

DOWN TO THE LAST OUT

The Journal of Biddy Owens

The Negro Leagues, Birmingham, Alabama, 1948



★ WALTER DEAN MYERS ★

SCHOLASTIC

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**The Journal of Biddy Owens
The Negro Leagues**

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

For David Key III, for whom the players in the
Negro Leagues are a distant, but glorious, history



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May 1

Baseball. Man, I love this game! This was probably the most exciting day of my whole life! All the exhibition games were good, and the working out and getting into shape, but there's nothing like opening day.

People were taking pictures of the team getting ready, some pictures of us in front of the team bus, even me putting the bats and bases in the equipment bags. Charlie Rudd, the bus driver, helped me get the equipment bags on the bus, and I could see that he was happy, too. Some of the Negro businessmen were around, talking to the guys, slapping them on their backs like we were on the way to a party. One photographer had us all kneel on one knee in front of the bus, making sure that he could see BIRMINGHAM BLACK BARONS behind us.

We had met at Bob's Savoy Café, and when Piper Davis told us it was time to go to the stadium I was as jumpy as a cat. Piper, who played second base and managed the team, said I looked like a tadpole in a frying pan. I didn't care — I was starting the season with the Black Barons, and you could not ask for more than that. Mr. Hayes, who owned the team, had got a bunch of cars together for the opening day, and we piled into them for the drive to Rickwood Field. When we did that, people watching us started cheering. Boy, it sure made me feel good. The Parker High School band struck up a tune and started high-stepping ahead of the cars to lead the procession. Yes!

So there I went, Bidley Owens, equipment manager, scorekeeper, errand boy, and sometimes right fielder, which I really want to play.

Our opening game was against the Cleveland Buckeyes, and they had changed into their uniforms down at Rush's, the best Colored hotel in Birmingham. When the Birmingham crowd saw them drive up in their bus, they gave them a cheer, too.

The drive to Rickwood Field took thirty minutes. Rickwood holds about 12,000 people, and it was already crowded. People were buying lemonade and sodas, and you could smell the roasted peanuts and hot dogs.

"It is truly beautiful." That's what Piper said as we started carrying the equipment into the Baron's dugout.

When I put the bats in the rack I was not thinking this was the Negro Leagues or anything like that. I was just looking at how green the grass was and how the blue sky looked like it was going to stretch on forever over the whole world just for us. I was mostly the equipment manager, but Piper knew that I wanted to be a regular with the team. He told me that if I put on a couple of pounds I would get the chance.

I'm tall enough — five foot ten inches tall — but I only weigh 135 pounds. Looks like nothing I do is going to put more weight on me right away. Daddy says the weight will come with age (I am seventeen), and Aunt Jack says I'm skinny because the good Lord don't want me to be no ballplayer. Aunt Jack blames a lot of things on the Lord.

The Parker band started up the national anthem at exactly five-thirty, and the game started right after. That is a funny time to start a game, because the sky is still light enough to see but changing color. That is why they turned the lights on. Right off you could see that the Barons were going to outplay the Buckeyes. Everybody was on their game and they were making plays in the field like they were back at Alabama State on the practice field. Just nothing to it at all. It was a few innings into the game when Ed Steele, our left fielder, jumped on a fastball and hit a blast out toward left field. Oo-wee! It looked to me like the whole world was holding its breath as that ball went flying. At first you could see it good, white against the deep blue sky, then it turned dark for a few seconds, and then gone as the lights caught it on the way down into the stands. They stopped the game right then and there and this is what Ed got for hitting the first home run of the season:

Two chicken dinners from Porter's Club

One chicken dinner from the Brown Derby Café

A diamond-studded watch

Five dollars from the Davenport and Harris Funeral Home

Another five dollars from the Orange Bowl Drink Stand

And two dinners from Bob Reed's Blue Bird Inn

The Barons went on and won the game 11 to 2. Everybody went home happy.

May 2

The little hand of the clock on top the icebox was already just about on twelve, and I knew I was supposed to be at Rickwood by one-thirty. Aunt Jack was making lunch, like she always did after church on Sundays, and taking her good, sweet time about it. Daddy was sitting in his chair nursing a cup of leftover coffee, and Mama and Rachel were upstairs changing out of their church clothes.

Aunt Jack asked me how many games they were going to play today, and I told her they always played doubleheaders on Sundays. Daddy asked me if Sam Jethroe was still playing center field for the Buckeyes, and I told him yes. I went on talking about Jethroe, and right in the middle of it Aunt Jack asked me who visited Daniel in the lion's den. When I didn't remember, she started in about me knowing more about baseball than I did about the Bible.

I explained to her again that I was working for the Birmingham Black Barons and had to know what was going on with the team. She gave me one of her big humphs and went back to stirring the grits. She was making grits, eggs, and sausages, and those sausages were smelling good. I knew she was be making redeye gravy, too, and she knew I was hungry.

Aunt Jack is my daddy's sister. They look a little bit alike, but Aunt Jack is darker than Daddy and

Daddy's nose has a little more pinch to it than hers. Their father, Grandpap Owens, was an AM minister. Aunt Jack wants me to be a minister, or at least go to college. I was thinking about going to college when Daddy got hurt and couldn't work for almost five months. He's back at work now, but I am still working for the Black Barons. Maybe I'll go to college next year.

May 3

We split a doubleheader with Cleveland, and it was their first win of the season. Some of the Buckeyes were going on about how they liked Rickwood Field, and Bill Greason, our best pitcher, said that was the best Negro League stadium in the whole country.

Most of the guys had played in major-league stadiums like the Polo Grounds up in New York, and Comiskey Park in Chicago. They said they were bigger than Rickwood Field but they weren't any better.

Pepper Bassett said they had to be better than Rickwood because they were built for white folks ball. Piper told him to keep his mind on his game and not to worry about white folks ball.

It's hard not to worry about white folks ball because now that Jackie Robinson is playing with the Brooklyn Dodgers and Larry Doby is playing with the Cleveland Indians, everybody is thinking about going up. Just a year ago, Jackie played with the Kansas City Monarchs, and Doby played with the Newark Eagles. Piper said that some of the players were so busy looking around for white scouts, they couldn't find the white ball.

Pepper is a huge dude. Wiley Griggs, who plays infield, said that Pepper is so big that when he was growing up his mama had to go out and buy some extra black just to keep him covered. He is too big to run fast and he can't hit all that good, but when he's in a good mood, which is once in a while, he is all right with me. When he isn't in a good mood, he isn't all right with anybody.

Piper gave me a copy of the opening day roster. I was sorry to see my name was not on it.

The 1948 Birmingham Black Barons

Lorenzo "Piper" Davis, *manager, second base*

John Britton, *third base*

Bill Greason, *pitcher*

Bill Powell, *pitcher*

Norman "Bobby" Robinson, *center field*

Joe Scott, *first base*

Ed Steele, *left field*

Sam Williams, *pitcher*

Arthur “Artie” Wilson, *shortstop*

Jim Zapp, *right field*

Jimmy Newberry, *pitcher*

Alonzo Perry, *pitcher, first base*

Herman Bell, *catcher*

Joe Bankhead, *pitcher*

Lloyd “Pepper” Bassett, *catcher*

Jay Wilson, *infield*

Wiley Griggs, *infield*

Jehosie Heard, *pitcher*

Clarence “Pijo” King, *outfield*

William Morgan, *pitcher*

Nat Pollard, *pitcher*

May 4

One of the nice things about working for the Barons is that we get to travel all over the country. Pepper said that in two months every time somebody mentioned “home” we would all think of being on the bus. Our first trip was to Anniston, Alabama, where we played (and beat) the Buckeyes again. Sad Sam Jones, who lost the game, came over to the bus when we were loading up and started talking about how we were not that good a team when you broke it down man to man. I looked at Piper to see if he was going to say something back but he was just smiling from ear to ear.

On the way home we stopped at a small store to pick up some bread and cold cuts for supper. When me, Piper, Charlie Rudd, and Jimmy Zapp went into the store to get the stuff, the clerk acted like if he didn’t see us, just kept on talking to a customer. They were both white, and so we figured we knew what that was about. When the clerk finally asked us what we wanted, Piper said that he needed food for twenty men. The clerk looked outside and saw the team bus and asked us were we the same Birmingham Black Barons that he had heard about.

Piper said we were. Then the clerk told us he could give us five loaves of bread and ten cans of sardines for twenty dollars. Piper said we were ballplayers, not fools, and there was no way they were going to pay that much for sardines and bread.

The clerk told Piper that he had better mind his manners, and Jimmy pulled Piper on out of the store before things got rough. When we got back on the bus, Pepper asked how come we didn’t get the food and Piper told him what had happened. We didn’t have anything to eat until we got back to Birmingham.

All of us were hungry and all of us were mad. Just about any white person could mess with you

you were black, and the thing was it made you mad for a little while and then it just left a hurt feeling inside of you.

When I got home my sister, Rachel, was sitting on a crate between Mama's legs, getting her hair braided. It was past seven, so I knew Daddy was off to the steel mill, where he worked. I looked in the icebox, and Rachel told me not to touch the potato salad because Aunt Jack had made it special for her. I told her to shut up because she was nothing but a half-pint, anyway. Then she said that was all right with her because men like little women.

Slap! Mama held Rachel by one of her braids and gave her a good slap. "You ain't old enough to smell your pee, girl!" Mama said. "Don't talk nothing in this house about what men like until you're grown! You hear me?"

There were some collard greens in the icebox, and I warmed them up with a ham hock and had them with some potato salad. It was good, too.

May 6

Pepper Bassett always wants to know what I'm writing in my notebook. I told him it's mostly about how the games are going and how the equipment is holding up. He told me not to write anything bad about him.

We're on the road again. Betsy, which is what Charlie Rudd calls the team bus, is running pretty good, and we are making good time. There are blankets and pillows on the overhead racks. The bats, bases, balls, and gloves are all kept in equipment bags in the luggage department. Once you get on the bus there are a thousand different smells. Bill Greason said that when the smell of fried chicken is stronger than the smell of the rubbing liniment it means the team is going good. All the players have their favorite spots. The veterans get the best seats.

We have two catchers, Pepper and Herman Bell. Bell said that the Monarchs are good, but not better than a half dozen other teams in the Negro Leagues. Only he was so tired, he was half asleep when he said it.

That's the thing, how tired everyone is. We played in Birmingham against the Buckeyes on Sunday, and as soon as the game was over we got on the bus and drove over to Anniston, where we played them again. Then we played against a team from the YMCA league, and finally a game against Bessemer Steel. Then we got right on our bus and were headed toward Cleveland.

May 8

My first time in Cleveland, Ohio, and it is a good city. They don't have all the WHITE and COLORED signs the way they have in Birmingham. Piper said that just because they didn't have signs all over the

place didn't mean that we were welcome everywhere we went. It's just that when they didn't want Colored folks around they were more polite about it.

The big talk in Cleveland is Larry Doby. I asked Ed Steele, our left fielder, how good Doby is, and he said he was really good when he played with the Newark Eagles. He was also kind of quiet, like Jackie Robinson. It seems to me that what the major leagues are looking for are players who act in a certain way. That means you don't just have to be good but you have to act like the major-league teams want you to act. Piper said that when people yell things at Jackie from the stands, or when one of the players says something nasty to him about him being black, he doesn't answer them. That must be hard on him.

We played a single game in Cleveland, and then a doubleheader in Toledo.

There was an article in the Cleveland newspaper about whether the Red Cross should separate "white" blood from "Negro" blood. Pepper asked how they could tell once it came out of your body and Bill said they could tell by the taste. Everybody gave him a look, but then he started laughing and we all laughed, except Pepper. He said he was thinking about breaking Bill's neck.

Jay Wilson is a skinny little guy with a high voice who always has something funny to say. He told Piper that he needed a rest because he's played so many ball games, he was dreaming about them. Bell asked him if he fielded as badly in his dreams as he did when he was awake.

That got Jay mad but not mad enough to mess with Bell, who has muscles in places some people don't even have places. Catchers are funny people.

Most of the guys don't mind traveling all over the country. Playing baseball pays more than most jobs, and it is a lot more fun. I think that if every Negro League team had a stadium of its own we could get more people to come to the games. When the Homestead Grays play in a big-league stadium, they draw at least as many fans as the white teams do. Another problem with our league is that our owners don't have the money to just pay us out of their pocket, so we have to get as many exhibition games as possible to keep the money coming in. That's why we travel so much.

Most of the complaining is good-natured. There isn't a man on the team who wants to give up baseball and do something else. Piper says that if any of his players is too tired to play ball, he should get into another line of work. He means it, too.

That was that. He doesn't care if we are tired or not. I don't get to play that much. I only get to play exhibition games against the industrial league teams, and exhibition games, or the league games that we are really losing bad. Piper says if I can flatten out my swing I'll get into more games.

The exhibition games against other teams in the Negro Leagues are hard, but games against colleges or strictly amateur teams are usually pretty easy. A lot of big companies have teams that play in what they call "industrial leagues." The Barons started off as an industrial team way back when.

May 9

The Barons played an exhibition game against the Homestead Grays. We won 4 to 3, but Buck Leonard hit a ball farther than I have seen any ball hit. Pepper said that you had to be a white man on the bus to go catch that ball, because if you were on the back of the bus where the Negroes sit, you never would catch up with it.

May 11

Lost to Cleveland in Montgomery. Me and Bill Greason went to the movies. No sooner had we settled in our seats in the Colored balcony than an usher came and said that all the Coloreds had to leave the theater. We asked why, and she said she didn't know, just that the manager told her it was so. A couple of people said they weren't going to leave, but a sheriff's deputy came up and told us all to go downstairs right away or we would wish we had.

We got downstairs and we all had to line up against the wall while a white lady walked by us. Somebody had snatched a purse from her hand while she was walking, and she thought maybe he had run into the movie theater.

She looked us over and then said she didn't see the one who had snatched her purse.

I wanted to go back upstairs, but Bill was mad and said he was leaving the theater. They didn't give us our twenty cents back, either.

I did inventory tonight. We have eight gloves that belong to the team, nine bats, four bases, and the catcher's gear. Everything else belongs to the players. I think I'm going to buy my own glove.

May 14

I read in a magazine that Jackie Robinson had been a football star in college. He went to UCLA, California.

Piper asked me what the score had been for our first game of the season, and I looked it up in my journal and told him. That pleased him, and then everyone started telling me things to write down. Pepper and Ed Steele got into an argument over who was fastest: Cool Papa Bell or Sam Jethroe. Ed said he saw Sam Jethroe get a double on a bunt.

Pepper said that he had seen Cool Papa Bell walk into a hotel room, switch off the light, and go into bed before the room got dark. But then Artie Wilson said that one time Jesse Owens, who everybody said was the fastest man in the world, was on a field with Cool Papa Bell. He said that Cool Papa Bell had challenged Jesse to a race, and Jesse just smiled and said he had heard about Cool Papa Bell. That settled it for most of us. Cool Papa Bell had to be the fastest if Jesse Owens did not want to run against him!

It took ten hours to reach Indianapolis yesterday. We got here at one o'clock in the morning. The hotel we stayed in was pretty beat-up looking, and we only got three rooms for the whole team. Pepper, Bill Powell, and Joe Bankhead slept on the bus.

May 15

The team we played today, the Indianapolis Clowns, came out and started fooling around, doing tricks with the ball and making people laugh. Piper said he didn't like that at all because it made it seem that Negro baseball teams weren't serious.

On one hand, everyone knows the major leagues are taking people like Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby because they aren't loud talking or clowning around. On the other hand, a team like the Clowns fools around before the ball game and sometimes even during the game if they can get away with it. The way I figure, they'll be the last ones to get into white folks ball.

Piper said when people see teams like the Clowns doing tricks with the ball or just being comical, they forget that they can play ball, too. I agree with Piper, but I really like to see the Clowns fooling around. They had this big guy on first base, Goose Tatum, and he was really funny. He could make the ball roll down his arm and then flex his muscle and make it pop up. When the game started he could hit, too. But we beat the Clowns, and I think everybody played harder against them because of what Piper had said. Sometimes Piper seems a little too tight, but when he says something, everybody listens to him. Everyone on our team was dead serious, and in the last inning, with us up by two runs, Piper said something to their catcher, Sam Hairston. They got into pushing each other around, but there wasn't really a fight.

May 18

The Clowns came out today ready to play. They got a three-run lead and held it to the seventh inning. All their fans were screaming and carrying on. In the top of the eighth, Piper said he wanted to show what we were made of, and I knew he wanted to win bad.

Johnny Britton bunted the first pitch down the third baseline and beat it out. Everybody expected Herman to swing away, but he bunted, too, and got thrown out at first. When he came back to the dugout, Piper gave him a look that would have curdled milk. Wilson got up next and slapped a ball into right field for a double. That put men on second and third, and they walked Piper, which made him mad. He was even madder when the umpire called Ed Steele out on strikes.

The first pitch to Joe Scott was down in the dirt for a ball. The next one was high, but the umpire called it a strike, anyway. The next pitch was a curve, and Scott must have missed it by a foot.

You could see the ball was dirtied up. Piper called time-out and asked to see the ball. The umpire

told him to shut up and get back on base, and Piper said he had a right to see the ball. By this time a bunch of Clowns were standing around the mound and by the time they produced the ball for Piper to see, it was a snow-white, brand-new ball. Piper complained to the umpire again and was told to get back on first base again. Soon as Piper got back on base, the pitcher started his pitching motion and Scott backed out of the batter's box.

I love to see Joe Scott when he gets mad, because the veins on the side of his head get swelled up and his eyes start bulging. He got back in the batter's box and hit the plate with the end of the bat.

Their pitcher, Bill Cathey, shook off one sign, then went into his full windup motion. He looked like he was going to throw fire up to the plate but, when he came around, it was that same curveball again. Only this time the ball was white, and Scott lit into it. Man, he hit that ball a ton and a half. Their left fielder just stood out there and watched the ball go over his head. He didn't move because that ball was deep in the stands. Scott nodded his head up and down all the way around the bases. We were ahead 4 to 3.

When Piper got back into the dugout he said that anybody who made an error for the rest of the game was going to have to fight him right there on the field. The game ended with us winning 5 to 3.

May 20

Today we played a team in St. Louis called the Hops. They were an industrial league team and I couldn't play at all the way I figured. Their pitcher was pretty wild and walked every other man I faced. When he slowed his ball down so he could get it over the plate, we were knocking it silly. I could have hit the guy easy. I know it. By the fifth inning we were ahead 12 to 0, and Piper told the guys to ease off. He didn't want to embarrass the team we were playing. If you embarrassed an amateur team, they wouldn't want to play you again.

Even when we eased off we were scoring runs. Pepper came in and hit a pop-up. The ball must have gone a mile high, and their second baseman missed it and Pepper started laughing. The final score was 18 to 2, but that wasn't the most exciting thing that happened. The stadium we played in had two dressing rooms, and we were changing clothes in one of them when these two white guys came in and stood by the door. One of them had a pistol stuck in his belt. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

They asked us did we have a lot of fun making their boys look bad. Piper said it was just a game and there was nothing to it.

The guy with the pistol told us to stick around if we wanted to play another game. He said he had some of his friends coming over and they played some pretty good baseball.

When the two guys left, everybody started grabbing their clothes. I asked Piper if we were going to play another game, and he told me to shut up and get the equipment on the bus.

I could tell by the way everybody was grabbing their stuff that Piper wasn't playing. We grabbed our stuff, put it in whatever bags we could find, and headed for the bus. Guys didn't even stop to change their clothes.

Charlie Rudd was sleeping on the bus when we got to it. Piper didn't even have to say anything to him. When Charlie saw us getting on in our uniforms, he started the bus up and, as soon as everybody was on, he moved it out.

I had seen that kind of thing before. Those guys weren't really mad about their team losing. They were just the kind of guys who knew that they could talk to black people any way they wanted to and they wanted us to keep that in mind. Daddy said what they wanted us to remember was that we were supposed to stay "in our place."

May 21

The team gets paid twice a month for the regular games they play. When they play games like the one in St. Louis, which was just an exhibition game, they split the gate with the people who own the stadium and with the other team.

After the St. Louis game, Piper counted out the money and saw that the Barons' share was two hundred dollars. That came to eight dollars a man.

I only get a hundred dollars a month regular pay, but I get a full share of the split-up money and I was pretty happy to get the eight dollars.

Afterward, Pepper, Alonzo Perry, Bell, Piper, and Sam Williams played tonk, and Pepper lost his eight dollars. I'm glad I wasn't playing. I can't see working for money and then losing it in a card game. They play a lot of cards on the road. The games they play mostly are tonk, poker, and whist.

May 22, morning

Kansas City has a white owner, Mr. Wilkinson, and all the players like him a lot. He came to Street View the hotel we were staying in, with a Colored reporter from the *Kansas City Call*. The reporter was asking him and Buck O'Neil what they thought would be the future of the Negro Leagues if the major leagues kept taking players. Mr. Wilkinson, who's pretty old and wears thick glasses, said the Negro Leagues would last as long as the south lasted.

The reporter from the *Call*, whose name was Davis, asked Mr. Wilkinson if he thought the south would last. Mr. Wilkinson looked at him and asked him to repeat the question, and he did. Then Mr. Wilkinson said that the south would last a lot longer than some people thought it would. Buck O'Neil said that the Negro Leagues could be just like the minor leagues and could even get support from the major leagues.

Afterward everyone was talking about how nice Mr. Wilkinson was and how he was one of the first people to have night baseball. But I was thinking of the reporter from the *Kansas City Call*. I asked him how he got his job, and he said he had gone to college and worked on the college magazine. He asked me if I wanted to be a reporter, and I told him I was thinking about it.

May 22, evening

Piper told me to write down why we had lost, only he didn't say *lost* — he said we had our butts kicked. He said he was going to send what I wrote down off to the *Birmingham World* and see if they publish it.

We were sitting in the dugout between games and Piper was mad. Piper was a man who could get mad in a heartbeat. Before the game he was talking about how we had to establish something against the Kansas City Monarchs. What happened was that Kansas City established something against us.

We went down one two three in the first inning. Jim LaMarque, their pitcher, was throwing hard and throwing strikes. In the bottom of the first, with Bankhead pitching, their first two batters walked. That was Curt Roberts and Herb Souell. Bankhead got Gene Baker to pop up, but then Elston Howard hit a line drive into the stands, and they were ahead 3 to 0. Piper called a meeting at the pitcher's mound and told everybody to tighten up their defense. The next batter, Hank Thompson, got a triple and Willard Brown got a single and we were down by four runs. Piper took Bankhead out and brought in Jehosie Heard and Buck O'Neil got a double off his first pitch.

Kansas City was just good. Okay, that was one thing. But when Piper came into the dugout after the fifth inning (we were losing by eight runs then) and Bankhead was looking at a newspaper clipping, things got ugly.

He yelled at Bankhead because he was reading in the dugout instead of paying attention to the game. Somebody had given Bankhead a newspaper clipping about Jackie Robinson stealing home against Pittsburgh.

Piper blew up. He got the clipping from Bankhead and threw it on the floor of the dugout. We lost the game big time.

Jimmy Newberry pitched the second game and we won. Britton hit a ground ball to Souell with two outs in the ninth and the Monarch's third baseman let it go through his legs. Two runs scored and we won 4 to 3.

Nobody said anything when we got on the team bus and went back to the hotel. We were playing in Kansas City, Missouri, but the hotel was across the river in Kansas City, Kansas. We ate at the Blue Sky Diner down the street from the hotel and the food wasn't that good. They served white gravy with their chops, and it was greasy. Bill Greason said the only thing they could make in Kansas City was steak and barbecue and I believe him. Piper finished eating first, paid, and left. Then the team relaxed.

some.

Some of the guys went downtown to a jazz club. I wanted to go, too, but Piper keeps an eye on me and he had told me to stick with Bill Greason. I told Bill we should go to see if we could hear some good, fast jazz and check out the ladies. Instead we went back to the hotel.

There was a phone in the lobby, and I called home. I don't know why I did and I really didn't have anything to say. Rachel answered, and I told her to put Mama on. She asked me where I was and I told her in Kansas City and she started asking me what Kansas City looked like. I told her to shut up and put Mama on. She said for me to beg her.

Right then and there I decided not to ever get married. I couldn't imagine myself married to a woman like Rachel. When she did get Mama on the phone, I just asked her how everything was going and she asked me what Kansas City was like, the same as Rachel.

I was glad to talk to Mama. After I hung up I thought of something else to say and almost called back. Traveling was nice. Home was good, too.

May 24

Lost two games against the Chicago American Giants yesterday. Greason said that it would be wise for us to keep a clear distance away from Piper, who does not like to lose. We lost the first game 7 to 5 and the second game 5 to 3. I think everybody is just tired. Piper was yelling for everybody to run on their ground balls. Jimmy Zapp struck out and ran to first base, and everybody had to smile at that, even Piper.

Tonight we played a night game against the Monarchs in Louisville, Kentucky. The field was small and kind of dark, but the Monarchs had their own night lights, which they could move from ballpark to ballpark. Very nice.

We won the game 5 to 4. Instead of being glad, Piper just said that we should have won all our games against the Monarchs. But I think he's wrong, because the Monarchs are one good team.

"Pijo," which is what they call Clarence King, said that his brother's dog had had puppies and asked if anybody wanted one. I said yes and hope that Mom is going to let me bring it home.

The newspaper is going on about how Truman is going to integrate the army. Bell said it didn't mean anything, because the war was already over, but Perry said it meant a lot, and he explained that the two biggest things they had in the United States were the armed forces and major-league baseball. They had baseball integrated and if they integrated the army it was going to mean that Negroes were going to be equal for the first time.

I couldn't help wondering what that meant. A lot of people were saying that the Negro League were going to fold up because people wanted to see integrated baseball. I wondered if integration of everything would mean there would be nothing Negro anymore.

We had to travel to Memphis, Tennessee, and after packing up the equipment I went with Charlie to get the bus gassed up. Then we picked up the team and started. We had bought some barbecue ribs from a Colored restaurant, and just out of town we stopped for some pop and coffee from a white diner. We had to go around to the back to get them. The ribs were good, and we ate them on the bus.

May 25

It took us two hours short of forever to get to Tennessee. A lot of the problems getting there were because of Jimmy Zapp, who had to keep stopping and finding a place to go to the bathroom. He said he must have eaten something bad, but Bill Powell said that the Zapper had eaten so many barbecue ribs that if he had saved the bones he could have built a small house for himself.

It was morning when we finally arrived, and we took a vote if we wanted to get hotel rooms or sleep on the bus to save money. Everybody voted to go to sleep on the bus, and Charlie parked in a Colored park. A state trooper at the park asked us who we were, and Charlie told him we were the Birmingham Black Barons, the best baseball team in the south. The trooper said he had gone to a few Negro games about three years before, when Josh Gibson was playing. He asked Charlie if we played with a regular baseball, and Charlie said sure we do. Perry threw the trooper a ball. The state trooper looked it over and shook his head. He said he still didn't see how in the world Gibson could hit a ball as far as he did.

Perry asked the trooper if he had ever heard of Babe Ruth and, when the trooper said he had, Perry told him that Ruth was the white Josh Gibson, only a little smaller.

The state trooper gave Perry the ball back and said he had never seen anybody hit the ball like Josh Gibson, and he was sure surprised that Negroes had the same kind of ball that whites had.

We parked the bus and got a few more hours sleep. We changed into our uniforms right there on the bus before heading toward the stadium.

On the way over to the stadium I wondered how that trooper could think that we used a different kind of ball. I said that to Piper, and Piper said that a lot of white people just don't know what being Negro is all about. That did not make a whole lot of sense to me.

May 26

When we arrived at the ball field all the guys were dead tired, but once they walked out onto the field it was as if they got new life in them. The Chicago American Giants were a good team, but not all that good. Piper, as usual, was talking about how the team needed to bear down. He said that on paper we were the better team, but the game was not being played on paper and we had better show some hustle on the field.

The crowd was enthusiastic, but the park wasn't nearly as nice as Rickwood. It seemed a little better when we won, 5 to 1.

After the game most of the guys stayed at the hotel that Piper booked for us, but a few were staying with Negro families around town. Bill Greason wanted to see a cousin he knew and asked if I wanted to go, and I said no. That's how I got to go to a pool hall with Herman Bell, Pepper, and Jehosie Heard.

In the pool hall there was this tall guy who looked like he needed to be arrested for something! He wore a powder-blue zoot suit with wide shoulders, a blue snap-brim hat, and a white silk shirt that was open down the front. On his side he wore this gold chain that went from the front of his pants down the leg and into the pocket. He had a scar down one side of his face that started just in front of his ear and went down the side of his jaw, and disappeared under his ear. Bell said that he was a pool hustler and his name was Mambo. Anyway, this Mambo guy had a girl with him. She was wearing a little short tight dress and she started winking and making up to us as soon as she found out we were ballplayers. This Mambo guy pulled back his coat, and you could see he had a pistol in his belt. He said he thought it was time for us to go.

I thought Pepper and Bell would have been all over him, but they just said they thought it was time to go.

It was hot in Chicago, and the poolroom had been even hotter. There was a little breeze outside. I asked Pepper what that had been about. Pepper said a lot of girls flirt with ballplayers and they don't mind a bit if they cause a little trouble.

May 27

I am so tired, I can't see straight. My pencil broke, and I asked Jay Wilson could I borrow his and he told me no and to leave him alone. Jay's not like that, but he's tired, too. I'm missing home again but I am determined not to call every time I get a little lonely.

Beat the Giants again. Quincy Troupe is their manager and he catches for them. Piper said he was better than Campanella when he was younger. I never saw Campanella play, so I don't know. I told that to Piper, and he told me to shut up, too.

The bus broke down, and we are going to take a train to Atlanta.

May 28

This afternoon in Atlanta we played against a team called the Black Crackers. They were a good team a lot better than we thought they would be, and we really had to play some good ball to come from behind and beat them. After the game we were tired, but the players were feeling good and a little

loopy. Even Piper was relaxed. We got down to the train station, and he was talking to everybody about how we were looking like a real ball club.

It was raining lightly, and we were in a good mood at the station. Then the train that would have taken us to Birmingham came in, but the conductor said we couldn't get on it because they had taken the Colored car off for repair. What we saw on the train was a big group of white men who were going to a convention in Birmingham. The train was crowded, and they didn't want us on. The next train wasn't going to be leaving until nearly two o'clock in the morning.

As good as we had been feeling, we came down in a big hurry. The Barons shuffled back into the station and into the Colored waiting room. We all just sat there for a while, with some of the players getting real mad at what had happened and others just stretching out on the benches. Then a fat brown-skinned fellow came and asked us if we were the Black Barons from Birmingham who couldn't get on the train, and we said yes. He said he was from the First Baptist Church and his congregation would love for us to spend the night at their church. He had a bus, and so we went to his church and had a good time. They fed us and treated us really nice.

I wanted to say something to Piper that maybe just winning ball games did not mean all that much at times, but I don't think he would have understood. I think what he would have said was that when you played ball you could win or lose depending on how good you were and how the ball bounced. Being black did not make a difference.

May 29

Home and Rickwood Field never looked so good. When I got home I gave Mama a big kiss, and she told me not to get upset with my room. I didn't know what that was supposed to mean, but when I got to it the whole place stunk like cocoa butter. Mama had let some of Rachel's friends stay over, and two girls had slept in my room and left some of their hair stuff on my dresser. I told Rachel she should keep her friends out of my room, and she said it wasn't my room anymore, that Mama just lets them stay there when I come to visit. I got mad and wanted to say something to her but I couldn't think of anything to say. I felt too bad about what she had said.

We were playing the Clowns again. This guy named Andy Mesa was on first, and Tatum, their first baseman, hit a single just past Piper. Okay, so Mesa goes tearing around second base and bearing down on third, and everybody starts yelling because they know he's going to try to score all the way from first on that little dinky single. Bobby Robinson comes in and scoops the ball up and fires it in Bassett, who's catching. Mesa is round third and coming down the line. Bassett, he's got the line covered, the plate covered, and he's waiting with the ball when Mesa plows into him.

The umpire called Mesa out, and we went over to Bassett, who was lying on the ground, to see if he was all right. He was lying there grinning and holding the ball, and we all went back to the dugout.

But when Bassett came back to the dugout, he was rubbing his arm. When Piper asked him if he wanted to come out, he didn't say anything, just grumbled under his breath the way he does sometimes. Piper told Bell to put the catcher's gear on.

I saw Bassett's arm. It was scraped up something terrible and bled right through his uniform.

Charlie Richards, who is white and is the clubhouse boy for the white Barons, got a bandage for Bassett and helped put it on. Charlie comes to a lot of the Black Barons' games because he likes good baseball.

I asked Mom if it would be all right to take a dog from Pijo, and Daddy said yes even before she answered. I went over to Pijo's house and got the puppy. Pijo's sister is a little, kind of nervous woman with a nice voice. She told me to take good care of the dog, which I would have done, anyway. On the way home he peed on me. I was going to name him "River" but I decided to name him "Skeeter" instead. No special reason except that I just like the name.

May 30

Played a doubleheader against the Memphis Red Sox here in Little Rock. We played well and split the games. The whole team was invited to a church picnic, but we have to play the Red Sox again in a few days back in Birmingham so we left as soon as the second game was over.

On the bus we played whist and me and Piper played the first game against Jimmy Newberry and Alonzo Perry. We were playing rise and fly style, meaning that whoever lost had to get up and let somebody else play against the winners. Guess who got mad at me when we lost???? Piper said I knew a blind monkey who could play cards better than me, and I did not think that was a good thing to say.

Life on the road can be boring. I like seeing all the cities but bouncing along in the bus or sleeping on some hard bed in a cheap hotel is not my idea of paradise. If I go to college I would have more things I could do. On the other hand if I played good enough to get into the major leagues I could play there for a while and then go to college. I told that to Bill Greason, and he said he could just imagine my face on a baseball card. Piper said I should stick with baseball cards because I sure couldn't play regular cards. He didn't have to say that.

June 1

It rained, so I spent the day cleaning up all the equipment. It all looks good, and Piper said I was a good equipment manager. I asked him if he thought I would get into a game soon, and he said yes. Aunt Jack tried to get Daddy and Mommy to go to a concert given by the Wings Over Jordan Choir. They had just come back from entertaining soldiers in Europe, and everybody was saying how good

they were. Nobody went with Aunt Jack, and she made a speech about we were old-time Negroes and it was time for a new Negro in America.

Joe Bankhead called me and said that Piper had cut him from the team. He was mad. Then I cried.

I had a talk with Rachel. I told her it was okay for her to let her friends use my room while I am on the road but not to let them go into my stuff. She said she might sleep in my bed. The girl is pushing me.

June 2

Ed Steele said I would not believe New Orleans, and he was right. It is the biggest city in the world. We got in and went to a hotel called Pascals, or something like that. All day long we walked along Canal Street and then went over to what they call the French Quarter. Bill Greason said a man could lose his soul in New Orleans and not even notice it. I said uh-huh, but I don't know what he meant by that.

June 3

We are playing the Memphis Red Sox, and they are traveling with us. Their regular bus broke down and they're traveling in three cars that break down every five miles. Some of them wanted to ride on our bus, and Piper said no. It has to be hard riding seven guys to a car, which is what they are doing but one of their guys said it wasn't so bad. He said he was making more money than anybody he knew. All the time he was talking he was also chewing on a big cigar and showing off a flashy ring that I wore on his pinkie. When the Memphis player left, Pepper said that his cigar was probably smarter than he was.

June 4

We have won two games against Memphis and lost one because of a bad call. In the game we lost the score was 6 to 5 in our favor, and we only needed one more out in the ninth. The Memphis left fielder tried to score from third on a short fly ball, and Jim Zapp threw a perfect ball to Bell. The guy was out by about a mile and a half, but the umpire called him safe. I couldn't believe it.

June 5

Lots of excitement this week. Word got around that there was going to be a protest demonstration

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