block the signing.

Rickey finally admitted to himself that the Dodgers were not going to ask him to promote to Robinson. So, on April 10th, he made the

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[176] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 165

[177] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 165

[178] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 165

announcement that the Dodgers had signed Jackie Robinson to a major league contract.[179] Robinson was now the first black player in major league baseball since Moses Fleetwood Walker was forced out of the majors 63 years earlier. For the most part, white fans and the mainstream media were unphased by the signing. Black fans and the black press, however, were ecstatic. Wherever the Dodgers went, black fans cheered wildly for Jackie Robinson and booed Dixie Walker, who they saw as the driving force behind the attempted players' revolt. Writers, both black and white, admonished fans in their columns for the booing and it quickly petered out.[180] The black press took great pride in their role in integrating baseball and they touted their involvement at every opportunity. Robinson often gave great credit to the black press, telling the Baltimore Afro-American that his signing was "obtained only through the constant pressure of my people and their press. It's a press victory, you might say."[181]

The 1947 Dodgers Season

After Robinson was signed by the Dodgers, the *Courier* increased their already zealous coverage of the "Robinson beat." Smith's columns were moved to the front page, where he emphasized Robinson's effect on Dodgers' ticket sales and proffered up rosy stories of Robinson's success in the big leagues. Smith rarely let on that Robinson was having difficulties with fans, with his

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[179] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 177

[180] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 178

[181] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 147

own teammates, and with hate mail.[182] Smith wrote weekly columns about Robinson's exploits, and there is some evidence that he ghostwrote a weekly column for Robinson as well. There has been much debate as to how much of Robinson's weekly column was actually written by him and how much was written by Wendell Smith or another ghostwriter. The confusion is compounded by the fact that neither Robinson nor Smith ever went on the record about who wrote the columns. The consensus among most Wendell Smith scholars is that Smith wrote large swaths of the text, as the writing style is similar in nature to Smith's bylined columns. Many famous athletes at that time had their own newspaper columns and the vast majority of them were ghostwritten. Brian Carroll has argued that it's easy to see Smith's unfailing optimism in the upbeat columns.[183] Oddly enough, Robinson's columns often contained accolades for some of the men who Carroll referred to as "baseball's most infamous racists," men like Ben Chapman, Ty Cobb, and Sporting News' editor J. G. Taylor Spink.[184]

Branch Rickey may have been prepared to break the major league color line, but he was not yet ready to break another unofficial rule: the taboo against interracial roommates on road trips. The taboo was so great, when "bench jockeys" on other teams taunted the Dodgers that year, a common insult was to accuse the other Dodgers of "sleeping with Robinson.[185]" When

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[182] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 161

[183] Carroll, This is IT! 155

[184] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 163

[185] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 201

he was with the Royals, Jackie Robinson roomed with pitchers Johnny Wright and Roy Partlow. As the only black player on the Dodgers, Robinson didn't have that option. Towards that end, and to give Robinson some companionship, Rickey hired Wendell Smith, for $50 a week, to lodge with Robinson and to make sure that the ballplayer always had a place to eat and a place to stay. Smith, who was still the sports editor of the *Courier*, said that "he would have done it for nothing." Smith described himself as Robinson's "Boswell," and took great pride in their friendship.[186]

Even with Smith there to smooth things over, the two men often faced problems with their accommodations. For the most part, the Dodgers stayed at hotels where Robinson and Smith were welcome. But, even in the North, they would sometimes encounter management at their higher end hotels who refused to rent rooms to black guests. Rickey didn't want to cause any scenes, so when they were refused lodgings, it was Smith's job to find the two men another place to stay. When the Dodgers returned to that city on subsequent road trips, they would stay at a hotel that would take the entire team. Robinson never had problems in Boston, Pittsburgh, or Chicago, but Smith had to make reservations at black hotels in Philadelphia and St. Louis. He planned to find another hotel in Cincinnati, but management there agreed to check them in as long as they promised to eat all of their meals in their room.[187] The "gentleman's agreement" against interracial roommates would

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[186] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 56

[187] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 201

last well into the 1960s, and even then very few teams had interracial roommates.[188]

Ben Chapman and the Phillies Gets Nasty

One of the most disturbing incidents from Robinson's 1947 season was a barrage of racial insults and epithets spewed by the Philadelphia Phillies and their manager, Ben Chapman during a game in Brooklyn. "Bench jockeying," harassing players on opposing teams with insults, names, and cat-calls, was an established component of the baseball culture at the time and there was often a racial or cultural component to it. Chapman, however, convinced his players to take their jockeying to a new level. As Dodgers executive Harold Parrrott described it:

> At no time in my life have I heard racial venom and dugout abuse to match the abuse that Ben sprayed on Robinson that night. Chapman mentioned everything from thick lips to the supposedly extra-thick Negro skull... [and] the repulsive sores and diseases he said Robinson's teammates would become infected with if they touched the towels or combs he used."[189]

Chapman also reportedly told his pitching staff that, if the count against Robinson reached 3-0, they were to hit him with the ball instead of walking him.[190] Robinson was shocked by the abuse directed at him:

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[188] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 313

[189] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 182

[190] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 163

> Starting to the plate in the first inning, I could scarcely believe my ears. Almost as if it had been synchronized by some master conductor, hate poured forth from the Phillies dugout.[191]

The abuse was so bad, fans who were sitting close enough to the Phillies' dugout to hear it sent angry letters to baseball commissioner Happy Chandler complaining about what they heard. Jackie Robinson's teammates were furious on his behalf. Eddie Stanky yelled over to the Phillies' dugout that Chapman was a "coward" and told him to "pick on somebody who can fight back." Even Dixie Walker, a close personal friend of Chapman, later told the manager that he'd gone too far.[192] In his 1972 autobiography, *I Never Had it Made*, Robinson wrote that the incident with the Phillies was the closest that he'd come to breaking Rickey's prohibition against retaliation:

> I have to admit that this day, of all the unpleasant days in my life, brought me nearer to cracking up than I ever had been. Perhaps I should have come inured to this kind of garbage, but I was in New York City and unprepared to face the kind of barbarism from a northern team that I had come to associate with the Deep South.... I thought what a glorious, cleansing thing it would be to let go. To hell with the image of the patient black freak I was supposed to create. I could throw down my bat, stride over to that Phillies dugout, grab one

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[191] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 58

[192] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 182

> of those white sons of bitches and smash his teeth in with my despised black fist. [193]

Robinson went on to say that “the haters had almost won that round."[194] Red Barber wrote of Robinson's recounting of the incident, "Let me add that Robinson edited and cleaned up much of the material he used in his book - what was yelled at him was rougher and dirtier."[195]

Ironically, it was Chapman's abuse that had the greatest impact on the Dodgers, mainstream writers and fans’ attitude towards Robinson. Where they had once been wary of Robinson's presence, watching his stoicism in the face of Chapman's onslaught brought the vast majority around to his side. Dodgers' announcer Red Barber wrote about it:

> The writers, almost to a man, were incensed. The black press raged. I heard all about it as soon as I left the broadcasting booth and began talking with the Dodgers.The Dodgers talked freely to the press. They were angered.[196]

Robinson later credited the black press with informing its readership about the nasty incident.[197] His own column in the *Courier* didn't mention the game's ugliness, either because Wendell Smith ghostwrote it or because, as

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[193] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 59

[194] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 59

[195] Barber. 1947, 158

[196] Barber, 1947, 157

[197] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 60

Courier sports editor, he edited it out.[198] In writing about the bench jockeying, Robinson's column played it down saying that "The things the Phillies shouted at me from their bench have been shouted at me from other benches and I am not worried about it."[199]

In May, when it came time for the Dodgers' first road trip to Philadelphia, Phillies' general manager, Herb Pennock reached out to Branch Rickey. Pennock asked Rickey to leave Robinson in New York, saying that the Dodgers couldn't "bring that nigger here with the rest of your team, Branch. We're just not ready for that sort of thing yet.[200]" Rickey retorted that he'd be happy to cancel the game if the Philadelphia players wanted to boycott - and that he'd happily let them forfeit the game to the Dodgers. Faced with the prospect of extra entries in their loss column, Pennock backed down.[201]

When the Dodgers arrived at Shibe Park in Philadelphia to play baseball, Jackie Robinson was first forced to undergo the indignity of posing with Ben Chapman for a staged photograph. The league had insisted on the photo, to show that everything was ok between the two men.[202] Neither man was happy about posing. Robinson wrote in his autobiography, "I have to admit... having my picture taken with this man was one of the most difficult things I had to make myself do."[203] Chapman, himself, was less than

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[198] Carroll,When to Stop the Cheering, 163

[199] PC Jackie Robinson Says May 3, 1947 pg. 15

[200] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 185

[201] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 185

[202] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 185

[203] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, 61

unenthusiastic. Philadelphia pitcher Freddie Schmidt later reported hearing Chapman mutter, "Jackie, you know, you're a good ballplayer, but you're still a nigger to me."[204] With the league watching, Chapman and his players toned down the racial aspect of their taunts. They managed to get under Robinson's skin, however, by alluding to the death threats that Robinson had been receiving.[205] Robinson described the seen thusly:

> The Phillies heckled me a second time, mixing up race baiting with childish remarks and gestures that coincided with the threats that had been made. Some of those grown men sat in the dugout and pointed bats at me and made machine-gunlike noises. It was an incredibly childish display of bad will.[206]

Towards the end of his life, Chapman insisted that he felt badly about his actions.[207]

The Difficulties of 1947

The 1947 season was a difficult time for Jackie Robinson. He withstood nasty attacks from other players, fans, and even some sportswriters. His promise to Branch Rickey prevented him from standing up for himself. Even the excitement and passion of black spectators could sometimes feel like an albatross around his neck:

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[204] Carroll, This is IT! 157

[205] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 185

[206] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 63

[207] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 332

> ...Black support of the first black man in the majors was a complicated matter. The breakthrough created as much danger as it did hope. It was one thing for me out there on the playing field to be able to keep my cool in the face of insults. But it was another for all those black people sitting in the stands to keep from overreacting when they sensed a racial slur or an unjust decision. They could have blown the whole bit to hell by acting belligerently and touching off a race riot. That would have been all the bigots needed to set back the cause of progress of black men in sports another hundred years. I knew this. Mr. Rickey knew this. But this never happened[208]

For his black fans, Robinson was the embodiment of all of their hopes for racial progress. They turned out in droves to attend his games. In areas of the country like Norfolk, VA and Cincinnati, where there was a sizable black population but no major league baseball team, railroads ran special trains so that fans could travel to Dodgers games. The black weeklies constantly admonished fans to be on their best behavior, and for the most part they complied. But fans were still overjoyed and excited to see Robinson play, and he often found this stressful and slightly embarrassing.[209] Robinson would later credit the clergy members and community leaders who kept watch in the stands, as well as the black press for keeping his fans in check.[210] Robinson

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[208] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, xxiii

[209] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 196

[210] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, xxiii

played phenomenally that season, and eventually his talents were enough to win over the hearts of many white Dodgers fans.

Robinson received a vast amount of mail throughout the season. When Robinson began receiving death threats, the Dodgers brought the more credible threats to the police. A special secretary was hired after Rickey insisted that it was too unsafe to have Robinson open his own mail. As a result of the threats, Rickey also insisted that Robinson start refusing any and all offers of speaking engagements.[211] The Dodgers kept the supportive letters, but threw away most of the hate mail. Chris Lamb wrote that the letters that do remain paint a sad picture of the hatred that Robinson was forced to deal with.[212] Despite the rage and hostility that he experienced from some fans, Robinson received many encouraging letters from people of all races and backgrounds.[213]

One of Jackie Robinson's most difficult challenges was loneliness. He would later write that "...one of my toughest burdens would be the experience of being lonely in the midst of a group -- my teammates."[214] As a rookie, Robinson was assigned the worst locker, cutting him off further from the rest of the Dodgers. In his newspaper columns, Wendell Smith presented a picture of Robinson as just one of the guys, an image that had very little basis in reality.[215] Smith himself was tasked with giving Robinson the

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[211] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 184

[212] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 325

[213] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 199

[214] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 64

[215] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 324

companionship he so desperately needed. Robinson was both saddened by his loneliness and grateful for the friendship. He would later write in his autobiography:

> When I traveled, during those early days, unless Wendell Smith or some other black sportswriter happened to be along, I sat by myself while the other guys chatted and laughed and played cards.[216]

Robinson wrote about that first season with some measure of regret:

> It hadn't been easy. Some of my own teammates refused to accept me because I was black. I had been forced to live with snubs and rebuffs and rejections. Within the club, Mr. Rickey had put down rebellion by letting my teammates know that anyone who didn't want to accept me could leave. But problems within the Dodgers club had been minor compared to the opposition outside. It hadn't been that easy to fight the resentment expressed by players on other teams, by the team owners, or by bigoted fans screaming "nigger." The hate mail piled up. There were threats against me and my family and even out-and-out attempts at physical harm to me.[217]

Smith himself would later admit that life on the road was tough. But, as always, he viewed their travails as a means to further an end:

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[216] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 65

[217] Robinson, I Never Had it Made, xxii

> When I think back, it was absolutely fantastic, all we went through. It's hard to conceive. Going into a town and finding a decent place to stay was not easy in those days. Eating in the places we ate, second -- and third-rate. Always having this stigma hanging over your head. But I knew Jackie would make it. And I knew if he made it, things had to open up.[218]

One teammate who did reach out to Robinson was shortstop Pee Wee Reese. Reese and Robinson weren't best friends, but they were cordial with each other. Once, on an off day, Robinson and Smith found themselves on a golf course playing behind a foursome that included Pee Wee Reese and some of their other teammates. Reese invited them to join their group,[219] an act of familiarity that Smith boasted about in his newspaper column, writing that "There have been many other instances on this trip similar to the golfing episode, all of which indicate that Robinson is not, as one writer put it, 'the loneliest man in sports.'"[220]

The Dodgers as a team were wildly successful that year, breaking attendance records in every city but Cincinnati.[221] At the conclusion of the season, a public opinion poll named Robinson as the second most popular man in America, finishing behind only Bing Crosby.[222] Wendell Smith began

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[218] Holtzman, Jerome Holtzman Baseball Reader, 188

[219] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 191

[220] Smith, The Sports Beat, June 28, 1947 pg. 14

[221] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 205

[222] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 200

his campaign on August 9, 1947 for Robinson to be named Rookie of the Year. He started early because he felt that the more accolades Robinson won, the easier it would be for other black players to make it into the league.[223] Smith was not disappointed. Robinson won Rookie of the Year honors from both the Baseball Writers Association of America and from the Sporting News. The latter was careful, however, to assert that they were giving the award to Robinson solely on the merits of his baseball skills.[224] Robinson's award was well deserved: he finished the season with a .299 batting average, 12 homeruns and a .989 fielding percentage at first base, a position that he was playing for the first time that season.[225] In a nod to the tendency amongst the press to mention Robinson's race whenever they wrote about him, a black paper, the *Philadelphia Tribune* wrote a joke column entitled "PAPERS PROVE JACKIE ROBINSON ISN'T WHITE."[226] Robinson had established himself as a great ballplayer, but he was still marked apart by his race.

Throughout the season, Smith continued to act as Robinson's "Boswell." He also helped out Branch Rickey by acting as an unofficial negro leagues talent scout, a role that he was quite proud of. In conjunction with Rickey, Smith worked to craft an image of Jackie Robinson as a stolid, unflappable man, impassive in the face of bigotry and intolerance.[227] Smith

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[223] Carroll,This is IT! 158

[224] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 325

[225] Carroll, This is IT! 158

[226] Tygiel, Baseball's Great Experiment, 200

[227] Carroll, This is IT! 154

believed that the only way that integration would succeed was if it followed a gentle course:

> I always tried to keep [the crusade to integrate baseball] from becoming a flamboyant or highly militant thing. There were people who wanted to become a part of it, to push it faster. Fortunately, I managed to keep them away. If more people had been involved, it would have done more harm than good. That's one of the reasons we succeeded. We always tried to play it low-key.[228]

That year, the Dodgers made it all the way to the World Series, losing in the seventh game to their crosstown rivals, the New York Yankees. Wendell Smith, in a subtle nod to his readers that he had also "made the grade," bylined his World Series column "Press Box, Yankee Stadium, New York."[229]

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[228] Carroll, This is IT! 155

[229] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 56

Chapter Three

The End of a Partnership

After 1947, Robinson and Smith grew steadily apart. The reasons for their estrangment aren't entirely clear, and neither man ever went on the record about it. There is some speculation from Robinson biographer Arnold Rampersad that Robinson was unhappy with his 1948 autobiography, which was ghostwritten by Smith. The book was quickly rushed to press in order to capitalize on Robinson's popularity. Smith got several important details wrong, including such basic information as Robinson's mother's name.[230] Smith referred to Mallie Robinson as Mollie.[231] He also glossed over several racial incidents, stating that Robinson left the army after a year, but never mentioning his refusal to submit to segregated bus seating and subsequent court martial.[232] Interestingly, Smith glossed over his own contributions to Robinson's success, omitting the fact that he had recommended Robinson to Branch Rickey -- he intimated that Dodgers' scouts had made the discovery on their own -- and crediting white sportswriters for their role in fighting for the end of the color line:

> The sportswriters, more than any other group or individual, are responsible for the entry of Negro players into organized baseball. For years and years they have fought for the abolishment of the color line. Never have they let baseball's officialdom forget that as long as they

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[230] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 56

[231] Robinson, My Own Story, 3

[232] Robinson, My Own Story, 10

> barred any race, creed, or color from the diamond, baseball could not be called the American sport.[233]

Smith had a tendency to report Robinson's successes and to ignore the setbacks, but he steadfastly believed that his selective reporting was for a greater cause. In 1948, Smith was rewarded for his efforts. He was offered a job at the *Chicago American*, a white daily newspaper. With his new job, he was finally able to gain membership in the BBWAA and the commensurate press card.[234]

In 1949, Jackie Robinson was finally relieved of his promise to Branch Rickey that he would let any and all abuse slide off of his back. In a meeting in Rickey's office, Rickey let Robinson know that he could now "fight back." Rickey gave Robinson permission to get aggressive on the base path, and to return the retorts other "bench jockeys.[235] Robinson soon discovered, however, that the general public was unprepared for his "new" attitude:

> Very soon after my talk with Mr. Rickey, I learned that as long as I appeared to ignore insult and injury, I was a martyred hero to a lot of people who seemed to have sympathy for the underdog. But the minute I began to answer, to argue, to protest -- the minute I began to sound off -- I became a swellhead, a wise guy, an 'uppity' nigger. When a white player did it, he had spirit. When a black player did it, he was 'ungrateful,' an upstart, a sorehead. It was hard to believe the prejudice

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[233] Robison, My Own Story, 37

[234] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 326

[235] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 328

> I saw emerging among people who had seemed friendly toward me before I began to speak my mind. I came, in their minds, and in their columns, a 'pop-off,' a 'troublemaker,' a 'rabble-rouser.' It was apparent that I was a fine guy until 'Success went to his head,' until I began to 'change.'[236]

Rickey and Wendell Smith both believed that, in order for their grand "experiment" to work, they needed to show America that it could happen dispassionately, without major incidents.[237] Smith had done a fine job of showing the world how gracious Jackie Robinson could be under fire. But when the world finally discovered the reality of Robinson's passions, many people turned against him. Smith himself accused Robinson of "ingratitude." In his newspaper column, he lashed out against the perceived aggression of Robinson towards the press: "Mr. Robinson's memory, it seems, is getting shorter and shorter. That is especially true in the case of the many newspapermen who have befriended him through his career."[238] Perhaps, the end of the men's friendship came down to a difference in style. Jackie Robinson was bombastic, tempestuous, quick to defend himself. Smith, as Charles Fountain put it, "was a crusader, not a bomb thrower."[239] He was

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[236] Robinson, I Never Had It Made, 79

[237] Carroll, This is IT! 158

[238] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 329

[239] Fountain, Under the March Sun, 55

passionate about doing the right thing, but he preferred to work behind the scenes and chose to work within the system rather than against it.

Jackie Robinson played ten seasons in major league baseball with the Dodgers. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, his first year of eligibility. Robinson died from a heart attack on October 24, 1972. He was only 53 years old. Eulogizing Robinson in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Wendell Smith wrote of the player's passions and tendency towards controversy, and his determination to make it in the big leagues.

> But through all this Jackie Robinson was always himself. He never backed down from a fight, never quit agitating for equality. He demanded respect, too. Those who tangled with him always admitted afterward that he was a man's man, a person who would not compromise his convictions.[240]

Smith died a month later, on November 26, 1972 of complications from cancer. He was 58 years old. In 1973, the Chicago Public Schools honored Smith by naming an elementary school after him.[241] In 1993, Smith was posthumously inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. His wife, Wyonella, a fellow reporter from the *Pittsburgh Courier*, gave the induction speech on his behalf.

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[240] Reprinted in the Pittsburgh Courier "Wendell Smith: The Jackie Robinson I Knew..." November 11, 1972 pg. 26

[241] Holtzman, Jerome Holtzman Baseball Reader, 188

The End of the Negro Leagues

One unavoidable consequence of the integration of Major League Baseball was the demise of the negro leagues. It took twelve years after Jackie Robinson signed his historic contract with the Dodgers for the last major league team, the Boston Red Sox, to sign a black player. Most teams only signed one black player at a time, employing an unofficial quota system.[242] In the meantime, fans and black papers were focusing their attention on Major League Baseball, to the detriment of the negro leagues. Even cities with no major league team saw their fans leave for the closest MLB team. Like they had with Dodgers games in 1947, railroad lines offered travel deals to fans who wanted to travel to baseball games.[243] Black teams started losing money and going out of business almost immediately.[244] The Negro National League closed up shop after its 1948 season, and the Negro American League didn't last much longer. By then, it was clear that negro baseball was waning.

The black press faced a difficult dilemma. They could continue to work for the integration of Major League Baseball, and watch as the talent drain slowly killed off black baseball. Or they could work to fix the problems inherent in the negro leagues and help them retain players. Many newspaper reporters wanted to do both, but it was a mutually exclusive proposition.[245] The negro leagues and the black newspapers had once worked together for a

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[242] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 192

[243] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 167

[244] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 157

[245] Carroll, Content Analysis, 61

common cause: the uplift and support of black baseball players. Unlike the cozy days of the 1930s, they were now at cross-purposes.[246] A content analysis performed by Brian Carroll shows that, in the time leading up to Jackie Robinson's signing in 1947, black papers were already switching their focus from the negro leagues to the major leagues.[247] After Robinson broke the color line, the switch in focus continued, at a rate that was nearly inversely proportional. The more the black papers wrote about Robinson, the less they wrote about the negro leagues.[248]

Of the 500 players in the negro leagues in 1945, there were only 50 or so who made it into the major leagues.[249] By 1953, only seven of the sixteen major league squads had signed black players, and those teams had only signed a total of 20 players between themselves. The loss of the negro leagues meant a loss of opportunity for black baseball players. Writers like Smith tended to be naive about what the end of the color line would mean for the negro leagues.[250] During the fight for integration, writers had often claimed that negro league teams could someday transition into a minor league farm system for black players, or that some of the more successful black franchises might join the big leagues. When neither of these possibilities came to pass, writers were put into a fundamental quandary. Would they continue to push for the full integration of baseball, knowing that it would probably mean the death of

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[246] Carroll, Content Analysis, 81

[247] Carroll, Content Analysis, 72

[248] Carroll, Content Analysis, 73

[249] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 149

[250] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 148

the negro leagues? Or would they support a wholly black owned and governed enterprise? Many reporters hoped that they could integrate baseball without losing the negro leagues, but that was just not possible.[251]

For Wendell Smith, who had often railed against the mismanagement, disorganization, and cronyism of the negro leagues, its demise barely elicited any sympathy[252]. Ironically, the societal changes that would eventually kill the negro leagues conspired to destroy most of the black newspapers as well. Jackie Robinson's first season in major league baseball was a high water mark for most black papers. Never again would the black weeklies garner as many readers or such high circulation numbers.[253] From a peak of 661,000 during World War II, the combined circulation of the three biggest black papers -- the *Pittsburgh Courier,* the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* -- had dropped off to 288,000 by 1963. Writers like Wendell Smith left their black papers to take jobs at white dailies. The increasing popularity of television cut into newspaper readership in general.[254] In an attempt to stay afloat, many black newspapers attempted to emulate the style of the mainstream dailies, including attempts at increased objectivity, but it was too late.[255] By 1966, the *Courier* had stopped printing. The paper would later be purchased and renamed *The New Pittsburgh Courier*, but its glory days were over.

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[251] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 168

[252] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 165

[253] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 166

[254] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 176

[255] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 191

For black activists, the negro leagues and black newspapers were an unwelcome legacy of Jim Crow America; a reminder of their inferior status in American society.[256] Brian Carroll argues that the leagues epitomized the idea put forth by W.E.B Dubois of a "double-consciousness."[257] Where the black leagues had once functioned as a vessel for self-help in the Booker T. Washington boot-strapping model, they now had be sacrificed in order to make greater strides in integrated baseball. Carroll put it best when he said that "blacks gave up more than they gained but believed there could be no other way."[258]

Smitty's Supporters

Many historians have written that, while Wendell Smith and his fellow black reporters worked tirelessly and effectively for baseball integration, they could not have succeeded without the help of sympathetic whites. Smith, who wrote for the largest and most influential of the black weeklies, had a large pulpit, but he was still mainly preaching to the converted. In order to make change happen, black writers needed white advocates, but they didn't want to wait for the mainstream dailies to come around to their side.[259] One of the reasons that Smith got so personally involved in the cause was that he lacked the clout to accomplish his goals by writing about them in his newspaper. He

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[256] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 167

[257] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 3

[258] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 189

[259] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 332

had to go directly to the men in power to advocate for change.[260] White sportswriters who worked for mainstream dailies had the ability to reach audiences that the black reporters had no access to.[261] Someone still had to sign the first black player, and that man was Branch Rickey.[262]

One organization whose contributions to baseball integration have often been overlooked is the American Communist Party. For a long time, American communists and reporters at the *Daily Worker* were the most reliable white advocates. They had more readers than the black weeklies, so when they wrote about baseball integration, it had a much greater impact.[263]. In March of 1942, a group of communists ran a petition drive demanding the end of the color line, an effort that ultimately garnered a million signatures.[264] Help from the communists came at a price. After the non-aggression pact signed between the USSR and Germany on August 23, 1939, American Communists had difficulties shaking the association between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.[265] Subsequently, the *Daily Worker* toned down its rhetoric and decreased the number of its articles on baseball. There were fewer comparisons between Jim Crow and Nazism, although they were still fighting for the same cause.[266] Fay Young, a longtime sports reporter for the black weekly, *the Chicago Defender*, discovered at an MLB meeting in 1947 that there

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[260] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 90

[261] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 166

[262] Lamb, Blackout, 8

[263] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 139

[264] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 105

[265] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 159

[266] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 161

were many people in baseball who believed that communists were the primary driving force behind desegregation efforts and were using the association to discredit the movement. After Young's discovery, black writers moved their once close relationship to one that was more arm's length.[267] In talking about the difference in strategy, Smith said "I always tried to keep it from becoming a flamboyant, highly militant thing. I think that's why it succeeded. If there had been picketing... this thing wouldn't have developed the way it did."[268] Smith was willing to work with the Communists when it was convenient, because he saw it as a means to an end. The Communists also had ulterior motives in working with Smith. When Smith sent the *Daily Worker* his letter of appreciation for reprinting his interviews, the *Worker* published it, both as a show of solidarity and because it showed that the communist party was making inroads with the black community.[269] Wendell Smith would later claim that the communists actually delayed integration because of their pushiness. Lester Rodney of the *Daily Worker* wrote him an angry letter reminding him that he had thanked them profusely in 1939 for their support.[270]

As white men working for daily papers, communist writers enjoyed access and privileges that weren't available to their black counterparts. Black newspapers all printed weekly, so black sportswriters were ineligible for membership in the Baseball Writers Association of America (BBWAA). A year

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[267] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 107

[268] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 81

[269] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 103

[270] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 326

after the *Daily Worker* added a sports section in 1936, the BBWAA begrudgingly gave *Worker* reporter Lester Rodney a membership card. With his press pass, he could get onto baseball fields and into areas at ballparks that weren't open to the general public. Rodney's membership was controversial and there were several writers who protested his membership, claiming that he was writing propaganda and not about sports.[271]

Most mainstream writers ignored the issue of integration, but when they did write about it, it was usually heralded in the black weeklies and in the *Daily Worker*. White writers didn't write about the issue often, and as a result their readers were unlikely to have much knowledge about the negro leagues or black baseball in general.[272] One writer who was a consistent advocate was Jimmy Powers of the *New York Daily News,* who once wrote in his column that negro leaguer Josh Gibson would be worth $25,000 a year to any major league team that signed him. Powers also encouraged his readers to attend negro league games at Yankee Stadium. Powers wrote:

> I have seen personally at least ten colored ball players I know are big leaguers but are bared from play by the Jim Crow law that Frick of the National League insists does not exist. Some day some owner will come along with enough courage to sign a fine young catcher like Josh Gibson. Then baseball will become a truly national sport.[273]

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[271] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 104

[272] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 163

[273] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 151

White writers were not always reliable. Dave Egan, the Boston *Record* reporter who pressured the Red Sox into honoring their promise to give Jackie Robinson a tryout, was often dismissed by his fellow writers as a drunk.[274] Jimmy Powers himself undid years of built-up goodwill within the black community when he criticized Branch Rickey for signing Jackie Robinson to the Montreal Royals:

> We wrote before and we repeat it here that we don't believe Jackie Robinson, colored college star signed by the Dodgers for one of their farm teams, will ever play in the big leagues. We question Branch Rickey's pompous statements that he is another Abraham Lincoln and that he has a heart as big as a watermelon and loves all mankind.[275]

Wendell Smith accused Powers of duplicity, in a column that was unusually negative, referring to Powers and *New York Daily Mirror* writer Dan Parker as "writing vicious, putrid and violently prejudiced stories.[276]" Chris Lamb believes Powers really did care about breaking the color line, but his well-known animosity towards Branch Rickey overruled his hatred of segregation.[277] Smith appears to have held a grudge against Powers for his column, singling him out for censure in Robinson's first autobiography as a writer who scoffed that Robinson would never "make the grade.[278]"

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[274] Bryant, Shut Out, 25

[275] New York Daily News, The Powerhouse by Jimmy Powers, March 12, 1946, page 41

[276] Smith, The Sports Beat, March 30, 1946, pg. 26

[277] Lamb, Conspiracy of Silence, 293

[278] Robinson, My Own Story, 42

Journalism Standards in 1947

When Wendell Smith agreed to accompany Jackie Robinson for the duration of the 1947 season, he also agreed to a $50 a week salary as a member of the Dodgers payroll. By the journalism standards of today, Smith's dual role was a regrettable conflict of interest. In Smith's eyes, he was a muckraking journalist, doing the necessary legwork to ensure that baseball's color line was destroyed once and for all.

There was historical precedent for Smith's involvement. At the founding of the negro leagues in the 1920s, the black press made it clear that their primary duty was the uplift of the black community. Journalism standards of the day may have called for a "clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion,"[279] but the *Pittsburgh Courier* and its fellow black weeklies saw themselves as a fighting press, first and foremost.[280] The *Courier* made causes and campaigns a key component of its business model and its reporters were upfront with their readers that theirs was a participatory form of journalism. Black journalists of the day were unapologetic about their involvement with the negro leagues, and they encouraged their readers to participate as well. [281]

A journalism textbook from 1946 states that the "days of writing crusading stories are far past."[282] Smith, however, was first and foremost a

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[279] Canons of Journalism, ASNE 1922

[280] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 72

[281] Carroll, Fraternity to Fracture, 73

[282] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 90

crusader. He still saw himself as a journalist, but one steeped in the tradition of other crusading black journalists and his primary goal was the uplift of his people. Towards that end, he often omitted stories or softened their blow if he believed that they would have a negative effect on Branch Rickey's "Great Experiment."[283] Smith's unprecedented access to Robinson meant that he was ideally situated to steer the narrative of that 1947 season.[284] Smith's columns were unmistakably activist, but his readers might have been surprised to discover just how much he was holding back.

Racial Pioneers

Jackie Robinson and Wendell Smith were more than just baseball men, they were racial pioneers. Seven years before Brown v. Board of Education, Robinson's entrance into major league baseball provided a definitive moment of racial change. Once he put on a Dodgers uniform, there was no going back.[285] Robinson's teammate and friend, Roy Campanella would later boast that "Without the Brooklyn Dodgers, you don't have Brown v. Board of Education."[286] As Campanella explained it, ""All I know, is we were the first ones down South not to go around the back of the restaurant, first ones in the hotels. We were like the whole integration thing."[287] Inroads in baseball came with great personal sacrifice. Jackie Robinson was proud of his role, but regretted its impact on himself and his family:

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[283] Carroll, This is IT! 152

[284] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 138

[285] Carroll, Content Analysis, 78

[286] Carroll, Conspiracy of Silence, 328

[287] Carroll, Conspiracy of Silence, 328

> I once put my freedom into mothballs for a season, accepted humiliation and physical hurt and derision and threats to my family in order to do my bit to help make a lily white sport a truly American game.... I paid more than my dues for the right to call it like I see it.[288]

Like the sit-ins and freedom rides that would begin a few years later, Jackie Robinson and Wendell Smith put themselves on the line so that black baseball players and reporters who came after them would have the opportunity to "make the grade." Baseball, as America's pastime, became a proxy for the upheaval that was slowly brewing in American society.[289] Most Americans who got their news from the white dailies had no idea that Jackie Robinson was faced with segregated accommodations, hate mail, and threats. Because of his rosy optimism, even Wendell Smith's readers weren't getting a full picture.

Journalism historian Armistead S. Pride was one of the first scholars to write about the effects of segregation on journalists. Like baseball players, Jim Crow laws often hampered their opportunities for advancement. But, while most black sportswriters were outspoken advocates for black athletes, they tended not to talk or write about their own difficulties, unless asked about it directly. [290] Because they couldn't apply for press credentials, black newspapermen were unable to obtain the same access as their white counterparts. *Courier* photographer Billy Rowe often had to take his pictures

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[288] Long, First Class Citizenship, 302

[289] Lamb, Baseball's Whitewash, 3

[290] Carroll, When to Stop the Cheering, 191

from the segregated section of the bleachers, a suboptimal vantage point for getting decent photos.[291] Smith and Rowe couldn't socialize with other reporters, either because they weren't able to go to the same restaurants or because they weren't invited. Smith, ever the optimist, wrote that "If they wanted me to go to dinner with them, it was against the law. I'm sure they would have liked me to join them. They didn't ask because they knew it was impossible." But Rowe remembers entering the press box in City Island, Florida and hearing one reporter remark to another, "This was a good job until Mexicans, Cubans, and Negroes started cluttering up the diamond."[292] Because he couldn't get a press pass, Smith's historic interview series was primarily conducted in hotel lobbies. Later, when given unprecedented access to Jackie Robinson, Wendell Smith was able to make a name for himself. Most black reporters lacked that kind of opportunity.

When Jackie Robinson entered organized baseball in 1946, America was at a crossroads. An opinion poll conducted in 1942 concluded that 6 out of 10 Americans were happy with the racial status quo and that a plurality of those polled believed that Jim Crow laws existed because black people were inherently inferior.[293] At the same time, black servicemen were returning from duty in the armed services and demanding the rights that they had fought so very hard for. In major cities, where the black population had been steadily

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[291] Lamb, Blackout, 105

[292] Lamb, Blackout, 146 Rowe added that the actual quote was much worse, "but this is a family paper."

[293] Wiggins, Glory Bound, 92

migrating, these tensions often bubbled up in the form of race riots.[294] The civil rights movement was still a decade off when Jackie Robinson first donned a Dodgers' uniform. But, for readers of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the other black weeklies, the civil rights movement had been a long time coming.

[294] Wiggins, Wendell Smith, 17

Conclusion:

Wendell Smith's popular legacy is likely to be that he suggested Jackie Robinson to Branch Rickey, but some of his most important work was conducted behind the scenes. Smith was bound and determined to integrate baseball, to give young players the opportunities that he himself had been denied. His efforts helped to pave the way for Robinson, and his presence in 1947 provided companionship to the "loneliest man in baseball." Smith bent some facts to fit his narrative, but in his mind the ends always justified the means. Today, Jackie Robinson is a household name and Wendell Smith is an historical footnote, but Branch Rickey's great experiment might never have succeeded without his his efforts.

In 1961, Wendell Smith spearheaded one last campaign, working behind the scenes to integrate spring training in Florida. Never again would black ballplayers be forced to reside in seperate lodgings and eat their meals out of local residents' kitchens. Smith worked hard on behalf of a new generation of ballplayers who were still hoping to "make the grade." By this time, Smith was a reporter at the *Chicago American*, Jackie Robinson had long since retired, and the two men were no longer friendly with each other. Wendell Smith and Jackie Robinson's friendship may have been fleeting, but the impact of their partnership is still felt by players and fans today.

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