A Historical Look at the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Impact of Black Baseball on American Society

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Abstract

The history and impact of Black Baseball in Pittsburgh is by no means something to be forgotten. The accomplishments in the game of its "Forgotten Heroes" alone, deserves to be recognized. Known as one of the greatest baseball clubs in the Negro leagues, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, began as a team made up of youth from the Hill District but later acquired names like Harold "Hooks" Tinker, and Hall of Famers, Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, "Cool" Papa Bell, Judy Johnson, and Oscar Charleston. These men, through their efforts on the sandlots of Pittsburgh, paved the way for your Jackie Robinsons and Larry Dobys, who were able to break to color barriers of baseball in America. Not only did the integration of major league baseball bring about the downfall of Black baseball, but it ignited a flame for social reform in America that dominoed into the Civil Rights Movement. For years, historians have debated over the origins of integration in our society. Now, with scholarly works like Rob Ruck's *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh*, Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment; Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, and the documentary, *Kings on the Hill: Baseball's Forgotten Heroes*, there exist new hypotheses to engage. Finally, these gifts create a window in which we can look back and remember the rich history of Black baseball, its players, and its impact on American society.

Introduction

Baseball in America has always been a recreational and entertaining event where crowds of people put their "cares" away and come out to cheer for their favorite team. Due to color barriers banning them from playing in the majors, blacks created their own baseball leagues, including the Negro National League, in 1920. Baseball's unforgettable heroes exhibited their uncanny skills on sandlots and rock-hidden fields for little to no pay entertaining colored and white fans across America. The Negro Leagues allowed blacks the opportunity, denied to them by white America, to show off their skills doing something they loved, playing baseball.

63
In America’s steel city, Pittsburgh, black baseball took on a new meaning during the late 1920’s and early 1930’s. Teams like the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays started to develop in to clubs with players that would later dominate black baseball until its demise. As players in a game that was racially segregated, these men of “extraordinary” talent lived and played America’s favorite pastime without the fame and glory of white newspapers, ignored in American sports history. Players like Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Oscar Charleston, “Cool” Papa Bell, Sam Streeter, Judy Johnson, Harold “Hooks” Tinker, Harry “Tincan” Kincannon, Charlie Hughes, Buck Leonard, Jud Wilson, and others entertained black America with ability comparable to that of the white major and minor leaguers. Inspite of proving themselves for years playing in the Negro leagues, color barriers still banned blacks from major league baseball, not to mention segregated them from white America.

The Little Harlem of Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh in the early 1900’s was the symbol of America’s industrial city. Due to its location, technological innovations, and Andrew Carnegie, Pittsburgh produced 64% of the country’s structural steel, 57% of its crucible steel, half of its coking coal, almost half of its Bessemer steel, and 26% of its steel rails in 1900.1 With job opportunities booming during Industrialization, blacks and white Southerners, and immigrants began to flood into regions of Pittsburgh looking for a better way of life. Pittsburgh’s unique layout made up of bluffs, hills, rivers, and ravines naturally divided the city into many smaller communities which reinforced the clustering of different ethnic and racial groups. Soon these communities flourished with the Irish, Germans, Poles, Serbo-Croatians, Russians, and blacks from the American South. The population of the city nearly doubled between 1880 and 1900. Pittsburgh’s black population, concentrated in the Hill District, East Liberty, and Homewood-Brushton grew to a total of 20,355 in 1900.2 During the next 30 years the number of blacks in Pittsburgh grew to over 55,000 making it the fifth largest black population in the country. With the rising percentage of blacks in Pittsburgh, the Hill District began to emerge as a thriving community with its wealth of internationally known musicians, flourishing black businesses, and popular entertainment spots. Claude McKay, a popular black author during the Harlem Renaissance called Pittsburgh’s Hill District “the crossroads of the world.”3 It was also known as “Little Harlem” with all the trimmings; five movie theaters, drug and furniture stores, entertainment clubs, the center for music, art, and literature, a lively, prosperous, and influential section of town from the 1930’s to the 1950’s.4 Living in the Hill was considered to be a unique demographic phenomena where Italians, Poles, and other ethnic immigrants lived and interacted with blacks creating a diverse atmosphere. You didn’t have to leave the Hill, everything you
wanted, clothes, meat, pharmaceuticals, a hair cut, etc., could be bought right within the Hill District. Wylie Avenue was the center for most of the Hill's activity. "Woogie" Harris ran the Crystal Barbershop across from Gus Greenlee's Crawford Grill#1, both located on Wylie Avenue. The Hill District was an exciting place to live during the early 20th century. It was the living stage for talented blacks in arts, literature, music, business, and sports to display their abilities not only to blacks but to whites who considered them to be inferior. It was also home to the Pittsburgh Crawfords, a baseball team where talented black players flourished with the dream of being the best. In reaching this goal, with America watching, blacks proved that they were not inferior to whites, creating the foundation for integration in society.

The History of the Pittsburgh Crawfords

Known as one of the greatest baseball clubs in the Negro leagues, the Pittsburgh Crawfords began as a team made up of youth from the Hill District. This diverse community allowed both blacks and whites to play together on the sandlots and streets of the Hill. As the game moved away from the sandlots and became more competitive, racial lines began to be drawn, establishing color barriers for blacks in baseball. Consequently, as historian Rob Ruck notes, "sandlot clubs were rarely composed of both black and white players, even though some may have grown up playing ball together." The Crawfords grew out of this interracial mix but eventually became an all-black squad.

The roots of the Crawfords stem from the South where original player Bill Harris was born, Christmas day 1909 in Calhoun, Alabama. Bill's oldest brother, Earl, was the first to leave the South moving to Pittsburgh and working construction jobs. His first exposure to baseball in the South was in watching small-town teams and big-city clubs like the Birmingham Black Barons and the Memphis Red Sox as a youngster. But it wasn't until Harris came to Pittsburgh's Hill District that he really learned how to play ball. In 1925, Harris played and managed a team at McKelvey School in the Hill. One of his closest friends, Teenie Harris, no relation managed another team in the Hill, Watt School. Both teams were made up of thirteen to fifteen year olds of different ethnic backgrounds wanting to play baseball. There were a few blacks, Italians, and Jewish boys playing on either team. The two teams faced off twice resulting in two victories by Teenie's Watt School team by a margin of one run in each contest. After taking a good look at the talent on both teams Bill and Teenie Harris decided to organize a ball team made up predominantly of the black players from each team leaving the others behind. The following season, 1926, the players returned to play in the city's recreation league, representing the Crawford Bath House as the Crawfords. The team gained financial support from prominent businessmen of the Hill,
The Sloping Halls Review—1996

patrons. One in particular, Gus Greenlee, owner of Wylie Avenue’s Crawford Grill#1, bought the team new uniforms and they won the city’s recreation league pennant. For the next two seasons, the Crawfords continued to represent the Crawford Bath House and the recreation center as a self-organized team coached by Jim Dorsey Sr., a man from the center.

In 1927, the Crawfords, with the help of five Jewish boys won the Senior Inter-Playground League Championship trophy. As the Crawford youngsters began to develop as one of the sandlots best teams, little did they know that the remaining nucleus of players needed to reach the top were playing alongside Harold Tinker with Olympian Earl Johnson’s ET (Edgar Thompson) Community ball club. Harold Tinker was born in Birmingham on March 23, 1905. He later moved to Pittsburgh’s Hill District in 1918 with his family where his father found work at Horne’s Department Store downtown after living in Mt. Washington for a year. Tinker began playing baseball in the South around the age of seven. At the age of nine, Tinker’s sister’s boyfriend took him to his first professional baseball game at Rickwood Park to see the Birmingham Black Barons play.

Once in Pittsburgh, Tinker’s childhood dream of becoming a baseball player began to develop into a reality. At the age of fifteen, Tinker played with his first summer baseball team, WEMCO, the Westinghouse Manufacturing Company. As a member of what Tinker recently called “the Knot-Hole Gang,” he lived at Forbes Field watching baseball games all summer long, desiring to put together the best Negro team in the history of the game. After a year, he joined the Pittsburgh Keystone Juniors for one season and was then on to the Pittsburgh Monarchs in 1922 to 1925. As a Monarch, Tinker held a job as a porter, then assistant, and finally head shipper at the Pathay News Film Exchange. As well as being captain of the team, Tinker did the publicity and kept records for the team. In 1926, Tinker faced the Crawfords for the first time as a center-fielder for the ET (Edgar Thompson) Community.

In 1927, Tinker joined the Crawfords. He also brought with him four of ET Community’s best players, Gilbert Hill, “Harod” Kimbo, Claude Johnson, and Ormsby Roy. This merger turned out to be the formula needed to make the Pittsburgh Crawfords the greatest local community semi-pro team in 1928. Most of the players grew up in the Hill and some grew up in East Liberty, but one young man by the name of Josh Gibson came from the North Side. Indeed, Harold Tinker discovered Josh Gibson, the legendary hitter of black baseball often referred to as the “Black Babe Ruth”. In the 1927 Campbell All-star game Tinker and Neil Harris played with the 16 year old Josh Gibson who was playing third-base. “It was the worst field I ever played on,” said Tinker, “but I saw Josh make some phenomenal plays from third inspite of all the pebbles, stones and gullies on the field.” It was then, after talking to Harris, that Tinker asked Josh “would you like to play for a real team son?” Josh responded, “yes sir.” This addition completed the synthesis of a dominating team, engineered by the work and dreams of Bill and Teenie
Harris and Harold "Hooks" Tinker. But right across the Monongahela River was the Homestead Grays, one of Andrew "Rube" Foster's Negro National League's best.

The Homestead Grays started in about 1911. The next year Buddy Clay, Chief Walton, Russell and Posey left the Pittsburgh Giants, Clay Giants, and the Ripley Giants to play with the Grays, then being operated by John Freyli Alexander and Jerry Veney, the founders of the club.16 Cumberland Posey ("Cum"), born in 1891 in Homestead, became the captain of the team in 1914. Cum Posey, known for putting together and playing with the best black basketball team, the Loendi Club, in the 1920's soon became the team's manager.17 The Grays were first put on salary in 1922, after Rube Foster started the Negro National Baseball League. Over the years the Grays built an roster of players like Frank Wickware, the first player signed, Jess Barber, Page, Oscar Charleston, and "Smokey" Joe Williams, that earned the Grays the glory of being the best professional team in the area. Harold "Hooks" Tinker and the Pittsburgh Crawfords had one goal, to beat the Homestead Grays. In their first meeting at Forbes Field the Grays won a very close 3-2 battle over J.W. King's Crawfords. In 1930, after the Crawfords reached the "top of the heap" as Tinker recently put it, some of the players began to get tired of riding to games in the bed of J.W. King's truck.18 Bill Harris remembering when proprietor of the Crawford Grill#1, Gus Greenlee, bought him a new uniform as a youngster suggested that the team ask him to take over the team. After a vote was taken, the Crawfords made a pivotal move in their history, making Greenlee the new sponsor/owner of the team.19

Gus Greenlee & The Negro National Baseball League

W.A.(Gus) Greenlee, a veteran of World War I, moved to Pittsburgh in 1920 from Marion, North Carolina. Greenlee opened the Crawford Grill#1 several years later, which was a restaurant/dance hall where Pittsburgh's best musicians played. The Crawford Grill#1 was not only an entertainment spot but it was a numbers joint. Greenlee made a fortune as the numbers King of Pittsburgh, bootlegging alcoholic beverages from his Grill.20 As the owner of the Grill, Greenlee became acquainted with many of the players of the Negro leagues and in 1930 he sponsored the local team, the Crawfords. But by 1931, Greenlee had begun building up his team so that they could compete with the Grays. Greenlee two days after coming to the Crawford club gave players an ultimatum to either work or be full-time professional ball players, giving them a few weeks to decide. Cash was no expense for Greenlee. He bought the team a $10,000 brand-new bus and built Greenlee Field off of Bedford Avenue at a construction cost of $100,000. Contrary to popular belief this was not the first Negro ballpark. The first Negro ballpark was built by the
Walker brothers at the corner of Chauncey and Hombre Way in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.\textsuperscript{21}

Under Greenlee, the Crawfords met up with the Grays for the second time on June 19, 1931. This time the Crawfords were blanked by the Grays by a score of 9-0. The players coming off this tough loss began to win again and prepare for another match up with the Grays. Greenlee signed pitcher Satchel Paige and catcher Perkins to load up for the Grays especially since Josh Gibson was now playing for them. The Pittsburgh Courier favored the Grays 2 to 1 but headlines later read: \textit{Paige Stops Grays As Crawfords Cop} and \textit{Grays Bow In 10-7 Thriller}. Beating the Grays was the epitome of Tinker’s career and with Greenlee’s ultimatum deadline drawing nearer he told Gus after the victorious game he was going to work and not be a full-time professional ball player. Shortly after Tinker’s leaving Greenlee signed “Cool” Papa Bell, the man who could turn off the light switch and run over and hop into the bed before the light went out. In 1933, Greenlee started the second Negro National Baseball League called the National Organization of Professional Baseball Clubs. It included teams like the American Giants, Homestead Grays, Indianapolis ABC’s, Detroit Stars, Columbus Blue Birds, Nashville Giants, Baltimore Black Sox, and the Pittsburgh Crawfords.\textsuperscript{22}

The Pittsburgh Crawfords won the pennant in 1933, 1935, and had the most wins during the 1936 season.\textsuperscript{23} This league flourished throughout the 1930’s until the integration of blacks into the major leagues on October 29, 1945. The Pittsburgh Crawfords 1935-36 teams have been considered by many including Harold Tinker and Historian Robert Ruck to be the best Negro baseball team ever, due to the fact that five of the players were inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame: Oscar Charleston, “Cool” Papa Bell, Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Judy Johnson. Satchel Paige was the only one of the five who played in the major leagues for the pennant winning Cleveland Indians.

**Social Reform in America**

When World War I opened up employment possibilities in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, mass migration began in earnest; the lure of high wages and a freer life proved irresistible to a people limited to agricultural and domestic service in the land of neoslavery. The “Push-Pull” Model of Migration basically states that something in the South literally was pushing blacks out while something in the North was pulling blacks in. This was what I consider the first stage in social reform, the Great Migration. This drastically changed the dynamics of America’s cities especially the population of blacks in the North. The need for blacks in the military as well as for economic purposes constitute impersonal forces pulling them to the North. Regardless of the common forces bringing people of all colors to the indus-
A Historical Look at the *Pittsburgh Crawfords*

trial cities the relationship between blacks, whites, and other groups still seem to be one of distinction and classification. What I mean by this is that their interaction was always a racial issue.

During the 1930's and 1940's American society let alone the major leagues was segregated. The barriers Blacks faced due to the color of their skin didn’t allow them to enter areas of life they posed talents and skills in.¹⁴ Inspite of the racial tension in America something existed that created diverse communities like the Hill District for example. You’d probably never see a black bus driver or a bank teller or even a black major leaguer during these times. The mindset of most European Americans was this imaginative idea that Blacks were inferior and incapable of doing any of the above. Even Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis made “little effort to disguise his racial prejudice during his twenty-five years in office and stood as an unrelenting foe on integration.”²⁵ According to Jules Tygiel, “the men who controlled the national pastime in the twentieth century had inherited a system of rigid racial exclusion. Although theirs was a sport played primarily in cities removed from the dictates of Jim Crow, baseball officials religiously policed the color line.”²⁶

Despite the color line, the Negro National League players often displayed the ability to be in the major leagues through exhibition games against some of white America’s best athletes. Up until 1945, with the integration of major league baseball, where Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson of the Kansas City Monarchs, this imaginative mindset wasn’t challenged by white America.²⁷ This historic event created a new line of thinking that some feel suggest the possibility of Blacks becoming integrated into white society. To black America, Jackie Robinson seemed to be a “savior, a Moses leading his people out of the wilderness.”²⁸ Black baseball was a vital part of the black experience in America. Black fans came to see their favorite teams play even during the hardest years of the Depression.²⁹ When America saw how well Jackie played against the best in the majors, people began to say as Mal Goode quoted, “dem Niggers should’ve been in da majors long time ago.”³⁰ According to Rev. Harold Tinker society in Pittsburgh began to become more integrated shortly after the integration of baseball. He feels strongly that 1945 was the year that white America began to accept Blacks as somewhat equal. Over the years Blacks began getting positions as bank tellers, bus drivers, positions Whites thought they couldn’t fulfill, disseminating from the change in the minds of white America. John Vernon, Chief of Education Branch at the National Archives, feels Jackie Robinson was “critical to race relations in America” and more importantly the catalyst for “social reform.”³¹

The Negro leagues over the years have had many great players who people believed could have played major league baseball but with the advancement of one, Jackie Robinson, and others that followed, the whole country now knew they could. Even today, as we look at collegiate and
professional sports, again, the whole country knows that African-Americans "can." This struggle has continued for African-Americans to prove to America that they are just as capable if not better in any and every aspect of life. Rev. Tinker was talking to a white student at Slippery Rock University who said, "I don't understand why Whites didn't believe you were 'good enough,' since you had been proving yourself all along?" Tinker replied, "it was pure prejudice young lady, something you probably don't understand." I believe it was and still is something more complex and deeply rooted in some white Americans' minds than just prejudice. This invisible barrier which continues to discriminate against Blacks in society is something that exists inspite of integration. Inspite of the racial tensions today, we can look back and better understand the dynamics of our society through the role Black baseball played in American History. Let us not forget what those talented men did in order to break the color barriers, but let us continue to discover ways collectively to breakdown the barriers that exist in America today.

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A Historical Look at the *Pittsburgh Crawfords*

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