

# The Man Who Signed Jackie Robinson

Baseball Pioneer and Forest Hills Gardens Resident Branch Rickey

By Cheryl Cuddeback

Who was Branch Rickey? That was my question when it was suggested I write an article about him. It seemed I wasn't the only one ignorant of this man, judging by the many quizzical expressions on people's faces when I mentioned my next writing assignment. Odd that the memory of a man who altered our thinking, would fall into an oblivion of unknown past. But that's about to change. Howard Baldwin, the same movie producer that gave us 'Ray', the life story of Ray Charles, is working on a movie about Jackie Robinson, the first Afro-American to play professional baseball. Branch Rickey was the man responsible for signing on Jackie Robinson to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Up until this point the major leagues did not allow blacks to play in any of these reindeer games. While Branch Rickey managed the Dodgers, He lived in Forest Hills Gardens.

Wesley Branch Rickey was born in 1880 and grew up in Delaware, Ohio, to God fearing Christian-based parents, Frank and Emily Rickey. He was named after John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. As for the name 'Branch' it may have come from one of the many biblical references. According to a recently published book, Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentlemen by Lee Lowenfisch:

"One Rickey family Bible contained a handwritten note in which the word branch was capitalized in a passage from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of the roots."

Early on Rickey would refer to himself as W. Branch Rickey, since two of his cousins were also named Wesley. Naturally, over time and generations the 'W' was dropped and long forgotten. His one son was named Branch Rickey as well as his grandson, who is still alive today.

Emily Rickey read bible stories to her children and Frank Rickey led the family in grace before meals. Branch didn't drink, honored his parents by never entering a stadium on Sunday and the extent of his cursing was limited to saying 'Judas Priest'. He did however bend the rules a bit when it came to his cigar, a prop he was rarely seen without.

Branch's education started in a one room school-house. Down the road he received a teaching certificate without even owning a high school certificate. He attended Ohio Wesleyan University as a conditional student, a term given to students without a recognized educational background. Pursuing an educational degree did not figure into Branch's surroundings among poor farm folk. Book learning was believed to be a pastime reserved for wealthy folk.

One of the motivating factors that let Branch to academia was his sweetheart, Jane Moulton, was also going to college.

Her father, Chandler Moulton, was Ohio's State Senator at the time.

In college he managed the university's football and baseball teams. Under his management, both teams improved their playing skills and scores. Branch was played professional baseball for the St. Louis Browns. After graduation he continued coaching Ohio's football team and playing with the Browns as a catcher. He also married his childhood sweetheart. Years later Branch's contract was late sold to the New York Highlanders, known today as the Yankees. Due to a constant pain in his throwing arm, Branch realized his baseball playing days were numbered. He began going after his law degree at the University of Michigan which he completed before serving a brief stint in the military during World War II. Upon returning to The States, Branch was asked to manage the floundering Cardinals. They were at the bottom of the barrel. They had no budget so the players had to wear used uniforms. Rickey increased funds for the team and improved their playing abilities. He also made his first mark in professional baseball by creating the farm system. This became a quick and inexpensive means of finding players, not only for The Cardinals, but for all teams. It enforced a much needed uniformity of style, technique, and attitude within the major leagues. Many believe that this system saved baseball during the Depression. Throughout his career, Rickey spearheaded anything that would benefit the players. He encouraged such innovations as batting cages, pitching machines, batting helmets, and a string outline of the strike zone rigged over home plate for pitchers working on control.

As Rickey continued managing The Cardinals, moved up within the league winning their first World Series in 1926. He led them to win a total of six World Series during the next 12 years. In 1942 he moved on to be the General Manager of The Brooklyn Dodgers. The Rickey Family made Forest Hills Gardens their home. Their address was 34 Greenway South, a red brick house, large in stature yet modest in design. As with most homes in The Gardens, it still looks the same as it did about 50 years ago. The also joined The Church-in-the-Gardens. Branch became a member of its Board of Trustees and often volunteered to give talks on moral matters, along the same vein as he did at boys' clubs and YMCAs. Needless to say he was an excellent source for free baseball tickets which members of the Pilgrim Fellowship youth group took full advantage of. His youngest daughter Betty had her wedding service at the church.

Much has been written about Branch Rickey larger than life persona, such as; he "possessed an aggressive, Bible-spouting style that became his trademark", "towered above even the most celebrated of baseball figures", "his personality was made up of "equal parts of being a genius, tightwad, saint, hypocrite, innovator, and



poacher", "His pontifical manner and florid speech, gave him the air of a con man playing a parson.". And yet, according to Branch Rickey III, his family never read a single book written about their beloved Branch. While the public may read of senior Branch being "the jowly lawyer, with bushy eyebrows, bow ties, and big cigars" who "double-talked his players into contracts for stingy salaries", members of the Rickey Family prefer to leave this image of him at the door so as not to tarnish what memories they have of him.

Branch III has been hired by Baldwin to be a consultant for the Jackie Robinson movie. Robert Redford wants to play the part of Branch Rickey. It wasn't much of a surprise to hear Branch III question the validity of Redford playing this part. To paraphrase Mr. Rickey III, "You could bring my grandfather to a fancy men's clothing store and have a suit tailored made for him, but the moment he'd put it on, he looked like he stepped out of the Salvation Army." We both wondered how the dapper Redford will be able to accurately depict this memory of Rickey. There are only three remaining relatives of Branch Rickey alive today. I wonder if any of them will see the movie.

It can easily be construed that it was Branch Rickey's religious background that gave him the good sense to sign on an excellent player, who happened to be a negro, to join the Dodgers. But think about it. It had to be something more than being a good disciple of the church. My take is Branch Rickey had the stuff that greatness comes from. He didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. Usually it's the scientist, the war hero or the writer who influences our culture for the greater good. Their noble professions lend themselves perfectly to the well being of our civilization. So who would have ever thought that one man's passion for baseball would force our society to grow up? If you look at Branch Rickey's life it makes perfect sense.