

Chandler, Albert Benjamin with Vance Trimble. *Heroes, Plain Folks, and Skunks: The Life and Times of Happy Chandler*. Chicago: Bonus Books, Inc., 1989. Pp. 303. Illustrations, no notes, index. \$18.95.

Albert Benjamin "Happy" Chandler's autobiography, written with Vance Trimble, portrays a remarkable career that included service as Kentucky's lieutenant governor (1933-1935), governor (1935-1939, 1955-1959), and United States Senator (1940-1945). Many Americans, however, remember Happy Chandler as Commissioner of Baseball (1946-1951) during a turbulent period which witnessed, among other things, player unionization through the Baseball Guild, competition from the Mexican "outlaw" League, suspension of Leo Durocher, and most importantly, the desegregation of professional baseball. Chandler paints his twenty-two chapter text with fascinating details, a striking achievement considering that he authored the book shortly after his ninetieth birthday. His witty homespun delivery endears the author to the reader.

While much of his national fame stems from his tenure as baseball commissioner, Chandler spent most of his career in the political arena. His outgoing personality won him a large constituency in Kentucky during the most critical stages of the Great Depression. His self-proclaimed "power of persuasion" enabled the Kentuckian to build a strong coalition of old guard Democrats that carried him to the governorship at the tender age of thirty-seven. Emphasizing strong ethical principles, Chandler's "no nonsense" approach as governor helped to check Kentucky's downward economic slide by the middle 1930s. From 1940 to 1945 he served in the United States Senate; in this period he also established a lasting friendship with comedian Bob Hope, who penned the "Forword" to Chandler's book. Through this relationship the Kentuckian developed close ties with several Hollywood notables.

Happy Chandler became baseball's Commissioner during a momentous era in the history of the national pastime. Indeed, Chandler's brief tenure might have been the most hectic experienced by any commissioner. The reader will

note that Chandler's feisty stance as baseball czar carries over into his account of each crisis, whether it be the Baseball Guild, the Mexican League raids, the suspension of Leo Durocher, or the Jackie Robinson episode. Chandler never second-guesses himself in any episode. He instead often portrays himself as a benevolent monarch. The Commissioner, was, in fact, exceedingly self-righteous and inflexible. According to Chandler, he approached the emerging Baseball Guild, as a compassionate Commissioner ready and willing to champion players' rights. Yet he withheld recognition of the fledgling union and even threatened suspension when the Guild considered striking for benefits such as player's pensions. Indeed, suspension was a weapon often utilized by Chandler. For instance, dismissing the Mexican League as simply "stupid" baseball, he suspended those major league players who opted for Mexico; he claimed that "the Pasquel brothers were totally outlaw operators, and were not at all interested in what was decent and beneficial for baseball in the United States." Chandler again used this tool when he banned Leo Durocher for one year. The Commissioner's vague justification was that Durocher was "guilty of conduct detrimental to the game." It is, however, Chandler's account of the Jackie Robinson saga that requires careful reading; his self-aggrandizing version of events is misleading. The book's cover photograph shows Chandler extending a welcoming hand to Jackie Robinson. In the text itself, Chandler proudly proclaims himself a pioneer equal to Branch Rickey. According to other reliable sources, however, Commissioner Chandler did little more than give Rickey his blessing. According to Jules Tygiel in *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, Chandler remained "mute" throughout the entire proceeding; he "appears as no more than a bit player in these historic events." (p. 82) In fact, Arthur Mann, in his biography of Branch Rickey, does not even address Chandler's role in the matter. To be sure, Happy Chandler's "blessing" was not unimportant and, indeed, accelerated the eventual integration of blacks into the game. Chandler, nonetheless, clearly overstates his role; the reality is that he played a minimal part both during and immediately following Jackie Robinson's entry.

Happy Chandler returned to politics following his ouster from baseball in 1951; four years later he reclaimed the Kentucky governorship. During this period he also failed in an attempt to win the Democratic nomination for president. Following his tenure as governor, Chandler remained a popular figure in the Kentucky political arena but never again held major office. While serving as a trustee of the University of Kentucky in the 1980s he made a widely-reported racial slur. Following large-scale protests on the campus, Chandler apologized for what he believed to be a "minor issue." Indeed, he blamed the media—a popular target in his book—for exaggerating the episode. Never does Chandler question his own judgment.

Heroes, Plain Folks, and Skunks is a charming, witty, and warm narrative. Its strength lies in the manner with which Chandler relates his personal triumphs and tragedies. If the author often paints his own portrait larger than life, the reader is nonetheless entertained. The critic will note some minor flaws. For

instance, one might expect that a chapter entitled “The Last-Gasp Pass That Elected Me Governor” would feature his gubernatorial triumph-but not until three chapters later does he actually deal with the election. In addition, several photographs appear to be misplaced in the text, while the caption for another is incorrect. On a more substantive level, scholars who look to Chandler’s autobiography for information and insight into “what really happened” will be disappointed-they will find that Happy Chandler is foremost among the heroes and his opponents are almost always among the skunks.

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