

The traveling Pittsburgh Crawfords.

BARNSTORMING AMERICA

**BY BUS, CAR, AND RAIL, THE
NEGRO LEAGUE TEAMS BROUGHT
BASEBALL TO THE PEOPLE.**

An excerpt from Bruce Chadwick's book

When the Game Was Black and White: An

Illustrated History of the Negro Leagues

HISTORY



THE BUS TURNED OFF THE HIGHWAY ONTO A NAR-row country road. It rumbled down the incline slowly, swaying from side to side, small clouds of dust on a hot, dry summer day kicking up along side it. All the windows were down for ventilation and people in houses along the road to Pennsylvania could hear the sound of black men dressed in baseball uniforms singing hymns as a bus rumbled past with the bold words PITTSBURGH CRAWFORDS painted on the side. Two miles up the road, a crowd of nearly 2,000 people was gathered at a typical 1930s ballpark. The stands were packed in the deep-tiered seating that ran in a single grandstand from beyond third base to beyond first base. On the field the local white semipro team took fielding practice, its players keeping one eye on the road as the bus pulled in slowly.

Dozens of kids, mostly white but some black, ran back and forth in front of the jammed parking lot. They leapt at the bus as it ground to a halt, kicking up more dust, hoping against hope for a chance to shake hands with the great Satchel Paige, or to carry Josh Gibson's equipment bag in for him, or to get a quick autograph from Cool Papa Bell. On the field the players stopped practice and turned to stare in awe at the legendary Pittsburgh Crawfords, said to be as good as the New York Yankees that summer of 1936. A wave of electricity ran through the crowd, fans standing to gawk at the black ballplayers as they walked slowly to the field, some grim faced, some waving, many yawning from a five-hour bus ride. The most exciting day of the summer was about to begin in that small Pennsylvania town. The Crawfords had arrived. The Barnstormers were here.

IN THE 1920S THE TEAMS OF THE NEGRO LEAGUES PLAYED

only about 33 percent of their games at home or away against other league teams. The rest they played on the road—on every highway and byway in America—in order to make enough money to survive. Because the teams owned no stadiums and were forced to rent them from white teams, they could only schedule games when no one else wanted them—the Homestead Grays often had to play 5 p.m. twilight games at Forbes Field, just hours after the Pittsburgh Pirates finished a 1 p.m. game. This situation made it impossible to schedule a 154-game season like the white majors, or even a 77 game season. But a 60- or 70-game league schedule couldn't generate enough revenue in an era without radio or television, so every single date that could be penciled into the spring and summer was. The owners needed the money, the players needed it worse, and there was no better way to earn it than by barnstorming across America.

Barnstorming had started way back in 1887, when New York's Cuban Stars went on the road to play black teams in the metropolitan New York area. By the 1890s black teams were regularly barnstorming through states and regions, usually by car. Some traveled in style, among them Michigan's Page Fence Giants, who rented their own railroad car in 1895. In 1912, Rube Foster's Chicago American Giants were also traveling by rail. A club called the All Nations team—founded by J.L. Wilkinson, based in the midwest, and made up of players from several countries—became the first team to barnstorm coast to coast. In 1915, the Indianapolis ABC's became the first black team to travel abroad when they barnstormed through Cuba.

During the twenties barnstorming had changed as small towns besieged black teams with offers to play local teams, both black and white. These small towns were not on well-traveled railroad lines, so the comfortable train cars were aban-

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done in favor of barnstorming buses, which soon became legend.

"To say travel conditions were awful is to be very complimentary," said Bob Harvey of the Newark Eagles. "Sometimes we'd ride that old bus for six or seven hours. No rest room, no ventilation but open windows, no sleeping. Just god-awful."

On a tight schedule between towns the players slept on the bus.

During the first game of a double-header sometimes the extra three or

four men would sleep on the bus and then play the second while three others slept. A manager might have to run out to the bus to wake up a sleeping pitcher and send him into the game.

"The food was awful. A lot of times, we'd just have sandwiches for dinner and eat them while we rode," recalled George Giles, who played first base for the Black Yankees and other teams. "The big thing was to save your money and, when you could eat somewhere, have yourself a big steak."

The old buses often broke down. One club riding a bus on one of the narrow old one-lane highways in the midwest had three different motors put in it during a 48-hour period. When another team's bus died on them at the side of the road, the manager had to scramble to rent two cars and they drove through the night, seven men in a car, to make the next game—tired and grimy to be sure, but they made it.

Game schedules were thrown together for no better reasons than time and money. A game against a team of white major-league all-stars in Yankee Stadium, the game

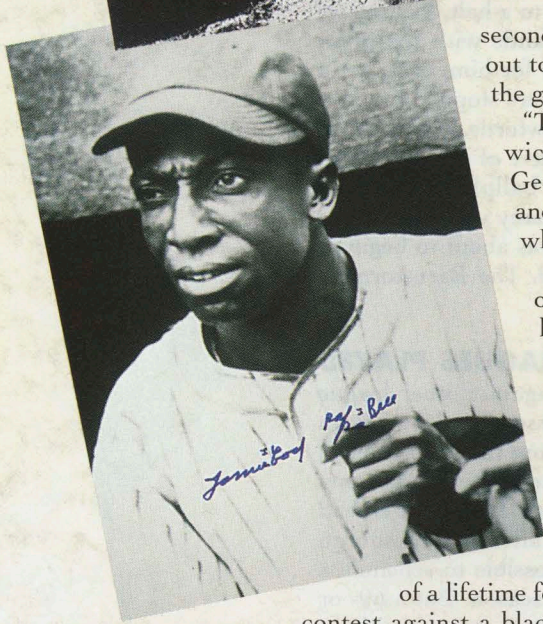
of a lifetime for some players, would be hastily sandwiched in between a contest against a black factory team in Trenton and a white semipro team in Passaic.

Forever worried about income, managers would stretch games to five innings in driving rainstorms so the team could collect its guarantee and not lose the date. Once night lighting was made available the Crawfords and Grays even booked games at 12:01 a.m. Monday mornings at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field to get around the Pennsylvania laws prohibiting baseball on Sundays.

The Grays, the world champions of barnstorming, put together a schedule each year that called for at least a game a day. (While the Grays were the most obsessive schedulers, they were not alone—at one point Roy Campanella of the Baltimore Elite Giants played four games in one day.) A perfect week for Grays' manager Cumberland "Cum" Posey featured eight games with one doubleheader.

But it wasn't only the better-known teams like the Grays and the Monarchs that barnstormed. Semipro black teams traveled all over their home states and frequently played white semipro teams. A black team from a big city was always an attraction for a white semipro team from a small town, just as famous black teams from another region were a big draw in big cities.

Black professional and semipro athletes were not the only players riding uncomfortable buses over bumpy country roads on the barnstorming circuit, however. White players barnstormed for the same reason the blacks did—to make more money—and to do so they grabbed offers from all over the country to play in October and November, and sometimes in Latin America in the winter. White teams played each other and over 10 times a year they played black teams. From 1908 until 1923, nobody minded the black-versus-major-league post-sea-

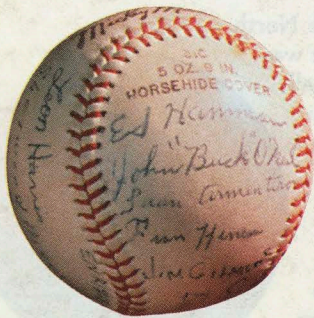
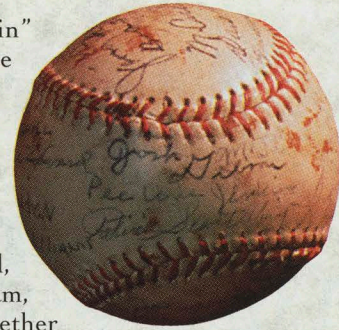


Satchel Paige bought a small plane so he could fly from game to game on his barnstorming circuit. Cool Papa Bell was so fast that Jesse Owens refused to race him.

son barnstorming games. The Philadelphia Athletics would play the Hilldale Giants in a natural backyard turf war and play them often. The Lincoln Giants would routinely play entire major league games. Everybody made extra money and fans loved it.

Then along came the Commissioner Kenesaw "Mountain" Landis, who banned off-season games between major league teams in 1923 after a fall barnstorming season in which many of them lost to black clubs. Landis never gave an official reason for his ruling, but he would not budge and came down hard on anyone who defied him. He even suspended Babe Ruth and Bob Meusel of the Yankees for six weeks during the 1922 season for barnstorming with a team loaded with Yankees in 1921. Still, as long as no entire team barnstormed, nor one made up mostly of men from a single major-league team, the commissioner looked the other way. So players put together "all-star" teams to get around the ban. A pitcher like Dizzy Dean would put together a team of four top major-leaguers and 10 lower-rung major-leaguers and have an "all-star" team. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig toured the country with their own teams, which were frequently filled with minor-leaguers and semipro stars.

Fans flocked to the black-versus-white barnstorming games. One game between the Kansas City Monarchs and the Dizzy Dean All-Stars at Wrigley Field in 1934 drew 30,000 people. Another between major-leaguers and the Homestead Grays at Griffith Stadium in Washington pulled 32,000 (the team regularly attracted 30,000 in the late thirties). But the very best black and white players didn't limit themselves to big ballparks. They traveled just about anywhere, bringing high drama to small ballparks far from the big-league press boxes. The 1,000-seat field at the Catholic Protectory School in New York was a regular stop for Lou Gehrig's all-star team. Walter Ayers, in the stands of the neatly groomed Catholic Protectory field at a game between the Black Yankees and Lou Gehrig's all-stars in October 1929, recalls the day:



"Gehrig could not hit this particular black pitcher. For several years he handcuffed Gehrig. I don't think Lou hit one out of the infield on this guy. First two times he's up, he strikes out. Third time, Gehrig moves out of the box, waves his hand at the pitcher, and yells something at him. Second pitch. Boom. Gehrig must have hit it 500 feet, way over the center-field wall. He trots the bases with this wide smile on his face because he broke the schneid. He rounds third, points at the pitcher, shaking his finger, scolding like, and yells, 'I finally got you! I finally got you!' Well we just roared. Then the black pitcher, smiling wider than Gehrig and shaking his finger at him, yells back: 'Well, it sure took you long enough.' Just broke everybody up, Gehrig included."

For blacks, the games were a barometer of how good they really were. When they did well, they had a feeling of exhilaration. "I remember a game in Dayton, Ohio, in the forties. I lost, 2-1, on a ninth-inning homer, but that day I struck out 14 major-leaguers: fourteen!" exulted Max Manning. "I struck out Charlie 'King Kong' Keller three times. That day I knew in my heart that I was as good as any white pitcher in baseball."

Blacks also loved the money they could make barnstorming with the all-star teams. With 30,000-person gates, they were splitting the huge revenues on 60-40 cuts, the winner taking 60 percent. Most of the players on Satchel Paige's 1946 all-star team earned \$2,000 for just two weeks' work, as much as they made in the entire Negro League season.



Although barnstorming necessarily took teams away from home, sometimes devoted fans would follow them anyway. The Scanlon Colored Giants, formed in the thirties from the membership of a huge black social organization in Newark, New Jersey, often barnstormed throughout the

state and nearby Pennsylvania and New York.

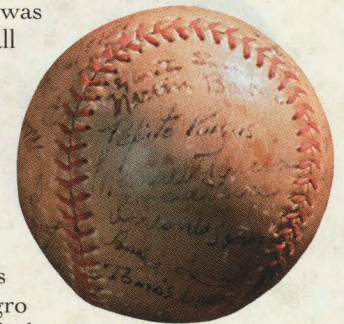
The Giants usually pulled 500 to 1,000 people at home games. But when they traveled they chartered a dozen buses to bring hundreds of fans and families, who always picnicked at the ballpark, setting up stoves, coolers, and play areas for kids at whatever meadow or woods looked cool on a hot summer day.

BARNSTORMING IN THE SOUTH WAS A DIFFERENT MATTER.

Since leagues generally began the season down south with spring training, they usually continued there with another 30 to 50 exhibition games to warm up for their regular-season summer tours and to make needed early-season cash. The presence of the Negro National League and Negro American League teams barnstorming through the region also helped keep the Southern Negro League strong, filling their parks and rail-thin treasuries with very bankable transactions. (The Southern League never played white barnstorming teams and only 5 to 10 percent of its audience was white.) Southern trips also gave Negro League coaches and owners a chance to recruit the best black players on black semipro and Southern Negro League teams.

But the primary difference between barnstorming in the South and the North had nothing to do with baseball. This land used to be the Confederacy. It was still a dark land of bigotry and hate toward blacks, a land full of baseball and baseball teams but no love of the baseball the blacks were playing. In June 1915 a black weekly called the *Indianapolis Freeman* ran a story about a semipro black team ready to tour every little town in Louisiana, while the opposite page reported a black man's lynching in Louisiana.

When Negro League teams barnstormed through the South they were careful. They could not stay in white-only hotels and often refused to stay at the run-down hotels available, so frequently they lodged in the private homes of black baseball fans. When acceptable accommodations couldn't be found, sometimes they slept on the bus or at the ballpark. Negro League teams could not eat at white-only restaurants. Sometimes a light-skinned black player passed for a white and ordered take-out sandwiches for the whole team, or a black cook who got to know the players at the ballpark would invite them to eat in the kitchen of the white-only restaurant where he worked. But more often than not, to avoid confrontations in restaurants, the team bus stopped at a grocery store on a dusty highway and players bought bread, butter, and cold cuts. In the Deep South bigotry sometimes got to the players—even the men who had developed a tough, that's-the-way-it-is attitude toward racism. After 10 years with the Homestead Grays, pitcher Wilmer Fields finally cracked in New Orleans during the 1948 Colored World Series. With the Grays meeting the Birmingham Black Barons (starring Willie Mays), the league was hoping for a good crowd and ordered the game played at minor-league Pelican Park. But Pelican had segregated seating, that reserved for whites being located between first and third base and that for blacks to the right of the bleachers.



"Before the game, we talked about how crazy this was. Here were two black teams, who, by the way, could probably beat half the white major-league teams, and we were in a stadium playing the black World Series and the whites get the good seats and the blacks get the bleacher seats," said Fields. "I was walking to the mound

and I looked out to the bleachers because my wife was out there. I forgot that at Pelican, chicken wire was used to separate the black and white sections in the bleachers. I looked out there and saw my wife, smiling back at me and waving, penned in with chicken wire, like she and all the other blacks were just farm animals. I got this sick feeling in my stomach, really sick. It was the only time the racism and segregation and all that really got to me."

He kept walking to the mound. "I took the ball and slammed it in my glove as hard as I could, hurting my hand, and said, 'Wilmer, just forget about it and pitch. Just pitch.'"

Of course, bigotry was common outside of the South as well, even if segregation wasn't so pervasive. And while black players most commonly were forced to acquiesce to the requirements of a racist society, sometimes the Jim Crow line bent a little because of baseball. Satchel Paige, for instance, convinced white owner J.L. Wilkinson to refuse any Kansas City Monarch bookings in towns that had white-only hotels. In 1935, the Bismarcks, a white team from North Dakota, eager to improve its standing, broke the state's color barrier by hiring Paige and several other blacks for its season.

Sometimes it was baseball that overcame racism. "One time in '47 we pulled into Worcester, Massachusetts, must have been midnight, for a game at noon the next day," remembered Philadelphia Stars catcher Bill Cash.

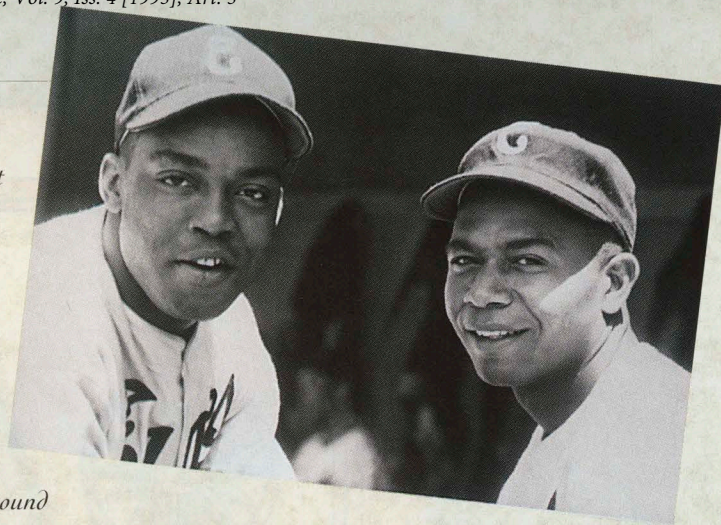
"We stopped at a very famous white-only hotel. Our manager went to the hotel manager and told him there were no black hotels or local homes we knew of and how we'd been riding the bus from Pennsylvania eight hours non-stop to get there. We didn't figure this would do us any good at all, but the guy listened and listened. Then he says, 'The Philadelphia Stars? I've read all about you guys for years. We can put you up here. How many rooms do you need?'"

And that night the famous white hotel was integrated by a manager who was a baseball fan, and it remained integrated.

It was a very difficult life for the players, wandering from town to town on buses that rattled down highways, taking every bump the wrong way. But year after year, decade after decade, the black players, weary as they were, piled up on those buses.

"Why? Hell, we were on our way to play baseball, that's why," said Lou Dials of the Chicago American Giants. "What better reason?" ■

Bruce Chadwick, a 1969 Newhouse and Arts and Sciences graduate, is a columnist for the New York Daily News. He is author of How to Buy, Sell, and Invest in Baseball Cards and Sports Memorabilia, and Abbeville's Major League Memories Series, which features books on the history and memorabilia of baseball's greatest teams. He lives in New Jersey.



Monte Irvin and Larry Doby, shown as members of the Newark Eagles. Doby went on to play for the Cleveland Indians, Chicago White Sox and Detroit Tigers. Irvin played for the New York Giants and Chicago Cubs. He was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1973.