

CHANGING TIMES

World War II and the Kansas City Monarchs

By Dr. Milbert O. Brown

The year 1941 marked the beginning of an unforgettable period in American history. While some U.S. soldiers basked in the comfortable confines of a Hawaiian breeze, half a world away the bulk of the United States citizenry had begun to rebuild their lives after digging out of the rubble from America's Great Depression years. The country was emerging from the valley that once had birthed unforeseen challenges.

The daybreak of a promising new decade presented hopeful fruits for American growth in commerce and industry. Race relations were thought to have improved; after all, the heavyweight boxing crown was worn by a fellow called the Brown Bomber: Joe Louis. The Negro Leagues' East-West All-Star Game in Chicago drew a crowd of just over 50,000 people.

But Jim Crow still smothered the hopes and dreams of Black people. The lynching of Black men remained a custom practiced in small Southern hamlets and large Northern towns. The excitement of seeing a little white baseball dance through the air still could not replace the hurt that families felt when they heard how their loved ones died at the hands of a racist mob. One such individual, Felix Hall, 19, had volunteered to train with an all-Black Army unit but was later found hanging from a tree with a rope around his neck on the Army base at Fort Benning, Georgia.

In December 1941, the world saw the smoldering fire that charred the iron guns and, even from a distance, they



could smell the burned human flesh; and the pillaring smoke opened America's nostrils during a time filled with disarray. After an early-morning surprise attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor, just west of Honolulu, on December 7, much of the United States Navy's Pacific fleet lay damaged and destroyed. Resting in the cool waters was the broken steel of the USS Arizona. The warship's hull was now surrounded by oil-contaminated waves, which served as a fluid coffin for over 1,000 sailors' bodies committed to a watery grave.

On the day when the United States was attacked, Negroes were still considered second-class citizens due to America's insidious apartheid system known as Jim Crow.



On August 25, 2021, six members of Doris Miller's family attended the ceremony at Northrop Grumman in Newport News, Virginia, where the Navy conducted the "First Cut of Steel" that signaled the formal start of construction for the fourth Ford-class aircraft carrier named the USS DORIS "DORIE" MILLER. Northrop Grumman acquired Newport News Shipbuilding in 2001.

Negro soldiers and sailors had limited possibilities while serving in the military, but that all changed after that surprise December morning: “From the moment the embers began to burn at Pearl Harbor, Black society, in general, vowed that it would not be shut out of the American war effort and its palpable unifying effects at home.”

As the Japanese pilots swooped down and targeted bombs into the belly of the USS West Virginia, Doris Miller, a Black cook from Waco, Texas, who lacked any combat training operated an anti-aircraft gun and began firing at the swirling enemy planes. Only a few hours earlier, Miller had just finished serving breakfast and was simply gathering laundry. Like society, the Navy had the perception that Blacks had low mental aptitudes and that they should be relegated to menial chores like laundry duty, serving as cooks, and shining white officers’ shoes.

Doris Miller turned that perception upside down and his act of bravery at Pearl Harbor earned him the Navy Cross. The Black press, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Black leaders publicized Miller as a symbol of Black achievement in the military.

The grandson of slaves, Miller had worked on his family’s farm but could not find work elsewhere, so he joined the Navy in 1939. The little Texas town he was from supported strong racist attitudes against Black people; in one instance, a 17-year-old boy was burned alive at the town’s square a few years before Doris’ birth in 1919.

Miller carried a 6-foot, 3-inch frame, and with over 200 pounds of weight behind his punches, he was crowned as his ship’s heavyweight boxing champion. Back in Texas, he had been the school’s fullback, and he could have played baseball well, but Doris Miller’s destiny involved more than just hitting a ball across the field.

His courageous act of heroism helped changed the military’s evaluation of Black men in uniform. It also helped to pave the way for Negro League players to be accepted as professional baseball players.

The Kansas City Monarchs during World War II

Approximately 120 Negro League baseball players participated in World War II by serving in the Army,

Army Air Corps, Navy, and Marines. The Kansas City Monarchs had over 13 players who served during the war years. Henry “Hank” Thompson, a second baseman, fought in the Battle of the Bulge in the Army’s 1695th Combat Engineers unit.

Monarchs catcher Joe Greene was part of a well-decorated unit, the 92nd Infantry. Greene’s company removed the body of disgraced Italian dictator Benito Mussolini after his execution during the liberation of Milan, Italy. The Monarchs’ Willard Brown of the Army Quartermaster Corps fought on France’s Normandy beaches. Brown, a great outfielder, was a seven-time Negro League home-run champion and was enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2006.

In 1942 the Kansas City Monarchs won the Negro World Series over the Homestead Grays. That same year, the team had a father and son drafted into the Army. Frank Duncan Jr., a catcher for the team, and his son, pitcher Frank III, created professional baseball’s first known father-son battery before their military service. According to Negro League historian James Riley, Frank Jr. was considered one of the top catchers in Negro League baseball. One of Frank Duncan’s epic stories was that Dizzy Dean, a major-league pitching great, needed a good catcher to play an exhibition game against the Monarchs. It was said that Dean pulled Duncan out of a pool room and had him catch the game. In the beginning of his career, the senior Duncan was acquired by Kansas City in a three-player trade in



1921. From 1923 to 1925, he helped the Monarchs win three Negro National League pennants.

During his career with the Monarchs, Duncan left and returned to the team four times. At the age of 42, he was drafted into the Army, serving in the 371st Infantry Regiment of the 92nd Division. Although he served in the Army for only six months, Duncan set a marksmanship record and was promoted to sergeant. Wartime service affected the careers of many baseball players and teams. After Frank Duncan III was discharged from the service, he started pitching for the Baltimore Elite Giants and played in the Mexican League but was not as productive as he had been during his time with the Monarchs.



TOP, l-r: The Monarchs 1941 World's Colored Champions and Jackie Robinson; (2nd row, l-r) Buck O'Neil and J.L. Wilkinson.

Just as Frank Duncan Jr. arrived back to the Monarchs in 1943, other Kansas City teammates were shipping out. Outfielder Ted Strong joined the Navy while Connie Johnson and James "Pea" Greene committed

to the Army. Buck O'Neil, the team's solid first baseman, was drafted and attached to a Navy Construction Battalion.

American society began to change as the Second World War progressed. More women began to work outside the home, and with the loss of many White baseball players to the armed services, the talk of Negro players integrating into the major leagues increased. A *Pittsburgh Courier* reporter asked the new commissioner, Happy Chandler, what his thoughts were on the integration of Negro players. Chandler said, "If they can fight and die in Okinawa, Guadalcanal, and in the South Pacific, they can play baseball in America."

Unlike Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, Chandler's predecessor, Chandler, a U.S. senator from Kentucky, was more commonly known as a player-friendly baseball executive. For years, Landis had a negative racial attitude toward baseball integration and "publicly maintained there was no discrimination in baseball, and privately worked against any effort to end discrimination."

Jackie Robinson Breaks Major League Color Line

One of Senator Chandler's promises was to support the continuance of baseball during World War II. The new commissioner was also responsible for ushering in Jackie Robinson's opportunity to break the color line and bringing fair treatment for Black players. After Robinson entered the league, he met with several incidents of blatant racial taunting. Chandler threatened to suspend the Philadelphia Phillies' manager, Ben Chapman, for hostile racial insults directed at Robinson.

Buck O'Neil later commented that integration for Black people still moved at a turtle's pace. While in the Navy, O'Neil got letters that informed him about how the Monarchs team was making out. One letter mentioned that the Monarchs had just signed a "colored" Army officer to play shortstop. The letter stated that this Army officer was a football and track standout named Jackie Robinson. The University of California, Los Angeles, star was an electrifying player who could hit and steal bases.



While in the Army, Lieutenant Jack Roosevelt Robinson had been waiting for his physical to clear so that he could join the 761st Tank Battalion, a segregated combat unit at Fort Hood, Texas. One day, Robinson, a handsome, gentlemanly young



man dressed in his distinguished Army uniform, flanked with officer's insignia, boarded an Army bus and set off an incident that greatly impacted his Army career. After boarding the bus, Robinson was told to move to the back of the segregated Army bus. He refused and was later court-martialed. Robinson was found not guilty and,

after he completed his service commitment, he was honorably discharged.

Kansas City Monarchs pitcher Hilton Smith had seen Robinson playing baseball for an all-Black Army team against a White service team during a 1942 exhibition game. As Robinson waited for his Army discharge papers, he heard that the Monarchs needed players, so he wrote the team and was granted a tryout.

After enduring two seasons without some of the Kansas City Monarchs' stars, who were missing due to the war, owner J.L. Wilkinson signed two players who became household names within the Negro Leagues: Jackie Robinson and Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe.

Robinson played only one season for the Monarchs, but he significantly impacted baseball history for a lifetime. Radcliffe played only 12 games with Monarchs after being hurt in a home-plate collision. He was referred to as "Double Duty" because he sometimes pitched one game of a doubleheader and then caught the other. He was a six-time Negro League All-Star, selected three times as a pitcher and three times as a catcher. Radcliffe played for a few other teams

before becoming a manager. Talent-wise, Radcliffe was equal to or greater than his younger roommate Robinson during their time with Kansas City. During their short time together, the two men had a special bond. As Radcliffe put it, “I roomed with Jackie the two months before he was called up to Montreal. I don’t think I’ve met a guy with more class in my life.”

Decline of the Negro Baseball League Teams

In 1947 Robinson was the first of five Negro League players admitted into the White major leagues; Larry Doby, Dan Bankhead, Willard Brown, and Hank Thompson were the others who soon followed. All five of the players were World War II veterans, which demonstrated that White society was more accepting of Black players who had served in the military during the war years. After the color barrier was broken, the Monarchs and other Negro Leagues teams began a rapid decline, as White minor- and major-league teams signed away all of the best Black talent.

The once-powerful Monarchs lasted until 1965; they were an independent team for the final three years of their existence as the Negro American League had finally folded after the 1962 season; the Negro National League already had disbanded after the 1948 season. Monarchs owner J.L. Wilkinson never received any benefit from Robinson’s signing by the Brooklyn Dodgers. As Hilton Smith recalled at Wilkinson’s 1964 funeral, “[T]hey just took Jackie, made all that money off him, and Wilkinson was the man that was responsible for him playing, and he didn’t get a dime out of it.”

On the other hand, one of the Monarchs players who enjoyed the fruits of Wilkinson’s grace was Satchel Paige. One of the greatest pitchers, Black or White, Paige spent the majority of his career in the Negro Leagues. He was later inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1971. Paige’s reputation allowed him to demand, and to receive, a cut of the gate, and Wilkinson provided him the use of his airplane to ferry Paige to games across the country.

Although many Monarchs players left to serve in the military during the war years, Paige remained behind and made a sizable name and income through self-promotion and by barnstorming with several teams. Paige’s glorious return to the Monarchs signaled the team’s “Second Dynasty” and the Negro World Series Championship in 1942. They also won six Negro American League pennants in 10 years from 1937 to 1947. The 1942 Negro World Series featured two of the league giants, Satchel Paige pitching for Kansas City Monarchs and Josh Gibson catching for the Homestead Grays.

In 1939 Wilkinson had introduced a portable lighting system that enabled the Monarchs to play night games, thus allowing them to attract larger crowds. Between NAL games, barnstorming tours, and the advent of night baseball for some teams, many Negro League franchises had become profitable organizations.

At the height of the World War II in 1944, the Monarchs franchise was one of the most popular of all Negro League organizations and a top money-maker as well, with \$100,000 in gate receipts and a profit of \$56,281. The popularity of the Monarchs and their Negro League peers during wartime helped to set the stage for the integration of White baseball in the years that followed.



Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, Negro League Baseball stars!

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