GUIDE to the WENDELL SMITH PAPERS

National Baseball Hall of Fame Library
Manuscript Archives

National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum
25 Main Street
Cooperstown, NY 13326

www.baseballhall.org

Corey Seeman, January 1997
Claudette Scrafford, updated November 2014
Collection Number
BA MSS 1
BL-572.97, BL-5302.97

Title
Wendell Smith Papers

Inclusive Dates
1943-1961

Extent
.16 linear foot (1 archival box)

Repository
National Baseball Hall of Fame Library
25 Main Street
Cooperstown, NY 13326

Abstract
This is a collection of correspondence and newspaper clippings.

Provenance
These items were donated in 1996 and 1997 by Wyonella Smith, widow of Wendell Smith.

Preferred Citation
Wendell Smith Papers, BA MSS 1, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY

Access
By appointment during regular business hours, email research@baseballhall.org.

Property Rights
Property rights are owned by the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

Copyright
For information about permission to reproduce or publish, please contact the library.

Biography
Wendell Smith, a prominent newspaper journalist and television sportscaster, played a significant, if not central, role in the desegregation of professional baseball in 1946. Smith was born and raised in Detroit, where his father worked in Henry Ford's household as a chef. He was the only African American student at Southeastern High School in Detroit. He played on that school's baseball team and was one of the leading pitchers on an American Legion team that featured future
Chicago White Sox catcher Mike Tresh. Smith played baseball at West Virginia State College at Charleston, where he also became the sports editor for the school newspaper during his junior year. Upon his graduation in 1937, he accepted a position at the *Pittsburgh Courier*, at that time the leading African American weekly newspaper in the country. After only one year at the paper, Smith was appointed sports editor. Besides covering the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays, Smith covered the National League Pittsburgh Pirates. He routinely interviewed players and managers from the Pirates and visiting National League teams on their opinion of whether African American ball players could compete with their white counterparts in the major leagues. In 1938, Smith polled all the National League players and managers with the integration question and found that 75% favored integration, 20% opposed and 5% had no opinion. In 1939, Smith, along with *Courier* Publisher Ira Lewis and well known singer Paul Robeson, appeared at a meeting of major league owners to present these findings and to promote the integration of major league baseball. No response was ever made to that presentation.

Wendell Smith continued to campaign for the integration of major league baseball. A good part of this campaign was waged in the columns of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, with many articles reprinted in other newspapers and picked up by wire services. Smith made his first direct inroad into desegregating major league baseball when he advised Boston politician Isadore Muchnick how to gain Boston's African American vote. At Smith's suggestion, Muchnick declared that he would withhold support for the annual City Council vote allowing Sunday Baseball in Boston unless the Red Sox and Braves agreed to allow Negro Leaguers to try out for the team. These two teams agreed and Smith selected three players to try out: Jackie Robinson, Marvin Williams and Sam Jethroe. He declined to select Satchel Paige because he was too old (a decision Smith would later regret) and Homestead Grays' Catcher Josh Gibson because of a protest from that club's owners. Duffy Lewis, a former player and the Red Sox' traveling secretary, conducted the hour long try out. While some other sports writers were there, neither national publicity nor a contract offer from the Red Sox or the Braves came out of the tryout.

On his way back from Boston to Pittsburgh, Smith decided to see Branch Rickey, general manager and president of the Brooklyn Dodgers. In 1945, Rickey was publicly planning a third Negro League, to be called the United States Baseball League. The generally accepted purpose of this league was to legitimate Rickey's interest in players from the Negro Leagues. Soon after this meeting with Smith, Rickey fixed his sights on Jackie Robinson, exclusively referring to him in his conversations with Smith as "that young man from the West." When Jackie Robinson was signed by Rickey for the Dodgers, Rickey sought the assistance of Smith to secure housing for Robinson in Spring Training and when the Dodgers were on the road. In a letter dated January 14, 1946 (as found in these papers) Smith wrote Rickey that the *Pittsburgh Courier* was "...willing to pay all my expenses in connection with this service; we are trying to render the cause of
Democracy in the country, so ably championed by you." In 1946, Smith followed Robinson closely as a player of that city's International League team and in 1947, followed him closely with the Brooklyn Dodgers. These men had a close relationship that led to Smith being hired to write Jackie Robinson's autobiography, titled *Jackie Robinson, My Own Story*, which was published in 1948.

In 1948, Smith left the *Courier* and joined the staff of the *Chicago American* as a sportswriter covering primarily boxing. No longer working at an African-American newspaper, Smith's application for membership in the Baseball Writers' Association was ratified (after numerous attempts while at the *Courier*). While he wrote for the *American*, Smith continued to encourage the full integration of spring training sites. Smith also felt that the inclusion of Jackie Robinson and other African-American players in the major leagues did not mean that the Negro Leagues should fold. He wrote repeatedly of the need for his readers to support the Negro Leagues and promoted the annual East-West game in his columns. He stayed with that paper for nearly 14 years. In 1964, he became the sportscaster for Chicago's television station WGN. At the time of his death in 1972, Smith was the president of the Chicago Press Club.

Smith was survived by his wife Wyonella Smith. In 1993, Wendell Smith was posthumously given the J. G. Taylor Spink Award by the Baseball Writers' Association of America, enshrining him in the "writer’s wing" of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

**Scope and Content**

Wendell Smith papers include correspondence and newspaper columns written by Smith for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago's American*. These papers document Smith's direct and indirect support of the candidacy of Jackie Robinson as the first African American to play professional baseball in the 20th Century. These papers also document Smith's ongoing support and interest in the Negro Baseball Leagues. Of primary note is incoming and outgoing correspondence with Brooklyn Dodgers President Branch Rickey and Dodgers Second Baseman Jackie Robinson.

The Correspondence dates from 1945 to 1949 and includes letters between Smith, Branch Rickey, and Jackie Robinson concerning spring training accommodations for Jackie Robinson, the demise of the Negro Leagues, and the support of the Pittsburgh Courier for the integration of major league baseball. Of note among letters between Rickey and Smith are Smith's suggestion of Brooklyn signing Robinson's UCLA teammate Kenny Washington as his second African American player (December 19, 1945), and letters written by Smith in 1948 and 1949 discussing the possibility of using established Negro League teams or new touring teams for training African-American players signed by Brooklyn. Also of note are two incoming letters from Robinson. In the first, dated October 31, 1945, Robinson thanks Smith for supporting his candidacy with the Brooklyn organization and questions comments made by Bob Feller in a printed article on
Robinson's chances in major league baseball. The second letter, c. 1948, concerns the completion of the book they wrote together.

The Newspaper Clippings are more comprehensive and date from 1943 through 1961. The vast majority of these clippings are Smith's columns, "The Sports Beat," that ran in the Pittsburgh Courier and, later, the Chicago's American. The columns primarily date from 1946 through 1948 and include detailed accounts of the integration of major league baseball as well as the individual exploits of African American players in the major leagues, minor leagues and the Negro Leagues. These players and management figures include: Brooklyn Dodgers players Jackie Robinson, Johnny Wright, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Larry Doby; Negro League player Satchel Paige; Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey; Brooklyn Dodgers Coach Clyde Sukeforth and Manager Leo Durocher, and Newark Eagles Owner Effa Manley. Many of the articles revolve around the personal experience of Jackie Robinson at Montréal in 1946 and with Brooklyn in 1947 through the 1950s. Smith included reprints of positive letters that Robinson received in a column written on April 26, 1947, a report from Montréal on May 11, 1946, the salary that Robinson received in 1947 from his player salary, exhibition baseball, endorsements, his movie contract and other resources, an offer after the 1947 season by the Harlem Globetrotters for Robinson to play with them. Columns and articles of note include coverage of Happy Chandler's speech at the Hotel Schenley in Pittsburgh (September 1, 1945), a reprinted editorial from The Sporting News critical about integrating African Americans into organized baseball and critical comments directed towards the New York Chapter of the Baseball Writers' Association of America for a sketch done at their annual banquet where they portrayed Robinson as a butler on Rickey's southern plantation(2/23/1946), and the reception to the Dodgers' African American players by various Florida cities (April 6, 1946). Two articles (May 24, 1947 and December 3, 1949) praise Pittsburgh Pirate First Baseman, and later Cleveland general manager, Hank Greenberg for his sympathetic support of Robinson as the first African-American baseball player in the 20th Century.

Articles documenting the history and changing role of Negro League baseball are numerous and include many references to players, owners, and other officials. Items of note include a tribute to Homestead Grays owner Cum Posey (April 13, 1946), two articles on Abe and Effa Manley, owners of the Newark Eagles (July 13, 1946 and September 18, 1948, with the latter reflecting upon her decision to leave the ranks of Negro Leagues owners), a 1943 article on Satchel Paige's performance in Pittsburgh, an undated article recording Cum Posey's choices for the best Negro League Teams between 1913 and 1931, 1948 folding of the Negro National League, coverage of the East-West games between 1946 and 1949. Smith wrote repeatedly of the need to continue to support the Negro Leagues and in an article dated December 16, 1950, wrote that the Negro Leagues should consider moving the focus of their operations towards producing major league talent and operate much like a minor league. Newspaper clippings from 1961
primarily include articles written by Smith (along with responses from other sports writers) describing the continued problems of segregated accommodations at Florida Spring Training facilities. Also of note are numerous articles on African American athletes in other sports including football, basketball, golf, and boxing including a November 13, 1948 column that tells an account of the first intercollegiate game between two black schools: Biddle University and Livingstone College in Salisbury North Carolina, 1892.

Content List

Box 1

Folder 1  Finding aid
Folder 2  Correspondence, 1945-1949
Folder 3  Newspaper clippings, 1943-1947
Folder 4  Newspaper clippings, 1948-1961
Folder 5  Clippings, Correspondence

BL-5302.97 second donation