

Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson: Interview Essay

By Jean West

In August, 1945, while playing for the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro League, Jackie met in Brooklyn with Dodgers owner-manager Branch Rickey. Rickey had scouted a hundred black players with the announced intention of forming another Negro League team, the Brown Dodgers. However, the first question Rickey asked was, "Do you have a girl?" Although he had been engaged, Jackie was surprised by the question and answered, "I'm not sure," before explaining because of his traveling and uncertain employment he wasn't sure if Rachel would still want to marry him.¹ When he told Rickey they were engaged (since 1941), Rickey smiled and responded, "You know you have a girl. When we get through today you may want to call her up because there are times when a man needs a woman by his side."²

Rickey then explained that he wasn't interviewing Jackie for a position on the Brown Dodgers, but to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers organization, starting with the Montreal Royals if he could make the team, and later on, if he made it, with the Brooklyn Dodgers professional baseball team. "I want to win the pennant and we need ball players! Do you think you can do it?" Scout Clyde Sukeforth remembered that Robinson "waited, and waited, and waited before answering.... We were all just looking at him." Then he said, "Yes."³

The simple answer was followed by an intense, emotional three-hour session in which Branch Rickey disclosed he'd had Robinson's background investigated for criminal problems, knew about his college grades and honorable discharge from military service, and even that Jackie regularly attended church and neither drank nor smoked. He knew Robinson and black boxer Joe Louis had challenged the military's rules against allowing black enlisted men to become officers, and Jackie had become a second lieutenant. Rickey also knew Robinson had been court-martialed and exonerated when he protested the seating of black soldiers in the rear of buses on army bases.

Then Rickey, a devout Methodist who wouldn't attend ballgames on Sunday and prohibited his players from using profanity, role-played a succession of foul-mouth bigots of the type he knew would try to provoke Robinson, including a spectator, headwaiter, hotel manager, sportswriter, and a succession of players who would try to spike him with their cleats or bean him with a ball or umpires who would make biased calls. Finally, Jackie demanded, "Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who's afraid to fight back?" Rickey shot back, "I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back. You will symbolize a crucial cause. One incident, just one incident, can set it back 20 years."⁴

What Branch Rickey did not explain to Robinson was the reason why Lincoln's portrait hung in his office and why he personally viewed Jim Crow as unethical. While coaching for Ohio Wesleyan in 1910, a hotel in South Bend, Indiana a hotel manager had refused to provide a room for Rickey's black baseball player Charley Thomas. Finally, Rickey convinced the man to allow him to share his own room with Thomas. Rickey recalled Thomas rubbing at his hands, ashamed of the color of his skin and vowed, "Charley, the day will come when they won't have to be white."⁵

When Rickey became president of the Dodgers in 1943, he was resolved to proceed with what he called his "noble experiment," his plan to sign a black ballplayer to his major league team. Branch Rickey would not only be defying Jim Crow, he was preparing to defy organized baseball. Years earlier, in 1901, Baltimore Orioles manager John J. McGraw had tried to pass off Charlie Grant, a second baseman from the Negro Leagues who had high cheekbones and straight hair, as Charlie Tokohama, a Native American. White Sox president Charlie Comisky turned McGraw in and McGraw was banned from the white leagues. Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the Commissioner of Baseball, given absolute power by the owners in 1920 to clean up the sport following the "Black Sox" scandal, met in late 1943 with members of the Black Publishers' Association and activist-

entertainer Paul Robeson along with all sixteen team owners and both league presidents. Robeson told them, "Because baseball is a national game, it is up to baseball to see that discrimination does not become an American pattern."⁶ However, the meeting did not end segregated baseball. When Leo Durocher, the Brooklyn Dodgers manager, complained about the "unwritten law," that he would hire "colored players if they were not barred by the owners," Landis replied, "There is no rule, formal or informal, or any understanding -- unwritten, subterranean or sub-anything -- against the hiring of Negro players by the teams of organized baseball. Negroes are not barred from organized baseball -- never have been in the 21 years I have served."⁷

Landis died in November of 1944 and was succeeded as Commissioner of Baseball by Albert B. "Happy" Chandler, former governor of Kentucky. Chandler was supportive of Rickey's plan stating, ""If they can fight and die on Okinawa, Guadalcanal [and] in the South Pacific, they can play ball in America." ⁸ Branch Rickey had a recent law, the Quinn-Ives Act, passed by the New York State Legislature to prohibit discrimination in hiring, on his side as well as New York City mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia who had created an "End Jim Crow in Baseball" committee.⁹ Nonetheless, when Branch Rickey petitioned baseball to allow him to integrate the league, the owners voted 15-1 against his request. A few days later, Chandler overrode the vote.

In his autobiography, *I Never Had it Made*, Jackie remembers Rickey concluding the grueling interview by saying, "We can't fight our way through this, Robinson. We've got no army, there's virtually no one on our side. And I'm afraid that many fans will be hostile. We'll be in a tough position. We can win only if I convince the world that I'm doing this because you're a great ballplayer and a fine gentleman. If you're a good enough man, we can make this a start in the right direction. But let me tell you, it's going to take an awful lot of courage." He then offered Jackie an English translation of Giovanni Papini's *Life of Christ* and pointed at a passage quoting Jesus, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."¹⁰ Rickey then demanded, "Now, can you do it? I know you are naturally combative. But for three years -- three years -- you will have to do it the only way it can be done. Three years -- can you do it?" Putting a fist in Robinson's face, Rickey shouted, "What do you do?"

Jackie Robinson answered softly, "Mr. Rickey, I've got two cheeks. If you want to take this gamble, I'll promise you there will be no incidents."¹¹

Satisfied, Branch Rickey offered him a contract. Jackie Robinson signed the contract for a salary of \$600 per month and a \$3,500 signing bonus. (According to estimates, Jackie earned \$30,000-\$35,000 dollars by 1950.) Rickey's desire to place Robinson with Montreal was based on his belief that Jackie would face less racism in Canada than the United States. Hector Racine, president of the Montreal Royals, certainly was fair-minded. Racine declared, "Negroes fought alongside whites and shared the foxhole dangers, and they should get a fair trial at baseball."¹²

This lesson was written by Jean West, a teacher at RJ Longstreet Elementary in Florida.

¹ Arnold Rampersad. *Jackie Robinson, A Biography*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 126.

² Rachel Robinson. *Jackie Robinson, An Intimate Portrait*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1996), p. 37.

³ Rampersad, p. 126.

⁴ Gordon Edes. "Opening a New Wide World: Robinson's Impact Felt Well Beyond the Chalk Line," *The Boston Globe*, 28 March 1997.

⁵ "Jackie Robinson, An American Hero," <http://www.dodgers2001.com/kids/classroom/jackie.htm>, accessed 2 May 2002.

⁶ Kenneth Pringle. "Landis, Robeson, & Robinson," APBnews.com, Article reposted at Sportsjones.com, 24 August 2001, p. 1

⁷ Pringle, p. 2.

⁸ Larry Schwartz, "Jackie changed face of sports," Espn.com, 2002.

⁹ Lamb, p. 178.

¹⁰ Rampersad, p. 126.

¹¹ Dave Kindred. "Jackie Robinson: One man, alone," *The Sporting News*, 1997.

¹² Chris Lamb. "'I Never Want to Take Another Trip Like This One': Jackie Robinson's Journey to Integrate Baseball," *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 182.