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**“YOU DIDN’T FIGHT CITY HALL, YOU HAD YOUR
FOOT IN THE DOOR”**

NEGRO LEAGUE BASEBALL AS A CASE STUDY OF RACIAL INTEGRATION

Master’s Thesis

North American Studies

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Abstract

This thesis examines Negro League baseball in the 1950s as a case study for racial integration. Historians of professional black baseball have focused on Negro League baseball until the desegregation of the Major Leagues, arguing that the Negro Leagues were in decline almost immediately after 1947. This thesis approaches Negro League baseball with a fresh set of sources, previously not used by historians as the base of their research. By making use of interviews with former Negro League players, this thesis shows a surprisingly different story from the historical consensus. Negro League baseball remained embedded in the African American community in the 1950s, and the African American community continued to support Negro League baseball despite the integration of the Major Leagues. Furthermore, this thesis shows that Negro League players were afraid to challenge segregation out of fear of white reprisals, and because they feared being seen as troublemakers, which would hurt their cause in integrating Major League Baseball.

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Introduction

Between 1952 and 1954, Gordon Hopkins played baseball in Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and other Major League ballparks. The number of fans who attended these games could peak at 30,000 to 40,000.¹ This is an impressive number, considering most Major League Baseball teams average attendance numbers did not get above 20,000 fans.² This number becomes even more impressive considering that Gordon Hopkins did not play in the major leagues. Instead, Hopkins played for the Negro League Indianapolis Clowns.³ Although the fact that Negro League baseball could outdraw Major League teams is not new – the East-West game played at Comiskey Park at times attracted over 50,000 fans – it is remarkable that the Indianapolis Clowns could still draw crowds of this size in the 1950s, considering Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball in 1947.⁴ The story of Negro League Baseball ties into African American History, and how the African American community tried to resist their exclusion from the white, mainstream American society through creating their own African American society where they could thrive and excel. Yet, this changes after Jackie Robinson integrated the Major Leagues. Negro League baseball shifted from being a narrative of resistance to segregation, to a narrative of endurance of black institutions after watershed moments in integration.

Jackie Robinson is credited with integrating Major League Baseball, however, the split

¹ Gordon D. Hopkins, “Interview with Gordon D. Hopkins, 1998 December 7,” interview by Harry Cornias, December 7, 1998, Oral History Collection, University of Baltimore, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F005_Hopkins_Gordon.pdf, page 12.

² “1952 MLB Attendance & Team Age,” Baseball Reference, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/1952-misc.shtml>; “1953 MLB Attendance & Team Age,” Baseball Reference, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/1953-misc.shtml>; “1954 MLB Attendance & Team Age,” Baseball Reference, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/1954-misc.shtml>.

³ I will use the term Negro League throughout my thesis to refer to the African American baseball leagues from the 1920s to the 1950s, as well as the teams and players who were a part of these leagues. This does not mean I condone using the term ‘negro’ to refer to African Americans, however, it is the term that was used at the time and is still commonly used by historians and journalists to refer to the African American baseball institution of the past. “Gordon Hopkins,” Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://nlbmuseum.com/history/players/hopkins.html>.

⁴ Leslie A. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960* (McFarland & Company, 2003), 119.

between Negro Leagues and the white Major Leagues was not always there. Therefore, Robinson was not the first African American who played in the Major Leagues. When Major League managers and owners decided on a ban on African American players in 1887, they hoped Moses Fleetwood Walker would be the last African American player on a Major League diamond.⁵ Although the ban would not prove permanent, it would stand for over 60 years, barring entire generations of African American athletes from making their mark in the Major Leagues.⁶ However, this did not deter African Americans from excelling in baseball.

African American ball clubs already existed before the color-line in the Major Leagues came into existence, despite the lack of a league structure in which they were allowed to fully participate. The team widely credited with being the first professional African American team, the Cuban Giants, originated in 1885, and is generally credited with laying the foundations for African American baseball.⁷ As early as 1886, attempts were made to organize a Negro League, yet it would take until 1920 for the first successful Negro League to be formed.⁸ Before 1920, African American teams were largely confined to barnstorming, something that would remain part of African American baseball, even when teams associated with organized Negro Leagues. Travelling across the country to play financially lucrative games and tournaments outside an official league structure, barnstorming was a necessity for many African American teams to ensure financial survival.⁹

The first successful professional African American league, the Negro National League, was launched in 1920. There were several pillars that can explain the success of the Negro National League. The first was the leadership of Andrew “Rube” Foster. In previous attempts

⁵ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 14.

⁶ Bill Kriwin ed., *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), VII.

⁷ Jerry Malloy, “The Birth of the Cuban Giants: The Origins of Black Professional Baseball,” in *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*, ed. Bill Kirwin (University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

⁸ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 23-35.

⁹ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 7.

to organize a Negro League, “the lack of leadership and vision contributed to the[ir] failure,” both of which were now provided by Foster.¹⁰ A second pillar of the Negro National League’s success was coverage by African American newspapers. Fans could now follow their teams and favorite players, and in doing so, they developed a sense of loyalty which ensured a loyal African American public for teams that played in cities with African American newspapers. The final pillar of the Negro National League’s success was the development of a large, working African American population in industrial cities. As part of the Great Migration, more than four million African Americans moved to northern cities to work in its industries between 1900 and 1960.¹¹ This created a large black community – a community able to afford supporting local baseball teams – in many Northern cities.¹² Negro League baseball would continue until the 1960s, despite Jackie Robinson already breaking the color barrier in 1947.

This thesis will examine Negro League baseball after the desegregation of Major League Baseball, by answering the question: *How did Negro League players experience the period after the integration of Major League Baseball?* This thesis will argue that black professional baseball remained an important part of black life in the 1950s and assess how Negro League players experienced the late 1940s and 1950s. During this period, the integration of baseball had already happened, however, most black players still did not get a chance to play in the Majors. This thesis will treat Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson as a case study of racial integration, and what happened to black institutions after watershed moments in integration.

Scholars have examined the significance of Negro League baseball in African American society when the white Major Leagues were off-limits for black players. The first influential work published on Negro League baseball was *Only the Ball Was White*, by Robert

¹⁰ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 37.

¹¹ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 330.

¹² Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 37.

Peterson in 1970. Since then, scholars started to pay more attention to African American baseball in the separate universe of the Negro Leagues. In the final decades of the 20th century, several books were published on Negro League baseball. However, most of them dealt with only a specific team or specific players and examined Negro League baseball until the integration of the Major Leagues in 1947.¹³ More general books on Negro League baseball were written during these decades, but they remained mostly outside the realm of academia.¹⁴

A growing body of academic scholarship on the Negro Leagues has been published in the 21st century. Most of these books focus on the importance of a specific team or person. The authors described the period before the integration of the Major Leagues as the heyday of Negro League baseball and describe the period after 1947 only as a period of decline.¹⁵ The inner workings of the Negro Leagues and its owners from 1900 until 1931 have been studied by Michael Lomax, who examines how these owners worked towards creating a stable economically viable business.¹⁶ Neil Lanctot continues the examination of economic aspects in the 1930s and 1940s. He argues that the Negro Leagues were most popular in the war years and became obsolete and irrelevant after the integration of the Major Leagues.¹⁷ A similar argument is made by Roberta Newman and Joel Rosen.¹⁸ Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez argue that

¹³ Janet Bruce, *The Kansas City Monarchs: Champions of Black Baseball* (University Press of Kansas, 1985); James Overmyer, *Effa Manley and the Newark Eagles* (Scarecrow press, 1993); Neil Lanctot, *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing: The Hilldale Club and the Development of Black Professional Baseball, 1910-1932* (McFarland, 1994).

¹⁴ John Holway, *Black Diamonds: Life in the Negro Leagues from the Men Who Lived It* (Information Today, 1989); Dick Clark and Larry Lester, ed., *The Negro League Book* (Society for American Baseball Research, 1994); James A. Riley, *The Bibliographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues* (Carrol & Graf, 1994).

¹⁵ Bob Luke, *The Baltimore Elite Giants: Sport and Society in the Age of Negro League Baseball* (John Hopkins University Press, 2009); Bob Luke, *The Most Famous Woman in Baseball: Effa Manley and the Negro Leagues* (Potomac Books, 2011); Rich Westcott, *Biz Mackey, a Giant Behind the Plate: The Story of the Negro League Star and Hall of Fame Catcher* (Temple University Press, 2018); Jeremy Beer, *Oscar Charleston: The Life and Legend of Baseball's Greatest Forgotten Player* (University of Nebraska, 2019).

¹⁶ Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860-1901: Operating by any Means Necessary* (Syracuse University Press, 2003); Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1931: The Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues* (Syracuse University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Roberta J. Newman and Joel N. Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business: Race Enterprise and the Fate of the Segregated Dollar* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

the Negro Leagues were part of an emancipatory effort and a form of economic resistance against segregation.¹⁹ Leslie Heaphy has examined the social side of Negro League baseball between 1869 and 1960. She argues that the Negro Leagues were an important institution in the black community until the integration of the Major Leagues. Thereafter, the African American community shifted its attention to the integrated Major Leagues.²⁰

Scholars have failed to fully assess Negro League baseball after 1947, only discussing it in terms of decline and comparing it to earlier decades. In books like *The Negro Leagues: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, and in *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson* half of the pages are dedicated to the integration of the white Major Leagues.²¹ Leslie Heaphy pays much more attention to the Negro Leagues in *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*, with only one chapter in her book being dedicated to the integration of the white Major Leagues. However, she also fails to study the Negro Leagues after 1947 extensively, since there are only two chapters dedicated to this period.²² This focus on integration for the period after 1947 means that the Negro Leagues do not receive the same attention from scholars during this period as they get from historians before 1947. Therefore, 21st century scholars leave a gap in the academic field of African American baseball history that is yet to be addressed.

Scholars of African American baseball in the 21st century also make use of the same source material, which means that their books address more or less the same issues. Scholars have relied almost exclusively on African American newspapers from Eastern and Midwestern cities in their research on African American baseball.²³ However, the focus on African

¹⁹ Joseph N. Cooper, Charles Macaulay and Saturnino H. Rodriguez, "Race and Resistance: A Typology of African American Sport Activism," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 54, no. 2 (2019), 151-181.

²⁰ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 225.

²¹ Lancot, *Negro League Baseball*; Kirwin, *Out of the Shadows*.

²² Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 198-224.

²³ There are a few exceptions, and these exceptions tell different stories than the literature that has used African American newspapers as its most important source material. Jean Hastings Ardell, "Mamie 'Peanut' Johnson: The Last Female Voice of the Negro Leagues," in *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*, ed. Bill Kirwin (University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Scott Roper, " 'Another

American newspapers as the most important source material could explain why these scholars have focused on integration after 1947, rather than focus on the Negro Leagues. Historians Brian Carroll, Samuel Gale, and Chris Lamb argue that African American sportswriters tried to contribute to the integration of the white Major Leagues. After Jackie Robinson made his debut, their focus was on making Robinson a success, so he could serve as an example of how successful African Americans could be in the white Major Leagues. This left them with little room to continue reporting on Negro League baseball.²⁴ The focus of the most important source material for scholars of Negro League baseball in the 21st century thus shifted from the Negro Leagues to making the integration of the Major Leagues a success.

Methodologically, this thesis will take a qualitative approach and use a fresh set of sources, previously not used in academic literature relating to Negro League baseball. The main source material used in this paper will be interviews with former players that played in the Negro Leagues after 1947. There are two databases and one book that generate the bulk of source material. The first database is the Oral Histories database from the Birmingham Public Library. The interviews used for this thesis are found by using the search term “Negro Leagues” in the Oral Histories database.²⁵ The second database is the Negro League Oral History Collection from the University of Baltimore.²⁶ Most interviews used in this thesis, however,

Chink in Jim Crow?’ Race and Baseball on the Northern Plains, 1900-1935,” in *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*, ed. Bill Kirwin (University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

²⁴ Brian Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering?: The Black Press, The Black Community, and the Integration of Professional Baseball* (Routledge, 2006), 4; Samuel Edward Gale, “A Bitter Partnership: The Black Press’ Contentious Relationship with the Negro Leagues in the Struggle to Integrate Major League Baseball,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 33, no. 16 (2016), 1885-1903; Chris Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball* (Lincoln University Press, 2012).

²⁵ This search term yields eighteen interviews with former players of the Birmingham Black Barons, a Negro League team that existed from the 1920s to 1960. Of these eighteen interviews, five were used since these interviews held more significant information for this thesis than others. See bibliography for which interviews are used. Birmingham Public Library, Digital Collections, Oral Histories, Negro Leagues, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/search/searchterm/Negro%20leagues/field/subject/mode/exact/conn>.

²⁶ From this database, the interviews with Gordon D. Hopkins, Hubert V. Simmons, Mamie Johnson Goodman, and Ernest Burke are used. University of Baltimore, Negro League, Oral History Collection, <https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/2/resources/76>.

were published in *The Negro Leagues Revisited: Conversations with 66 More Baseball Heroes*, by Brent Kelley.²⁷ Apart from these databases, three more interviews from other databases are used. The first is an interview with George L. Jefferson from the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral Histories: University of Kentucky Libraries, the second an interview with Henry Bow Mason from the Oral History Collection of the Society for American Baseball Research, and the third an interview with William Bell from the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.²⁸

There are two main reasons why interviews constitute the main archival source material for this thesis. First, historians have tended to overlook interviews as source material for researching professional black baseball; rather, they have relied on black newspapers. Therefore, shifting the emphasis to interviews will examine African American baseball from a different perspective. Second, as historians Brian Carroll, Samuel Gale, and Chris Lamb argue, black newspapers focused their attention on the Major Leagues once they were integrated, leaving little room for reporting on the Negro Leagues.²⁹ Therefore, unlike African American newspapers, interviews with former Negro League players will provide useful insight into professional black baseball after Jackie Robinson.

This thesis recognizes that using oral history has potential benefits and pitfalls. Written documents for a large part reflect the views of the elites and dominant classes in society. By moving away from these sources, this thesis will construct a narrative of a community that was largely undocumented and excluded from mainstream society in their own words. It draws on the argument of Mark Thompson and Joanna Bornat that oral history can provide insights into

²⁷ From this book, nine interviews were used. Brent Kelley, *The Negro Leagues Revisited: Conversations with 66 More Baseball Heroes* (McFarland & Company, 2015).

²⁸ The findings in this thesis are thus based on a total of twenty-one interviews with former Negro League players. George L. Jefferson, "Interview with George L. Jefferson, May 23, 1981," interview by William J. Marshall, May 23, 1981, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7pnv997v43>; Henry Bow Mason, "Interview Henry Bow Mason (2001)," interview by Paul Motyka, March 11, 2001, Oral History Collection, SABR, <https://oralhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>; William Bell, "William Bell Talks About Hardships of Life in the Road," interviewer and date unknown, Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/nlbemuseum/mov/belltravel.mov>.

²⁹ Carroll, *When to Stop Cheering?*; Gale, "A Bitter Partnership"; Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence*.

the lives of undocumented and unprivileged classes. As such, “it provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past.”³⁰ However, this thesis also recognizes that oral history can relay information that is untrue, or only partially true. Donald Ritchie cautions that; “Oral history can be unconvincing.” Interviewees’ memories can be “self-serving,” or sometimes, interviewees’ simply don not remember correctly what happened at a specific moment.³¹ On the other hand, Alessandro Portelli argues that oral history “reveal[s] unknown events or unknown aspects of known events,” and the main problem with the factual use of oral history is that of “verification.”³² “Oral sources,” Portelli argues, “are credible but with a *different* credibility.” He argues that often expressed critique – like the unreliability of oral sources – is valid for many written sources as well, and thus oral sources should not be discarded as unimportant. The importance of oral history in “wrong” memories, is that they remain “psychologically true” and the meaning of the memory is as valuable – if not more – as the meaning of factual information.³³ Thus, oral history can provide insights and new information from populations that have not been traditionally represented by written sources – as is the case with Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson. This thesis is aware that memories can be wrong and self-serving. Yet, even these memories hold value, since their meaning is true for the interviewee, and, as such, these memories are still important for historical research.

Chapter 1 is a historiographical chapter that assesses the current state of the literature on black professional baseball. It argues that scholars have paid little attention to Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson and have based their research primarily on African American newspapers. Chapter 2 asserts that the Negro Leagues did not suddenly fall from grace in the African American community. It remained popular well into the 1950s, drawing large crowds

³⁰ Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

³¹ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 111.

³² Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2015), 53.

³³ Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 54.

and enjoying the support of the black community. Chapter 3 analyzes how Negro League players negotiated the changing landscape of race relations in the 1950s. It will argue that they tried to avoid segregated areas and facilities, rather than outright fight it. Furthermore, it argues that many players felt the integration of Major League Baseball had not brought them much, since they were still held back because of their skin color.

There are some limitations to this study. Although the choice for interviews as the main source material for research is a fresh approach to the study of Negro League baseball, the dependence on interviews held by other people means that the interviews cannot be steered into the direction that is of most interest to this research. However, considering the scope of this research, and the fact that many Negro League players have already passed away, finding and interviewing surviving Negro League players does not seem a viable option. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic meant this thesis had to rely exclusively on online archival material. Despite these limitations, this research can still shed a new light on Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson and examine what happened to black institutions after watershed moments in integration. That the Negro Leagues continue to be an important topic in the baseball world became clear on December 16, 2020, when Major League Baseball bestowed Major League status on several Negro Leagues in existence between 1920 and 1948.³⁴

³⁴ Antony Castrovince, "MLB adds Negro Leagues to official records," Major League Baseball, published December 16, 2020, <https://www.mlb.com/news/negro-leagues-given-major-league-status-for-baseball-records-stats>.

Chapter 1: Historiography

This chapter will assess the existing literature on black baseball. Although the first book on black baseball was published over 50 years ago, some glaring gaps remain in the scholarship. I make two arguments about the existing scholarship. The first argument is that scholars have primarily focused on African American baseball before Jackie Robinson made his debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers. The second argument is that 21st century scholars have primarily used African American newspapers as their main source material. The scholarship will be divided into two groups: literature published in the 20th century; and literature published in the 21st century. Finally, Negro League baseball in the 1950s is linked to Civil Rights scholarship.

20th Century Scholarship

Although Negro League baseball was an important aspect of African American life in the first half of the 20th century, the historiography has only emerged slowly. The scholarship on black baseball published in the 20th century was primarily focused on gaining recognition for the Negro Leagues and Negro League ballplayers and making public the – then relatively unknown – story of professional black baseball.

The first influential work published on Negro League baseball was *Only the Ball Was White*, by Robert Peterson in 1970. Peterson's main goal was showing that Negro League players were outstanding athletes and deserved recognition. He wanted, for example, Negro League players to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.³⁵ This would finally happen with the induction of Satchel Paige in 1971.³⁶ *Only the Ball Was White* can be credited with bringing black baseball to the general public for the first time. However, Peterson's final chapters are

³⁵ Robert Peterson, *Only The ball Was White* (Prentice-Hall, 1970), Epilogue.

³⁶ Jackie Robinson was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1963, although Robinson also played in the Negro Leagues, he played in the MLB for the largest part of his career thus making Satchel Paige the first player who played (almost) exclusively in the Negro Leagues to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Matt Kelly, "The 35 Negro Leagues Legends in the Hall of Fame," *Major League Baseball*, Published August 16th, 2020, <https://www.mlb.com/news/negro-leaguers-in-the-national-baseball-hall-of-fame>.

dedicated to the integration of the Major Leagues by Jackie Robinson, and he thus neglects to give the Negro Leagues after 1947 the same attention as the leagues that came before.

After the publication of *Only the Ball Was White*, scholars started to pay more attention to the separate universe of black baseball. In 1975, John Holway's *Voices From the Great Black Baseball Leagues* was published. Holway interviewed twelve former Negro League players and these interviews were primarily deployed to prove that black players had the same skill-level as their white counterparts.³⁷ Holway determines the end of professional black baseball in the year 1948, and thus fails to assess the Negro Leagues after Jackie Robinson in the same way Peterson did. Donn Rogosin further expands the story of Negro League baseball in *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*. Rogosin conducted interviews with 37 former Negro League players, and even more with owners and African American sportswriters.³⁸ Although it was published in 1983, more than a decade after *Only the Ball was White* and the induction of several Negro Leaguers into the Hall of Fame, Rogosin's *Invisible Men* is still aimed at gaining recognition for the Negro Leagues. Yet Rogosin also connects black baseball to larger developments in African American society, points out the viability of black baseball as an economic enterprise, and makes a connection with Latin America where lots of Negro Leaguers went to play 'winterball'.³⁹ Rogosin also sees a later point of demise for Negro League baseball; "everything after about 1951 or 1952 didn't really count because by then all the best Negro baseball players were in the white leagues."⁴⁰ Rogosin thus expands the meaning of black baseball to an international undertaking and paid attention to its meaning off the diamond as well as within. Nonetheless, there is scarcely any attention for the Negro Leagues after 1947 in

³⁷ Steven A. Riess, "Reviewed Work: *Voices From the Great Black Baseball Leagues* by John Holway," *Journal of Sports History* 6, no.1 (1979), 72-74.

³⁸ John A. Knox, "Reviewed Work(s): *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* by Donn Rogosin," *Material Culture* 42, no.1 (2010), 99-103.

³⁹ Don Roper, "Reviewed Work: *Invisible Men Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* by Donn Rogosin," *Journal of Sports History* 11, no.3 (1984), 113-115.

⁴⁰ Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*, 2nd ed. (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 5.

his book.

The single team genre was introduced by Janet Bruce in 1985 and further developed by Neil Lanctot in 1995. When Bruce published *The Kansas City Monarchs: Champions of Black Baseball*, it was not received with a lot of praise. One critic estimated that the book “provides only enough information about the Kansas City Monarchs to justify, in my opinion, perhaps a very long journal article.”⁴¹ Neither did the book contribute to a better understanding of the Negro Leagues by expanding the period discussed. There is only one chapter, for example, dedicated to the entire thirteen years history of the Kansas City Monarchs after Jackie Robinson. Neil Lanctot’s adoption of the single team genre was more successful. In *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing: The Hilldale Club and the Development of Black Professional Baseball, 1910-1932*, Lanctot lays bare the economic aspects of Negro League baseball. The book evolves around the role of the African American president and part owner of the club and is based on its financial records which are well preserved – a rarity for black baseball clubs. Lanctot points out the importance of the Great Migration for the economic viability of black baseball in Philadelphia.⁴² Lanctot contributes to scholars’ understanding of Negro League baseball by examining different aspects of the Philadelphia Hilldale Club, and he was the first to successfully put together a complete picture of the economic enterprise behind a professional black baseball club. However, he fails to point out differences and similarities between Philadelphia and other cities with large African American populations, thus failing to put his findings in *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing* into a broader context.⁴³ His contribution is mainly that he deepened scholars’ understanding of early African American baseball’s economic

⁴¹ David K. Wiggins, “Reviewed Work: *The Kansas City Monarchs: Champions of Black Baseball* by Janet Bruce,” *Journal of Sports History* 13, no.1 (1986), 50.

⁴² Neil Lanctot, *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing: The Hilldale Club and the Development of Black Professional Baseball, 1910-1932*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse University Press, 2007), 50.

⁴³ Michael E. Lomax, “Reviewed Work: *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing: The Hilldale Club and the Development of Black Professional Baseball, 1910-1932* by Neil Lanctot,” *Journal of Sports History* 23, no. 2 (1996), 185-187.

workings. However, since his final chapter ends in 1932, Lanctot equally fails to address black baseball after 1947.

The relationship between the African American community and professional black baseball was analyzed extensively for the first time by Rob Ruck. In *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh*, Ruck argues that black baseball teams were important in shaping a sense of community for Pittsburgh's black population. Black baseball was, according to Ruck, crucial in molding a community made up of both Pittsburgh-born African Americans and migrants moving north as part of the Great Migration by "providing" them "with teams and athletes that both groups could identify with."⁴⁴ Although the primary focus of *Sandlot Seasons* is on the interwar years, Ruck shows how black baseball continued to be pivotal for creating a sense of community for Pittsburgh's African American community.⁴⁵ *Sandlot Seasons* is thus the first work to pay attention to the role of black baseball after 1947. Yet, since Ruck focuses solely on the role of black baseball in Pittsburgh and constructed his narrative primarily on interviews and reporting from the *Pittsburgh Courier*, there remains a gap in the scholarship on the broader contours of African American baseball.

In conclusion, late 20th century scholars' primary task was unearthing the forgotten story of black baseball. The Negro Leagues had been practically forgotten by 1970, until Robert Peterson published *Only the Ball Was White*. His aim was gaining recognition for Negro League players. Many scholars writing on the Negro Leagues and black baseball in the 20th century shared this focus or wanted to shed a light on aspects that were previously undiscussed in academic literature. They made use of both interviews with former Negro League players and reports published in African American newspapers.

⁴⁴ Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (University of Illinois Press, 1987), 6.

⁴⁵ Janet Bruce Campbell, "Sandlot Seasons (Book Review)," *American History Review* 93, no. 2 (1988), 521.

21st Century Scholarship

Scholars in the 21st century have had the advantage of building on the pioneering work of scholars in the previous decades. They further developed our understanding of Negro League baseball with more research into the dynamics of professional black baseball. They also put the meaning of black professional baseball in the broader context of American society and American history. However, they also had issues to contend with. For example, they did not have the opportunity to interview former Negro League players since many were deceased by the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore, they relied primarily on African American newspapers as their source material.

Scholars like Neil Lanctot and Michael Lomax have expanded our knowledge on the economic dynamics of professional black baseball. In *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, Lanctot examines the developments in black baseball in the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Lanctot claims that the 1930s were a decade in which Negro League baseball did not live up to its full potential as a profitable institution, due to the rise of competing interests for African American sports fans, the raiding of Negro League players by foreign leagues, and organizational issues.⁴⁶ According to Lanctot, this only changed in the 1940s. Lanctot pays considerable attention to the successes and failures of Negro League baseball in the first few years after integration, although he always puts them in the perspective of the relation between the Negro Leagues and the white Major Leagues. When Lanctot describes the decline in attendances and declining fan interest, he gives the same amount of attention to the extent in which the white Major Leagues were in fact integrated, or rather, the extent to which they were not integrated.⁴⁷ Lanctot claims that he “attempted to read virtually every sports page of every black newspaper located in a league city”, in contrast with

⁴⁶ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 55, 62-64, 66.

⁴⁷ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 308-336.

“other historians”, who relied “on the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*”.⁴⁸ Lanctot also claims that he went beyond the focus on newspapers by conducting interviews and diving into the sparse documents relating to Negro League baseball that do exist.⁴⁹ Still, Lanctot’s references are mostly to African American press, with almost every endnote containing a reference to an African American newspaper and many still contain a reference to either the *Pittsburgh Courier* or the *Chicago Defender*.⁵⁰ Thus, Lanctot primarily uses black newspapers as his main source material, and fails to sufficiently examine Negro League baseball after 1947. Micheal Lomax continued Lanctot’s quest for uncovering the economic story of the Negro Leagues of the entrepreneurs behind the teams in *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860-1901: Operating by Any Means Necessary* in 2003 and *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1931: The Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues* in 2014. In the first volume, Lomax examines the rise of black baseball as a commercial enterprise and puts these developments in the broader context of the African American struggle in American society. Lomax points out the importance of the Great Migration in the development of black baseball, as well as the relationship with resort hotels, often employing players to supplement their salaries. In the second volume, Lomax asserts that the growing revenues led the entrepreneurs behind the clubs to organize leagues and associations in order to maximize profits and professionalize black professional baseball.⁵¹ Due to a growing African American consumer market and the expansion of the black press, black professional baseball had truly become an African American institution by the 1930s.⁵² Lomax’s work is almost exclusively based on African American newspapers, and he addresses black professional baseball only until 1931.⁵³

Scholars in the 21st century have also studied the social context surrounding Negro

⁴⁸ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, IX.

⁴⁹ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 8.

⁵⁰ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 339-388.

⁵¹ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1931*, 70.

⁵² Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1931*, 420.

⁵³ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1931*, 429-470.

League baseball, in addition to economic dynamics. Leslie Heaphy argues that “the Negro Leagues were an important institution within African American communities.”⁵⁴ Heaphy narrates the experiences of Negro League players outside of the stadiums and explains that Negro League players were very much part of the communities, both from their hometowns and the ones they visited on the road.⁵⁵ Heaphy discusses the different aspects of Negro League baseball and the lives of Negro League ballplayers in great depth for the period before the integration of the white Major Leagues.⁵⁶ This is also the most important contribution she makes to the existing literature, because in her discussion of the Negro Leagues before Jackie Robinson, integration is mentioned only occasionally. When it is brought up, it is most often because contemporary actors paid significant attention to them, rather than the author placing something in perspective of the later integration of the white Major Leagues. For example, the topic of integration plays a role when Heaphy discusses the first Negro National League, but this is not surprising nor is it an attempt to write integration into earlier Negro League history, since the founder of this league founded it with the goal of preparing African American ballplayers for the integration of the white Major Leagues.⁵⁷ However, the focus on Negro League baseball and Negro League players changes after Heaphy addresses the issue of desegregation of the white Major Leagues. When Heaphy discusses the Negro Leagues after Jackie Robinson, the focus is very much on the shift of attention of fans and sportswriters towards Jackie Robinson and away from Negro League baseball.⁵⁸ She also relies heavily on African American newspapers for her source material.

Scott Roper’s research made use primarily of African American newspapers from the Northern Plains – rather than African American newspapers from the Northeast and the

⁵⁴ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 225.

⁵⁵ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 69-85.

⁵⁶ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 9-189.

⁵⁷ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 39.

⁵⁸ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 211-224.

Midwest – and he states that segregation in baseball was not always uniform. Roper argues that the integration of African Americans on white semi-pro teams accelerated between the two World Wars, and he asserts that there were integrated teams on the Northern Plains more than a decade before the desegregation of the Major Leagues.⁵⁹ Although African American players often suffered from racism, these changes were still indicative of “important trends in baseball at the national level.”⁶⁰ Roper’s essay only assesses baseball on the Northern Plains but he shows how levels of segregation were different around the United States, and that while Major Leagues clubs held firm the color line, semi-pro clubs did not.

A small number of scholars have used oral history for their research, however, they fail to put their findings into context, thereby limiting the meaning of their research. Jean Hastings Ardell relies on interviews to tell the story of Mamie ‘Peanut’ Johnson in “Mamie ‘Peanut’ Johnsons: The Last Female Voice of the Negro Leagues.” Johnson was one of three women who played in the Negro Leagues – all in the 1950s – and the only pitcher. Ardell argues that black women often had to play on teams with black males, since there were few female teams. Ardell states that the women who made it to the Negro Leagues did so because of their ability, which contradicts many historians’ and journalist’s statements that they were only drawing cards.⁶¹ Despite these contributions, Ardell fails to examine Johnson’s story in the broader context of Negro League baseball or African American history. Therefore, the meaning of the essay is limited. Oral history was also central in *Barnstorming to Heaven: Syd Pollock and His Great Black Teams*, the memoirs of Alan Pollock – son of Syd Pollock, one of the most successful Negro League owners after 1947. The memoirs evolve around the Indianapolis Clowns, and a significant part is dedicated to the Clowns in the 1950s and 60s. According to

⁵⁹ Roper, “ ‘Another Chink in Jim Crow?’ ”, 87,90.

⁶⁰ Roper, “ ‘Another Chink in Jim Crow?’”, 90.

⁶¹ Ardell, “Mamie ‘Peanut’ Johnson,” 116, 123, 124.

Alan, the quality of the Clowns and their league were already in decline by 1952.⁶² Regardless, the Clowns continued to draw large crowds.⁶³ Most of Alan's memories are related to whom was on the roster in a specific year, and the challenges his father faced in putting together a competitive team. The second subject that comes up often is travelling. Alan tells how the Clowns were condemned to playing the majority of their games on the road. When the team was on the road, they experienced segregation everywhere they went. Even when Alan would step into a restaurant alone, he would be refused service because he travelled with a black baseball club, disregarding the fact that Alan was white.⁶⁴ The Clowns often tried to negotiate segregation rather than resist it. *Barnstorming to Heaven* is the first monograph that deals extensively with Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson. However, it deals mostly with what happened in games and who were on the roster. Although its contribution to the understanding of American society in the 1950s and 60s-and the role of black baseball in it-is therefore limited, it shows potential in its use of memoirs as a source for Negro League baseball in the 1950s and 60s and moves away from African American newspapers as source material.

In the 21st century, the role of the black press in the rise and demise of the Negro Leagues has received plenty of scrutiny from scholars. In *When to Stop the Cheering? The Black Press, the Black Community, and the Integration of Professional Baseball*, Brian Carroll asserts that in the years leading up to the integration of the Major Leagues the black sports press' primary objective was to make Negro League baseball a lasting institution. However, when Jackie Robinson made his debut in the Major Leagues, their coverage was almost exclusively aimed at making Jackie Robinson a success. After all the stories about Jackie Robinson, there was no more room for coverage of the Negro Leagues. In this way, the black press contributed to the

⁶² Alan J. Pollock and James A. Riley, *Barnstorming to Heaven: Syd Pollock and His Great Black Teams* (University of Alabama Press, 2006), 224.

⁶³ Pollock and Riley, *Barnstorming to Heaven*, 242.

⁶⁴ Pollock and Riley, *Barnstorming to Heaven*, 352.

demise of the Negro Leagues. According to Carroll, the integration of the Major Leagues did not exclusively mean progress, “As members of an integrated baseball scene, black ball players had to play by someone else’s rules and always as a minority.”⁶⁵ The demise of the Negro Leagues meant that blacks got fewer opportunities to play a part in professional baseball, especially off the field. In 2012, Chris Lamb further examined the role of the press in the integration of baseball. Lamb examines the role of the white press in the desegregation of baseball and concludes that they did their best to prevent the integration of the Major Leagues by refusing to discuss the subject.⁶⁶ Samuel Gale asserts that there were three phases in the relationship between the black press and the Negro Leagues. During the first phase, in the 1920s and 30s, the black press collaborated with the Negro Leagues to make them successful and lasting institutions. Yet during the second phase, in the 1940s, the black press feared that Negro League owners would object to the integration of the Major Leagues out of fear for their own enterprises and met their objections with harsh criticism. The third phase, in the 1950s, was a wave of nostalgia as black institutions became obsolete in American society. Gale suggest this wave of nostalgia in the black press might stem from their own threat of becoming obsolete.⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, these works retain the focus on African American newspapers as their most important source material. However, they can offer an explanation for the lack of scholarship on black baseball after 1947.

Most of the literature on black baseball relies heavily on black newspapers as their source material and focusses on black baseball before the desegregation of the Major Leagues. The black press after 1947 focused on the successes of Jackie Robinson in the Major Leagues and had insufficient room to cover the Negro Leagues beside it. This means that the most important source material for literature on black baseball – especially in the 21st century – paid

⁶⁵ Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering?*, 4.

⁶⁶ Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence*.

⁶⁷ Gale, “A Bitter Partnership,” 1885-1903.

almost no attention to black professional baseball after 1947, which means that black newspapers are not the right choice of source material for writing about black professional baseball after 1947.

Civil Rights Literature

Several scholars on the struggle for Civil Rights argue that black advancement after watershed moments was stifled by white resistance. Carol Anderson argues that moments when black advancement seemed imminent, whites reacted by trying to halt black advancement and tried to conserve a culture and society of white dominance. She dubbed this phenomenon “white rage.”⁶⁸ Tomiko Brown-Nagin argues that African Americans were aware of the potential of violent white backlash to black advancement. This made many African Americans afraid of claiming their rights, to such an extent that they sometimes preferred gradual integration over instant implementation of Civil Rights legislation.⁶⁹ The desegregation of the Major Leagues by Jackie Robinson was seen as a breakthrough in segregation. Therefore, it is important to keep these arguments in mind. The desegregation of the Major Leagues could lead to “white rage” and if African Americans were aware that it could, this might impact how Negro League players behaved themselves, or the extent to which they dared hope for a chance in the Major Leagues.

Civil Rights scholars also argue that there is a difference between integration and desegregation. Paul Mokrzycki makes use of Gloria Powell’s research in defining the difference between integration and desegregation. “She defines desegregation as the elimination of any legalized, physical separation between races, while integration involves incorporation of disparate groups into a cohesive whole.”⁷⁰ It is important to keep in mind that integration and

⁶⁸ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, 2020 ed. (Bloomsbury 2020), 3-6.

⁶⁹ Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 112.

⁷⁰ Paul Mokrzycki refers to: Gloria Powell, *Black Monday’s Children: A Study of the Effects of School Desegregation on Self-Concepts of Southern Children* (New York, 1973). However, this monograph was not

desegregation are two different concepts. Jackie Robinson had desegregated baseball in 1947, yet he had by no means integrated it. African Americans were not “incorporated” “into a cohesive whole” just because there was one black player in the Major Leagues. Many teams in the Major Leagues did not immediately follow the Brooklyn Dodgers in desegregating their ballclubs; the Boston Red Sox would take until 1959 to let a black player take the diamond in their uniform, more than twelve years after Jackie Robinson desegregated the Major Leagues. The years between Robinson and the integration of the Red Sox are the years examined in this thesis and throughout the thesis readers must keep in mind that while desegregation had occurred, integration had not. This will also be a central issue in chapter 3.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the existing body of literature on black baseball focuses primarily on black baseball before the desegregation of the Major Leagues, and recent scholarship primarily evolves around the use of the black press for source material. Scholars of black baseball in the 20th century tasked themselves with gaining recognition for the ballplayers who were the victims of a discriminatory rule blocking them from playing in the Major Leagues, and to simply uncover the economic, social, and cultural dynamics neglected by academics until the last quarter of the 20th century. Scholars like Peterson and Holway set out to prove that black ballplayers had the same skill level as those in Major League Baseball. They argued that Negro League players deserved to have their plaque honored in Cooperstown alongside Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and other baseball greats.

Although scholars in the 20th century should be credited for bringing black professional baseball into the realm of academics, and maybe even mainstream American society, they left

available through the Leiden University Library. Therefore, I quote Mokrzycki’s version of Powell’s definition: Paul Mokrzycki, “After the Stand Comes the Fall: Racial Integration and White Students Reactions at the University of Alabama, 1963-1976,” *The Alabama Review* 65, no. 4 (2012), 291.

a gap in the literature. In scholarly works published in the 20th century, there is a universal neglect of black baseball after Jackie Robinson desegregated the Major Leagues. Many of the works focus on the heyday of black professional baseball in the 1920s and 1930s, and when the period after 1947 is discussed, it is only briefly and in general terms of decline.

Unfortunately, scholars in the 21st century did little to address this gap, partly because scholars in the 21st century relied on one body of source material: African American newspapers. Scholars who addressed the relation between the black press and the Negro Leagues have pointed out that their primary aim was to report on the successes of Jackie Robinson in the Major Leagues, which meant that there was no room left to keep up their coverage of the Negro Leagues. Thus, the reliance of scholars in the 21st century on African American newspapers can explain why they have failed to address the gap in scholarship left by 20th century scholars. The aim of this thesis is to address this gap. By making use of interviews rather than African American newspapers as source material, it will uncover the story of black baseball after Jackie Robinson made his debut in the Major Leagues.

Chapter 2: The Enduring Popularity of Negro League Baseball

In April 1954, 15,000 people gathered in Blues Stadium in Kansas City for the Negro American League season opener, with the Kansas City Monarchs facing off against the Birmingham Black Barons.⁷¹ Six hundred miles to the east, the Major League series between the Cincinnati Redlegs and the visiting St. Louis Cardinals in Cincinnati averaged an attendance of about 12,500.⁷² Interestingly, a Negro League game could still outdraw the Major Leagues halfway through the 1950s. The general consensus among historians of black baseball is that the signing of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn Dodgers meant the end of Negro League baseball and a steady decline began almost instantly. Neil Lanctot states that “the incremental social and economic advances of recent years, culminating in Jackie Robinson’s highly publicized breakthrough in 1947, had led many blacks to reconsider the necessity, desirability, and ultimate purpose of separate institutions, including black professional baseball.”⁷³ However, the fact that Negro League regular season games could still draw crowds of 15,000 – and in doing so outdraw Major League regular season games – indicates that the decline of the Negro League was not as immediate and devastating as is generally thought.

The relationship between the African American community and the Negro Leagues after Jackie Robinson is examined in this chapter. It argues that the Negro Leagues continued to be an important institution in the African American community well into the 1950s. The first argument is that attendance numbers stayed high during this period, especially in cities and towns in the West.⁷⁴ The second argument is that Negro League players continued to be

⁷¹ “Interview Henry Bow Mason (2001),” 29:30, <https://oralhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>.

⁷² “Redlegs Crush Cards,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1954, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1954/04/21/issue.html>; “Redlegs Protest Cards’ 4-2 Victory,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1954, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1954/04/22/issue.html>.

⁷³ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 320.

⁷⁴ It must be noted that these attendance numbers come from interviews with people who were at the game decades before they were interviewed, so when someone estimates the attendance at 15,000 it might deviate somewhat from the actual number. Yet, these are the most reliable sources available on Negro League baseball for this period, since African American newspapers had shifted their attention to Jackie Robinson. Thus, the numbers named in interviews will be assumed to be correct.

connected to the black community. This indicates that they were still well liked, and that the African American community still very much wanted to associate with Negro League players, and in fact had not completely shifted their attention to the Major Leagues. As such, this chapter will contribute to a better understanding of Negro League baseball, because it will contest the general consensus among historians that the demise of the Negro Leagues set in fast and hard after Jackie Robinson was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers, while in fact, the Negro Leagues continued to be an important institution in the African American community for many more years. It will also extend the relevant period for research on the Negro Leagues, since if Negro League baseball still was an important institution in the 1950s this decade should receive the same scrutiny from scholars as the preceding decades.

Attendance

The common narrative of Negro League baseball after 1947 is one of decline, with an emphasis on the loss of interest by the African American population in Negro League baseball. Historians often emphasize that the African American community had lost interest in the Negro Leagues, instead focusing on the few black ballplayers that made it into the Major Leagues. Leslie Heaphy asserts that “when Jackie Robinson broke the barrier the [Negro] leagues did not immediately disappear but continued to operate through the 1960 season before owners decided they were losing too much money. Spectator interest also had long since turned to the Majors and Minors.”⁷⁵ Neil Lanctot agrees with Heaphy, stating “the majority of fans had abandoned black baseball by the early 1950s.”⁷⁶ Yet the available evidence reveals a surprisingly different picture. Negro League baseball could still draw considerable crowds, sometimes even larger than crowds in the Major Leagues.

One of the clubs that continued to draw large crowds was the Kansas City Monarchs.

⁷⁵ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 225.

⁷⁶ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 363.

Operating as early as 1902, the Monarchs grew into one of the largest institutions in black baseball under the ownership of J.L. Wilkinson and became a team that had a strong relationship with the African American community in Kansas City. At its height, the Monarchs had a booster club of over 200 members supporting the team.⁷⁷ The prominent place of the Monarchs was further solidified in 1950 when they played on the road against the New York Cubans in the first Negro League game to be broadcasted on television.⁷⁸

The Kansas City Monarchs had built a strong relationship with the African American community and this relationship would prove to last into the 1950s. Several former Negro League players remember that their games continued to draw large crowds well into the 1950s. Carl Long was an outfielder for the Birmingham Black Barons in 1953, and although no records were kept for his season, his outstanding performances that year would earn him the chance to be a part of the Pittsburgh Pirates organization. Long started in the outfield for the Black Barons on Opening Day against the Kansas City Monarchs in 1953. According to Long, a very large crowd had gathered to watch the start of a new Negro League season: “52,000 people was in the park in Kansas City, Missouri. We played ‘em on Opening Day. I’d never seen so many at one time in all my life in one place.”⁷⁹ While the exact number of spectators is unknown, Long’s comments indicate that there were still tens of thousands of baseball fans who wanted to see Negro League baseball in 1953. Long later played in both the Mexican League, and in the Minor League circuit for the Pittsburgh Pirates, and his comment “I’d never seen so many at one time in all my life in one place” certainly indicates that Negro League baseball was more popular with baseball fans than the other leagues he played in.⁸⁰ On Opening Day 1954, the crowd seems to have shrunk to 15,000.⁸¹ However, this crowd was still larger than the crowds of some

⁷⁷ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 33.

⁷⁸ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 216.

⁷⁹ Brent Kelley, “Carl Long,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 304.

⁸⁰ Kelley, “Carl Long,” 308.

⁸¹ “Interview Henry Bow Mason (2001),” 29:30, <https://oralhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>.

Major League clubs during the same time, revealing that the Kansas City Monarchs were still an important institution halfway through the 1950s as more people came to see them play a Negro League game against the Birmingham Black Barons, than came to see regular season Major League games.

Like the Monarchs, the Birmingham Black Barons – one of the most southern Negro League teams – continued to draw considerable crowds well into the 1950s.⁸² The Black Barons had played a pivotal role in the organization of the Negro Southern League in 1920, and later became an integral part of the first Negro National League. The Black Barons would go on to win two Negro American League titles and one Negro League World Series.⁸³ The Birmingham franchise had thus established themselves as an important part of Negro League baseball, much like the Kansas City Monarchs. Jesse Mitchell had started playing with the Birmingham Barons in 1954 after being traded there from the Louisville Clippers.⁸⁴ His tenure in Birmingham would be very successful, earning him four consecutive All Star Game selections between 1955 and 1959.⁸⁵ Mitchell fondly recalled his days playing for the Black Barons, remembering that they “had some good crowds there.”⁸⁶ He estimated that these crowds were close to 15,000 people, and that they also had white people joining the African American community to come see them play.⁸⁷ The number of 15,000 does not come close to what Carl Long remembered from his playing days with the Kansas City Monarchs, but 15,000 people is still a very large number considering that Birmingham only had a black population of around 130,000 in the 1950s.⁸⁸ Raymond Haggins became a teammate of Mitchell on the Black Barons from 1955 to 1958 after

⁸² I will continue to use Black Barons to refer to this team, since there was also a Minor League team called the Birmingham Barons operating out of Birmingham during the same years.

⁸³ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 42, 50, 215.

⁸⁴ Jesse Mitchell, “Jesse Mitchell interview,” interview by Ben Cook, June 16, 1995, Oral Histories, Birmingham Public Library, 0:50, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/12>.

⁸⁵ “Jesse Mitchell,” Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/history/players/mitchelljj.html>.

⁸⁶ “Jesse Mitchell interview,” 3:45, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/12>.

⁸⁷ “Jesse Mitchell interview,” 3:00, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/12>.

⁸⁸ “Government Documents: Birmingham Population by Race,” Birmingham Public Library, revised October 3, 2016, <http://www.bplonline.org/resources/government/birminghampopulation.aspx>.

joining them from the Memphis Red Sox.⁸⁹ He too remembered having “good attendances” in Birmingham.⁹⁰ Louis Gillis played in the Negro Leagues as a catcher for the Atlanta Black Crackers and the Black Barons.⁹¹ He also remembered crowds flooding Rickwood Field, the home of the Black Barons. Although Gillis did not estimate the size of the crowds, he described them the same way Mitchell did, “so many people around the ballpark, all the around the fence.”⁹² The Black Barons are thus another example of a Negro League ballclub that continued to draw large crowds, and thus stayed relevant for the African American community well into the 1950s.

Negro League teams also attracted large numbers of fans when they were barnstorming. In the first half of the 1950s, Gordon Hopkins played for the Indianapolis Clowns, primarily a barnstorming club, until he was drafted into the military in 1954. Hopkins remembered that the Clowns drew spectators in the tens of thousands: “we were drawing something like, sometimes 30 – 40,000 people, to the stands.”⁹³ Henry Mason was a regular Opening Day starting pitcher for the Kansas City Monarchs. In 1952, he threw 16 innings(!) for a 3-2 victory over the Philadelphia Stars.⁹⁴ Mason remembered: “we were playing at Yankee Stadium, were playing the Indianapolis Clowns. We had 35,000 people in the ballpark to watch black ballplayers, and over at Ebbets Field, in Brooklyn, a Big League ballclub, a Major League ballclub, only had 15,000.”⁹⁵ Considering Mason played for the Monarchs between 1951 and 54, the game must

⁸⁹ Raymond Haggins, “Raymond Haggins interview,” interview by Ben Cook, June 28, 1995, Oral Histories, Birmingham Public Library, 1:40, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/18>.

⁹⁰ “Raymond Haggins interview,” 2:15, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/18>.

⁹¹ “Louis Gillis,” Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/history/players/gillis.html>.

⁹² Louis Gillis, “Louis Gillis interview,” interview by Ben Cook, June 28, 1995, Oral Histories, Birmingham Public Library, 11:35, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/15>.

⁹³ “Interview with Gordon D. Hopkins,” page 12, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F005_Hopkins_Gordon.pdf.

⁹⁴ “Henry Mason,” Negro League Baseball Museum, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://nlbemuseum.com/history/players/mason.html>.

⁹⁵ Unfortunately, these numbers are difficult to check with other sources. Newspapers – both black and white – had lost interest in the Negro Leagues. The few articles dedicated to the Negro Leagues very rarely mention attendances. The ones that do mention attendance often estimate crowds close – and just over – to 10,000. However, they are so few that it is likely that there were games that drew larger crowds, especially if the mission

have been during this period. That the Monarchs and the Clowns outdrew the Brooklyn Dodgers – who played at Ebbets Field – makes it even more remarkable. After all, Jackie Robinson had joined the Dodgers in 1947, and the Dodgers appeared in five World Series between 1949 and 1956.⁹⁶ Thus, the African American community continued to watch Negro League baseball, even when it had to compete with the Brooklyn Dodgers and Jackie Robinson.

Although many Negro League players remembered high attendance numbers continuing well into the 1950s, not everyone did. George Jefferson remembered crowds growing considerably smaller after the desegregation of the Major Leagues.⁹⁷ However, this point relates more to a reorganization in Negro League baseball than to the decline of Negro League baseball. Jim Robinson explains that by in the early 1950s, Negro League teams primarily existed in the West, and had left the East where the leagues of the 1930s and 1940s had been.⁹⁸ It is difficult to find an explanation for this occurrence. Maybe the Eastern teams were in fact made irrelevant by the desegregation of the Major Leagues, or maybe there is another explanation. On the other hand, Henry Mason remembered outdrawing the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1950s, so interest in the Negro Leagues did not disappear in the 1950s.

Well into the 1950s, Negro League games could still attract tens of thousands of fans, indicating that the relevance of Negro League baseball did not rapidly diminish after the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson as many historians have asserted. Both the Kansas City Monarchs and the Birmingham Black Barons continued to have strong support from the African American communities in their hometowns, which was reflected in the high attendance numbers. Even a travelling club like the Indianapolis Clowns could still draw crowds of 30,000

of the black press had become to legitimate the desegregation of Major League Baseball. “Interview Henry Bow Mason,” 16:20, <https://oralhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>.

⁹⁶ “Postseason History: World Series,” MLB, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.mlb.com/postseason/history/world-series>.

⁹⁷ “Interview with George L. Jefferson, May 23, 1981,” 43:40, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7pnv997v43>.

⁹⁸ Brent Kelley, “Jim Robinson,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 310.

people halfway through the 1950s, indicating that the continued relevance of the Negro Leagues was a nationwide occurrence, rather than in just a few cities with strong Negro League franchises. The attendance numbers of Negro League baseball show that the African American community continued to support the Negro Leagues, which in turn means that the Negro Leagues continued to be an important institution in the African American community. There is, however, more to the story of the position of the Negro Leagues in the African American community than just attendance numbers. Next, the relationship between those involved in the Negro Leagues and the African American community will be examined.

Community interest

Historians agree that Negro League baseball was important in creating a sense of community, both in their hometowns and the towns they visited on the road. In their hometowns, Negro League clubs provided the African American community with a focal point, where African Americans who were born and raised in different ways and places could come together in support of their favorite ballclub and their baseball idols.⁹⁹ When Negro League teams were travelling, accommodations were often unavailable due to segregation. In big cities with an African American neighborhood they could often find a hotel to stay in, but in smaller towns or in the Deep South, this was often not the case. The Negro League teams and players had to rely on the African American community for sleeping arrangements and food, which helped solidify the relationship between Negro League baseball and the African American community.¹⁰⁰ It is necessary to assess the extent to which this relationship between Negro League baseball and the African American community remained intact after the desegregation of the Major Leagues. If the current consensus of a swift demise of the Negro Leagues is correct,

⁹⁹ Rob Ruck, "Baseball and Community: From Pittsburgh's Hill to San Pedro's Canefields," in *Out of the Shadows: African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson*, ed. Bill Kirwin (University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 77.

and African Americans really followed black newspapers in their focus on Jackie Robinson in the Majors, the relationship between the Negro Leagues and the African American community probably deteriorated as a result. As we have seen, the African American community kept supporting Negro League baseball in large numbers, as is reflected in the large crowds that were still drawn to Negro League baseball. Now, it will be determined whether the position of Negro League baseball within the African American community remained strong as well. One of the things that could tell more about this relationship is the extent to which Negro League players were invited to dinner parties and other events by the members of the black community. Another is whether or not Negro League baseball still had to rely on – and in fact was able to rely on – the African American community for sleeping arrangements when they travelled.

If invitations to dinner parties and other events are any indication, the relationship between Negro League baseball and the African American community did not suffer after the desegregation of the Major Leagues. Hubert Simmons played for the Baltimore Elite Giants in 1950, and he spoke of a strong relationship between the Elite Giants and Baltimore:

Well Baltimore loved the Elite Giants. They were quite a group and everywhere you would go somebody would know you and somebody would invite you to dinner. Somebody would invite you for a beer or whatever. Sometimes we would go to clubs and we would see people and they would remember and a lot of them went to the ball games, had no problem getting fans to the ball games. And even now we have people remembering the good old days when they had the Elite Giants here, good relationship with the community and the team.¹⁰¹

Simmons thus remembered the relationship between Negro League baseball and the African American community in Baltimore remained strong, even after the desegregation of the Major Leagues. Simmons even states that the relationship between Negro League baseball and the African American community remained strong, despite the Elite Giants folding after the 1951 season. This indicates that the relationship was in fact stronger than many historians have led

¹⁰¹ Hubert V. Simmons, "Interview with Hubert V. Simmons, 1998 December 12," interview by (first name unknown) Lutz, December 12, 1998, Oral History Collection, University of Baltimore, page 13, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F007_Simmons_Hubert.pdf.

us to believe, since Negro League baseball is still remembered despite Negro League baseball in Baltimore having ended more than 40 years before Simmons' interview. Gordon Hopkins remembered the same interest from the African American community. He even talked about getting advice on what to do with invitations because they were getting so many, "so many invites out there, that you don't want to be takin' on too many invites, because they are gonna be out there."¹⁰² Hopkins played between 1952 and 1954, so the relationship between Negro League baseball remained strong until at least halfway through the 1950s. As these interviews indicate, invitations for Negro League players from the African American community kept rolling in at least until halfway through the 1950s, showing that the relationship between the Negro Leagues and the African American community remained strong.

Negro League teams also kept relying on the African American community for sleeping arrangements when travelling. Scholars have argued that homestays were one of the aspects of life on the road that helped solidify the position of the Negro Leagues in the black community.¹⁰³ Proving that these homestays were still an aspect of Negro League baseball in the 1950s is, therefore, an argument that the black community still supported Negro League baseball. Mamie Johnson, one of three women to play in the Negro Leagues remembered travel conditions: "When we did get up to nice towns that had nice hotel[s] we stayed in them, bu[t] it was still a segregated thing." Later Johnson specified: "The fellows would stay mostly in the dingy hotels or whatever, but we stayed in people's home where it was very nice."¹⁰⁴ Johnson remembered that she and the other women on the team always stayed in homes provided by the African American community, but the men on the team mostly stayed in hotels. This could mean that the relationship between the Negro Leagues and the African American community

¹⁰² "Interview with Gordon D. Hopkins, 1998 December 7," page 14, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F005_Hopkins_Gordon.pdf.

¹⁰³ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Mamie Johnson Goodman, "Interview with Mamie Johnson Goodman, 1998 November 28," interview by Reba Cottingham, November 28, 1998, Oral History Collection, University of Baltimore, page 4 http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F003_Goodman_Mamie.pdf.

did indeed cool down. However, many of the male Negro Leaguers that played in the 1950s also have memories of staying in homes rather than hotels. Ernest Burke remembered that a lot of the larger cities and towns that had African American hotels where the Negro League owners would reserve rooms for the team. Yet when they had to play in the Deep South, or in smaller rural towns, the owners arranged for them to be put up in houses in the African American community. For some of the people who made available their homes for Negro League players it did not matter what team came to town, they accommodated everyone.¹⁰⁵ Lefty pitcher William Bell Jr. played with the Monarchs during the first half of the 1950s and also remembered staying with families when the team was travelling. He remembered northern cities like Detroit and Chicago having black hotels where they could stay. But during his years in the Negro Leagues, they still slept at black families' homes when there was no possibility of sleeping in a hotel.¹⁰⁶

The relationship between the Negro Leagues and the African American community thus remained strong in the 1950s. Negro League players still were important figures in the African American community, indicated by the fact that they were often invited to dinner parties and other events by members of the African American community. Negro League players were still invited to so many events in the 1950s that they had to be mentored by older teammates on how to deal with these invitations. The position of Negro League baseball thus did not change during the 1950s, and it remained an important institution within the African American community.

When on the road, Negro League teams continued to make use of homes of African American families for sleeping arrangements, indicating that their relationship remained strong as ever. In some cases, the Negro League ballclubs stayed in hotels when they were on the road.

¹⁰⁵ Ernest Burke, "Interview with Ernest Burke, 1998 November 24," interview by Steve Buckman, November 24, 1998, Oral History Collection, University of Baltimore, page 5, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F001_Burke_Ernest.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ "William Bell Talks About Hardships of Life in the Road," <https://nlbemuseum.com/nlbemuseum/mov/belltravel.mov>.

However, this was only possible in the larger towns and cities with a large African American population. Cities like New York, Detroit, Chicago had black hotels where African Americans visiting the city could stay. Still, a large part of the country did not offer hotels for African Americans. They offered sleeping accommodations for whites only, in line with the Jim Crowism that still remained strong throughout the United States in the 1950s. Negro League ballplayers had to rely on support from the African American community when visiting such places, or else they would have to sleep on the bus. The team owners often arranged for them to stay in families' homes. This was something that happened throughout Negro League history and strengthened the relationship between the Negro Leagues and the African American community all over the country. The interviews discussed in this chapter make clear that this bond remained strong well into the 1950s, refuting historians that concluded that the desegregation of the Major Leagues resulted in an instant demise of the Negro Leagues and its position in the African American community.

Conclusion

Historians of African American baseball have mostly paid scarce attention to Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson integrated baseball in 1947. They have argued that with the integration of the Major Leagues, Negro League baseball had become an obsolete enterprise, doomed to fail. Its demise was swift, and everybody that played Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson was fated to play in only a watered down version of the great Negro Leagues of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Baseball historian Neil Lanctot argues that there was only a short period of time in which Negro League baseball was really worthwhile, relegating the entire period after 1947 as "irrelevant".¹⁰⁷ There are historians that did pay some attention to Negro League baseball after 1947, however, their analysis has left little room for assessing Negro League baseball in the 1950s. Rather, they have emphasized a narrative of decline in

¹⁰⁷ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, ix.

ability and attendance for Negro League baseball after the 1940s. Leslie Heaphy is often referred to by other scholars for her analysis of black professional baseball in the 1950s. Yet, even Heaphy does not disconnect herself from the historical consensus of the Negro Leagues as ‘in decline’ after Jackie Robinson. In her analysis of Negro League baseball in the 1950s, Heaphy mainly concerns herself with roster changes, ownership deals, and describing the teams that folded and were created during the decade. While doing so, she emphasizes that they were not of the same skill level and were not as popular as the teams that existed in the decades before.¹⁰⁸

This chapter has argued that the Negro Leagues did in fact enjoy continued popularity in the 1950s, and have thereby contested the historical consensus on Negro League baseball in the 1950s. It shows that after watershed moments in integration, black businesses were not instantly forgotten, or deemed obsolete by the African American community. It has shown that Negro League teams continued to draw considerable crowds, and sometimes even outdrew Major League games that were played in the same city. Crowd sizes remembered by former Negro League players range from around 15,000 to more than 50,000 for regular season games in the Negro Leagues in the 1950s. This refutes that fans had left the Negro Leagues for the Major Leagues once Jackie Robinson made his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, as many historians have asserted. The position of Negro League players within the African American position did not change either. They kept receiving invitations from the African American community for dinners and other events, even to such an extent that the younger players had to be mentored by older players on how to deal with the amount of invitations. This indicates that the African American community kept supporting the Negro Leagues, and kept idolizing Negro League players, rather than focus all their attention on Jackie Robinson. The Negro Leagues kept relying on the African American community for sleeping arrangements when black hotels

¹⁰⁸ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 211-224.

were unavailable. Historians have asserted that this was one of the things that strengthened the relationship between the Negro Leagues and the African American community, and that it continued into the 1950s makes it likely that the relationship did not suffer from the desegregation of the Major Leagues. All these findings indicate that Negro League baseball continued to be an important institution in the African American community. The Negro League games continued to draw large crowds, the players continued to be idolized by the African American community, and the reliance of Negro League teams on the African American community for sleeping arrangements continued. These are all indications that the African American community had definitely not lost sight of the Negro Leagues in the 1950s.

Chapter 3: Changing Race-Relations

Birmingham native Donald Harris saw his dreams come true in 1957. When Black Barons outfielder Jesse Mitchell went out with an arm injury, the team recruited Harris to replace him. Harris was on the Black Barons' radar because he had played for several teams in Alabama. His performance on the field was enough to move the recovered Jesse Mitchell to left field, earning Harris a contract for the 1958 season. Harris would go on to make the all-star team during his period with the Black Barons, before being signed into the Pittsburgh Pirates organization during his second season.¹⁰⁹ One of the greatest moments of Harris' baseball career took place when he was a Black Baron, hitting a homerun over the left-field bleachers in Rickwood Field against New Orleans.¹¹⁰ Despite these positive memories, Harris also had negative experiences during his period in the Negro Leagues. When asked about travel conditions with the Black Barons, Harris replied: "Hated it, we had to sleep on the bus a lot of times. People was very cordial, but because of segregation, they would just not allow you to stay in these places, just couldn't do it."¹¹¹ These memories show a tension that continued in professional black baseball through the 1950s. On the one hand, many African American athletes still saw the Negro Leagues as important leagues to showcase their abilities. However, playing in the Negro Leagues also meant dealing with segregation in large parts of the country. This chapter will assess the way in which Negro League players dealt with segregation during the 1950s, and what their attitudes were towards the desegregation of the Major Leagues.

Negro League players came from all walks of life and travelled often. Not only did they drive hundreds of miles in between games in the United States, many of them also played in

¹⁰⁹ Donald Harris, "Donald Harris interview," interview by Ben Cook, June 28, 1995, Oral Histories, Birmingham Public Library, 1:40, 4:20,

<https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/11>.

¹¹⁰ "Donald Harris interview," 11:50, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/11>.

¹¹¹ "Donald Harris interview," 5:55, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/11>.

Latin America during the offseason.¹¹² This means that Negro League players experienced varying degrees of segregation during their playing days and were among the best travelled in the African American community. It is interesting to examine whether their experience in places with no – or hardly any – segregation impacted their views on segregation in America and the desegregation of the Major Leagues.

Recent scholars argue that the integration of the Major Leagues led to more opportunities for professional black baseball players. Neil Lanctot, for example, argues that integration led to better opportunities for players, but that managerial and front office opportunities declined since those positions were dominated by whites.¹¹³ However, interviews with former Negro League players indicate that they were not all in agreement with Lanctot's claim. Many felt that the integration of the Major Leagues moved at a sluggish pace, and many talented African American ballplayers still did not get a fair opportunity in organized baseball. This suggests that support for the integration of the Major Leagues might not have been as high as is commonly believed.

Two arguments are made in this chapter. The first argument is that Negro League players tried to avoid putting themselves in a position where they would have to endure segregation, rather than resist it. Many former Negro League players mention that they believed fighting segregation was not worth it. Instead, they would try to avoid situations in which they would feel the consequences of segregation. The second argument is that Negro League players were ambivalent about the integration of the Major Leagues. Although many black baseball players applauded the desegregation of the Major Leagues, not all of them did. Some felt that Jackie Robinson was the wrong person to integrate the Major Leagues, and that someone else should have gotten the honor, while others felt that the desegregation of the Major Leagues hurt African American baseball more than it helped. The most common argument is that the

¹¹² Don Roper, "Reviewed Work: *Invisible Men*," 113-115.

¹¹³ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 393-394.

desegregation of the Major Leagues eventually led to hundreds of African American ballplayers losing their jobs, because only a fraction of them could play in the integrated Major Leagues. As such, this chapter will contribute to better understanding of attitudes of Negro League players towards race-relations in the 1950s. This chapter also gives a voice to Negro League players and offers new insight into how they experienced the final decade of professional black baseball.

Segregation

The 1950s were significant years for the advancement of civil rights. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ended the ‘Separate but Equal’ doctrine implemented by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896. While the NAACP argued for swift and uncompromised integration, many African Americans were afraid to claim their rights. Tomiko Brown-Nagin argues that many African Americans preferred gradual integration. Brown-Nagin explains that “Without a doubt, white resistance influenced blacks’ ‘preference’ for gradualism in many cases and many places.”¹¹⁴ This concept of white resistance to black advancement is further developed by Carol Anderson. Anderson argues that whenever black advancement seemed imminent, white Americans reacted with fierce opposition. Whites were determined to curtail and rollback the possible advancements of African Americans.¹¹⁵ During the 1950s, African Americans, therefore, had to be careful when dealing with segregation. Challenging it could lead to serious retaliation by white Americans who were afraid to lose the privileges.

Negro League players often expressed that they tried to avoid putting themselves in a position where they would be affected by segregation during their playing days. Mamie Johnson was one of three women to play in the Negro Leagues, and the only female pitcher to make it to that level. In her three seasons for the Indianapolis Clowns, she won more than 10 games

¹¹⁴ Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 112.

¹¹⁵ Anderson, *White Rage*, 3-6.

each season, and never lost more than 4 games. Johnson was not just an above average pitcher, she also batted between a very respectable .262 and .284 during her period in the Negro Leagues.¹¹⁶ Johnson remembered, “we knew it[segregation] was there, so it really didn’t bother us because we knew it was there and we knew that we wasn’t wanted so why put yourself in a position where you’re not wanted so it didn’t bother us at all.”¹¹⁷ Johnson further explains that her team was not affected by the Civil Rights Movement, exactly because they did not challenge segregation; “like I said before we knew segregation was there and we didn’t put ourselves in a position for it to affect us, because if I know that you don’t want me at your house or whatever then I am not going to come there.”¹¹⁸ Johnson’s memories tell us that her team tried to avoid segregation. Her last memory, stating that she will not go somewhere she is not wanted shows some knowledge of segregation, and also an awareness that she would not risk challenging segregation because it could lead to repercussions. Johnson remembered not really being ‘bothered’ by segregation. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that she was born in South Carolina and had developed a sensibility on how to avoid segregation, therefore, she might have an easier time doing so than teammates who did not share her experience.

Johnson’s relatively tepid attitude towards segregation was shared by other Negro League players who had grown up in the South. Eddie Reed was an outfielder for the Memphis Red Sox who grew up in Alabama. Reed thought back about conditions in his playing days, and his memories were along the line of Johnson’s; “Oh, to me it wasn’t bad where we stayed, but it was no king’s place.”¹¹⁹ Reed is thus another example of a Southern born ballplayer who was relatively positive about his experiences on the road. Baltimore Elite Giant second baseman

¹¹⁶ “Interview with Mamie Johnson Goodman, 1998 November 28,” page iii,

http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F003_Goodman_Mamie.pdf.

¹¹⁷ “Interview with Mamie Johnson Goodman, 1998 November 28,” page 3,

http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F003_Goodman_Mamie.pdf.

¹¹⁸ “Interview with Mamie Johnson Goodman, 1998 November 28,” page 5

http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F003_Goodman_Mamie.pdf.

¹¹⁹ Brent Kelley, “Eddie Reed”, in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 322.

Hubert Simmons grew up in North Carolina and remembered growing up in a town where segregation was very strict; “In fact in my hometown it was so segregated you couldn’t play on the playground with the white people,” Simmons continued, “they built the skatin’ ring in the middle of the playground for the white kids, but at night I would go out and skate, skate as much as I want to at night. Lights came, cars came, I stop go hide.”¹²⁰ Simmons – like Johnson – had experience with segregation and had grown up learning not to challenge it in public: he defied segregation by going skating, but only when he was absolutely sure no one would see him. Therefore, knowing his defiance would not have consequences. Fear of repercussions held him back from openly challenging segregation. Simmons recalled travel conditions as being “alright”, stating that “some of the places we had had to stay were not the best places you would want to stay in, but they did what they could.”¹²¹ This indicates that Simmons’ experience with segregation prepared him for travelling across segregated regions. Off course, not all Southern born Negro League players shared this attitude towards segregation. Donald Harris’ experience is narrated in the introduction of this chapter. He was born and raised in Birmingham, yet he still said he “hated” travel conditions. The tepid attitude towards segregated facilities was, therefore, not a universal attitude shared by all Southern born players. However, it is shared by enough Southern born Negro Leaguers that it is worth mentioning that a vast amount of Southern born players had different experiences than those born in Northern states or Latin America.

Former players that did not have the same experience growing up had worse memories of the segregation they had to endure. Ernest Burke had played for the Elite Giants a few years before Simmons. However, Burke was born in Perryville, Maryland, close to the Delaware border. He remembered his family being the only black family in his hometown, but his

¹²⁰ “Interview with Hubert V. Simmons, 1998 December 12,” page 2, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F007_Simmons_Hubert.pdf.

¹²¹ “Interview with Hubert V. Simmons, 1998 December 12,” page 12, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F007_Simmons_Hubert.pdf.

recreational activities were not segregated like those of Johnson or Simmons; “We rolled a rim or a tire, and ah that was the only ah, any athletics that I have done, and all the rest of them in my neighborhood. I was the only black that lived in Perryville, Maryland, my family and a that’s the only recreation white or black had.”¹²² Despite being the only African American family in an otherwise white town, Burke had access to the same recreational activities as the white families. Consequently, Burke did not have the same level of experience with segregation as his Southern born teammates. This becomes evident when examining his recollections of travelling with the Elite Giants. Burke remembered: “there was a lot of discrimination,” and “It was bad, it was bad, it was really bad.”¹²³ Despite Burke experiencing segregation on the road differently from Southern born players, he did not react to it by challenging segregation. Rather than reacting or challenging it, Burke remembered that “you had to hold tongue.”¹²⁴ This indicates that Burke did not like segregation, but he was aware of the possible violent reaction if he openly challenged it.

While segregation was harder to adjust to for players from the North, it was even more so for players from Latin America. During the 1950s, the Negro Leagues had become something of a steppingstone for players from Latin America to get a chance at Major League ball. Although racial discrimination was prevalent in Latin America as well, it operated differently and was less violent than in the United States. Latin American players had thus grown up without the experience and knowledge of American segregation, and often did not know how to deal with it when they first came to the United States. Enrique “Ricky” Maroto was already well traveled before he arrived in America. He was born in Havana and started his professional pitching career in Cuba before making the transfer to Canada, playing for a Manitoba based

¹²² “Interview with Ernest Burke, 1998 November 24,” page 2,
http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F001_Burke_Ernest.pdf.

¹²³ “Interview with Ernest Burke, 1998 November 24,” page 3,
http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F001_Burke_Ernest.pdf.

¹²⁴ “Interview with Ernest Burke, 1998 November 24,” page 4,
http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F001_Burke_Ernest.pdf.

team. Before signing with the Kansas City Monarchs, Maroto already had experience playing professional ball in America on a Cuban travelling team.¹²⁵ Yet, despite his experiences travelling, he was not prepared for what his skin color meant in the United States. In Cuba and Canada, Maroto had not experienced discrimination, and he remembered not knowing what rules he had to follow in America; “here, I remember one time I want to go to movie; I had to wait outside and see if any black goes in, then I go and get my ticket.”¹²⁶ Maroto thus felt unable to negotiate segregation when he first came to America, and only dared to act if he had seen other blacks do what he was about to do since he knew what could happen if he disregarded segregation. Similarly, Cuban native Pedro Sierra joined the Detroit Stars in 1954 as a pitcher, and despite having an aunt who worked as a maid in the South, he had still not expected segregation to be so visible; “The problem to me was the adjustment to seeing signs at that time, ‘For Whites Only,’ I didn’t expect to see that vivid.”¹²⁷ However, unlike for his American born teammates, his experience with segregation changed when people found out where he was from; “But I guess a lot of times, funny enough, when people knew that I wasn’t a black American they talked to me differently.”¹²⁸ That Cuban players could circumvent segregation because they could identify themselves as Latin American has already been established by Adrian Burgos Jr. in a study of Afro-Caribbean players in the Negro Leagues during the first half of the twentieth century. Sometimes, Cuban players could, for example, order meals in restaurants that served “Whites Only”, when they started speaking Spanish. Their language made clear to the restaurant owner that they were not African Americans despite their skin color, and thus they would be served.¹²⁹ The interview with Sierra reveals that this pattern continued into the

¹²⁵ Brent Kelley, “Enrique ‘Ricky’ Maroto,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 324.

¹²⁶ Kelley, “Maroto,” 327.

¹²⁷ Brent Kelley, “Pedro Sierra,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 343.

¹²⁸ Kelley, “Sierra,” 343.

¹²⁹ Adrian Burgos Jr., “Playing Ball in a Black and White ‘Field of Dreams’: Afro-Caribbean Ballplayers in the Negro Leagues, 1910-1950,” *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 1 (1997), 67-104.

1950s. Still, Sierra was aware that his heritage did not exempt him from discrimination completely. He remembered fear creeping in his mind when he was in bed at night, wondering about the possibility of “hangings” or the “big Klan.” Despite judging these fears as improbable, he still remembered; “you don’t put yourself in a position to create any attack.”¹³⁰ So, like his African American teammates, Sierra’s behavior was influenced by segregation, as he was very much aware that there was a threat of white attacks if he challenged it.

There were also players who believed that challenging segregation would harm their chances in the Majors. Henry Mason remembered, “you didn’t fight city hall, you had your foot in the door.”¹³¹ Mason did not want to make problems, in other words, because the Major Leagues had just opened their doors for African Americans. This shows that Mason believed integration was a step forward, but if Negro League players would make a habit of challenging segregation and race relations, this might harm their chances of acceptance in the Major Leagues.

Of course, there were also exceptions. One of these was righthand pitcher Bob Mitchell. Compiling a winning record around .500 in his seasons in the Negro Leagues, Mitchell is more remembered for his performances off the field. Mitchell recalled one time,

In my town, one day going to lunch I said I was going into this Woolworth’s and I’m going to order me a hot dog and a drink and I’m going to stand right here at the counter and eat it. *Stand*, not sit. So I ordered it and I stood right there and ate it. The woman said, ‘You can’t do that.’ I said, ‘Why not? I just bought it.’ I stood right there and ate it, drank my soda and everything.¹³²

Evidently, there were also some examples of Negro League players that did challenge segregation, however, the majority did not.

In conclusion, Negro League players were aware of the possibility of violent white

¹³⁰ Kelley, “Sierra,” 343.

¹³¹ “Interview Henry Bow Mason (2001),” 22:50, <https://oralhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>.

¹³² Brent Kelley, “Bob ‘Peachhead’ Mitchell,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 333.

backlash if they challenged segregation. Therefore, they did not challenge it, but rather, tried to act so they would not be affected by it. Negro League players' backgrounds mattered in terms of how they experienced segregation and travel conditions. Those who grew up in heavily segregated areas tended to have a milder reaction to experiencing segregation than those who grew up without those experiences. Yet how they dealt with it was strikingly similar. Most focused on baseball and tried to avoid confronting segregation. Negro League slugger Jim Robinson remembered, "At that time, I knew what to expect." He continued, "We just dealt with it. Funny thing, when you're in it, you sort of deal with it on a day-to-day basis. I guess you kind of overlook some things."¹³³ Although their reasons for not challenging segregation were not the same, they were both products of the times they were living in. Negro League players did not challenge segregation, as they believed it was not the time to do so. One reason was that they were afraid of violent white reactions, and another that they were afraid causing trouble might hurt their chance for acceptance in Major League Baseball. In general, Negro League players were just trying to get by with experiencing a minimal degree of segregation.

Still, for some players, it was just too much, and they decided leaving baseball was their best option. Eugene Scruggs decided the rising tensions emerging from civil rights protests were a reason to call it quits. Scruggs pitched for both the Detroit Stars and the Kansas City Monarchs, compiling a 7-4 winning record, before he decided it was time to look for calmer waters, "In 1958, the civil rights struggle was going on and all sorts of things were going on, including bombing of buses. We did not have anything like that happen to us; however, I did not want to be involved in any trouble."¹³⁴ Scruggs even remembered the exact incident that made him think of leaving baseball, "In the 1957 season, I was either in Birmingham or Mobile and this man was pushed or made to jump off a bridge between Montgomery and Birmingham.

¹³³ Kelley, "Robinson," 312.

¹³⁴ Brent Kelley, "Eugene 'Dick' Scruggs," in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 359.

I started thinking that I should be at home.”¹³⁵ Another example is Juan Armenteros. Born in Sagua La Grande, Cuba, Armenteros never did quite understand race relations and segregation in America, despite being a catcher for different teams over a five-year period. In the end, his experience with segregation is what made him decide to leave baseball, although by this time, he was already in the Minor Leagues, “As a matter of fact, I stopped playing because I got married in ’58 and I didn’t want her to go with me because of the situations I saw.”¹³⁶ Rather than face segregation and white rage, these players judged that their lives would be better if they would not be exposed to the segregation and discrimination that Negro League players often experienced.

Integration

Among historians of black baseball, it is generally asserted that despite Jackie Robinson integrating Major League Baseball in 1947, ‘full integration’ was still a long way off. Neil Lanctot argues that by the “mid-1950s” organized baseball employed around the same number of African Americans as the Negro American League and the Negro National League had in the 1940s. Employment in organized baseball supposedly brought better opportunities and the chance to get called up to the Major Leagues.¹³⁷ However, this view was not shared by Negro League players in the 1950s. Therefore, it is interesting to look at whether this influenced the attitudes of Negro League players towards integration. There are two sides to integration that will be examined here. First is the attitude of Negro League players towards Jackie Robinson. Second, is the extent to which Negro League players felt that integration was widespread, and the extent to which they felt that they were given a fair shot at organized baseball.

Although there was some discontent about Jackie Robinson being the one to break the

¹³⁵ Kelley, “Scruggs,” 359.

¹³⁶ Brent Kelley, “Juan Armenteros,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 215.

¹³⁷ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 393-394

color barrier in 1947, this had disappeared in the 1950s. Henry Mason believed that Jackie was “the right person at the right time. Those other guys could not have withheld their tempers. If Jackie had messed up, there wouldn’t be any black player right now in the Major League.”¹³⁸ Mason thus believed that Jackie was the right man, implying that he may not have been the best player, but because his experience in the Army, and playing integrated football in UCLA, Jackie was the right man. The idea that Jackie Robinson was the right man because of his mindset and experience off the field was widely shared by Negro League players during the 1950s. Simmons remembered,

I felt it[Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier] was good thing for anybody, for Robinson, for any other ball player, but my feelings was that there was a lot of players that didn’t like that. They felt that somebody else should have been first. Robinson, as I said, was perfect for the job and then he acquired a lot of skills while he was in the farm club, carried himself the way he should have. There wasn’t any fights and they called him names, but they picked the right man for what he did he was picked because he had the experience and he had participated in sports that required multi-race players.¹³⁹

Most Negro League players of the 1950s thus believed Robinson had been the right person to integrate professional baseball. They still did not believe that he was the best player, which is what led to opposition among Negro League players towards Jackie Robinson in 1947. Yet, by now they believed that he had been the right choice, because of his experience playing integrated sports in college and being a lieutenant in the Army. Of course, halfway through the 1950s, Robinson had amassed a number of baseball accolades – 1947 Rookie of the Year, and 1949 National League MVP, among others – so it was hard to deny his suitability as integrator of the Major Leagues.¹⁴⁰ This makes it all the more interesting that Robinson was primarily praised for his mindset and behavior, while most of the opposition from Negro League players

¹³⁸ “Interview Henry Bow Mason (2001),” 49:05, <https://oralhistory.sabr.org/interviews/mason-henry-bow-2001/>.

¹³⁹ “Interview with Hubert V. Simmons, 1998 December 12,” page 13, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F007_Simmons_Hubert.pdf.

¹⁴⁰ David Naze, *Reclaiming 42: Public Memory and the Reframing of Jackie Robinson’s Radical Legacy* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 116.

in 1947 came from believing he was not the best player.

The opposition towards Robinson had ebbed in the Negro Leagues by the 1950s, however, many Negro League players were still ambiguous about the desegregation of organized baseball. Many believed that integration actually cost many African American athletes, managers, and front office personnel their jobs. Ernest Burke remembered, “a phrase was made, ah when Jackie Robinson broke the, color barrier, says it was a damn shame for five hundred or, or eight hundred people to lose their job over one man.”¹⁴¹ Therefore, Burke’s memory of the desegregation of the Major Leagues was not positive. In Burke’s memory, the desegregation of baseball cost African Americans more than it provided. The statement that hundreds of African Americans lost their jobs because of one man is not true, of course; Jackie Robinson was joined by other African Americans in the Major Leagues. However, it is correct in the sense that most African Americans did not get a fair chance in organized baseball, and therefore, desegregation came at a high cost to African Americans.

Many former players also remembered that equal opportunities for African Americans in Major League organizations were still a long way off. Neal Henderson, who played in the outfield for Kansas City from 1949 to 1953, remembered most guys signed by Major League organizations never got called up, regardless of how good they were: “A lot of us, if they’d have give us a chance, we could’ve maybe been a Willie Mays or a Jackie Robinson or anybody, but they just swept us under the carpet and forgot about us.”¹⁴² Henderson’s memory thus shows that many African Americans were still not getting a fair chance, at least until Henderson stopped playing in 1953. His statements were repeated by later Negro Leagues players. Black Baron outfielder Jesse Mitchell illustrated that full integration and equal opportunities were still a long way off with a personal experience, “I had all the tools[to make it to the Majors],”

¹⁴¹ “Interview with Ernest Burke, 1998 November 24,” page 6, http://archives.ubalt.edu/nloh/pdfs/R0089_NLOH_B01_F001_Burke_Ernest.pdf.

¹⁴² Brent Kelley, “Neal ‘Bobo’ Henderson,” in *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 263.

Mitchell continued, “even the manager was [inaudible], but like he said, it was the front office that didn’t had everything to do with it.”¹⁴³ Mitchell’s skills were good enough to get him to the Majors, as confirmed by his manager. Yet, he was held back by the front office, meaning that African Americans still did not get the same chances as Caucasians. The role of the Negro Leagues was thus not yet irrelevant for many professional black baseball players. Benjamin Givens shared Mitchell’s memory of unequal opportunity, “We had a lot of good players that, I feel like, should have went up, should have got signed, but they didn’t. [...] Back then, there was a lot of talent that didn’t get the chance to go anywhere.”¹⁴⁴ Givens and Mitchell both played for the Birmingham Black Barons in the late 1950s, and their memories tell us that black ballplayers still did not get the same opportunities by then.

In conclusion, Negro League players were ambivalent about the desegregation of baseball all through the 1950s. Their opposition towards Jackie Robinson had disappeared, since many Negro League players from the 1950s praised Robinson for his mindset and behavior off the field. However, many Negro League players also remembered having a negative attitude towards integration. Some felt like the desegregation of baseball was costing the African American population more than they gained by desegregation. In fact, David Ogden argues that the demise of the Negro Leagues turned away African Americans from baseball as a whole.¹⁴⁵ Many more remembered that although a lucky few got the chance to make it to the Majors, many more were still held back by unequal treatment. Gerald Early asserts that the Negro Leagues had become a “black cultural and commercial venture,” and that “by demonstrating the nationalistic urge of blacks to act independently of whites [...] became ends

¹⁴³ “Jesse Mitchell interview,” 13:55, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/12>.

¹⁴⁴ Benjamin Givens, “Benjamin Givens interview,” interview by Ben Cook, July 7, 1995, Oral Histories, Birmingham Public Library, 12:00, <https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/13>.

¹⁴⁵ David C. Ogden, “Baseball and Blacks: A Loss of Affinity, a Loss of Community,” in *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond*, ed. Frank Hoffmann, Edward J. Rielly and Martin J. Manning (Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 82-83.

in themselves, taking on a compelling racial mission.”¹⁴⁶ Early further argues that “owners” of “black businesses” often “opposed integration,” and that Negro League owners did in fact oppose integration.¹⁴⁷ Neil Lanctot argues that “more critical view of integration emerged by late 1960s.”¹⁴⁸ This research shows that the critical view has existed all through the 1950s, and that it did exist among players as well as owners.

Conclusion

When Jackie Robinson desegregated Major League Baseball, segregation in sports and American Society as a whole did not simply disappear. It would take decades of civil rights activism to improve the lives of many African Americans, and even with de jure segregation being ruled illegal, de facto segregation continued for many years. Thus, Negro League players still had to endure the hardships of segregation and discrimination when participating in Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson. The extent to which they were shocked by – or even understood – segregation depended on their experiences growing up. In general, Southern players were more equipped and less taken aback by segregation than Northern players, while Latin American players often found themselves unable to judge what rules their skin color bound them to in American society. Latin American players could exempt themselves from some of these rules by making clear that they were Latin American, rather than African American. However, how all these players dealt with segregation is remarkably similar. Rather than put themselves in a position where they would be affected by segregation, and rather than challenging segregation, they tried to avoid drawing attention or getting themselves into delicate situations. This does not mean that Negro League players did not mind segregation – they did – but they felt that they were living in a time where they could do nothing about the

¹⁴⁶ Gerald Early, *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 174.

¹⁴⁷ Early, *A Level Playing Field*, 178.

¹⁴⁸ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 393.

limits that were imposed on African Americans. Many Negro League players felt fortunate to be able to play baseball, and, therefore, were unwilling to put themselves in the spotlight in a way that could negatively impact them.

These findings fit into current academic debates about racial integration. Tomiko Brown-Nagin argues that although Thurgood Marshall called for an immediate implementation of *Brown*, many in the African American community felt that moderation was the best way forward. This is apparent in the behavior of many Negro League players, who did not suddenly decide to ignore segregation after *Brown*. Their reluctance to challenge segregation was caused in large part by their fear of white reprisals if African Americans would instantly try to claim the same rights as whites. This affirms Carol Anderson's theory that whites reacted ferociously to black advancement, and this made many blacks cautious in dealing with segregation. In the case of Negro League baseball, it seems the fear of a backlash from a white institution that had just opened its doors for African Americans – albeit only very moderately – made them bite their tongue.

Another interesting finding is that the attitude in the Negro Leagues towards integration was not just positive. Many players felt the desegregation of the Major Leagues cost the African American population more than it gained. These findings fit into Paul Mokrzycki's discussion of the difference between integration and desegregation.¹⁴⁹ This thesis shows that the desegregation of the Major Leagues did not lead to the integration of the Major Leagues. Negro League players still felt they were not receiving equal opportunities, and even when they were signed into a Major League organization, they did not get called up, no matter how good they were. Neil Lanctot's statement that the integration of the Major Leagues was good for African American ballplayers thus does not reflect the views of Negro League players from the 1950s.

¹⁴⁹ Mokrzycki, "After the Stand Comes the Fall," 291.

Conclusion

Negro League baseball did not end with the integration of the Major Leagues. For more than a decade professional black baseball clubs continued to compete with each other in league structures. This period has been understudied by historians. This thesis has studied black professional baseball as a case study of racial integration and has examined what happened to black institutions after watershed moments in integration. The general consensus among historians is that the Negro Leagues were in their prime during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. After Jackie Robinson, the Negro Leagues had allegedly become irrelevant since black ballplayers were now allowed to showcase their talents alongside white players in the Major and Minor Leagues.¹⁵⁰ However, this research project paints a surprisingly different picture.

The Negro Leagues continued to be an important institution in African American society throughout the 1950s, both for fans and Negro League players. Although Jackie Robinson had integrated Major League Baseball in 1947, Negro League baseball kept drawing significant crowds. Former Negro League players remember playing for tens of thousands of fans long after the integration of the Major Leagues. Negro League players also continued to be deeply connected to African American communities in both their hometowns and the towns they visited during barnstorming tours and away games. The African American community would continue to invite Negro League players to events and would provide Negro League teams with meals and lodging in places where black hotels were unavailable.

Negro League players tried to avoid putting themselves in situations where they would be affected by segregation. Many of them were aware – and afraid – of possible white repercussions if they openly challenged segregation. The extent to which they recognized the rules of segregation, and the degree to which it shocked them was dependent on their experience

¹⁵⁰ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*, 225-230.

with segregation. Players who grew up in the South were generally less shocked by discrimination and travel conditions than players who grew up in the North. Latin American Negro League players often found themselves shocked and less able to judge the rules that race imposed on them in American society, although they could loosen the shackles of segregation somewhat by making clear they were Latin American, rather than African American. The collective reaction to segregation, however, shows striking similarities. No one wanted to put themselves in a situation where segregation would affect them. They believed that they could do little about these restrictions, since they were all a product of the times they lived in. Players often felt that they were in a fortunate position just to be able to play baseball for a living, and rather than challenge segregation, they just had to keep out of trouble and avoided drawing negative attention.

The attitude in the Negro Leagues towards integration was ambivalent. Although many Negro League players from the 1950s praised Jackie Robinson for integrating the Major Leagues, they felt integration had not provided them with equal opportunity. Many of the best Negro League players in the 1950s got signed into Major League organizations and were put on Minor League rosters. Once they were inside the organizations, most of them were held back by a glass ceiling. No matter how good they were, they would not get called up. Many Negro League players remembered players that they felt had the quality to make it to the Majors – or at least high Minor League ball – but were held back by Major League organizations.

These findings dispute the historical consensus on Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson, by using new source material. Many scholars agree that the Negro Leagues quickly became irrelevant after 1947, and that the African American community lost interest in professional black baseball in favor of the newly integrated Major Leagues.¹⁵¹ This research shows that this was not the case. The African American community continued to support the

¹⁵¹ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*,

Negro Leagues throughout the 1950s, and due to a lack of opportunities the Negro Leagues were still an important institution for showcasing black talent. In fact, African American interest in baseball dropped significantly after the decline of the Negro Leagues, indicating that it was one of the things keeping the African American community interested in baseball as a whole.¹⁵² Scholars of black baseball have almost exclusively used African American newspapers as their source material. As Brian Carroll, Chris Lamb, and Edward Gale have argued, the black press had focused their attention on integrating the Major Leagues. Once their goal was achieved, they focused on reporting on Robinson's successes to show that African Americans could be successful in the Majors. This left no room for reporting on the Negro Leagues.¹⁵³ Therefore, it is unsurprising that scholars have argued that the Negro Leagues had become irrelevant, and that the African American community lost interest. By making use of interviews with former Negro League players, this research has been able to argue otherwise. Hopefully, more scholars will turn towards interviews as source material for Negro League baseball after Jackie Robinson, since they obviously hold information that cannot be found in the black press.

This research also ties into civil rights history. The Civil Rights Movement achieved one of its most important victories during the 1950s with the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Negro League players travelled the country during a decade in which race relations started to shift, and African Americans – at least on paper – started to get more freedom. However, Negro League players did not rebel against segregation, but rather tried to avoid conflicts relating to race. Carol Anderson argues that every time it looked like African Americans would make progress in American society, whites reacted with fierce opposition and a determination to curtail and rollback black advancements.¹⁵⁴ Tomiko Brown-

¹⁵² Ogden, "Baseball and Blacks," 87; Early, *A Level Playing Field*, 179.

¹⁵³ Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering?*; Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence*; Gale, "A Bitter Partnership," 1885-1903.

¹⁵⁴ Anderson, *White Rage*, 3-6.

Nagin argues that African Americans were well aware of a possible white backlash to black progress. Therefore, many African Americans were afraid of a radical implementation of *Brown*, fearing white backlash.¹⁵⁵ This research shows the same restraint in African Americans to claim their place in American society. Negro League players often portray segregation as a product of their time, and as such, there was not much they could do about it. This research thus contributes both to a better understanding of Negro League baseball, and of attitudes of African Americans towards integration and segregation in the Civil Rights Era. It asserts that African Americans sometimes felt ambiguous towards integration, feeling that it harmed them on some levels. While other historians have argued that in baseball this ambiguity was felt primarily by owners, this research has shown that was also felt by players.

The use benefits interviews as source material for research into the history of black professional baseball should not be underestimated. This research has made clear that they still yield useful information, despite their limitations. In the year 2021, it has been more than 60 years since the last Negro League folded. This means that players who were young talents at that time are probably in their 80s by now. Some of the former Negro Leaguers are still alive, however, their number is dwindling. The time for harvesting interviews on the Negro Leagues has, therefore, likely passed. Consequently, historians have lost the opportunity to ask former Negro Leaguers about subjects that interest them, which is a severe limitation for the use of interviews in research. Luckily, around the United States several institutions have publicized interviews in digital databases, making them available to researchers all around the world. So far, historians have paid scarce attention to them. Hopefully, this research can convince other historians of the value that these interviews still hold and encourage them turn towards existing interviews for research. If one is willing to listen to them, the stories they tell provide wonderful

¹⁵⁵ Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 112.

insights into a period when black newspapers largely ignored them in favor of a minimally integrated institution that African Americans had only nominal access to.

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