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America, Baseball, and Historical Memory in 1956: The Way We Never Were

In the late summer of 1995 as Mickey Mantle was dying from cancer, letters poured into his Dallas hospital expressing the writers' admiration for Mantle and the America of the 1950s when the Yankee outfielder dominated the sport.

Correspondents (many of them white males) recalled lost youth and yearned for an America free from crime, decaying morals, culture wars, economic insecurity, and racial conflict. In short, to many Mantle epitomized the good ole' days before America got off track in the 1960s. Mantle encouraged this perspective with a book of memoirs co-authored by Phil Pepe. In *My Favorite Summer 1956*, Mantle recalls his most successful season, winning baseball's triple crown, and describing America in terms of affluence and consensus (although these are academic terms not exactly in Mantle's vocabulary). But was that the reality of baseball and America in 1956?

A detailed reading of *The Sporting News*, which continued to serve as a trade paper for baseball in 1956, indicates considerable economic insecurity and an insensitivity to the winds of racial change which were gathering force in the late 1950s. For example, as minor league attendance continued to decline and major league baseball failed to recapture the postwar boom crowds, there was considerable concern among the baseball establishment regarding issues of expansion, Congressional oversight, and the role of television. Players were becoming more restive, and the Major League Baseball Players Association, representing what *The Sporting News* termed as the hired hands, confronted baseball owners over the issues of pensions and minimum salaries. While an effort was made to maintain the rhetoric of consensus, it was evident in 1956 that the players, led by Cleveland star Bob Feller (who would later be very critical or jealous of the players), were on a collision course with management, whose position was often articulated by former player and Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg. Player discontent was also evident in a controversial *Collier's* magazine piece in which Brooklyn Dodger star Duke Snider confessed that he only played the sport for money.

On racial matters, baseball management tended to view the sport as a model of integration for the country. Yet, Texas League officials caved in before a Louisiana law barring inter-racial athletic contests, and the New York Yankees claimed that they could not find another Afro-American athlete with the character of Elston Howard. The insensitivity of the sport and time, as well as power relationships, were quite apparent in the pages of *The Sporting News*. Businesswomen who purchased a minor league franchise were referred to as "gals"; Cleveland Indian pitcher Herb Score was described as looking for twenty scalps when he sought twenty victories; and a confrontation between Jackie Robinson and Milwaukee pitcher Lew Burdette, in which Robinson was called a

watermelon eater, was termed an argument over the Afro-American's weight. In other words, this study of baseball in 1956 demonstrates that the values of consensus were not the reality of sport and society, but rather a nostalgic historical memory for Americans uncomfortable with change in our society. The issues of race, gender, and class were certainly alive and well in the 1950s.

This paper relies upon an extensive investigation of *The Sporting News* and popular periodical literature in 1956, secondary historical literature on the 1950s, and the memoirs of such athletes as Mantle, Feller, and Greenberg.