

Fields, Wilmer. *My Life in the Negro Leagues, An Autobiography*. With Foreword by John B. Holway. Westport. CT: Meckler Publishing. 1992. Pp. 91. Appendix, index. \$29.50.

Wilmer Fields enjoyed a great career as both a pitcher and hitter in the Negro Leagues and in Latin America from 1939 through 1958, though he missed three years to serve his country during the Second World War. Fields vividly recounts those days in his autobiography, highlighting events beginning with his birth in 1922, the start of his family and playing days, through the end of his career. He emphasizes his baseball achievements but never loses sight of the joy and importance of his family. The text and John B. Holway's introduction provide the reader with a complete picture of Wilmer Fields, the ball player and the man.

Fields began his baseball career playing sandlot ball in Manassas, Virginia. The Homestead Grays gave him a tryout against a semi-pro club from Ballston, Virginia, when he was only 17. After helping to win that first ball

game in 1939. Fields signed a contract to join the famous Grays. As the youngest player on the team, Fields found himself in a whole new world. He learned from the veteran players and remained with the Grays throughout his Negro League career. By the mid- 1940s he had become one of the best pitchers in the game, pitching in all of the Grays' major contests. Like other top pitchers he took the mound against teams such as the Kansas City Monarchs and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, while the rest of the pitching staff led the team during barnstorming trips.

In the 1950s. Fields played throughout Latin America and Canada. making such good money south of the border that he turned down three different offers from major league clubs. Loving the game of baseball as he did and happy where he was, he did not want to keep moving his family around or take a salary cut as many did when they made the jump to the majors. The average salary in the white major leagues was approximately \$5,000 in the early 1950s. but Fields reports that in 1953 he received \$3,000 a month plus expenses for his family in the Dominican Republic. Why would a player forgo that kind of money and the enthusiasm of the Latin American fans to risk racial abuse in the United States? Fields and many others made the choice to finish out their careers in the Negro Leagues which had been good to them and which continued to offer them the chance to play the game they loved.

During the winter months, white all-star teams played semi-pro and Negro League teams across the country, winning and losing their share of games. After winning eight pennants with the Grays. Fields won two championships in Latin America, and when pitching for Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1956 won the Global World Series. In addition to the team crowns, Fields received seven Most Valuable Player awards in the 1950s (p. 87).

The Homestead Grays provided Fields with the opportunity to play alongside and against some of the greatest ball players in history, both white and black. He describes the experience of watching Ray Brown, Bob Feller and Roy Welmaker pitch. Fields much admired first baseman Buck Leonard, who taught him a great deal about the game. Two other players Fields highly respected as gentlemen and athletes were catcher Josh Gibson and pitcher Sam Bankhead. Character interested Fields nearly as much as a player's accomplishments. The Negro Leaguers took great pride in their teams and their skills, believing they were major leaguers also.

Fields ends his brief but interesting story with a discussion of his family and the many opportunities baseball provided for them. Fields believed that there was a price for everything. Any sacrifices he made, such as turning down the major league Senators, Dodgers, and Yankees, were offset by the rewards that came from playing Negro League baseball. Through Fields' words the reader gains a true sense of life in the Negro Leagues, and how seriously those ball players treated the game. Baseball was their life and their job.