

Uppity Bill White

A flick of the wrists and the ball was gone. Or so it seemed to my father. We were attending a Cardinal game in 1964 and, along with thousands of others, had just seen Bill White drive a pitch into the right field stands. The ease with which the Cardinal first baseman drove the ball about 350 feet seemed to my father almost magical, like a kid swatting a shuttlecock over a badminton net. We were sitting closer to the field than we normally did, on lower-deck seats in the old Busch Stadium at Dodier and Grand which offered an excellent view of the batter's box. My father had been introduced to the game by his older brother, my Uncle Sidney, who brought him into the same stadium in the 1930s to watch Dizzy Dean, Ducky Medwick, Leo Durocher, and many other stars of the Gashouse Gang.

I was reminded of the experience by reading Bill White's autobiography *Uppity: My Life in Baseball*. The writing in *Uppity* is fairly pedestrian and doesn't rise to the level of David Halberstam's splendid history of the 1964 season, which covers some of the same ground. But White did many things in a long career in baseball--as a player, broadcaster, and an executive in Major League Baseball—and the book illuminates curious details in the history of the game.

He started his career with the Giants in the early 1950s and moved on to the Cardinals at the end of the decade. San Francisco traded him away when White, a first baseman, found himself competing for the same position against Willie McCovey and Orlando Cepeda, players who had major careers. His most memorable season came with the Cardinals in 1964, when Gene Mauch's Phillies had their epic collapse in September and allowed St. Louis to capture the National League pennant on the final Sunday of the season. This was before the endless cycle of playoffs pushed World Series play into November and made the season feel interminable. The '64 Series began two days after the Cardinals won the pennant and was over by the second week of October. St. Louis bested the Yankees in seven games, but White's treatment of that magical year is perfunctory, superseded apparently by other memories and achievements.

What does make the book memorable are the stories of racism affecting black players long after Jackie Robinson entered the game in 1947. In 1953, White was playing for a long-forgotten minor league team in Melbourne, Florida, southeast of Orlando on the Atlantic coast. Blacks and whites had their own bathrooms, water fountains, taxi cabs, and restaurants, and were confined to different sections of town. White's team, the Danville Leafs, had taken over part of a former military base, and the barracks, not surprisingly, were also segregated. Dining at a "black restaurant," White and his teammates had to pass through a white neighborhood late in the evening to get back to the rented barracks. Here is White's version of the story:

One night some other black players and I were having dinner and hanging out at a black restaurant/club when we realized it was late, and we had to go back to the training complex. There weren't any cabs, so we decided to walk the three miles back. We didn't get far before a police car. . .pulled up next to us. . .It turns out there was a rule that said blacks weren't allowed on the streets outside

their neighborhood after 11 p.m. It was sort of like those signs posted in some Deep South towns that said, niggers don't let the sun set on you in this town.

The cop let the players go with a warning: "Y'all better hurry up and get back there then. And make sure you don't ever do this again, ya heah?"

Matters were slow to improve. In 1959, when the Giants traded White to the Cardinals, segregation was still pervasive in what many consider a southern city. "At the time," White writes, "St. Louis was the worst city in the league for black players. We couldn't stay in white hotels there, and couldn't eat in the white restaurants. For black players on the road, it was a terrible environment." White also claims that the Cardinals were the last major league team to abandon segregated seating. Black fans attending major and minor league games for decades were shunted down the right field line into seats high up in the stadium.

The situation was no better in St. Petersburg, Florida, where the Cardinals held spring training. Conditions had been more relaxed with the Giants in Arizona; all of the players stayed in the same hotel. The hotel the Cardinal players used in St. Pete was in what White terms "a surprisingly seedy" facility near the water, but none of the black players could stay there. Even a firebrand like Bob Gibson seemed reconciled to the terms of life in the South. "So this is the way it is here?" White asked Gibson, when they first met. "Black players can't stay in the team hotels?" Gibson shrugged in resignation. "Welcome to St. Petersburg," he answered.

In 1961, White and his black teammates were still prevented from sharing hotel lodging with white players during spring training. But public pressure and the resistance of black players finally compelled Cardinal management to insist on desegregation of the hotel, whose management refused despite the threatened loss of business. A St. Peterburg businessman, eager to keep baseball alive in the city, then bought "a beachfront motel called the Outrigger and made it available to all Cardinal players and their families. . . .As a show of solidarity, players who usually stayed in private beachfront homes, like Stan Musial and Ken Boyer, also moved into the Outrigger."

There are other curious bits of baseball history in Uppity that should elicit the interest of fans. How many readers know that the first black umpire to reach the major leagues was Emmett Ashford, who broke the color line at the start of the 1966 season? Overly sensitive to claims of umpires' incompetence, baseball forbade umpires to wear glasses on the field until the mid-1950s. The umpire Dave Pallone was thought to be involved in a gay prostitution ring, and though he was never charged with a crime, MLB forced him out of the game. Pallone received a full severance package and later wrote about his experience as a gay umpire. Pam Postema was the first woman umpire, but she lasted only a single spring training game. Bart Giamatti was justified in banishing Pete Rose from baseball for gambling on games, but he made a number of serious mistakes in the process. An obscure umpire named Dusty Boggess, active in the post-war decades, occasionally came to the stadium drunk and offered pitchers an exceptionally liberal

strike zone. According to White, players would say to each other, “Dusty’s feeling good today, swing at anything.”

Bill White’s story is so filled with anecdotes and analysis—of reporters, players, owners, league officials, general managers, umpires, and broadcasters—that you can open the book almost anywhere and find one piquant detail or another. So take up the book, rifle the pages—and swing at anything.

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