

0. BRANCH RICKEY MAKES A CHANGE - Story Preface

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Before he worked with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey was a baseball player. In this 1906 photo, from the Library of Congress, we see him in a batting stance at the home plate of South Side Park.

Wesley Branch Rickey, on behalf of the Brooklyn Dodgers, had in mind a game-changing idea. He wanted to employ an African-American on his major-league team.

Not only would such a person break the color line, Rickey's brainstorm would be great for business. Lots of black people lived in the area where the Dodgers played ball. If one of their own were playing, wouldn't they fill the bleachers at Ebbets Field?

Besides ... Branch Rickey genuinely disdained Jim-Crow laws, baseball's "color line" and everything else those legally allowed (and culturally accepted) policies meant for people of color. He wanted to make a change to the game and to the country. He wanted to right a wrong he had witnessed, in 1910, and never forgot.

As coach for Ohio Wesleyan, 21-year-old Rickey (still a student himself) and his baseball team were in South Bend for a game. Everyone on his team had a room, at a local hotel, except for Charley Thomas.

Arguing with the hotel manager that his black player needed a place to sleep, Rickey finally proposed a compromise. Couldn't Charley sleep on a cot in the coach's room?

Years later, Rickey told the heartbreaking story to Robinson:

"He sat on that cot," Mr. Rickey said, "and was silent for a long time. Then he began to cry, tears he couldn't hold back. His whole body shook with emotion. I sat and watched him, not knowing what to do until he began tearing at one hand with the other - just as if he were trying to scratch the skin off his hands with his fingernails. I was alarmed. I asked him what he was trying to do to himself."

"'It's my hands,' he sobbed, 'They're black. If only they were white, I'd be as good as anybody then, wouldn't I, Mr. Rickey? If only I were white.'"

"Charley," Mr. Rickey said, "the day will come when they won't have to be white." (I Never Had It Made, page 27.)

That day came four decades later, when Rickey was president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. With the approval of the team's owners and board of directors, Rickey began a search for an African-American to join a National League club which had only won a single pennant in 22 years.

Rickey wasn't just looking for a great baseball player. As he tells the story, he was looking for "A Man." What did he mean by that phrase?

I had to get a man who would carry the burden on the field. I needed a man to carry the badge of martyrdom. The press had to accept him. He had to stimulate a good reaction of the Negro race itself, for an unfortunate one might have solidified antagonism of people of other colors. And, I had to consider the attitude of the man's teammates. (Ebony Magazine, quoting Branch Rickey in its November 1968 issue, at page 157.)

Wendell Smith, a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Courier* - America's largest-in-circulation, African-American newspaper at the time - heard about Rickey's plan. He wanted to know whether this was a serious quest or just a sham:

If you aren't serious about this, Mr. Rickey, I'd rather not waste our time discussing it. But, if you are serious, I do know of a player who could make it. His name is Jackie Robinson.

It wasn't the first time Branch Rickey had heard the name of his future star.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/BRANCH-RICKEY-MAKES-A-CHANGE-42-Jackie-Robinson>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/BRANCH-RICKEY-MAKES-A-CHANGE-42-Jackie-Robinson>

Questions 2 Ponder

How Did Branch Rickey's Revulsion of Racial Discrimination Change Baseball?

When he was still a student, coaching a college baseball team, Branch Rickey witnessed an event which eventually ended baseball's discrimination against African-Americans.

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What influence do you think Charley Thomas and his ill-treatment had on Branch Rickey and his desire to break baseball's "color line?"

Could a situation involving someone like Charley Thomas happen today? Explain your answer.

Media Stream



Branch Rickey in 1913

Branch Rickey photo, published in *Michiganensian* in 1913, at page 230. This photo is cropped from the team photo. Online, Wikimedia Commons.

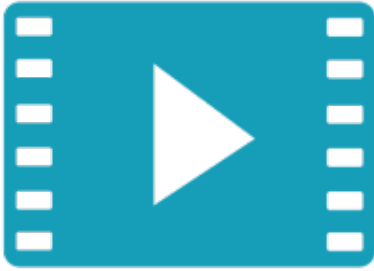
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Branch Rickey on Television

Video clip of 13 September 1959 "What's My Line," featuring Branch Rickey, online via YouTube.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Branch-Rickey-on-Television>