

“Black and White Made Green:” Integrated Baseball Games in a Segregated Society, 1910-1940

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The Homestead Grays visited Akron, Ohio, to play the Goodyear Wingfoots, Firestone Non-Skids, or General Tires most every year during the 1920s. As one of the leading black teams in the nation, the Grays never lost a game in the Rubber Capital of the World. But the factory team representing the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company thought its luck was about to change in June, 1926. Forty-two year-old fastballer Smokey Joe Williams was to pitch for the Grays; surely, the employee newspaper Wingfoot Clan opined, a squad of the caliber of the Wingfoots could beat such an “old man.” It was not to be. Williams beat Goodyear 10-4, striking out nine. the story in the employee newspaper covering the game mentioned nothing of Williams’ advanced age.

Such games between local white teams and major league black squads were, in fact, not uncommon because they served the proposes of both. Teams in the black majors barnstormed between league games to make extra money, competing for a larger portion of the gate or higher set fee for winning. As a result, only one game in three was played by black teams within the league. These games were profitable to industrials squads as well, but in a different way. Companies sponsoring baseball teams in city leagues often did so as part of a broader employee welfare program. Management used welfarism, or “employee betterment,” as a tool to build company spirit, reduce turnover, and therefore, deter unionization efforts. Baseball teams of the 1910s, and 1920s served a function for companies akin to that of collegiate sports on campuses today. Games played against such competitors -- the Wingfoot Clan called Homestead “one of the fastest colored teams in the nation” -- attracted larger crowds to root for the company colors. Profitability prevailed over race, as Negro National League outfielder Jimmie Crutchfield said: “everyone got along just fine, because we knew that black plus white made green.”

Companies had been sponsoring “varsity” teams since the early twentieth century as part of the growing trend of employee welfare as a management tool. Welfarism sought to use better working conditions, more benefits, and esprit de corps to increase worker loyalty, reduce turnover, and silence the siren song of unions. the newly formed Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1913 that the reason most cited

by businesses for sponsoring such programs was keeping unions out or their growth in check. Better lighting, safer workplaces, death and disability insurance, lunchrooms, coffee breaks, libraries, classes, housing developments, athletic facilities, and a host of other programs strove to keep workers happier, more loyal, and too busy to spend time in union halls. By the mid-1910s firms as diverse as the Firestone Tire & rubber company, National Cash Register, Amoskeag, H.J. Heinz, union Pacific Railroad, and Buick sponsored wide-ranging programs which included ball teams.

These teams mirrored the racial attitudes of the period -- that is, they were all-white teams in all-white leagues. The relatively few black industrial teams played in segregated leagues on lesser fields with limited support. As with their Caucasian counterparts, these teams were often the only baseball available to African-American spectators. The segregation prevalent in housing, hiring, education, and everyday life extended to the baseball diamond -- but not always.

Many industrial teams also played exhibition games against town teams, industrial counterparts, and professional squads. Among the most popular competitors were professional black teams. By the time Goodyear played Homestead, more fans had seen Smokey Joe Williams pitch than had watched Walter Johnson, more had witnessed stolen bases by Cool Papa Bell than by Ty Cobb, more were awed by home runs by Josh Gibson than swats by Babe Ruth. Yet these integrated games were an accepted part of the baseball season for many. Racial slurs were at a minimum, and reporting of games in employee magazines and papers bears a remarkably small hint of the racial attitudes of the time. Teams such as the Pittsburgh Crawfords, Kansas City Monarchs, and St. Louis Stars were gate attractions, as fans fled to the park to see some of the greatest African-American players of the century.

This paper relies upon company magazines and newspaper published for employees, black newspapers with more national coverage, and oral histories with players. it explores the dichotomy such games presented -- segregated baseball and society which permitted, and even encouraged, such interracial games; long-held views that African-American players were inferior while black teams rarely lost such games to white squads; racism which promulgated society but was set aside when it was profitable to do so. These games took place and were well-attended by both black and white spectators against a backdrop of Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis' opposition to integrated teams and leagues, of "gentlemen's agreements" among owners to not sign black players, of a society in which the doctrine of separate-but-equal was the sanctioned law of the land.