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## Prologue

On Saturday night November 13, 1965, nearly two hundred people gathered in the ballroom of the Daniel Boone Hotel in Columbia, Missouri. The weather outside was cold and dreary, but inside the mood was warmly expectant. Earlier in the day the Missouri Tigers had trounced the Oklahoma Sooners, 30–0, and accepted a bid to play in the New Orleans Sugar Bowl football game on New Year's Day. Now it was time to hear the featured speaker of the evening, eighty-three-year-old Branch Rickey, who had just been inducted into the Missouri Sports Hall of Fame.

To most people in the room, Branch Rickey was “Mr. Baseball,” the man who had revolutionized the sport not once but three times. As the mastermind of the St. Louis Cardinals from 1917 to 1942, Branch Rickey had used his innovative farm system of developing players to turn a financially struggling franchise in the smallest metropolitan area in the National League into a juggernaut that often whipped the rich big-city boys in Chicago and New York. His signing of Jackie Robinson for the Brooklyn Dodgers after World War II not only was his second baseball revolution, obliterating with a stroke of his pen the so-called gentleman's agreement that had barred American players of color from competing in professional baseball, but also was a gesture of profound social importance that directly prefigured the national civil rights movement in the decade ahead. In the late 1950s Rickey made headlines again as the president of the Continental League, a proposed third Major League that, though it never lived to start a season, played an important role in a third baseball revolution, the expansion of the American and National Leagues.

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Branch Rickey was a renowned orator, and the ballroom audience was eager to hear what he had to say. Few realized that he had made the trip from a hospital bed 125 miles away in St. Louis against the advice of his physicians. Branch Rickey had suffered two heart attacks in the past seven years, and the octogenarian now needed a cane to walk. His doctors had warned him that his heart was too weak for a long trip and for the exertion of public speaking, but Rickey was insistent. “Doctors evidently think that you can live forever,” Rickey grouched. “I’ve always believed that it is better to die ten minutes sooner than to live doing nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the raw weather Rickey had attended the football game that afternoon. The lure of a Saturday on a campus was irresistible to Rickey, who, as a young man, had coached both football and baseball at his alma mater, Ohio Wesleyan, and had later coached baseball at the University of Michigan. He relished being in the presence of a crowd filled with ardent sports fans and ambitious young people. Rickey was currently leading a fund-raising drive for Ohio Wesleyan, and he couldn’t wait to get out of the hospital to continue his work.

Another reason for Rickey’s eagerness to attend the night’s ceremonies was that George Sisler was a fellow inductee. Rickey first met Sisler in 1912 when the unassuming freshman southpaw pitcher walked into Rickey’s Michigan varsity baseball practice and mowed down the upperclassmen with ease. Under Rickey’s tutelage Sisler was gradually converted into a first baseman, and, upon his graduation three years later, he rejoined his coach, who was then managing the American League’s St. Louis Browns. In 1939 Sisler would be enshrined in the first class elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. The first baseman also became one of Rickey’s most trusted scouts, instructors, and friends. When learning that Sisler would be honored on the same stage, Rickey’s mind was made up. “I wanted to come because of George,” he said.<sup>2</sup> He added that he also wished to pay homage to the posthumous induction of J. G. Taylor Spink, the editor and publisher of the *Sporting News*, the influential St. Louis–based weekly that frequently had featured Rickey’s ideas and accomplishments and had named him “Man of the Year” in 1936, 1942, and 1947.

After a warm introduction by St. Louis Cardinals broadcaster Harry

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Caray, Branch Rickey hobbled to the rostrum. The audience murmured nervously at the sight of the bushy-browed Rickey's frail physical condition, but once they heard the cadences of Rickey's stentorian baritone—a voice *Time* magazine once likened to Lionel Barrymore playing Thaddeus Stevens—they settled back to be transported by his mesmerizing words.<sup>3</sup>

"I've been in the hospital so much I don't know whether I'm in or out," Rickey began. "I hate to leave anyone in suspense about something like that." Then, using the Socratic method, which had been second nature since his earliest days as a teacher, Rickey asked, "What's the matter with the old man? I'll tell you what's the matter." He explained that he had been hospitalized with a 105-degree fever of unknown origin. Days of tests had proved inconclusive, and he had promised the doctors that he would return for more tests after the night's talk. "You know, I actually believe that the medical profession can produce scientific men who are sufficiently sincere in thinking that they can extend human life in the flesh forever," Rickey declared.<sup>4</sup>

A vegetative life, however, without the struggle to put ideals into action, would never be worth living for Branch Rickey. Thus he was delighted to be speaking on the subject "Courage—Physical and Spiritual." He started by praising the successful performance of Missouri on the gridiron that afternoon. "In football, they call it guts," the onetime coach exclaimed. "Courage, we call it in literature."

Rickey then brought the audience back to a day in the 1920s when he was managing the St. Louis Cardinals and his first baseman Jim Bottomley exhibited rare physical courage. "Bottomley had a fine mind, not scholarly but a fine mind," Rickey recalled, his eyes watering at the memory of one of the first products of his farm system, the son of an Illinois coal miner, who had worked his way up from the Minor Leagues to St. Louis, where he played on three pennant winners and two World Series champions and ultimately won election to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Rickey set the stage for the story. It was the bottom of the eighth inning of a tied game in St. Louis. Jim Bottomley was leading off and smashed a line drive down the right-field line. He hustled around first base and slid safely on an aching right hip into second with the potential tie-breaking run. Moments later, second baseman Rogers Hornsby, another future

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Hall of Famer, singled Bottomley home with the deciding run in a big victory for the Cardinals. Bottomley's hip had been very sore, and he almost didn't play in the game, Rickey noted, but once the dedicated player went out on the field, he risked personal pain in service to his team. What was the moral of the story? Rickey asked. "He paid the price, he paid the price."<sup>5</sup>

The words might seem trite and superficially macho when spoken by ordinary coaches and nonathletic jock wannabes, but somehow when they came out of Branch Rickey's mouth, they carried the force of a genuinely spiritual as well as powerfully physical presence. Rickey's admirer the Reverend Billy Graham once said of him: "He was a rarity, a man's man and a Christian."<sup>6</sup>

"Now I want to talk about something even greater than physical courage," Rickey continued. "Spiritual courage." He was used to gruff, hard-boiled athletic types doubting the relevance of his biblical stories, but they were as real to him as the most secular tales of adventure swapped by his hunting and fishing buddies. Before he could read, Branch Rickey had learned over a thousand scriptural stories on the knee of his devout mother, Emily Brown Rickey.<sup>7</sup>

In his inimitable speaking style, part inspirational coach and part lay preacher, Rickey started to tell the story of Zaccheus from the book of Luke. "It just happens that this chap I'm telling you about, in my judgment, had the greatest amount of courage of any man in the Bible, more than David, Samson, or Paul," Rickey exclaimed. Ever the talent scout and evaluator, he described Zaccheus as "a little fellow. I don't think he could have been over five feet tall. Wealthy, he had embossed shirts and custom-made suits. He was dressed better than anyone around Jericho. He was a tax gatherer, hated by most people."<sup>8</sup> Zaccheus was one of Rickey's favorite biblical characters because he epitomized the kind of person who wasn't afraid to make a fool of himself by going up a tree, literally out on a limb, in search of the truth embodied by the word of Jesus. The passionate, retired executive believed that great baseball teams needed players like Zaccheus, hustling, never-say-die little fellows who knew how to overcome obstacles to win.<sup>9</sup>

This night, however, Rickey would not be able to further expound on the connection between biblical figures and baseball heroes. After

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an uncomfortably long pause, he staggered, grabbed the lectern, and gasped, "I don't believe I'm going to be able to speak any longer." Rickey collapsed into a chair next to his wife on the ballroom stage. Only the quick thinking of a doctor in the audience, who gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, saved his life.<sup>10</sup> Unconscious, he was rushed to a hospital in Columbia, where he lingered in a coma for nearly a month. Jane Moulton Rickey, his childhood sweetheart and wife of nearly sixty years, maintained a constant bedside vigil, but he never regained consciousness. On December 9, 1965, Rickey's powerful heart ceased beating, eleven days shy of his eighty-fourth birthday.

At the funeral four days later at St. Louis's Grace Methodist Church, Reverend Ralph Sockman, a prominent New York City pastor, eulogized the soul and vision of Branch Rickey. "He was adventurous enough to explore new trails, and he was brotherly enough to bring others along with him," said his close friend, who had been a student at Ohio Wesleyan when Rickey was the baseball coach.<sup>11</sup> After the funeral Rickey's body was returned to his roots in Scioto County in southeastern Ohio, where it would be laid to rest alongside the graves of his parents and other members of the Rickey family.

As mourners gathered in a funeral home in Portsmouth, Scioto County's largest city, they were startled by the arrival of a group of huge black men. On tour one hundred miles away in Cincinnati, the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team had decided to pay their respects to the man whose signing of Jackie Robinson had set a national example for racial fairness. Satchel Paige, the legendary pitcher of the Negro Leagues who broke into Major League Baseball a year after Jackie Robinson, was part of the Globetrotters' traveling party. So was Frank Duncan, Jackie Robinson's manager on the Kansas City Monarchs when Robinson played in the Negro Leagues in 1945. "I can still picture them, one by one, offering condolences to Mrs. Rickey by the coffin," remembers Robert Holm, who was working with Rickey on the Ohio Wesleyan fund-raising drive. "And then as quickly as they appeared, they were gone."<sup>12</sup>

During Ralph Sockman's eulogy in St. Louis, the minister predicted that within twenty-five years Branch Rickey would be enshrined in the New York University Hall of Fame of Great Americans, joining the twelve

# 1

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## Diamond in the Rough

“Do you think you can run me out of my job?” schoolteacher Branch Rickey bellowed at a scowling student, squeezing hard on the defiant youngster’s shoulder blades. “Well, you just can’t do it. I need the money, I need the job, so sit down!” It was early in the fall of 1899, and the notoriously tough students in Turkey Creek in Scioto County were living up to their reputation as incorrigible and uneducable. The post office address of Turkey Creek might be Friendship, Ohio, but the name was quite ironic. The sons of Turkey Creek’s loggers, farmers, and moonshiners had spat upon, physically attacked, and run the last two teachers out of town. Seventeen-year-old Branch Rickey thought he could meet the challenge of Turkey Creek’s belligerent youngsters, but he was being tested early.

On Rickey’s first day on the job, a long-haired, unkempt student, corn liquor on his breath, defied him by spitting at his feet. Sensing he needed to establish his authority quickly, Rickey ordered the slovenly student outside to settle the issue physically. Out of the classroom they strode, trailed by the other, amazed members of the class, who were eager to see how their audacious new teacher fared. Though Rickey was barely older than the defiant student, he beat him in a bloody fistfight. It would not be the last physical encounter Rickey engaged in with insubordinate students, but he was making the point that education mattered and, if necessary, was worth fighting about.<sup>1</sup>

Among the remarkable aspects of Rickey’s first teaching job was that he had earned his teaching certificate without owning a high school diploma. Book learning and formal education were not especially valued

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in Rickey's home area of Scioto County. Most of the area residents were farmers who didn't believe that advanced schooling was needed for their children to work in the fields. Branch Rickey himself had been reluctant to leave home because his parents couldn't usually afford hired hands. He wanted to help his parents with the chores because his younger brother, Frank Wanzer, was scarcely ten and his older brother, Orla Edwin, was already licensed as a teacher.

Temperamentally, however, Branch Rickey was not cut out to be a farmer, much preferring to read and talk and argue. "He could sit down on a hoe faster than anyone I ever knew," Branch's mother, Emily Brown Rickey, liked to say with a twinkle in her eye.

Since he could earn \$35 a month teaching in Turkey Creek, he persuaded himself that he could contribute to the household that way. So he invested in a fancy new bicycle and began commuting seventeen miles each way to Turkey Creek from Lucasville, where the Rickey family had moved in 1893 from Branch's birthplace a few miles away in Stockdale. He was licensed to teach orthography, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English grammar, U.S. history, physiology, and hygiene.<sup>2</sup>

Rickey had been hired by two young Scioto County school administrators, Frank Appel and James H. Finney, who saw him as a diamond in the rough, an especially passionate and intelligent young man who had college potential. Appel and Finney were both students at Ohio Wesleyan College in Delaware, twenty miles north of the state capital, Columbus, and they encouraged Rickey to follow in their footsteps. They were aware of his limited financial resources, but they hoped that the Turkey Creek teaching job would ultimately provide him enough money to afford his college tuition.

His mentors also liked Rickey's abilities as an athlete. He was a fierce football running back and a take-charge baseball catcher who was blessed with better than average running speed. In local games Rickey often caught Orla, a hard-throwing left-hander, and the battery of the two brothers was known with respect throughout Scioto and adjoining Ohio counties. In the spare time left after preparing classes, teaching, helping out on the farm, and playing sports, Branch Rickey boned up on the courses needed to enter college. Especially deficient in one of the requirements, Latin, Rickey walked miles for special tutoring in the subject.<sup>3</sup>

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Rickey spent two years as a Turkey Creek teacher. Before the second year, Rickey had received an invitation to move to a less physically intimidating school in nearby Pike County at nearly double the salary. However, the Turkey Creek parents wanted to retain him, circulated a petition in his behalf, and offered him a slight increase in salary. Rickey felt obliged to stay when he saw “those Xs of poor people who wanted their children taught,” he remembered a half century later to Arthur Mann, his first biographer.<sup>4</sup> Years later Rickey’s father, Jacob Franklin Rickey, said that he considered the invitation to return to Turkey Creek for a second year of teaching his now-famous son’s greatest achievement.<sup>5</sup>

Known in Scioto County as Frank Rickey, or “Uncle Frank,” Branch Rickey’s father worked hard on his vegetable farm, trying to eke out a living by growing potatoes, corn, and sorghum in the particularly barren soil of south-central Ohio. Whatever the economic privations of his hardscrabble existence, Uncle Frank was a well-respected and formidable personage in Scioto County. For a time, he served as a county commissioner—a Republican, of course, for it was said of Ohio at the turn of the twentieth century that Republicanism was as natural as snow for an Eskimo.<sup>6</sup> He was also a champion wrestler, well known in the region for his ability to pin men far larger than he was.

Rickey’s father also liked to wrestle with God. Raised a Baptist, Frank Rickey, not long after Branch’s birth, changed his church affiliation to the more tolerant form of Wesleyan Methodism, a religion that did not believe in heresy and that preached a doctrine of “think and let think.” Yet his search for religious purity could be very demanding, and it led him to change churches many times and, when necessary, to establish his own.<sup>7</sup>

Religion played a significant role in the naming of Wesley Branch Rickey. A founder of Methodism was John Wesley, whose conversion in 1738 to a very personal form of Christianity at a meeting house on Aldersgate Street in London, England, became a seminal event in the history of the religion. The name Branch also had profound scriptural roots. 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.” Branch’s name might also have

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been inspired by the New Testament book of John, 15:2: "Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."<sup>8</sup>

A devout belief in Jesus Christ as God's emissary on earth was thus a foundation in the household of Frank Rickey and his equally devout wife, Emily. Mary Rickey Eckler, the oldest of Branch Rickey's six children, recalls that whenever she visited her grandparents in Ohio, she felt the presence of God. She remembers how Frank would proclaim at grace before meals, "The Lord is the head of this house."<sup>9</sup>

Though Branch Rickey's parents were very pious and God fearing, their household was not a solemn one. Young Branch was encouraged to be an active, athletic boy and to have a mind of his own. He received no parental opposition when he decided to drop the name Wesley as a young teenager to avoid confusion with a cousin who had the same name and also because he simply preferred Branch to Wesley. He was encouraged to read good secular as well as religious books. In 1887, when Rickey was five years old, a fire at a bookstore in Portsmouth enabled Frank Rickey to buy for \$2.25 twelve volumes that would become special treasures for his son's entire life. The bounty included Dante's *Inferno*, a collection of Washington Irving's short stories, a New Testament (which Jacob Franklin Rickey inscribed to his son), and a book of the illustrated drawings of Gustave Dore, a French etcher and painter who was also a lay Christian preacher. Dore's graphic representations of biblical struggles and his depictions of stormy and heavenly skies would remain permanently imbedded in Branch Rickey's consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the anchor of religion in Branch Rickey's formative years, patriotism also played a major role. Young Branch was especially close to his paternal grandfather, Ephraim Wanzer Rickey, one of the larger landowners in Scioto County. Ephraim had been unable to fight in the Civil War because he had only one eye, so he became a horse trader who supplied steeds for the Union army and then later went into business for himself. Branch loved to listen to his grandfather's stories, and he took careful notice when Ephraim explained that the secret to good horse trading was "to know more about the other fellow's animal than your own."<sup>11</sup> It was a lesson Rickey would shrewdly apply when he got into baseball trading. In *The American Diamond*, Rickey's elegy to baseball

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written near the end of his life, he likened the authoritarian personality of his grandfather to American League president Byron Bancroft “Ban” Johnson. Both were men of strong determination and self-possession. Once they decided on a course of action, they would pound on a table and declare, “That’s the way I think it is, and that’s the way it is.”<sup>12</sup>

As Branch Rickey entered his second year of teaching in Turkey Creek, he was beginning to look forward to attending college. Frank Rickey, however, was uncomfortable with the thought of his son moving on to the world of higher education. He told Branch that college was really for wealthy people, not for sons of farmers. He did not have to add that the temptation to sin and break away from the pieties and practices of solid Methodist religion would be ever present in the college atmosphere.

Emily Brown Rickey, known throughout Scioto County as Aunt Emma, shared her husband’s fears of worldly temptations but she also had faith in her son’s morality. Her reading of biblical stories to him had reinforced in young Branch the belief that there was a right way and a wrong way to live. Emily Rickey also believed in the value of secular learning, and she always encouraged Branch to develop his mind to the highest level. As far as she was concerned, there was no limit to what her son could achieve, not just individually but for the greater glory of the community and of God. She and her husband did not have to preach to Branch to imbue him with the living truth of John Wesley’s precept, “Having, first, gained all you can, and, secondly, saved all you can, then give all you can.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the total support of his mother, Branch Rickey had another reason to aspire to college and beyond. While he was teaching in Turkey Creek, his sweetheart, Jane Moulton, had entered Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, although she would shortly transfer to Ohio Wesleyan. Jane (born Jenne Moulton and often called Jen or Jennie until she adopted Jane after her marriage) was from the better side of the tracks in Lucasville, the fourth of six children of Chandler and Mary Cecilia Smith Moulton. Chan Moulton was one of the pillars of the small-town Lucasville community. The grandson of a Revolutionary War veteran from Vermont, he was a prominent merchant who ran the Lucasville general store and would be instrumental in bringing the

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Ohio state fair to the town in 1904. Moulton, who served for years as a Republican member of the Ohio state legislature, was blessed with a serene temperament. “He takes everything easy and does not worry about anything,” a contemporary marveled. “Job could have taken lessons of him and improved his book.”<sup>14</sup>

It was expected that all the Moulton children, girls included, would go to college and marry respectably. Though the Moultons appreciated that Jane was smitten with Branch, they harbored grave doubts about whether he could support her in the manner they expected. He was an eager, affectionate young fellow, they conceded, but he hardly seemed a good marital catch. After all, he was a fellow of limited means who lived across the street from the Moulton general store.

Like all young people in love, Branch and Jane knew better. Branch always said that from the day he first laid eyes on Jane Moulton, she was “the only pebble on the beach.” She was pretty and had nice legs, but she was also intelligent and athletic. She could outrun many of the boys in town and did so with an insouciant air. She was also a talented painter who, as a teenager, drew portraits of family members that have remained treasured heirlooms.

Branch and Jane understood each other intuitively, and as they grew older, their love and respect deepened. Having as great or perhaps even more of a sense of adventure than he did, she encouraged him to take both the West Point and Annapolis military service academy exams in the late 1890s. He scored very high on both tests but not quite well enough to receive an appointment. “I made almost nothing in history—didn’t know what the thing was about,” he told Arthur Mann years later.<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that a deficiency in the physical aptitude portion of the exams hurt his cause, which, of course, is ironic in that he would be a Major League Baseball player in a few years and would devote his professional life to trying to perfect the physical science of baseball. Although disappointed by his failure to enter one of the prestigious military academies, Branch Rickey vowed to make something of himself in the world of education. He wanted to succeed, and he wanted to win the hand of Jane Moulton.

Thus, for many reasons, it was a special day in the life of Branch Rickey when, in March 1901, with Turkey Creek’s school closed for the year

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while farming duties resumed, he stepped down from the train in Delaware, Ohio, to begin his college studies at Ohio Wesleyan. Labeled a “conditional” student because of his lack of full academic credentials, Branch Rickey was the picture of the hayseed as he arrived on campus. Clad in ill-fitting clothes (hand-me-downs from brother Orla) and oversized shoes, he carried a battered straw suitcase in one hand and his baseball catching equipment in the other. He had his life savings of barely \$60 in his pocket, but he had incalculable richness in the support of his friends.

Lucasville chums Clyde Brant and Ed Appel, school superintendent Frank Appel’s younger brother, met Rickey at the train station in Delaware and took him to a rooming house. For 50 cents a week, he rented a room not much larger than a closet, with barely space for a bed and desk. The conditional freshman would make ends meet by rising before dawn to stoke the coal furnaces in several college buildings. Later, he augmented his earnings by waiting on college dining tables.

Adjustment to college life did not come immediately for Branch Rickey. His clunky, pigeon-toed gait and unmistakable country accent led to some uncomfortable moments. Early in his first semester, an experience in Latin class loomed as a potential disaster. When called upon by instructor John Groves to recite a passage from Cicero, Rickey stumbled over the correct conjugation of a Latin verb. Professor Groves asked a flustered Rickey, “What book did you study in high school?” “Yours, sir,” Rickey hesitantly replied. The class broke up in gales of laughter, and Rickey reddened with embarrassment.

“See me after class, Mr. Rickey,” Professor Groves said quietly. Rickey began to make plans to catch the next train back to Lucasville. Maybe his father was right, and college work was just too difficult for him. However, Professor Groves, like so many of the mentors Rickey encountered in his life, saw the obvious intelligence and eagerness to succeed in the conditional freshman. Groves suggested a special half-hour, 7:00 a.m. tutoring session in Latin for the next few weeks. Rickey jumped at the chance, and before long, Latin became one of his strongest subjects and undoubtedly influenced his eloquent, if long-winded, speaking style of the future.

Another early incident at Ohio Wesleyan became a guidepost in Rick-

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ey's education. It happened after one of the first student chapels of the school term. While walking down a hill on campus Rickey hesitantly asked a self-assured upperclassman, "Where do I go from here?" "Go anywhere you damned please," came the snarling reply. Having been raised in a home where swearing was frowned on, Rickey was taken a bit aback by his schoolmate's language and insolent tone. He didn't necessarily take the insult personally, but he remembered who had been so surly to him. When football practice started later in the fall, Rickey tackled the offending student hard enough that the fellow had to be carried off on a stretcher. Fortunately, there were no broken bones, and before long Rickey became fast friends with his teammate, whose advice he had taken to heart: he could go anywhere he pleased, and success was there for those who wanted it badly enough.<sup>16</sup>

Though Rickey was taking a full load of courses and working several jobs to pay for his tuition, he couldn't be kept from the athletic fields. The school provided limited equipment, so Rickey "sewed his own elbow pads on an ragged, unsightly sweater," baseball historian Richard D. Miller has noted.<sup>17</sup> Once again eliciting snickers for his dress, Rickey quickly quieted the scoffers by becoming a football standout. He scored the winning touchdown in Ohio Wesleyan's 10-6 victory over archrival Ohio State in Columbus, and area sportswriters voted him the starting halfback on the All-Ohio college team of 1901.

In the spring of 1902 Rickey was the starting catcher on the baseball team, a squad that finished with a 10-2 record and was awarded the informal All-Ohio college championship. He was thrilled that the core of Ohio Wesleyan's championship team came from his hometown of Lucasville: shortstop Ed Appel, third baseman Clyde Brant, and first baseman Ephraim Rickey, Rickey's cousin, who also later played Minor League Baseball.<sup>18</sup> Ohio Wesleyan's coach was Dan "Mickey" Daub, a former Major League pitcher who had won forty-four games in the 1890s (all but one for the Brooklyn "Bridegrooms," so nicknamed because of the many young newlyweds on the team). Daub put Branch Rickey in the leadoff spot, a rare position for a catcher but a testament to his speed and his igniting force at the top of the lineup.

Rickey showed plenty of pep and ginger behind home plate and loved the sensation of playing for his alma mater. During one contest a young

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hooligan ran off with the baseball, and for fifteen minutes the game was stopped as Rickey and his friend Ed Appel hotly pursued the culprit down to the Olentangy River. The thief swam away but left the ball in the water. The fiery catcher waded in and reclaimed it.<sup>19</sup>

The earnest and competitive young student-athlete was also making a name for himself on the Ohio Wesleyan football team. No one loved the school spirit embodied in college fight songs better than Branch Rickey, and he was thrilled when he inspired special verses for the annual big game against Ohio State:

Speak to me, State, only speaky-spiky-spoky;  
Why are those tears on your cheeky-chiky-choky?  
You can't make first down against Rickey-Riky-Roky.  
Amen.<sup>20</sup>

Branch Rickey was enjoying living the life of sound body and sound mind on the Ohio Wesleyan campus, but his meager finances were a constant concern. In the summer of 1902 he accepted an offer to catch for the Portsmouth "Navvies," a semipro baseball team in his home area. He was paid \$25 a week and was able to visit for the first time such southern cities as Knoxville, Louisville, Memphis, and Birmingham. Returning to campus in the fall, Rickey carried a huge course load of twenty-one credits so he could graduate in three and a half years. He continued to make ends meet by working his odd jobs, but he also found the time to play sports and to become an active member of the Mu chapter of the Delta Tau Delta fraternity on campus.

Unfortunately, after playing every minute of the first two football games in the 1902 Ohio Wesleyan season, Branch Rickey's college athletic career came to an abrupt halt. Newspaper articles throughout the area reported that Rickey must be ruled ineligible for all college sports because he had received pay to play baseball for the Portsmouth Navvies. He was now a professional, not an amateur, the articles charged. At a time when commercialized sports were seen by many critics as a blight and corruption on college campuses, the accusations were serious.

Rickey was summoned into the office of Ohio Wesleyan president James W. Bashford and shown the clippings. He was also handed a letter from Navvies owner Major Jack Andrews, who argued for Rickey's

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innocence. “Dear President, Whoever said I had paid Branch Rickey any money was a Goddamned liar. I never paid him a damn cent,” Andrews wrote. President Bashford asked the earnest student for an explanation. “Major Andrews is not telling the truth, President,” Rickey said. “I did accept pay, but I needed that money for school. I didn’t know about the rule, but to tell the truth, Dr. Bashford, I would have played anyway.”<sup>21</sup>

“I understand, Mr. Rickey,” Bashford said quietly. However, the college president felt that since rules were rules, he had no choice but to declare Branch Rickey ineligible for the rest of his collegiate career. Bashford’s ruling was disappointing for the student-athlete, but he realized that varsity athletic participation was only a secondary reason for his coming to college. His primary purpose was to obtain a good education and credentials for a future career in law. Preparing for law school would certainly make a good impression on Chandler Moulton, who Rickey ardently hoped would one day become his father-in-law.

Shortly thereafter, a great opportunity presented itself to the ambitious student. Baseball coach Dan Daub informed the school that he was not planning to coach again in the spring of 1903. For a replacement President Bashford immediately thought of Rickey, who was well liked and admired on the campus and had certainly been forthright in explaining his actions as a semipro player the previous summer. Rickey jumped at the chance. By coaching baseball he could stay involved with the sport, and the job also provided academic privileges. He could sit in on faculty meetings, even though he couldn’t speak or vote. He relished the chance to become a part of both the coaching and teaching communities of Ohio Wesleyan.

The style of Rickey’s two Ohio Wesleyan baseball teams would foreshadow his professional teams of the future. Following the lead of their young coach, they were highly competitive, passionate, and hustling teams. Though Rickey’s first squad in 1903 went only 8-9-1, his 1904 team won 14 of 19 games, establishing a school record that lasted for more than eighty years.<sup>22</sup>

Rickey’s first college coaching experience was also significant because one of his players was Charles “Tommy” Thomas from nearby Zanesville, Ohio, the only black player on the team and one of the few black students in the college. (Pictured in a photo of the 1903 team is a black

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mascot, who was also a student.)<sup>23</sup> An excellent athlete, Thomas had come to OWU as an outfielder–first baseman, but after Rickey was ruled ineligible he moved him to catcher, thus making the black student-athlete the first of hundreds of players to switch positions under Branch Rickey's guidance.

In the two seasons Thomas played under Rickey, the coach was anguished by the racial slurs endured by his new catcher. When the OWU was in Lexington to play the University of Kentucky in spring 1903, some of the Kentucky players and fans chanted, "Get that nigger off the field!" Twenty-one-year-old coach Branch Rickey raced across the field and confronted the Kentucky coach in the dugout. "We won't play without him!" Rickey declared. Many of the Kentucky fans, having come to see a game, sided with the Ohioans and started their own chant, "We want Thomas! We want Thomas!" After an hour's delay, the game began and was played without incident.<sup>24</sup> Thomas received similar rough treatment at West Virginia University, where he was the first black player ever to play on the school's diamond.<sup>25</sup>

During the 1904 season an incident occurred that Branch Rickey would cite frequently decades later as a key factor in his determination to break baseball's color ban and sign Jackie Robinson and other black players. Ohio Wesleyan journeyed to play Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, but a hotel clerk would not allow Thomas to register with the rest of the team. Determined to keep his squad together, Rickey asked to see the hotel manager, while sending Barney Russell, the team equipment manager, to check on the availability of rooms at a local YMCA. Already a passionate persuader at his young age, Rickey managed to convince the hotel personnel to put a cot in his room where Thomas could sleep.

The black player was grateful for his coach's support, but when they arrived in the room, Thomas broke down sobbing, scratching at his skin as if he wanted to forcibly remove the stain of its color. "I never felt so helpless in my life," Rickey remembered to Arthur Mann.<sup>26</sup> Though not yet well read on the subject of racial discrimination, Rickey instinctively empathized with Thomas's pain of rejection.

Rickey realized that, but for the color line, Thomas was a good enough athlete to have a chance at a professional baseball career.<sup>27</sup> (Rickey had

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also been impressed by another black athlete in Ohio, running back Charles Follis of Wooster College, who had scored four touchdowns against Ohio Wesleyan in 1903 and had been Rickey's teammate on the semipro Shelby Steamfitters football team.)<sup>28</sup> Together in his hotel room in South Bend, Rickey tried to console Thomas, telling him that a time would come when there would be equal opportunity for all, regardless of color. In the meantime he gave his hurting player a pep talk. "Come on, Tommy, snap out of it, buck up! We'll lick this one day," he said, "but we can't if you feel sorry for yourself."

The South Bend encounter between Rickey and Thomas has been re-told innumerable times and was undoubtedly embellished over the years by the master storyteller Branch Rickey. However, there is no doubt that the incident occurred and that Rickey and Thomas remained friends for the rest of their lives, sharing a mutual devotion to their alma mater, Ohio Wesleyan. In 1947 Thomas, who had become a dentist in Albuquerque, New Mexico, told writer Mark Harris the story of his visit to his former college coach in St. Louis "about the time when Dizzy Dean was in his prime." Rather than send him out to watch the game in the segregated section of Sportsman's Park, Thomas remembered that Rickey spent the time talking in his office, saying once again that one day the indignity of racial discrimination would not exist in a land founded on the idealism of the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting on the South Bend incident more than fifty years later, Rickey told black journalist Carl Rowan, "I later realized that in many cases a Negro could stay in a white hotel if he were a servant traveling with a white man and that so long as this relationship of master and servant was obvious, then it was perfectly all right with whites who otherwise would object to a Negro's staying in the hotel."<sup>30</sup>

In the summer of 1903 Branch Rickey resumed his professional baseball career, signing with a semipro team in Terre Haute, Indiana. However, on the recommendation of Billy Doyle, a onetime teammate on a Portsmouth town club, Rickey's contract was purchased by a team in LeMars, Iowa, which played in the faster Iowa-Dakota League. He hit .265, but his true worth was his catching and overall leadership, which contributed to LeMars's winning the league championship. After the 1903 season,

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Rickey learned that Dallas, of the Texas League, an even higher classification Minor League, had purchased his contract for the 1904 season.

The school year of 1903–04, Rickey's last year as an Ohio Wesleyan undergraduate, was filled with many high points for the maturing farm boy. In athletics Rickey vigorously rooted on the 1903 Ohio Wesleyan football team as they provided some major thrills, most notably a victory over the big boys from Ohio State University in Columbus. He yearned to be out on the field with his teammates, but even if he had still been eligible to play, he could not have competed because he had broken his ankle in a Shelby Steamfitters game.

Academically, Rickey received his first full scholarship, enabling him to devote himself completely to study and coaching without the burden of menial jobs. When the 1904 spring term began, Rickey reached another milestone when he was seated in chapel for the first time with the regular Ohio Wesleyan senior class. Having lived up to his academic promise, he no longer carried the stigma of "conditional" student. He would graduate with his class in June 1904, having made good on his goal of completing the bachelor of literature degree in three and a half years. It was a thrilling moment for the young man who earlier had harbored grave doubts about his abilities as a college student. However, because he had not yet taken the required mathematics classes, Branch Rickey would have to wait longer to earn the bachelor of arts degree, a prerequisite for law school.

After graduation he was off to Dallas for another season as a baseball professional. Rickey hit only .261 for Dallas but stole 14 bases, scored 25 runs, and had 41 assists as a catcher, proof that he knew how to throw out opposing runners.<sup>31</sup> During Rickey's year in Dallas the gregarious catcher met a personable outfielder on the Houston team, Charley Barrett, who would become his closest friend among all his loyal baseball associates in the years ahead. Barrett never learned to hit the curve ball and did not reach the Major Leagues, but he was a speedy, aggressive player who loved the game. Barrett "had no newfangled ideas about baseball," Rickey later said about his good friend. "He knew that the main one was to get on and then around the bases."<sup>32</sup>

Rickey's 1904 performance in Dallas was rewarded when his contract was purchased before the end of the season by the Cincinnati Reds, the

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favorite team of his youth. As a rookie Rickey did not expect much playing time, but he absorbed the Major League atmosphere avidly. On Friday, August 26, 1904, he made his debut in an exhibition game at Rushville, Indiana. "He has a splendid whip and knows how to use it," wrote *Cincinnati Inquirer* sportswriter Ren Mulford of Rickey's performance. "His cheery voice was heard all through the contest."<sup>33</sup>

The next day, with Rickey watching from the bench, the Reds lost a tough home game to Boston. Afterward he handed his chest protector to first-string catcher Heinie Peitz. "You better take this," Rickey told his teammate. "I won't be here tomorrow." Sunday was his regular day of rest and worship, and Rickey assumed that Dallas owner Joe Gardner and field manager Charlie Moran had informed Cincinnati officials of his Sabbatarian convictions. However, Reds manager Joe Kelley, a crusty member of the tough, brawling championship Baltimore Orioles teams of the 1890s, knew nothing about Rickey's beliefs and contract stipulation. When he overheard Rickey's conversation with Peitz, Kelley barked, "This is a Sunday town; that's when the dough comes in to pay you fellows."<sup>34</sup> Kelley told Rickey that if he didn't play on Sunday, he should see Cincinnati owner August "Garry" Herrmann, receive his pay, and never return to the Reds.

Rickey was confused and concerned, but he was not going to bend his principles or yield his contractual rights. He also was not the only player unwilling to play Sunday baseball at a time when Cincinnati and St. Louis were in the small minority of cities allowing it. Famed New York Giants pitcher Christy Mathewson was the most noteworthy Sabbatarian early in his career (he later relented and played on Sunday), but several other Major Leaguers also did not play on the Sabbath. In the Sunday game Rickey refused to play, three Boston players also sat out for religious reasons, prompting the *Sporting News* to call the contest a "baseball farce" with "too many Sabbatarians" on the Boston team.<sup>35</sup>

Without any second thoughts Branch Rickey made the one-hundred-mile journey from Cincinnati to Lucasville for Sunday worship and rest with his family. He was consoled, as always, by his visits to his sweetheart, Jane Moulton, who was back in Lucasville, living with her parents after graduating from Ohio Wesleyan in 1903.

On Monday he returned to Cincinnati and headed to the imposing city