

The Racial Integration of Baseball in Bismarck North Dakota

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Introduction

When most people imagine about the integration of professional baseball, they often think about Jackie Robinson signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. This may be true, but there were already some places playing integrated baseball before it was done in Major League Baseball. One of these places was Bismarck, North Dakota which was a prominent home for African American baseball players in the 1930s simply because a car salesman named Neil Churchill wanted his baseball team to be competitive with neighboring cities. This leads to several questions such as why did a town with only 11,000 people¹, who were mostly white, able to attract black players from across the country? How was an integrated team able to break a color barrier in an era full of racial tension? What lasting impacts did an integrated team in a rural city create? This thesis will argue that baseball in Bismarck during the 1930s impacted the racial integration of baseball on a national level because black players who played in Bismarck during the time had the opportunity to play on an integrated, winning team which led to national exposure and black players in Bismarck performed statistically as well if not better than their white counterpart which led to ample opportunities in the future such as coaching teams in the Midwest, playing professionally on teams across the United States, and scouting for Major League teams on an international scale.

The biggest question I have received about my thesis is why I chose my topic. The answer is simple. I chose to write about baseball in Bismarck in the 1930s because I have always been interested in the sport and it is a significant event in local history for North Dakota. I first heard about the 1935 Bismarck team during a North Dakota History lecture at the University of

¹ “Bismarck, North Dakota Population 2020 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs),” accessed November 3, 2020, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/bismarck-nd-population>.

Mary. The class had a speaker come in named Terry Bohn, who is the author of several books about baseball in North Dakota. Mr. Bohn talked briefly about his love for baseball and talked about some of the famous figures who played in North Dakota. As soon as he said Satchel Paige, the topic really captured my interest since I knew he was a significant player in the Negro Leagues, and I had no idea that he spent time in Bismarck. As time went on, I kind of forgot about the idea but then I saw an article published by the Bismarck Larks discussing the team again. After that, I knew this was the topic I wanted to research in the future if the opportunity presented itself. Luckily for me, the topic was approved for my senior thesis.

The format of this thesis will include several sections being a short review of historiography/review of primary sources, what life was like for black players playing baseball outside of Bismarck, what life was like for black players playing in Bismarck, how the Bismarck team came together, how black players were able to achieve national exposure, how black players performed statistically, and what happened to black players after their time in Bismarck. The reason each of these sections has been included each has a specific reason. The first section on historiography/review of primary sources will be used to show how much research has been done in this area and also show what types of sources have been used to compile this thesis. The second and third sections will be used to make a comparison between life for players outside of Bismarck and the life of players in Bismarck. The hope of these two sections is for readers to see differences between how people were treated. The fourth section, which deals with how the team came together, will discuss what factors led to black players wanting to play in a state which had a relatively low African American population and why the idea to bring black players came into Neil Churchill's mind. The fifth section on national exposure will be used to showcase the types of competition the Bismarck team played against, important individuals who saw the Bismarck

team play, and national coverage by different newspapers the team was able to get by playing in a national tournament. The sixth section will showcase black players performance compared to others during the same time period and modern times to give a reference about how well black players were able to perform. The last section will deal with what happened to black players after their time in Bismarck as some of them were able to have short professional careers, and finally the implications the Bismarck team had on other places.

Historiography

Up until the last 50 years or so, not much has been written about African American baseball players. In fact, the Negro Leagues began around 1920 and almost nothing was written about them until the 1970s. This means fifty years went by before a significant part of United States history became acknowledged. As time has progressed interest in the integration of black baseball has spiked as many people investigate further into their history. More recently though, people have been finding more and more stories which have allowed them to write about major African American players and has led to the development of being able to write about integration of the sport before Major League Baseball. There are several books that I have used extensively for research for this thesis.

The first major book published on the Negro Leagues is Robert Peterson's book, *Only the Ball was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams*. This book was originally published in 1970, which was ten years after all Major League Baseball teams were integrated. It was later rereleased in 1992. In the preface of the 1992 version Peterson writes, "By 1960, all major-league teams had been integrated. When *Only the Ball was White* was first published ten years later, Negro baseball had virtually been forgotten."² So, the book

² Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), Preface.

came as a revelation to many fans, especially younger ones to whom Jackie Robinson was a figure from ancient history, if they had heard of him at all.

The other major book which discusses Satchel Paige is *If You Were Only White: The Life of Leroy Satchel Paige* written in 2012 by Donald Spivey. This book goes into incredible detail about the life of Satchel Paige. It uses sources such as interviews, books, articles, newspaper articles, Paige's autobiography, and photos. Spivey tells about Paige's childhood, his time in the Negro Leagues, his time in Bismarck, and his short stint in the majors. The book showed how well Paige was treated even though he was a black man playing a white man's game in the 1930s. Spivey wrote, "He would be paid the munificent sum of \$1000 per month in Great Depression-era dollars. In short, it was a small fortune... considering that a monthly wage of \$200 put you in a very good stead in the 1930s."³ *If You Were Only White* is an important part of this thesis because Satchel Paige was one of the most famous baseball players in history and it is important to know some information about his life since he played a major role on the integration of baseball.

Arguably the most important book for my research is Tom Dunkel's 2013 book *Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball's Color Line*. In this book, Dunkel tells the story of a racially integrated baseball team from Bismarck, North Dakota, which went on to win the 1935 Semi-Pro National Championship in Kansas. The team was also able to beat the Major-League All-Star Team in a series. He starts before the team was formed and discusses how Neil Churchill wanted his team to be the best no matter what, how they became champions, and what happened to some of the players after their time in Bismarck. This book is significant because as the title says, the Bismarck team was almost forgotten until recently. Dunkel wanted to show

³ Donald Spivey, *If You Were Only White: The Life of Leroy "Satchel" Paige*, First edition (University of Missouri, 2012), 110.

how well black players could perform and how far ahead of the curve Bismarck was compared to other parts of the country. Dunkel says, “If only the rest of the baseball world would catch up to Bismarck, North Dakota.”⁴ He does this by using newspaper articles from around the country, statistics, biographies, books, photos, and interviews. His work has inspired others to follow in his footsteps

There are also two books written by Terry Bohn, an author from North Dakota, whose works I have used for background information on the topic. Those two books are *Sunday Afternoons on the Prairie: The Growth of Baseball in North Dakota*⁵ written in 2016 and *Lots More Fun That Way: The First 30 Years of Amateur Baseball in North Dakota*⁶ written in 2017. These books will help give insight to what baseball was like in North Dakota before and after the 1935 championship team in which Dunkel referred to.

The last major book I feel is important to highlight is *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*⁷ written by Leslie Heaphy in 2015. This book is important because it tells specifically about different time periods during the Negro Leagues which can be used to compare what other authors said about black players time in Bismarck. This thesis does not entirely focus on places outside of Bismarck, but as stated before, other places in the United States will be used for comparison.

Now, there are a few primary sources that are important to highlight. The first is an autobiography written by Quincy Troupe titled *20 Years Too Soon: Prelude to Major-League*

⁴ Tom Dunkel, *Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball's Color Line* (New York City: Grove Press, 2013), 244.

⁵ Terry Bohn, *Sunday Afternoons on the Prairie: The Growth of Baseball in North Dakota* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

⁶ Terry Bohn, *Lots More Fun That Way: Amateur Baseball in North Dakota* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

⁷ Leslie A. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*, Reprint Edition (McFarland, 2015).

Integrated Baseball.⁸ This autobiography is important because Quincy Troupe was one of the African American players who played in Bismarck during the 1930s. His book can be used to show the perspective of an African American player at that time and also can be used to show what happened to some of the players after their time in Bismarck came to an end.

The other autobiography that should be highlighted is Satchel Paige's *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*.⁹ This autobiography is significant for the same reason as Quincy Troupe's autobiography. They both show an African American perspective at a time where integrated baseball was almost unheard of. Satchel Paige also was known for having a somewhat wild personality and was known as being a showman which may have contributed to the crowds he brought in.

The last important thing to note is that this thesis also used several newspaper articles and oral interviews. Most of the newspaper articles come from the *Bismarck Tribune*, the local paper in Bismarck, which focuses on the community's outlook on an integrated team. There are also some newspaper articles from other places in the country, such as Kansas, to show the more national coverage the Bismarck team had. The oral interviews used in this thesis are used to show what life was like outside of Bismarck for some players and also what life was like in North Dakota.

Forming of the Bismarck Team

It is important to note that black players playing in North Dakota was nothing new to the state. In fact, African American baseball players had been coming to North Dakota since the 1890s. The first black players to play in North Dakota came because of military service in 1891,

⁸ Quincy Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon: Prelude to Major-League Integrated Baseball* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Pr, 1995).

⁹ Leroy Satchel Paige, John B. Holway, and David Lipman, *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*, Illustrated Edition (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1993).

but this tradition continued outside of military service as well. By 1900, many small-town teams were bringing in players from out of state, they were just not the same quality of players that Bismarck was able to bring in later on.¹⁰

Before we get into what made the Bismarck team so special, it is important to know why the team came together in the first place. Why did African American baseball players want to come play baseball in a state like North Dakota where there were only 377 black people in the entire state (less than 1/10 of one percent of the population)?¹¹ The answer to this question is actually quite simple. It all started when businessman Neil Churchill wanted to help his local team, Bismarck, be competitive against surrounding cities in the state of North Dakota.

Churchill first began working with the Bismarck team in 1926. Before this time, Bismarck would bring in semipro baseball players to try to compete with surrounding cities. As soon as Churchill took the reins, he did away with hiring players and focused on using local talent. This was due to financial issues the team was having. No one expected the team to perform well but somehow, they were able to overcome the odds and the team finished the 1926 season 14-3-1.¹² This was an early indication that Churchill would be able to detect talent and be able to produce a winning team no matter what.

Things did not stay positive for Churchill his entire time as leader of the Bismarck team. In fact, in 1929 the Bismarck had to cancel many games and borrow players from other teams because of financial issues. Incidents like these led to Neil Churchill to resign as manager of the team in 1930. This hiatus did not last long though because of a tragedy occurred in 1931 during a baseball game taking place between Wilton and Bismarck. During the game, a batter named

¹⁰ Bohn, *Sunday Afternoons on the Prairie*, 165–75.

¹¹ Joe Cicha, “Growing ND by the Numbers,” *North Dakota Department of Commerce*, October 2014.

¹² Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 36–38.

Balzer Klein was beamed in the head during his at bat. Klein took himself out of the game and when it was over, he agreed to ride to the hospital with one of the Bismarck fans, who happened to be Neil Churchill. After being admitted into the hospital, Klein tragically passed away. Klein was only 26 years old and his conversation with Churchill led to Churchill wanting to manage the team again.¹³ This also led to Churchill to change his managerial philosophy to become more business-like. “Baseball teams, he’d come to realize, were like cars: you get what you pay for.”¹⁴ This meant that Churchill no longer cared about what the players looked like as long as they performed well.

In 1933 Bismarck brought in its first African American baseball players to play on an integrated team. Those two players were 30-year-old Roosevelt Davis, a pitcher from Saint Louis, and 20-year-old Quincy Troupe, a catcher who was also from Saint Louis. Troupe once asked Davis what he thought about Bismarck and Davis replied with, “I’m doing okay here, Quincy. These people don’t know a thing about baseball except that they want you to win, and that’s what I’ve been doing.”¹⁵ The main reason black players were brought into Bismarck was because Neil Churchill saw how well Jamestown, North Dakota performed when they added African American players. Jamestown is approximately 100 miles east of Bismarck and the two were bitter rivals early on. After Churchill was able to bring in Troupe and Davis, he met with one of his old friends to bring in more African American players. Churchill’s friend was none other than Abe Saperstein who was the founder and coach of the Harlem Globetrotters.¹⁶ The relationship with Saperstein helped Churchill bring in more African American players, and after

¹³ Ibid., 44–45.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon*, 43.

¹⁶ Norm King, “Abe Saperstein – Society for American Baseball Research,” accessed November 11, 2020, <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/abe-saperstein/>.

losing yet another game to Jamestown that is exactly what Churchill did. Churchill went out and signed “Red” Hailey, who would play shortstop, and brought in Satchel Paige, one of the most prominent and dominant pitchers in all of baseball, to try to get an edge against Jamestown in 1933.¹⁷ Bringing in Paige was one of most difficult things for Neil Churchill to accomplish. Churchill first got the idea from Quincy Troupe when he asked if he knew of any other black pitchers who would potentially want to come to Bismarck. Troupe had previously met with Paige in Pittsburg and according to Troupe Paige said, “I’m not certain he meant it, but he told me if my team needed a pitcher to get in touch with him.”¹⁸ Troupe got into contact with Paige and he eventually arrived by train. Paige was known for more than just being a great baseball player though. He was known for having an electric personality which would bring people in from miles away in order to watch him play. Churchill obviously wanted to win baseball games, but by bringing in a larger than life personality such as Satchel Paige he would be able to bring in larger crowds which in turn would lead to more money. The increase in money due to larger crowds meant Churchill could improve his team even further. This is where the business side of Neil Churchill was in full force. As many have said, sometimes you need to spend money in order to make money, and this is the philosophy Churchill followed. It does not matter how much someone loves a sport; it will become difficult to watch if the product on the field is not competitive. 1933 marked the first major steps taken by Bismarck to show they no longer wanted to just field a team for fun, but they wanted to be able to compete against the best of the best no matter what it took. In this case, it was signing players who were often overlooked and thought of as inferior to white players.

¹⁷ National Endowment for the Humanities, “Park Here to Seat 3,000 for Week-End Jamestown Series.,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, September 1, 1933, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1933-09-01/ed-1/seq-10/>.

¹⁸ Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon*, 46.

The 1934 team was different for Bismarck. The main problem was that they struggled with pitching since Satchel Paige decided to play elsewhere that year. The Bismarck team ended up finishing second to Jamestown in the state standings. Following the 1934 season, Churchill had some more tricks up his sleeve as he was able to convince one of Jamestown's best players, Ted "Double-Duty" Radcliffe.¹⁹ The adding up Radcliffe significantly improved the Bismarck team, which also took a major toll on Jamestown. Radcliffe was a great all-around player when it came to both pitching and hitting. In 1935 the team consisted of Hilton Smith, Ted "Double-Duty" Radcliffe, Satchel Paige, Red Hailey, Barney Morris, Quincy Troupe, Joe Desiderato, Vernon Johnson, Dan Oberholzer, Axel Leary, and Ed Hendee. Of these 11 players, six of them were black.²⁰ Churchill's business-like tactics disregarded color and helped bring in wins and more money for the team.

Places Outside of Bismarck during the 1930s

When organized baseball was first being played, the sport showed major signs of segregation. Already in 1888 there were rules being put in place to ensure that white players and black players would be separated.²¹ White and black players were separated especially, in the South where Jim Crow laws were established and enforced. Because of the separation, a new league, called the Negro Leagues, was established. The Negro Leagues were made up of mostly black players with some Latin American players. The league thrived from 1920 until Major League Baseball became integrated in 1947. The Negro League was also very successful in its own right even though it had far less viewers than the MLB. Games would still bring in 12,000-

¹⁹ Curt Erickson, *Did You Know That...? 47 Fascinating Stories About People Who Have Lived in North Dakota*, vol. 7 (Fargo, North Dakota: Forum Communications Printing, 2013), 165.

²⁰ "Bismarck Baseball History," Bismarck Larks, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://northwoodsleague.com/bismarck-larks/bismarck-baseball-history/>.

²¹ Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 32.

15,000 spectators and had a record attendance of over 45,000 people.²² The amount of attendees at most games show that baseball was highly regarded by all races. Many people did not care who was playing as long as there was a game to watch.

There are some specific examples of segregated baseball bringing enjoyment to people. The first of these examples was given in an article written by Paul Edwards where he writes about the significance baseball played during the time of the Great Depression in Arkansas. Most of the teams were made up of all white players, but there was one team which was outside the norm. The Claybrook Tigers was an all-black team which played from 1935-1936 and was made up of players from around Arkansas and others who were former Negro League Players. The owner of the team would give players jobs during the season and a place to live. The team would bring together thousands of people to watch games.²³ In this instance, baseball was used to bring people some sense of normalcy in hard times. Even though the teams were segregated, white people still responded well to the African American games going on.

Now, it is not fair to assume that all players had the same feeling. No one player can speak for the ideas of all. There are examples of players who had no problems with playing in the Negro Leagues, but there are also players who were more outspoken about their feelings towards playing segregated baseball. In some cases, many African American players felt like they were better than many of the white players who were given opportunities to play professionally.

One example of a player who had personal experience playing in the Negro Leagues is James Moore. He had a long career in the Negro Leagues and was quite successful. He played

²² Ibid., 197.

²³ Paul Edwards, "Farmers and Fastballs: The Culture of Baseball in Depression Era Northeast Arkansas.," *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 41, no. 2 (August 2010): 111–12.

from 1929-1948 and made three all-star team during his career, however he did not play from 1942-1945, due to military service.²⁴ James “Red” Moore had an interview in 1978 where he discussed his time playing in the Negro Leagues, specifically in Atlanta. One large factor Moore points out is that players in his league were not payed a salary; they would be payed a percentage of whatever money each game brought in. He said most of the time his team would have to travel to play games and they would draw much smaller crowds than others, bringing in anywhere from 500 to a few thousand spectators.²⁵ This could either turn out very well for players or very poorly depending on the day. On days where weather was nice and there were large crowds, players could make a decent living, but if weather was poor, players would not do very well financially. This more than likely made budgeting for travel, gear, and personal needs extremely difficult.

There were other aspects of life that were difficult for black players. Some things white people found simple, such as traveling or having a place to stay, was incredibly difficult for those playing in the Negro Leagues. Black players often time would not be allowed to stay in hotels and would be banned from eating in certain restaurants. In many places, players would have to stay in personal homes of individuals who would be willing to let them stay. Depending on where a person played also played a significant role in whether or not they were even payed enough to live off.²⁶ Again, conditions varied from player to player, but the average salary for someone playing in the Negro Leagues was between \$125-\$150 per month during the time of the Great Depression.²⁷ Another factor that impacted many teams was actually finding other teams to play. A former Negro League player who played from 1927-1936 named Bill Yancey said,

²⁴ “About | James Red Moore Homepage,” accessed November 16, 2020, <http://jamesredmoore.com/about/>.

²⁵ James Moore, An Excerpt from an Oral History Interview with James (“Red”) Moore, 1978, .
<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/negro-league-baseball/sources/191>.

²⁶ Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*, 69–75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

“When I first started, if we were going any long distance we would go by train, but later on we used to travel by bus. Because a lot of times you couldn’t get trains to where we were going... In a lot of towns, they didn’t even have places for us to dress...”²⁸ North Dakota was one of those states in which Negro League teams would sometimes stop by to play a few teams.

Another important factor when it came to the Negro Leagues is that many teams had to share stadiums with other teams. If a Negro League team shared a stadium with a white team, the white team was always given priority on the stadium. Also, many cities would not allow for too many games to be scheduled in consecutive days because during the 1930s, people were not able to afford to go to baseball games all the time. A former Negro League player named Buck Leonard talked on the subject and said, “We didn’t have any home grounds. We played anywhere we could get a game.”²⁹ This also made things difficult for African American fans because in many stadiums, segregation was in place, which would lead to limited seating for black fans and families. Also, it would be extremely difficult to cheer on the local home team if the team is always on the road. In modern times, home field advantage in one of the biggest factors on how well a team is able to perform. Many Negro League teams did not have a positive experience with fans, especially if they were playing against all white teams. If playing against all white teams, fans would often times yell racial slurs or try other methods to intimidate opposing black teams.

Life in Bismarck

Life in Bismarck, North Dakota was very different. For Satchel Paige, things started out a little rough. “The racism was visible in the otherwise positive news coverage of the arrival of the

²⁸ Ibid., 83.

²⁹ Ibid., 82.

“dusky hurler” and “Ethiopian” who was portrayed by the *Tribune* with apelike features.”³⁰

Things did eventually become better though. Satchel Paige and his wife started by living in a small boxcar. Soon after she left due to living conditions, Neil Churchill purchased a hotel and Satchel Paige was allowed to live in one of the suites. Also, many people who were originally against Paige and his wife being in Bismarck quickly changed their minds after they saw how well he could pitch. The stadium in Bismarck had to be expanded to hold more occupants, and it still was not big enough to hold crowds he would draw in. It was not uncommon for spectators to bring in lawn chairs and sit in the surrounding grass. However, not all things were as good as they seemed. Bismarck did have instances when the Ku Klux Klan would try to come into town to scare off any black players on the team. The threats did not last long but they ultimately helped influence Neil Churchill to later run for mayor of Bismarck.

One of the major reasons African American players were treated well in Bismarck is because the team had a value of treating each other as family. A player named Joe Desiderato, who was white, had an offer to play professionally with the Chicago White Sox but ended up refusing it because Bismarck payed better and he felt more secure.³¹ Desiderato was also quoted saying “In some places we were even barred from going into restaurants. We paid no mind I remember two places we came into at night, after the game, and we were refused rooms because we had blacks on the team. We packed up and left together. We always stayed as a family.”³² This shows how well black players were accepted by their white teammates in Bismarck. Breaking the barrier with teammates was the first step in being accepted by the rest of the population.

³⁰ Spivey, *If You Were Only White*, 103.

³¹ Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 246.

³² Spivey, *If You Were Only White*, 114.

Bismarck players even had a positive interaction with the Native American population. In his autobiography, Paige says, “The summer of 1935 I was around Bismarck so much that I got to know a bunch of Indians up there real well.”³³ In fact, the Native-American people helped create ointments for the team out of rattlesnake venom. The ointment was used to relieve pain and is said to have burned when it was put on and would then cause numbness, which would relieve pain. It must have worked well because Satchel Paige used it after every game.³⁴ This goes to show not only were African American players accepted by white people in North Dakota but by other races as well.

The people were not the only reason players would choose to stay in Bismarck. The salary Churchill was willing to pay his players more than most other places. For example, Satchel Paige was payed \$1000 a month, which was much higher what than other teams were offering. The next highest offer was around \$600.³⁵ The difference in salary for Paige would be equivalent to roughly a \$11,000 per month in modern times. Also, sources vary when it comes to discussing how much Paige was paid. The \$1000 a month comes from an autobiography about his life titled *If Only You Were White*. Other books, such as Tom Dunkel’s *Color Blind* say Paige was paid \$400 a month and given a Chrysler car.³⁶ It is important to note this is an extreme case. For most players, the pay difference was not nearly as significant. Quincy Troupe was payed \$175 per month which was \$35 more than he had previously made³⁷, which is equal to a difference of about \$700 per month today.

³³ Paige, Holway, and Lipman, *Maybe I’ll Pitch Forever*, 97.

³⁴ Spivey, *If You Were Only White*, 113–14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 102-11

³⁶ Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

It is also important to note that some players developed certain hobbies during their time in Bismarck to help pass the time. For example, Quincy Troupe and Red Hailey got into hunting rabbits since they lived out of town with a family, the Smiths, who they had a very good relationship with. Mrs. Smith when asked by Churchill how the boys were replied by saying, “Oh, they are just wonderful. Like my own sons.”³⁸ Mr. Smith also had a positive review of the boys and would let them take his car whenever they wanted to go out and do things. Neil Churchill did the same for Paige when he came to Bismarck. Hunting was an activity which more than likely helped build positive relationships with farmers in the area. Troupe and Hailey would kill rabbits that were on the farmers land and destroying crops. Eventually, Satchel Paige would join in on the hunting trips and the three would have competitions. Things like this seem small, but for people in rural North Dakota this could be seen as a big step. By doing something like hunting, which would be thought of as common in North Dakota, it showed that black players living in the area were not as different as they may have seen at first to the people of Bismarck. It is important to keep in mind a majority of the population in North Dakota had probably never seen an African American person in their lives so the only information they had access to was from word of mouth from those who had. It is important to put oneself in the shoes of the people who were living at the time.

One key reason the team was treated so well is because of the leadership of Neil Churchill. A newspaper article from 1933, the first season Bismarck had African American players on its roster, stated “Much credit for a fine local team and the enthusiastic support of Bismarck citizens is due to the splendid management of Neil Churchill.”³⁹ This is mainly because

³⁸ Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon*, 46.

³⁹ “Former Governor Speaks at Luncheon,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, August 23, 1933, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1933-08-23/ed-1/seq-7/>.

Neil Churchill did not care about skin color. All he cared about was putting the best product that he could on the field. He knew that if the players he brought in played how he believed they could, eventually the rest of the community would not care either. Both Quincy Troupe and Satchel Paige spoke positively about Churchill in their autobiographies pointing out he did not care if you were black or white as long as you did your job and did it well. For the most part, black players were accepted into Bismarck by a vast majority of people.

There were some instances that occurred in Bismarck though which were a little more controversial. Ted Radcliffe and Satchel Paige were very flirtatious with women and at one point, Radcliffe said that he would not be able to stay in Bismarck without some companionship. When discussing relationships, he had Radcliffe said, "Me and Satch did our part for integration right there in that Prince Hotel. You could call us kind of baseball goodwill doers for some real better understanding of the races. We made them women believers; I tell you. Yes, sir, we did our things for the cause!"⁴⁰ The biggest problem with these actions is that Satchel Paige was married at the time.

Overall, black players in Bismarck were treated fairly well. There were some instances where some problems would arise. It may have been because many of the players were into firearms that they were mainly left alone, or maybe it was that North Dakota was just different than the parts of the United States that the players were used to. Whatever the reason may have been, it is safe to say players had a mostly positive experience.

National Exposure

The biggest way in which baseball in Bismarck impacted the racial integration of baseball is by giving players national exposure they would not otherwise receive. This is evident

⁴⁰ Spivey, *If You Were Only White*, 113.

from the fact the team went on to win the 1935 Semi-Pro National Championship in Wichita, Kansas. During the time in Kansas, several newspapers made reports about the skill of black players on the Bismarck team. The *Wichita Eagle*, a newspaper, said “We know Satchel is good, but no human can be as unstoppable as he’s supposed to be.”⁴¹ This led to the stadium to overflow with spectators. Another newspaper, *Oakland Journal*, even reported that the game had Major League scouts in attendance and some might be interested in giving black players a tryout.⁴² Even though Major League Baseball did not give black players a chance until almost a decade later, this was still an encouraging sign and showed players were starting to receive more recognition than previously. When talking about the attention the team received because of the 1935 Semi-Pro National Championship, Quincy Troupe said, “This is probably where the breakthrough for blacks into the major leagues originated. There had been mixed teams in colleges for years, but the opening of the Wichita tournament, with a mixed team, really put the idea on organized baseball owners’ minds.”⁴³ It is thought that there were over 10,000 people in attendance for the championship game in Wichita.⁴⁴

Winning the National Tournament did more than just give players national exposure though. It also helped gather even more of a positive response from the local fans. After the team got back a headline in the *Bismarck Tribune* read, “Churchill Honored by Bismarck Fans.” The city held a special dinner for Churchill and gifted him with a watch. At the event, Churchill made an interesting statement saying the team actually lost money when playing in the tournament because they were misinformed about how much the winning team would receive. They were

⁴¹ Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 197.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 243

⁴³ Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon*, 58.

⁴⁴ “Bismarck Wins National Semi-Pro Pennant,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, August 28, 1935, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1935-08-28/ed-1/seq-1/>.

told they would receive \$5000 and ended up receiving half that amount.⁴⁵ The reason why the full amount was not given is not entirely known. Some think it may be because the tournament did not bring in as much money as anticipated and other believe it may be because an integrated team was victorious.

In 1936 the Bismarck team went back to Wichita again for the tournament, but this time without Satchel Paige. The team still did quite well, and Quincy Troupe and Hilton Smith were able to earn spots on the all-tournament team. After the tournament concluded Quincy Troupe said the tournament director approached him and Hilton Smith and said, “Oh, they’re interested in someone on your team, all right. This scout said he would recommend paying \$100,000 each, for you two boys, if you were white.”⁴⁶ Troupe replied by saying, “Well, sir we’re available right now. I’m sure you’ve noticed that color doesn’t make a difference on our club.”⁴⁷ This shows that even though black players still were excluded from getting professional offers, white scouts from Major League teams were able to tell that African American players were more than capable of playing baseball at a high level.

Many people may think that since it was a semi-pro tournament that means the Bismarck team was not playing against the best of the best. This may be true for that particular event, but Bismarck did play against Major League competition. Before the Bismarck team won the semi-pro tournament, they played against the American League All-Star team in 1934. An All-Star team is usually made up of the best players from the league. The team was on their way to Japan and had decided to stop and play a few games on their way, one of those stops was in Bismarck. The teams played a three-game series and Bismarck went onto win all of them. One player from

⁴⁵ “Churchill Honored by Bismarck Fans,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, September 13, 1935, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1935-09-13/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁴⁶ Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon*, 66.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

the All-Star team went onto say, “I knew there were a lot of good colored players. I just didn't know they were all in Bismarck!”⁴⁸ In some cases, the games were not even close. In fact, Bismarck was able to win one such game 11-3 which would be considered by most to be a blowout.⁴⁹ The series showed many people how well black athletes were able to perform. By beating a team of professional athletes, who would have been considered some of the best in the game at the time, the Bismarck team was able to garner even more attention, which would help some players on the team to get even more chances to play professional baseball later on.

Performance

On many occasions, black players were able to perform as well, if not better than many of their white counterparts. The most famous example of this comes from Leroy “Satchel” Paige. Satchel Paige is often considered one of the best pitchers in the history of baseball. In fact, after his 1933 season, he was considered a “near god of the plains.”⁵⁰ These claims came after Paige had dominated the competition and helped lead Bismarck to a state championship. It also went to show that many people in North Dakota had started to not worry about the color of Paige’s skin as long as he performed at a high level.

It is also important to point out that when it came to how the Bismarck team performed at the National Tournament the Bismarck team finished 7-0 and not many of the games were even close. In total there were 32 teams in the tournament from 16 different states.⁵¹ This helps show

⁴⁸ “Section 4: Bismarck Baseball | North Dakota Studies,” accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iv-modern-north-dakota-1921-present/lesson-3-building-communities/topic-5-sports/section-4-bismarck-baseball>.

⁴⁹ “North Dakota Semi-Professional Club Humbles American All-Stars Here, 11-3,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, October 8, 1934, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042243/1934-10-08/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁵⁰ Spivey, *If You Were Only White*.

⁵¹ “Bismarck Wins National Semi-Pro Pennant.”

that Bismarck was able to not only compete with teams throughout the country, but able to dominate.

As mentioned earlier, Paige was payed exceptionally well to play in Bismarck and he definitely proved he was worth the price. In his time, he earned great praise from Churchill. Churchill said, “I have been following major league baseball for 25 years and I think Satchel Paige is the greatest pitcher I’ve ever seen. If he were eligible to play in the big leagues, I would bet he would win at least 30 games.”⁵² Paige showed the country what Churchill meant as he went onto win the 1935 Semi-Pro Most Valuable Player after his performance in the tournament where he struck out 66 batters and gave up five runs in 39 innings pitched. Paige had an Earned Run Average of roughly 1.15 during the tournament.⁵³ The average ERA in Major League Baseball today is around 4.00.⁵⁴ Any ERA under 2.00 is considered exceptionally well. He additionally was able to make the all-tournament team, which is recognition of the best players in the tournament.⁵⁵ One sportswriter from the *Minneapolis Tribune* went onto write, “... if he were white and eligible to play organized baseball, [Paige] would bring in \$100,000 in the open market. He possesses everything a great pitcher must have.”⁵⁶ This goes to show that not only did North Dakota realize how great of a player Paige was, but people around the country were taking notice. Paige did end up eventually getting to play in Major League Baseball, but he was way past his prime. He did not get his chance until 1948 at the age of 41. He only played five complete seasons in that time but was still able to make two all-star games and win a World

⁵² Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 197.

⁵³ The way ERA is calculated is by taking the number of runs scored (5), divided by the number of innings pitched (39), multiplied by the number of innings in a standard game (9).

⁵⁴ “Major League Baseball Pitching Year-by-Year Averages,” Baseball-Reference.com, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/pitch.shtml>.

⁵⁵ Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 230–38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 238

Series. He finished his MLB career with an ERA of 3.29⁵⁷ and ended up making the Hall of Fame. It is hard to say what Paige's career ERA outside of Major League Baseball was because in the Negro Leagues, ERA was not an official stat.

While Paige was probably the most famous player to have ever been in Bismarck, there were other black athletes who also were considered great players. Quincy Troupe also made the all-tournament team during the 1935 Semi-Pro National Tournament and ended up going onto have a short stint in Major League Baseball, but like Paige, was past his prime. Troupe was 38 years old and only had ten at bats in his professional career and recorded only one hit.⁵⁸

While Paige is thought of as the best of the players who played in Bismarck, Hilton Smith actually performed better than him statistically. The problem was that Smith was not nearly as charismatic as Paige so in turn he did not receive as much attention. Since ERA was not an official stat in the Negro Leagues though it is hard to say what Smith's would have been. His RA/9, runs allowed per nine innings, was 3.44 for his career.⁵⁹ The difference between RA/9 and ERA is that RA/9 includes runs scored due to errors whereas ERA is only runs which are earned meaning if a runner who reached base on an error end up scoring the pitcher is not held responsible. This means that an ERA should always be lower RA/9 when looking throughout a career. Hilton Smith also had a lower WHIP, Walks/Hits allowed divided by Inning Pitched. Smith's WHIP was 0.958 which means he allowed less than one base runner per inning that he pitched while Satchel Paige's WHIP was 1.279.⁶⁰ While this shows Smith may have been better

⁵⁷ "Satchel Paige Stats," Baseball-Reference.com, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/p/paiges01.shtml>.

⁵⁸ "Quincy Troupe Stats," Baseball-Reference.com, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/t/troupqu01.shtml>.

⁵⁹ "Hilton Smith Negro & Mexican Leagues Statistics & History," Baseball-Reference.com, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/register/player.fcgi?id=smith-001hil>.

⁶⁰ "Satchel Paige Stats"; "Hilton Smith Negro & Mexican Leagues Statistics & History."

on average it is also important to know that Smith only played for 13 seasons while Paige played for 30. Either way, both players performed much better than the Major League average which has been between 1.3 and 1.5 from the 1920s to modern times.⁶¹

There are several other black players who played in Bismarck but never received the opportunity to play professionally. These players include the likes of Ted “Double Duty” Radcliffe, Red Haley, and Barney Morris.⁶² All of these players went onto have successful careers in the Negro Leagues and Hilton Smith went on to join Satchel Paige in the Hall of Fame. Ted Radcliffe proved he could play with the best also. He was the player who was pitching when Bismarck beat the American All-Star team 11-3, and performed exceptionally well by giving up only eight hits to the All-Star team while recording three hits of his own in only four at bats.⁶³ One can only imagine what some of the players would have been able to do if baseball would have been fully integrated earlier.

Time After Bismarck

To see what implementations baseball in Bismarck, North Dakota during the mid-1930s truly had it is important to look at what happened later. As mentioned previously, a few of the players did go onto have short professional stints in Major League Baseball, but there is more to the story than that. It is easy to think that a small town in North Dakota would have little to no impact on the overall look in the rest of the nation. However, some of the players who played in Bismarck during the time period went on to do incredible things and the teams success led to rule changes in integrated baseball.

⁶¹ “Major League Baseball Pitching Year-by-Year Averages.”

⁶² Spivey, *If You Were Only White*.

⁶³ “North Dakota Semi-Professional Club Humbles American All-Stars Here, 11-3.”

The first player who went on to have a tremendous career following his time in Bismarck is Ted “Double-Duty” Radcliffe. Following the 1935 Semi-Pro National Championship season in Bismarck, Radcliffe went on to do much more for the sport of baseball. In 1936 Radcliffe’s time in Bismarck came to an end and he went to go play in the Negro Leagues again for 11 seasons. During this time, Radcliffe was an all-star for six of those seasons; chosen three times as a pitcher and three times as a catcher. During the 1945 season in Kansas City, Radcliffe was even roommates with Jackie Robinson which one can assume had an impact on both of their lives. After Radcliffe’s time playing was done, he became a Major League scout for the Cleveland Indians. Even though he was not able to break the color barrier as a professional baseball player he still got an opportunity as a scout. Radcliffe has such an impact on the sport of baseball that after he retired in 1996, he was able to throw out the opening pitch of the Chicago White Sox games every year on his birthday, if the team had a home game. During his retirement, he was also invited back to pitch one time for the Fargo-Moorhead Red Hawks where he became the oldest person to pitch in a professional style game at the age of 96. He only threw one pitch, but this was still an incredible achievement for anyone. Radcliffe died on August 11, 2005 at the age of 103 which makes him one of the oldest former baseball players ever. After his death, the Chicago White Sox created an annual event called the “Double Duty Classic” to encourage African American children to participate in baseball. Radcliffe’s career stats include over 4,000 hits and 400 homeruns as a batter. He did not earn the nickname “Double-Duty” for nothing though. His pitching statistics are just as outstanding having won almost 500 games and striking out 4,000 batters.⁶⁴ This goes to show the lasting impact Ted “Double-Duty” Radcliffe was able to create.

⁶⁴ Erickson, *Did You Know That...? 47 Fascinating Stories About People Who Have Lived in North Dakota*, 7:163–65.

Another player who went onto accomplish a lot after their time in Bismarck was Quincy Troupe. After he left Bismarck, Troupe played with many different teams. He spent many years in South America and Mexico playing. While in Venezuela, Robinson was able to play for two months with Jackie Robinson. Troupe pointed out in his autobiography that Robinson had a major temper when he was young and was afraid it would have a negative impact in his playing career. Troupe was also with Robinson when he bought the engagement ring for his wife.⁶⁵ This leads us to believe that Troupe and Robinson must have had a positive relationship with each other. In 1952, Troupe was finally able to live his dream and get a short stint playing professional baseball with the Cleveland Indians. Troupe only played in three games during his two and a half months in the majors.⁶⁶ After his time playing baseball ended, Quincy Troupe also became a professional scout for the St. Louis Cardinals from 1953-1970. Two of the players Troupe scouted were Earnie Banks and Roberto Clemente. Both were people of color who the Cardinals did not sign, and both went on to become Hall of Fame players. Clemente, who was a Latin American player from Puerto Rico, became the first Latin American player to do so. When asked about black players inclusion in the Hall of Fame Troupe had an interesting response saying, "It is very disturbing that the selection committee voted into the Hall of Fame black ball players who never played in the majors. I disagree empathetically with their announcement that they are satisfied that their mission of voting all qualified black ball players into the Hall of Fame has been accomplished."⁶⁷ The reason Troupe feels this way is extremely valid. He believed there was no actual criteria used to judge the players because many of the people on the committee did not closely watch the Negro Leagues. Troupe thinks there are many players who

⁶⁵ Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon*, 87–88.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

deserve to be in the Hall of Fame who are not and some who are enshrined in the Hall of Fame who should not be. Troupe passed away on August 10, 1993 at the age of 80.⁶⁸ Quincy Troupe helped contribute to the sport of baseball tremendously and his first major opportunity began in Bismarck, North Dakota.

The last player to discuss who played in North Dakota and had a significant impact on the sport of baseball is Leroy “Satchel” Paige. Paige only spent two seasons in Bismarck and was already a well-known player at the time. His time in Bismarck was spent to help his teammates get national exposure and it definitely worked. Paige accomplished much more though in his time after Bismarck. The title of Paige’s autobiography is *Maybe I’ll Pitch Forever* and while he died June 8, 1982 at the age of 75 his legacy has definitely lived on.⁶⁹ Satchel Paige was elected into Major League Baseball’s Hall of Fame and was the third African American player to do so and the first who did not play at least ten seasons in Major League Baseball.⁷⁰ As stated earlier, Paige statistically was one of the greatest pitchers of all time, but he is remembered for more than just that. After his death, the Major League Commissioner at the time spoke at his funeral and said, “It’s too bad major league fans never had a chance to see him in his prime, for he was one of the greatest pitchers of all time. Some fine athletes are forgotten when they’re gone. Satch will never be.”⁷¹ Satchel Paige is remembered for changing the game of baseball with his larger than life personality and always wanting to put on a show for his audience. Paige had one of the longest careers in baseball, playing for almost four decades. No other athlete dominated a sport for as long as Satchel Paige. Paige is often time credited as well with the being the one who

⁶⁸ “Quincy Troupe - Seamheads Negro Leagues Database,” accessed November 15, 2020, <https://www.seamheads.com/NegroLgs/player.php?playerID=troup01qui>.

⁶⁹ “Satchel Paige Stats.”

⁷⁰ Paige, Holway, and Lipman, *Maybe I’ll Pitch Forever*, 287.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 295

opened up Major League stadiums to black players due to the fact he was able to bring in such large crowds. It is also extremely important to note that Satchel Paige is the one who caught the attention of Branch Rickey, owner of the Dodgers when Jackie Robinson was signed, to consider signing an African American player. Many believe that Branch Rickey wanted to sign Paige since he was already well known, but ultimately signed Robinson because he was younger. If it were not for Paige, who knows how long it would have been before Major League Baseball was integrated.⁷²

One cannot forget about the man who started all of this in Bismarck, Neil Churchill. After the 1936 season Churchill quit managing the Bismarck team. He promoted some teams though and continued to work with Abe Saperstein to bring in baseball teams with black players for road trips. Churchill also served as the mayor of Bismarck from 1939-1946. Many believe he was elected because people remember the success that the 1935 Bismarck baseball team had. During his time as mayor, Churchill put in the first stoplight in Bismarck, but also put in internment camps in Bismarck during World War II. In 1952, Churchill sold his car dealership and retired by moving to Los Angeles, California where he died on September 30, 1969 at the age of 78.⁷³

The overall impacts of the Bismarck team were almost immediate. As stated before, there were several Major League scouts in attendance of the 1935 Semi-Pro National Championship. During this time, several of them made comments about being more interested in black baseball players than they previously had been. According to a lecture by Tom Dunkel when discussing his book, he said that the commissioner of Major League Baseball was in attendance of the

⁷² Ibid., xiv.

⁷³ Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 262–66; Erickson, *Did You Know That...? 47 Fascinating Stories About People Who Have Lived in North Dakota*, 7:147–50.

tournament along with Branch Ricky.⁷⁴ Now, it is not possible to say this is the reason Jackie Robinson was given an opportunity to break the color line in professional baseball, but it is fair to assume the Bismarck teams performance at least got the commissioner's attention as well as Branch Rickey's. After the 1936 season, black and integrated teams were banned from the National Tournament in Kansas.⁷⁵ After Churchill quit his job as manager of the team, Bismarck was no longer able to afford to bring in out-of-state talent like it used to and when World War II began, many from North Dakota enlisted into the armed forces. Also, slow-pitch softball was starting to become more and more popular since it was less physically demanding on the body. These two things ultimately led to the end of semi-pro baseball in North Dakota.

Implications of Argument

Most people credit Jackie Robinson with breaking the color barrier in baseball. He may be credited with being the first to do it professionally but there were certainly people who did it before him. Many players who played in Bismarck may not have gone onto the MLB, but they still helped pave the way for black players in the future. If it would not have been for the efforts of Neil Churchill taking a chance and bringing a group of African American players to a state which was almost entirely white at the time, who knows what would have happened. Churchill took a chance and it paid off. His choice brought players national exposure by getting to play in a national tournament. Numerous Major League scouts noticed how well black players were able to perform due to the performance in Wichita, Kansas in 1935. If it was not for the 1935 Bismarck team, I firmly believe the integration of professional baseball would not have happened when it did. I cannot say with 100% certainty that Bismarck was the only team to help

⁷⁴ Politics and Prose, *Tom Dunkel "Color Blind,"* 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehzacVSAzVE&t=1654s>.

⁷⁵ Dunkel, *Color Blind*, 253.

push for integration because I am sure there are others as well whose stories have not yet been told. Going off of comments made by players and scouts though, it is fair to say Bismarck did play a role in integrating professional baseball.

My hope for this paper is that it will inspire others to look at events in the past that are often times thought of as insignificant or are overlooked such as potentially other baseball teams. This goes further than just baseball though. In many cases history has been somewhat one sided and not all sides have been told. This has been improving in recent years and my hope is that this trend continues to occur. As for baseball specifically, my hope is that this paper brings to light some of those amazing stories that are almost entirely forgotten. My research has most related to Tom Dunkel's book *Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball's Color Line* and closely relates to what he stated in his book being that Bismarck baseball in the 1930s played an impact on the integration of professional baseball later on. My work varies from Dunkel's though because I chose to add information from other areas as well while Dunkel focused on just Bismarck. Hopefully, someone chooses to dig even deeper in the future to help identify even more history in North Dakota or are able to uncover what was once considered the lost era of baseball.

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