

Professional Baseball as an Avenue of Social Mobility 1900-1919

by

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Historians have long accepted the conventional wisdom about baseball which claimed that it was an excellent avenue of social mobility for indigent, uneducated young men with limited alternative opportunities. The purpose of this paper is to examine that belief by studying the social origins and the subsequent work histories of major league ballplayers active during the Progressive Era when baseball was at its height.

To get an idea of the family backgrounds of professional baseball players I sent a questionnaire to former major leaguers active before 1920 who were still alive in 1971. Since college men were overrepresented among the sixty-eight respondents, I weighted the sample to obtain a more representative group. I found that 39.6 percent had white-collar fathers, 21.8 percent had fathers who were farmers, and 34.1 percent had manual blue-collar fathers. This was a remarkable result since one-third of all adult males in 1910 were agricultural workers and 45.9 percent were manual workers.

Contrary to popular myth, these athletes came primarily from cities and not rural regions. At a time when less than two out of every five Americans lived in cities, 58.6 percent of the major leaguers came from communities with over 2,500 inhabitants. Nearly one in four came from metropolitan areas with populations in excess of 100,000. These men were almost exclusively of old-stock American, Irish, or German descent. Less than 1 percent were the offspring of recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who were the people at the bottom of the social ladder and who were most in need of alternative opportunities for advancement. The professional ballplayers were far better educated than other men their age for 17.9 percent had attended college compared to less than 10 percent for all other young men.



Some of the participants at a NASSH luncheon.