

JACKIE AND RACHEL ROBINSON arrived at Lockheed Terminal in Los Angeles in the early evening of Thursday, February 28, 1946, to board an American Airlines flight to Daytona Beach, Florida. Rachel wore a dyed three-quarter-length ermine coat that Jackie had given her for a wedding present not quite three weeks earlier, a matching black hat, and a brown alligator-skin handbag he had bought her that winter in Venezuela. Although Southern California weather hardly required a fur coat, “that piece of ermine was my certificate of respectability,” she later said. “I thought that when I wore it everyone would know that I belonged on the plane, or wherever I happened to be.”¹

As Jackie’s mother, Mollie, said good-bye to her son and daughter-in-law, she handed them a shoe box.

“What’s this?” Jackie asked.

“It’s full of fried chicken and hard-boiled eggs,” his mother said.

“Aw, mamma, you shouldn’t have brought this,” he protested. “They serve food on the plane.”

“I know,” she answered. “But I just thought something might happen, and I didn’t want you starving to death and getting to that baseball camp too weak to hit the ball.”² Mollie Robinson’s experiences in the South had taught her the importance of being self-sufficient. She often told her family: “God bless the child who got’s his own.”³ But Jackie and Rachel did not want the shoe box. They knew the stereotype about blacks having picnics on trains and could imagine strangers’ disapproving or mocking stares. They also knew, however, that they would disappoint Mollie if they did not accept her gift. So they reluctantly took the shoe box, thanked Mollie, and, in a few minutes, said good-bye.⁴

Rachel later remembered her anxiousness as she and her husband began their journey. “I did have some trepidation about entering the South for the first time,” Rachel remembered. “But dressed in my wedding finery and escorted by my strong, handsome, talented husband, I couldn’t foresee the need for the odorous chicken as we parted from Mollie. I was focusing my hope that whatever the circumstances, Jack would land a desperately needed job and win a place in the starting lineup.”⁵

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

Jackie Robinson was headed to spring training, hoping to win a spot on the roster of the Montreal Royals, the Brooklyn Dodgers' AAA minor league team. When a few months earlier he had signed with the Royals, he became the first black in organized professional baseball in the twentieth century. Simultaneously, Robinson was transformed into a symbol of black America's long struggle for racial equality. After playing the 1946 season with Montreal, Robinson was promoted to the Dodgers, where the following April he broke Major League Baseball's color line. And it is there, in April 1947, that his story so often begins. Because of all Robinson accomplished from that moment on and all that he has come to represent since, the events before April 1947 have been all too easy to ignore.

But the real story of the integration of baseball had actually begun more than a year earlier, when Robinson boarded that flight to Florida deep in the Jim Crow South. For blacks, the racial climate in the South was tense, unpredictable, and violent. Discrimination was legal and enforced without regard to basic human rights. Whites reinforced Jim Crow laws through threats and physical coercion as well as by taking the law into their own hands.⁶ The brunt of these attacks were borne by black war veterans, who, having bravely served in World War II, returned home believing they should be treated with the same respect as other Americans. Instead, a number were lynched "to teach them their place."

In return for fighting and dying for their country, blacks demanded nothing less than the rights guaranteed them in the U. S. Constitution – equal opportunity, equal protection under the law, abolition of public segregation, and the same treatment afforded whites.⁷ In his 1945 book, *Rising Wind*, Walter White, chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), wrote that the war had given American blacks a sense of kinship with other oppressed people in the world. He called on the country to reject the lynchings of returning black soldiers. The United States, White wrote, "could choose between a policy of appeasement of bigots – which course she gives every indication now of following or she can live up to ideals and thereby save herself."⁸

During spring training of 1946 the inequalities and prejudices of baseball converged with those of the country they reflected. Discrimi-

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

nation was so institutionalized that mainstream America gave little thought to such concepts as civil rights or racial equality – especially in the South.⁹ In 1944, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal had published *An American Dilemma*, a groundbreaking study of race relations. So complete was segregation in the South, Myrdal wrote, that “the white Southerner practically never sees a Negro except as his servant and in other standardized and formalized caste situations.”¹⁰ Southern newspapers enforced policies that prohibited the publication of photographs of blacks – except for those, as one black writer wrote, “who dangled at the end of ropes over limbs of trees.”¹¹

The story of Robinson and his first spring training thus reveals an important – and so far neglected – piece of history about the integration of baseball. In doing so, it also reveals a great deal about America as it struggled to correct its contradictory character: preaching equality for all while discriminating against millions of its own. The story of Jackie Robinson’s first spring training captures America as it moved, or staggered, toward its promise of equal rights for all. In addition, the drama of baseball’s first integrated spring training dramatizes the ways in which the issues of integration, segregation, and civil rights were covered by the nation’s black press as well as its white mainstream press.

Both in content and context, the reporting in the mainstream press was limited by a mindset that prevented white reporters, their newspapers, and their readers from appreciating the historical significance of Jackie Robinson’s 1946 spring training. To black sportswriters and their readers, however, the story clearly symbolized the hopes and the dreams of integration, not merely on a ball field but in society. Black sportswriters and their newspapers recognized this crucial juncture between the stories of baseball and civil rights and shared it with their readers.¹² Because white America learned little about civil rights from its newspapers, it failed to understand that America was changing – and thus was ill-prepared for the civil rights movement.

Baseball was one of the first institutions in postwar America to become desegregated.¹³ Baseball was America’s national game, and like America itself, it preached that it was a melting pot where everyone, regardless of identity or origin, could succeed, provided they had the talent or determination. The nation’s mainstream sportswriters perpetuated this myth, and baseball fans accepted it, not knowing or not

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

caring that talented black ballplayers played in the shadows of white baseball, barred from the game because of an insidious “gentlemen’s agreement” that had excluded blacks since the 1880s.

Though most of America did not know it, several sportswriters working for black weeklies and the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, had campaigned for integration for more than a decade before Montreal signed Robinson in October 1945. The Communists and the radical left would play a part in making the national pastime more democratic. But black and Communist sportswriters understood that they could not end segregated baseball by themselves. Like the leaders of the civil rights movement, they needed the support of white journalists, activists, and politicians. They needed someone like Branch Rickey, the president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who had the courage, foresight, and clout to force the issue on baseball.

In late August 1945, Rickey summoned Robinson, then playing for the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues. Rickey explained that he had been scouting black baseball for the right player and the search had led him to Robinson. Following a three-hour meeting, Rickey signed Robinson to a contract after receiving his assurances that he would have “the guts not to fight back” against racist epithets, spikings, and worse. Rickey told Robinson that if he lost his temper, it would set off race riots in stadiums or simply prove that blacks were too emotional to play in organized baseball.¹⁴ The baseball establishment had long justified segregation by maintaining that blacks lacked the requisite ability and temperament. Rickey and Robinson kept the contract to themselves until Rickey felt the time was right to make the announcement.

On October 23, 1945, Montreal stunned the baseball world by announcing that it had signed Robinson, thus forcing integration on baseball and, by implication, American society itself. “I realize what I’m getting myself into,” Robinson told reporters. “I also realize how much it means to me, my race, and baseball.”¹⁵ Intelligent and pragmatic, Robinson understood the dangers inherent in challenging segregation on its own ground in Florida. Unlike most blacks, he had been around whites – as a four-sport athlete at UCLA and then as an officer in the U.S. Army. He had faith in his ability as an athlete. He also had faith in Branch Rickey. And, finally, he believed that he was on the side of the

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

angels, that the hand of God was with him, and that he would triumphantly emerge from the challenge.¹⁶

Unbeknownst to the Robinsons, a few days before their flight departed from California, a race riot had erupted in the small southern town of Columbia, Tennessee. Blacks would read about it in horror over the next few weeks. A black mother and her son, Gladys and James Stevenson, recently discharged from the navy, had gone into the Castner-Knott Shop to complain that a radio she had left for repair was still not working. The repairman, a twenty-eight-year-old white man named William Fleming, resented Mrs. Stevenson's complaint, followed her and James outside, and then slapped and kicked the woman. James Stevenson then pushed Fleming through the store's plate-glass window. A number of white men, including a police officer, then attacked James. When Mrs. Stevenson intervened, the officer struck her over the eye. The Stevensons were arrested and jailed on charges of assault.¹⁷ Fleming, however, was not arrested.

The jailing of the Stevensons did not resolve the tension. Columbia, located near Pulaski, Tennessee, the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan, had a history of racial violence. Many of the town's three thousand black citizens still remembered the black teenager who in 1933 had been beaten, burned, and hanged by a white mob after being acquitted of raping a white girl.¹⁸ Sheriff J. J. Underwood, hearing rumors that a white mob was forming and a rope had been acquired, called two prominent black citizens and asked for their help in smuggling the Stevensons out of town.¹⁹

By six o'clock, seventy-five whites had gathered in the city's public square, just a few blocks from the town's black district, known as Mink Slade. Within an hour, white men were knocking on the jail door and demanding the release of the Stevensons. Sheriff Underwood opened the door and, firing a machine gun over the men's heads, ordered the crowd to disband. He arrested two men for not dispersing and threw them in jail for public drunkenness. Hoping to defuse the situation, Underwood then ordered his men to set up a roadblock to keep blacks and whites apart.²⁰

Black residents, meanwhile, fearing the worst, met in Mink Slade. A few armed men shot out the streetlights and then waited at store windows, fearful of an attack. When night came, two white police officers,

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

without Underwood's permission, turned their engines off and rolled through the darkened Mink Slade district without identifying themselves. "Here they come!" someone yelled from his position in a store window. The air exploded with gunfire. Black townspeople, some of whom were war veterans, demonstrated that they would fight before seeing another lynching. "We fought for freedom overseas," one black shouted, "and we'll fight for it here!"²¹

Once the shooting began, the white mob ran into Mink Slade with their guns firing. In the aftermath, as blood drained into the street's gutters, the mayor of Columbia asked the governor to send state troopers and the National Guard. Early the next morning, hundreds of law enforcement officers converged on Mink Slade, forced black residents out of their houses, and confiscated their guns and even their jewelry and money. Once Mink Slade was under control, the law enforcement officers then began destroying homes and businesses, shooting out windows, tearing up furniture, burning business records, and scrawling KKK into walls.²²

Daily Worker reporter Harry Raymond counted thirty-four bullet holes in front of a barber shop. In another shop, every jukebox was smashed and the money removed. A state patrolman's bayonet had been shoved through the music box in a refreshment store and all its beer carted off for a celebration. Raymond described the destruction done to a church: "With fiendishness, these men, sworn to uphold law and order, ripped and tore the chapel draperies. Pieces of wreckage were on top of a Bible on the pulpit."²³

Over the next two days, dozens of blacks were arrested and charged with inciting a riot and attempted murder. According to one account by a black journalist, "The writ of habeas corpus was virtually suspended. Negroes were arrested without charges, held incommunicado, questioned without benefit of counsel, and detained on excessive bail. . . . The home of virtually every Negro in Columbia and its immediate environs was searched and all firearms taken."²⁴ The arrests continued throughout the week. About a hundred blacks were eventually arrested and jailed. Not a single white was arrested. While police questioned two suspects, William Gordon and James Johnson, one grabbed a weapon, and when they tried to escape, according to police, the two men were shot to death.²⁵

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

The *Nashville Banner* and other Tennessee newspapers blamed communists and outside agitators like the NAACP for the violence. “We’ve always treated our niggers nice,” a Columbia lawyer said, “and now they turn against us like this.”²⁶ State politicians urged reporters to write that black folks in Columbia would not have acted so violently if it not been for “outside agitation.” In an editorial, the *Columbia Daily Herald* wrote: “The white people of the South . . . will not tolerate any racial disturbances without resenting it, which means bloodshed. The Negro has not a chance of gaining supremacy over a sovereign people and the sooner the better element of the Negro race realize this, the better off the race will be.”²⁷

The Columbia race riot alarmed blacks. “It fulfilled predictions that mob violence would be used after the war to force the Negro back into ‘his place,’” *The Crisis*, the organ of the NAACP, said. The publication added that the Columbia race riot revealed a new militancy among black Americans – that even in small communities, blacks did “not intend to sit quietly and let a mob form, threaten, and raid their neighborhoods.”²⁸ Walter White immediately contacted Washington DC and asked the Justice Department to “safeguard the constitutional rights of Negroes against state violation of these rights,” a strategy that would become central to the civil rights movement in the 1960s.²⁹

NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall, who later argued *Brown v. Board of Education* in front of the U.S. Supreme Court and then became America’s first black Supreme Court justice, agreed to represent the suspects. When he contracted pneumonia, however, he turned the case over to fellow attorneys Alexander Looby, Maurice Weaver, and Leon Ransom. The judge moved the case to nearby Lawrence County, where an all-white jury acquitted twenty-three of the twenty-five suspects charged in the riot. Black newspapers praised the stunning decision. “America justice has triumphed over the klan,” White told reporters. In November, Marshall, now recuperated, represented the two suspects who were charged with attempted murder. After a four-day trial, the all-white jury in a neighboring town found one suspect not guilty but the other guilty. Marshall’s life in danger, he, like the Stevensons, had to be smuggled out of town for fear he would be lynched.³⁰

Unaware of what was unfolding in Columbia, the Robinsons flew over the western deserts, their thoughts focused on what awaited them

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

in Florida.³¹ They had been married on February 10 in a simple ceremony at the Independent Church in Los Angeles. After the reception, they checked into their hotel room on Central Avenue, and, as Rachel put it, “closed the door on the outer world, all of my fears and doubts vanished. It was a precious moment filled with feelings of completeness.”³²

For Rachel, spending the spring in Dixie was not the honeymoon she had dreamed of. She had heard the stories of lynchings but tried to hide her concern from Jackie. “I was worried because I had heard so many stories about the treatment of Negroes in the Deep South,” she later said. “I knew how quickly Jack’s temper could flare up in the face of a racial insult.” If that were to happen, she did not know whether they both might be “harmed, or killed, or, at best, we might jeopardize this opportunity to wipe out segregation in baseball.”³³

Jackie could indeed be fiercely stubborn and temperamental. In August 1943, Robinson, then a lieutenant in the army, was arrested and then court-martialed for refusing to go to the back of a bus near Fort Hood, Texas. Black newspapers, such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, publicized the incident about the onetime college star athlete. Because of his athletic fame, Robinson had advantages not afforded other blacks facing punishment in the armed services. In fact, given the frequency of violence against impudent black soldiers, if he had been Joseph Robinson or James Robinson, Jackie might not have survived to face a court-martial.

Instead, as Jackie Robinson, he was cleared of charges and spared a sentence in a military jail. During his arrest he had been called a “nigger” by a superior officer and was forced to sit in chains throughout his trial. In November 1943, he was discharged from the army a changed man. “He was far more deeply interested now in a personal commitment to the ideal of social justice, especially for blacks,” Arnold Rampersad wrote in his biography of Robinson. “But he had paid a stiff price in the process.”³⁴ Without any clear direction in his life, he joined the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro Leagues the next spring. If Robinson had not been court-martialed for challenging Jim Crow laws, he would have remained in the army and would thus have been in the service, and probably in Europe, when Rickey instructed his scouts

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

to search for the right man to integrate baseball. Someone else's name would have been typed on that Montreal contract.

About 7 a.m. on Friday, March 1, Jackie and Rachel arrived at the New Orleans airport, having flown through the night from California. After a scheduled four-hour layover, they would fly on to Pensacola in the Florida panhandle for another stop, before going on to Daytona Beach. When Rachel went to find a bathroom, she saw something she had never seen in California: signs that said "White Woman" and "Colored Woman." More indignant than embarrassed, she refused to sacrifice her self-respect and rushed head down into the white ladies' room with such determination that nobody said anything.³⁵

When the Robinsons lined up to board the plane, an American Airlines employee instructed them that they had been bumped for military reasons, though the war had been over for six months. The Robinsons decided to get a bite to eat in the airport's restaurant and wait for the next available flight. But they were prohibited from entering the restaurant. They could buy sandwiches, they were told, but they would have to eat them elsewhere. The Robinsons bristled at the suggestion. Now they understood why blacks took food with them when traveling – and why Jackie's mother had given them the shoe box.³⁶

After a few hours, the Robinsons, impatient and tired, decided to find a hotel room and wait there for word on their flight. A cab driver took them to a nearby hotel, but when they found that it prohibited blacks he deposited them at a blacks-only hotel. The room was small and cramped, and it reeked. It left a lasting impression on Rachel. "I was almost nauseated. It was a dirty, dreadful place, and they had plastic mattress papers. Lying on the bed was like trying to sleep on newspapers," she remembered.³⁷ Finally, the Robinsons returned to the airport, where they waited several more hours before boarding their plane.³⁸

When the American Airlines plane landed to refuel in Pensacola, a flight attendant asked three passengers – the Robinsons and a Mexican – to exit. In explanation, another employee told them that to counter the weight of additional fuel needed in case of an expected storm, three passengers had to be removed. As the Robinsons listened, Jackie saw three white passengers get on the plane.³⁹ Frustrated, he felt a mounting rage in the pit of his stomach, but remembering what Rickey had

Fried Chicken and Hard-Boiled Eggs

told him – he would have to have “the guts not to fight back” – the ballplayer choked back his anger.⁴⁰ The airline told the Robinsons that there would be another plane to Daytona Beach the next day but could not guarantee them seats.⁴¹ Ironically, only a week earlier, American Airlines had apologetically characterized as “clumsy and unusually stupid” an airline advertisement showing a black messenger carrying a tray and speaking in dialect.⁴²

Already late for spring training, Jackie did not have the luxury of waiting for an airplane that might, or might not, allow him to board. When he called Rickey’s office in Florida, he learned that Rickey was displeased that Robinson was not yet in camp. Rickey’s frustrations were passed on to Robinson. Rickey also was frustrated – partly because he did not know what to expect and partly because he did. Rickey, a devout Methodist who refused to attend games on Sundays, believed, like Robinson, that God was with him – though he knew that a lot of mortals were not.

Rickey’s success in baseball had a lot to do with his ability to leave as little as possible to chance. “Luck,” as he observed, “was the residue of design.” As unpredictable as things were in the South, he could make the proverbial playing field slightly more level for Robinson. Rickey sent his top assistant, Bob Finch, on a tolerance campaign to Florida. Knowing that Robinson was going to be the loneliest man in Florida, Rickey considered signing several other blacks but in the end signed only one – Johnny Wright, a pitcher. He also hired Wendell Smith, the crusading sports editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, to find accommodations for his two black players and keep an eye on them.

Wright, like his teammate, had problems getting from his home in New Orleans to training camp. After his car broke down, Wright was forced to take the train, where he met Cleveland Indians catcher Dutch Meyer. When Wright identified himself, Meyer told him that Montreal Royals manager Clay Hopper, who was traveling from his home in Mississippi, was sitting in the same car. During a stop, Meyer then introduced Wright to Hopper. Wright remembered a cordial exchange. “He was very nice,” Wright told Wendell Smith. “He seemed pleased to meet me.”⁴³ Wright arrived in Sanford, Florida, where the Montreal team began spring training, on Saturday, March 2. But Rickey sent him to Daytona Beach to wait for Robinson. According to the