

Baseball's Reluctant Challenge: Desegregating Major League Spring Training Sites, 1961-1964*

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The entire affair made little sense to Bill White, first baseman for the St. Louis Cardinals. "I think about this every minute of the day," he told a reporter in March of 1961.¹ As a professional baseball player, he had visited cities throughout the country, participated in many different social functions, and never once had he caused trouble. He was articulate, educated, personable, and middle-class. "I think I'm a gentleman and can conduct myself properly," he insisted. Yet White and his black teammates on the Cardinals had been excluded from the invitation list to the St. Petersburg, Florida "Salute to Baseball" breakfast, sponsored annually by the local chamber of commerce. City and team officials maintained they had not intended the breakfast to be a white-only engagement and the team invitations were meant to include all players. But White and the others had not found the invitations so explicit, and they understood by precedent and custom that the protocol of race applied to such affairs. No longer willing to accept excuses for discrimination, White used the incident to publicly condemn the discriminatory racial policies at spring training locations in Florida. "This thing keeps gnawing at my heart," he stated grimly. "When will we be made to feel like humans?"²

Whether an oversight or intentional, the exclusion of black players from the 1961 breakfast was consistent with past and existing practices in spring training. More than a decade after the major leagues desegregated, racial policies in the spring season continued to reflect Southern social patterns. In 1961, thirteen of the eighteen major league teams trained in eleven Florida cities. All of the clubs—with the exception of the Dodgers—routinely housed their black players in segregated accommodations, usually private homes or boardinghouses in

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1. The reporter was Joe Reichler, a UPI sportswriter. Henry Aaron with Lonnie Wheeler, *I Had a Hammer* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 1991), 154.

2. Pittsburgh *Courier*, March 18, 1961.

the black districts.³ By sanction of law and custom, Jim Crow established the standard when dining, lodging, socializing, and traveling. Florida ball parks also adhered to that standard by seating their fans in segregated sections.⁴

Throughout the 1950s, team and league management refrained from challenging these practices and from disrupting the Southern social order. "The segregation of the hotels was the hardest thing to break down," Henry Aaron reflected thirty years after integration. "There wasn't a white man in Florida-or in baseball, for that matter-who was going to change things just out of his sense of decency."⁵ But even black players, who during this period quietly tolerated unequal treatment, had inadvertently contributed to the retention of discrimination. When Bill White took his grievances before the public in 1961, his forthrightness followed a break from the black players' tradition of reticence. Many had recently come forward to protest the inequities of spring training and demand that baseball management contest the South's unsavory form of hospitality. The impetus of that new assertiveness, however, had not originated within the ranks of baseball. Bill White and the others were actually following the lead of Florida black citizens who were engaged in their own struggle for equality.⁶

In some ways that argument diverges from traditional interpretations. Many scholars and ballplayers writing about sport have been inclined to emphasize that professional baseball served as a precursor of positive change in American race relations. Four years after Jackie Robinson became the first black to play in the major leagues, Walter White, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, observed that the "most visible sign of change to most Americans is the cracking of the color line in professional sports, particularly professional baseball."⁷ Hall of Fame member Monte Irvin maintained at the height of civil rights activity in 1964 that "Baseball has done more to move America in the right direction than all the professional patriots with their billions of cheap words."⁸ Speaking from a more objective standpoint than Irvin, but probably no less congratulatory of baseball's experiment with integration, historian Jules Tygiel concludes that "the events unleashed by the historic alliance between [Jackie] Robinson and [Branch] Rickey significantly altered American society."⁹

3. Though racial discrimination did exist in the West where many teams trained, it was not nearly as prevalent nor as harsh as in the South; nor did teams training there face the same housing problems. The Dodgers avoided the problems of segregated housing in Florida by converting an abandoned Naval Air Station at Vero Beach into their own self-sustaining facility.

4. For an excellent examination of the black players' experiences in the Jim Crow South see Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 262-302.

5. Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 153.

6. In Henry Aaron's autobiography, Bill White believes his public condemnation of the St. Petersburg baseball breakfast "started the ball rolling" against segregation in spring training. However, the book makes no mention of the local civil rights activity that dealt directly with the spring training issue and preceded White's March denunciation. Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 154-55.

7. Frederick W. Cozens and Florence Scovil Stumpf, *Sports in American Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 249.

8. Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It* (New York: Lippincott, 1964), 96.

9. Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 343.

As the nation's pastime, baseball was indeed woven into the fabric of American society and culture. From the time of its modern conception in the nineteenth century, baseball as a recreational sport quickly evolved into a mass culture, one that transcended class, race, ethnic, and gender lines. In its institutional and professional form, the minor and major leagues, baseball did not begin to promote a similar widespread sense of cultural and social unity until its integration in the 1950s. Yet even by then its impact was limited. In the South, the white power structure chose not to follow the American pastime's example of racial integration, and until the 1960s disunity more than unity often characterized the spring seasons.

The South's first encounter with integrated professional baseball in the twentieth century came in 1946, when the Brooklyn Dodger's farm club, the Montreal Royals, traveled to Florida for spring training. With them they brought the minor leagues' first black recruits, John Wright and Jackie Robinson. The Royals' experience in Florida that spring revealed that not everyone favored baseball's changing complexion. Many communities were opposed to blacks and whites playing together on the same ball field. In Jacksonville, the recreation commissioner locked the Royals out of the ball park to prevent interracial participation. Two days later, Deland city officials achieved the same results with the excuse of a faulty lighting system. When the Royals tested the reception in Sanford, the chief of police ordered the removal of Robinson and Wright from the ball park.¹⁰

Although reactionary forces in some Florida communities tried to obstruct baseball's new direction in race relations, municipalities across Florida and the South were not unified in their response to integrated play. A number of Florida cities launched ambitious recruitment campaigns for the chance to host the Dodgers in 1947, even in anticipation of Robinson's rise to the major leagues. Professional sports teams provided a lucrative draw for communities that depended heavily on the winter tourist trade. Opposition to interracial baseball generally came less from the fans and business leaders than from extremist elements and a few intransigent authority figures. When spring training tours introduced integrated major league baseball to other parts of the South in the late 1940s, the response was equally mixed as in Florida. Minor league teams with new black recruits as well encountered both opposition and acceptance. While many Southern communities in the early 1950s chose to give up their minor league franchises rather than a Jim Crow custom, other communities were eager for the opportunity to provide a new home to a previously spurned team.¹¹

Baseball management generally dealt with lingering pockets of resistance by avoiding such places. Still, hostility to black players occasionally surfaced unexpectedly as late as 1954. In March of that year, the police chief of the rural citrus town of Winter Garden informed Zinn Beck, general manager of the

10. Baltimore *Afro-American*, April 6, 20, 1946; Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 108-115.

11. See Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 246-284.

Chattanooga Lookouts, that talk in town opposed the presence of the Lookout's seven black Cuban players. "[W]e don't allow our [Negro] boys to play out there," the police chief warned. Fearing for the safety of his black players, Beck removed them to the Orlando training camp of the Washington Senators, parent team of the Lookouts.¹²

The home-town connection of the Senators drew the attention of some important people. In a speech before the annual conference of the National Civil Liberties Clearing House, Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr., pointed to the Winter Garden incident as a glaring example of the nation's race relations problems. Commenting on the incident from the White House, President Eisenhower wrapped his message on race relations in Cold War rhetoric when he told Americans, "we must constantly remember that the struggle against foreign tyranny can scarcely be won by any people who lightly regard their own people." Sounding a similar patriotic note, but finding a target for blame, Washington NAACP director Clarence Mitchell insisted that it "almost seems the Winter Garden police chief and commissioners are trying to give some free service to the Communist propaganda mill." Mitchell proposed a boycott of Winter Garden citrus, and called for the Justice Department to take immediate action against the police chief and local officials.¹³

The overall response in Washington and Florida went little beyond public denunciations. The Winter Garden city council extended a formal apology to the Lookouts and assured the future safety of their Cuban players. The FBI looked into the matter but apparently determined that it did not warrant a full investigation.¹⁴ The affair in Winter Garden represented the first and last time the federal government directed its attention to the racial problems of organized baseball in the South. It also revealed the Southern white racial ambivalence to black players.

By the time of the Winter Garden incident, numerous black players had asserted a formidable presence in the major leagues, and open opposition to integrated competition became the rare exception. Professional baseball had managed to topple a landmark of segregation and, while doing so, illuminate the conflict between time-honored traditions and the benefits of social progress. Yet a victory for professional sports and black athletes did not necessarily translate into defeat for the white South. Southern whites could enjoy a better game of baseball and reap the economic and social benefits from it. Change had been confined to the baseball diamond. Local officials conceded no more than what they deemed necessary to keep professional baseball alive in their communities, and they had done so while keeping the traditional racial order intact.

For many observers, that idea had been mostly lost in the general enthusiasm for baseball's impressive accomplishments in race relations. The media was wont to portray the major leagues as the nation's most racially progressive institution. In a 1954 editorial that fostered such an image, the *New York Times*

12. *Orlando Sentinel*, March 19, 20, 1954.

13. *New York Times*, March 19, 1954.

14. *Washington Post*, March 19, 1954; *Orlando Sentinel*, March 20, 1954.

noted that professional baseball was responsible for "some of the most intelligent and effective work against racial discrimination." Black players "have done more than could have been accomplished by volumes of polemics to demonstrate the stupid folly of prejudice."¹⁵ But what baseball players had accomplished by their skills on the playing field was not enough to break down the segregation barriers in spring training accommodations. The separation of players by race in lodging, dining, and ball park bleachers continued to go largely unchanged and unchallenged through the 1950s.

Yet beneath the seeming lethargy of black players floated a latent desire for change. Black players had traditionally stood their ground in personal confrontations with gross injustice, but collectively they had retreated from publicly condemning the problems in the spring season. Despite their personal accomplishments and their positive contributions to baseball, many felt open protest would jeopardize the progress blacks had made in the major leagues. Spring training lasted only a few weeks of an eight-month season, and players concentrated on winning a spot on the team, not with ending Jim Crow. Still, they were not content with the existing conditions. Some players had expressed their concerns to the Florida NAACP in informal and subtle ways. When in 1960 two members of the NAACP chapter in St. Petersburg, Ralph Wimbish and Robert Swain, suggested coming out publicly against racial policies in spring training, black players pledged their support.¹⁶

Both Wimbish and Swain were prominent members of the black community in St. Petersburg, and they played important roles in the struggle to end social segregation there. A young physician, Wimbish was president of the local chapter of the NAACP. Swain, a dentist with a budding practice, was a behind-the-scenes money man in the desegregation movement. Both owned rental properties, and for years they had enjoyed the financial windfall that came with housing black players in St. Petersburg for the New York Yankees and the St. Louis Cardinals. But in the torrid climate of the times, they came to terms with the paradox of that practice. If they continued to lodge black players, the two men reasoned, they would be contributing to the condition of forced segregation and betraying the very principles for which they were fighting."

The two black leaders did not single out spring training for any specific reason. Its segregated conditions reflected the broader social problem, and the attack against it was consistent with NAACP policy to challenge segregation wherever it existed. For that reason, NAACP state headquarters gave its full endorsement to the Wimbish and Swain plan, and did so without consideration of anticipated publicity. The NAACP did expect an infusion of national attention and support, nonetheless, and intended to welcome it as an added benefit to the ongoing struggle in Florida and St. Petersburg.¹⁸

15. New York Times, March 20, 1954.

16. *Ibid*

17. Interview with Robert Swain, by author, March 7, 1990.

18. Both Robert Saunders, Florida NAACP field secretary at the time, and A. Leon Lowry, president of the Florida NAACP at the time, confirmed this strategy. Interview with Robert Saunders, by author, August 11, 1990; Interview with A. Leon Lowery, by author, August 1, 1990.



Robert J. Swain, St. Petersburg, Florida dentist and NAACP member. Courtesy of St. Petersburg Times and the Pinellas County Historical Society.

As the recognized “capital” of spring training, St. Petersburg made a fitting locale for the forthcoming protest. Tourism had been the foundation of growth for the Gulf coast city of 181,000. Northerners had been making winter retreats to St. Petersburg since before its incorporation in 1892. Retirees especially found its reputed medicinal climate enticing, and city boosters actively promoted the retirement community image. Sometimes to the chagrin of local boosters, St. Petersburg’s demographic distinctiveness often became the substance of drollery for journalists. In one example of mirthful prose, Carl Biemiller of *Holiday* magazine wrote: “There are no old people in St. Petersburg, just young folks seventy-five years of age or better, most of whom



Ralph Wimbish, St. Petersburg, Florida physician and president of the St. Petersburg chapter of the NAACP. Courtesy of *St. Petersburg Times* and the Pinellas County Historical Society.

spend their time playing shuffleboard, pitching horseshoes fantastically well, guzzling oceans of orange juice while seated on park benches, or playing foot[s]ie somewhere along the twenty-two miles of silver beaches which border the westward boundaries of the city.”¹⁹

But the resort city’s outwardly serene appearance veiled what many white observers often overlooked: the Deep South characteristics. St. Petersburg was thirteen percent black in the 1950s, and was thoroughly segregated from its

19. Carl Biemiller, “Florida’s Baseball Riviera,” *Holiday*, March 1955, 70.

schools to its public facilities. The majority of St. Petersburg's "silver" beaches was restricted to white use only, and its acclaimed world's largest drugstore, Webb City, maintained Jim Crow lunch counters. Known world-wide as the City of Green Benches, an appellation that suggested friendly hospitality, St. Petersburg denied blacks the privilege of sitting on these landmarks. Blacks were even prohibited from driving their automobiles on the famed Million Dollar Pier. "It bothered all of us," recalled Earnest Ponder, a black school teacher during St. Petersburg's segregated days.²⁰

The organized challenge to those conditions had no specific beginning. "You just wake up one morning and all of a sudden these things are happening," Robert Swain remembered.²¹ Following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which determined the unconstitutionality of segregated public schools, blacks across the South began testing the legality of segregation in places outside of public education. In Florida, the NAACP encouraged blacks to accommodate themselves to the tourist state's segregated beaches, and in the summer of 1955 swimming facilities in St. Petersburg became the targets of swim-ins. The next year, local blacks won a federal law suit ordering the desegregation of the municipal beaches and swimming pool. The legal victory was temporarily spoiled, however, when St. Petersburg officials closed the swimming facilities. Their actions initially received widespread public support. But opposition mounted as it became increasingly evident that St. Petersburg residents and tourists would be denied a major recreation for a long period. Under pressure from downtown businesses and the *St. Petersburg Times*, coupled with that from the black community, officials finally reopened the beaches and pool in 1959.²²

The next major victory for local blacks came two years later. St. Petersburg was one of the 69 Southern cities caught in the wave of lunch counter sit-ins that had begun in 1960 with three black students in Greensboro, North Carolina.²³ In November of that year, beginning with a McDonald's restaurant located near the black junior college, St. Petersburg black students in cooperation with the NAACP launched a boycott and picketing movement against segregated lunch counters. The NAACP provided the monetary backing and organizational experience. The students provided the manpower and youthful energy. Lasting less than a month, the protests were relatively peaceful and few arrests were made. In January 1961, seventeen establishments, including Webb City, ended their discriminatory policies.²⁴

Riding on the momentum of their success, black leaders in St. Petersburg directed their attention to the segregated lodging of baseball's spring trainees.

20. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 6, 1989.

21. Robert Swain interview.

22. Darryl Paulson, "Stay Out, the Water's Fine: Desegregating Municipal Swimming Facilities in St. Petersburg, Florida," *Tampa Bay History* 4 (Fall/Winter, 1982) 6-19.

23. For relevant books on the sit-in movement see William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Martin Oppenheimer, *The Sit-In Movement of 1960* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989).

24. Robert Swain interview; Interview with Nate Oliver (former St. Petersburg resident and 1959 Dodger draftee), by author, May 5, 1990; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 9, 1961.



Students demonstrating against segregated lunch counters in St. Petersburg, Florida in December 1960. Courtesy of *St. Petersburg Times* and the Pinellas County Historical Society.

On the last day of January, Ralph Wimbish called a press conference. The St. Petersburg physician told reporters that he would no longer act as the Yankees' unofficial housing representative. For years he had located accommodations for the team's black players, and had himself provided housing for Elston Howard. To demonstrate his commitment to the cause, Wimbish announced that he would not offer the Yankee catcher accommodations that season, and he urged other black landlords to follow his lead. He then concluded by calling on Yankee and Cardinal officials to push for an end to segregated practices at their respective headquarters, the Vinoy Park and Soreno hotels. "It's time the management of the clubs takes a hand," he insisted.²⁵ NAACP state president A. Leon Lowry seconded Wimbish's statement by sending letters to all of the clubs training in Florida urging them to seek a resolution to the problem of "racial bias."²⁶

In response to Wimbish's demands, Yankee president and coowner Dan Topping called his own press conference. He insisted that the Yankees' four

25. *New York Times*, February 1, 1961.

26. A. Leon Lowry interview; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 3, 1961. Available evidence indicates that there were no plans to boycott Al Lang Field in St. Petersburg, where the Yankees and Cardinals played their spring season games. Robert Swain recalls that only a small number of black fans attended the games and segregated seating at Al Lang was not a primary concern of the St. Petersburg NAACP. Robert Swain interview.

black players “mean as much to our ball club as any other players and we would like very much to have the whole team under one roof.” Topping then requested his general manager Roy Hamey to work with Soreno management and St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce officials to find a solution. Yet, according to the *Fort Lauderdale News*, Topping’s actions may have been less than sincere. An anonymous source close to the Yankee organization claimed that Wimbish’s demands had “backed [Topping] against a wall.” New York state’s anti-discrimination laws made it “illegal to condone segregation.” Whether or not the law applied in this case, alleged the source, Topping requested integrated quarters to avoid any possible entanglements with New York authorities.²⁷

Whatever the motivation of Topping’s request, the Yankees’ efforts to end segregation met strong resistance. The chamber of commerce offered a spurious excuse that others would later use to defend conventional practices. “The city is full of tourists and guests,” the chamber of commerce statement read. “Neither the hotel management nor city officials care to risk jeopardizing the existing social structure at a time when the tourist business is at the highest of the season.” Florida’s Chairman of the Governor’s Baseball Committee, Elon “Robie” Robison, later concurred with the chamber of commerce’s position. “The baseball clubs are caught in the middle,” he fumed, while revealing his frustration with Wimbish’s demands. “We can’t upset the traditions of generations in a single day or a single year.”²⁸

The spring training controversy quickly captured the national spotlight. The *New York Times* assiduously kept its readers abreast of the story with investigative reports, as did the major black newspapers. In cooperation with the NAACP, the Pittsburgh Courier launched a media campaign to end racial discrimination at Florida’s training camps.²⁹ Branch Rickey, former Dodger president and the man who signed Jackie Robinson to the major leagues, supported the campaign and called the segregation policies an “outrage,” adding: “There is no earthly reason why Negro players shouldn’t stay in the same hotels and eat in the same restaurants as the other players.”³⁰ Elston Howard, one of the Yankee players at the center of the controversy, expressed the grievances that black players had generally kept to themselves. “It is my feeling that all players should be accorded the same treatment,” the normally taciturn Howard contended. “We get it on the field but not off.”³¹

The accusations of Howard and the others were not excessive caviling, especially in light of the disparities between black and white accommodations. For white players, the four to six week hiatus in Florida resembled that of any

27. *Fort Lauderdale News*, February 2, 1961.

28. *New York Times*, February 3, 19, 1961. Robert Swain said that within a short time after Wimbish’s press conference he received a telephone call from a man who identified himself as Elon Robison. The caller warned, “You are going to regret what you are doing.” Robert Swain interview.

29. Former Florida NAACP field secretary Robert Saunders explained that the NAACP worked closely with sports writer Mal Goode of the Pittsburgh *Courier* on discrimination in spring training. The *Courier* acted as a public voice for the NAACP in their activities in Florida. Robert Saunders interview.

30. Pittsburgh *Courier*, February 4, 1961.

31. *New York Times*, February 3, 1961.



Dan Topping, president and co-owner of the New York Yankees. Courtesy of *St. Petersburg Times* and the Pinellas County Historical Society.

tourist vacationing in the Sunshine State. Ball clubs generally housed their white players in top-rated hotels offering amenities such as room and maid service, dining facilities, wall-to-wall carpeting, private baths, and swimming pool. The “lavish” Vinoy Park Hotel in St. Petersburg, where the Cardinals headquartered, boasted not only a waterfront location but “[m]oorish arches and tile-lined cupolas, elegant Georgian-style ballrooms with leaded glass windows and carved beam ceilings, scores of crystal chandeliers and ornamental urns, and 367 lavishly appointed rooms.”³² After a day at the ball park, players could spend time at the beach or on the golf course, dine in fine

32. Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1988), 202.

restaurants, or enjoy a movie, amenities typically restricted to whites only. For many white players—particularly established veterans—spring training served the dual purpose of a family vacation. Players who brought their wives and children lodged away from the team hotel in locations of their choosing, and some players owned their own houses. Like any white tourist, they had complete access to Florida’s beaches, restaurants, and amusement parks.

The black players’ accommodations contrasted sharply with the fine appointments found in hotels such as the Vinoy Park. Many facilities were located in the poorest section of the black district. Players often bunked two or more to a room, shared a common bathroom, and ate prearranged meals.³³ At the team hotels, white players “ordered dinner from a full menu card,” recalled Monte Irvin, ace batter for the New York Giants. “We ate whatever was shoved before us.”³⁴ The boardinghouse in Tampa where Cincinnati Reds third baseman Frank Robinson lodged provided only a bathtub and no shower for three players.³⁵ Overnight travels created additional problems. Henry Aaron remembered the scene when sharing the Bradenton boardinghouse leased by the Milwaukee Braves with black players of visiting teams: “Sometimes the place is so crowded that they have two guys sleeping in the hall.”³⁶

Black players also lacked access to many local public facilities. The ubiquitous “Black Only” and “White Only” signs were a disturbing feature both to local and visiting blacks. Jim Crow in Florida restricted non-whites to certain parts of town, and black and white players found socializing together difficult. In some places, blacks could not even ride in buses with their white teammates; nor could they be transported in taxis with white drivers. In restaurants, theaters, stores, nightclubs, and other establishments that did accommodate blacks and whites, segregation policies were observed, in some cases with the sanction of law. The Florida state sanitary code required restaurants that served or employed both races to provide separate toilet and lavatory facilities.³⁷ In Tampa, Jim Crow policies were enforced at the jai alai fronton, where blacks were barred, and the dog track, where, according to Frank Robinson, the black section was “so far away that the dogs looked like rabbits and the rabbits like fleas.” An admitted addict of the big screen, Robinson sometimes watched two or three movies in a single day. But in Florida he spent much of his time confined to his room because local theaters restricted black seating to the balconies, where he refused to sit. “No movies, no bowling, nothing. It was watch our step every time we went on the street.”³⁸ Most golf courses, municipal and theme parks, recreational complexes, and beaches were off

33. Interview with Clifford Williams (son of former boardinghouse owner), by Denise Frontel, February 10, 1990.

34. Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It*, 91.

35. *Ibid.*, 154.

36. *New York Times*, February 19, 1961.

37. *Robinson v. Florida*, 378 U.S. 153 (1963).

38. Frank Robinson with Al Silverman, *My Life is Baseball* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968), 84, 117; Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It*, 154-155.

limits to blacks. Some places provided Jim Crow beaches, but these were typically located on the most unattractive and least accessible sections of the waterfront. Like Frank Robinson, many black players chose to limit their social activities and spare themselves from humiliating encounters with Jim Crow.

For the few blacks who took their families to Florida, the inhospitable conditions often frustrated their visits. Elston Howard described the difficulties of having his family join him in St. Petersburg: "I can't make plans until I get down there and see what kind of house I can rent. The other players can rent from an agent in advance, but I can't. It's not pleasant."³⁹ After two weeks in Fort Lauderdale, Hector Lopez sent his wife back to Panama. She was afraid to go out "on account of this thing in the South," Lopez later recalled.⁴⁰ Billy Bruton's wife, who accompanied the Braves player south for five seasons, never saw her husband play in Florida. She refused to attend the games because segregation policies at ball parks prohibited her from sitting with the wives of the white players.⁴¹ Most black players kept their families isolated from these problems by simply leaving them at home in the North or Latin America.

The forced segregation, inadequate facilities, and constant abuse that came off the field contradicted treatment on the field, where black players could become the heroes of whites. Despite their national popularity and middle-class distinction, black players became part of an undifferentiated whole of racial



Segregated seating at Al Lang Field in St. Petersburg, Florida. Courtesy of *St. Petersburg Times* and the Pinellas County Historical Society.

39. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 2, 1961.

40. Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It*, 115.

41. *Ibid.*, 175.

subordinates in Southern society. The indignity of the white-imposed social order was illuminated whenever the team bus dropped off the non-white players at the edge of the black district and their white teammates rode on to enjoy the privileges of their race. Joining in the chorus of public denunciations, Wendell Smith of the Pittsburgh *Courier* incisively described the paradox of the black players' experience in Florida: ". . . despite all your achievements and fame, the vicious system of racial discrimination in Florida's hick towns condemns you to a life of humiliation and ostracism."⁴² It was this sort of double standard black players and locals alike sought to eradicate. "It's a matter of pride," one black spokesperson in Florida pointed out. "They don't want to be second-class citizens."⁴³

Once the injustices prevalent in spring training were exposed in St. Petersburg, Florida's other spring training sites were compelled to qualify their stand on the housing question. St. Petersburg blacks had directed their grievances toward the Yankees and Cardinals and did not expect such a windfall of response from the other communities. But it soon became evident that team and local officials throughout the state had misinterpreted the black players' feelings toward segregation. Club management equated the black players' years of silence with contentment, and asserted that their players were happy with the present conditions. City and team officials typically addressed the problem by denying that one existed. To them, the real problem was the possibility of black agitation jeopardizing business relations in Florida.

In Bradenton, team and city officials tended to overlook the concerns of black players in such a manner. Responding to Wimbish's public statement, Braves executive vice president George "Birdie" Tebbetts assured the press that segregation had never presented a problem and that Milwaukee's black players were satisfied with their housing arrangements. Bradenton city council member C. B. Tipton agreed: "We have never had any trouble and we don't expect any this year."⁴⁴

But trouble of the sort to which Tipton referred soon followed. Braves players Henry Aaron, Wes Covington, and Billy Bruton flatly denied the accuracy of Birdie Tebbett's statement and criticized him for making it. Their accommodations in a local boardinghouse were adequate, the three acknowledged, but it lacked the comforts of the team hotel, which should be open to blacks as well. Aaron told Tebbetts, "It's about time you all realized that we're a team and we need to stay together."⁴⁵ Bruton held management responsible for finding a solution. "I realize the ball clubs are small compared to states, but they take a lot into the cities and they're important enough to be listened to. After all[.] take the Braves out of Bradenton and what have you got?"⁴⁶

Nonplused by these accusations, Bradenton and Braves officials turned

42. *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1, 1961.

43. *New York Times*, February 19, 1961.

44. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 2, 1961.

45. Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 154.

46. *Bradenton Herald*, February 5, 1961.

defensive. "We have never had any complaints before from any of our Negro players," insisted a surprised Duffy Lewis, Braves traveling secretary. With similar conviction, Bradenton Mayor A. Sterling Hall claimed: "The Negro players have always told me they were well satisfied." The mayor then suggested that the problem could be solved by the ball clubs leasing complete housing facilities or by building their own training complex, as the Dodgers had done in Vero Beach. Birdie Tebbets was certain that the teams and local communities would eventually find a solution, but not "by pressure methods, and not overnight." The teams, he maintained, had no business trying to change local customs. The black players "want us to tell a hotel in Florida to take all our men, or none, when there is a state law which says owners of a private hotel can refuse to admit anyone he pleases. Where do we stay then?"⁴⁷

This sort of temporizing reverberated around the state that February. In Ft. Myers, where locals extended a cheerful welcome to the World Champion Pittsburgh Pirates, city officials claimed confidently that the black players had "excellent accommodations in private homes." Across the state in Pompano Beach, spring home of the Washington Senators, the chairman of the local Citizen's Baseball Committee assured: "We have no problems." He added that the black players were happy in their private two-story home, and "actually [were] more comfortable than their teammates."⁴⁸ From his spring headquarters in West Palm Beach, general manager Frank Lane declared that the Kansas City Athletics were "not spearheading any political movements."⁴⁹

The call for change did not rest well with hotel owners and managers either. A *New York Times* reporter investigating the housing question found hotel managers "generally jumpy and gunshy." The strongest resistance to integration was expected to come from the Tampa Bay region (which included St. Petersburg), a popular winter resort area and spring home to seven major league clubs. Explained one anonymous hotel manager, "our hotels are almost like private clubs this time of year. If we opened our dining rooms and other facilities to just any one, you can see what would happen." Some managers privately admitted that they were not personally opposed to integration and they were willing to go along with a uniform change in policy. But they were not willing take the initiative and risk losing business to their competitors who continued to maintain white-only accommodations. A few acknowledged they were waiting to follow the direction of the Soreno Hotel in St. Petersburg.⁵⁰

That wait was a short one. Within a day of the Yankees' request for desegregated facilities, Soreno management announced its decision. Assistant manager Norville H. Smith declared that the hotel would continue to house the Yankees only on "the same basis as we've always had them by making

47. *Ft. Meyers News-Press*, February 10, 1961; *Florida State Statute*, 509.092 authorized restaurant and hotel managers "to refuse accommodations or service to any person who is objectionable or undesirable to said owner or manager."

48. *Fort Lauderdale News*, February 2, 1961.

49. *New York Times*, February 19, 1961.

50. *Ibid.*

arrangements for some of the players outside.” From Tulsa, Oklahoma, C. H. Alberding, owner of both the Soreno and Vinoy Park, supported his assistant manager’s statement, and firmly added that if the Yankees and Cardinals insist on housing blacks with whites then they “should look for other hotels.”⁵¹

Alberding’s pronouncement marked the end of Yankee efforts that winter to end segregated housing. Club officials had proceeded along a cautious line, asking rather than pressing for change, and quickly backing down in the face of opposition. Publicity director Bob Fishel affirmed a fleeting commitment to immediate integration when he acknowledged that the Yankees had contracted to lodge at the Soreno that spring. He then recommended reaching a resolution through additional private talks “at a more leisurely pace.” In a seemingly positive note, Fishel announced that the Yankees tentatively planned to move to Fort Lauderdale next spring, suggesting that the move might resolve the housing problem.⁵²

Dan Topping later confirmed the anticipated change. “But moving has nothing to do with the problem of segregation,” the Yankee president clarified. Intimates had known Topping to refer to St. Petersburg as a “dead city” that was “depressing” to players and fans. For the past few years, the team had been negotiating with Fort Lauderdale officials, who promised lucrative gate receipts and the construction of a new sports complex, larger than the St. Petersburg facilities. Integrated accommodations in Fort Lauderdale would be a “definite plus,” Topping pointed out, but they were not a requisite nor were they assured. Topping further conceded that he had no desire to contest the social order of the South. “We do not run the State of Florida,” he declared pointedly.⁵³

Other team and league officials took the same noncommittal position. From the beginning of the controversy, St. Louis Cardinals management kept a relatively low profile, though general manager Bing Devine did admit that the policies in St. Petersburg presented a problem. “But we don’t make the rules and regulations for the various locations,” he explained in a public statement that had anticipated Topping’s last announcement.⁵⁴ Taking a safe but equivocal position, American League president Joe Cronin gave full support to the Yankee response, while National League president Warren Giles declined to “comment on a problem I do not know exists.”⁵⁵ Official league policy came from the baseball commissioner’s office, where Ford C. Frick advocated caution, and stuck by the prevailing view of team management to “not become involved in any sort of controversial racial or religious question.”⁵⁶

Florida state officials were equally cool in their response. Governor Farris Bryant’s sole statement on the housing situation reflected the state’s low-keyed position. Bryant pledged his commitment to keeping major league baseball in

51. *New York Times*, February 2, 3, 1961.

52. *Ibid.*, February 3, 1961.

53. *Ibid.*, February 4, 1961; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 4, 1961.

54. *New York Times*, February 2, 1961.

55. *Ibid.*, February 3, 1961.

56. Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It*, 99.

Florida, and asserted his belief in the "freedom of association." Yet the governor who had run for office on a platform of social segregation also declared that integrated accommodations in spring training baseball would "go against custom."⁵⁷ Throughout the affair the state government avoided a potentially explosive issue. The recent rush of civil rights activity had placed other Southern states and communities under national scrutiny, often resulting in increased intervention and condemnation from the North, protracted confrontations with the federal government, and restructured social policies. In Florida, negative publicity could jeopardize the tourist trade. But since baseball officials had taken a nonassertive position, the state government was able to minimize its role in the controversy and safeguard its principal industry, as well as the traditions of Jim Crow.

Probably most disappointing to the advocates of change was the lack of support from landlords, white and black. Some landlords were openly appalled by accusations that their facilities were somehow substandard. The elderly landlady for the Braves black players felt personally slighted when Aaron and the others, who she had always treated "like my own sons," went public with their demands to be accommodated in the team hotel.⁵⁸ At the same time, desegregation threatened an added source of income. Renting to the major league teams was a lucrative business that brought up to three or four times the standard rental rates. Most landlords at Florida spring training sites declined to join Wimbish and Swain in their stand against segregated housing. In the St. Petersburg area, at least one black landlord and more than one white landlord provided lodging for the players Wimbish and Swain had turned aside.⁵⁹

Despite the pervasiveness of resistance, the actions of many intractable Floridians masked a growing belief that change was imminent. Local civil rights activity had triggered what many regarded as unavoidable. "You can't fight it-it's got to come," one hotel manager admitted. Even Robie Robison, the state baseball committee chairman, grudgingly conceded that baseball teams "will someday be forced to yield to the pressure. When they do we will have to make arrangements to meet their demands." At the same time, he blamed local blacks for unleashing the forces behind that inevitable process.⁶⁰

While some officials speculated on future probabilities, others took steps to move away from past policies and practices. Responding to Wimbish's press conference, Chicago White Sox president Bill Veeck made the first official gesture toward desegregation. In March 1961, Veeck canceled reservations at the McAllister Hotel in Miami after its management refused to lodge his black players during an upcoming exhibition game with the Baltimore Orioles. He then asked the nearby Biscayne Terrace Hotel to take both white and black players. "I mulled it over in my mind for three or four weeks," hotel manager

57. *Fort Lauderdale News*, February 3, 1961.

58. *New York Times*, February 19, 1961 (quotation); Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 155.

59. Robert Swain interview; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 9, 1961.

60. *New York Times*, February 19, 1961.

Randy Kippel said of his decision to house the White Sox. Veeck was pleased. "This is a real sign of progress."⁶¹

Others followed Veeck's initiative. In March, the Braves ended Jim Crow policies at their ball park in Bradenton by abolishing segregated seating requirements and removing discriminatory signs at washrooms, ticket windows, and gates. Other ball parks made similar changes in policy.⁶² Desegregated accommodations for most of the players came the next spring season. The Yankees moved to the new training facilities in Fort Lauderdale, while local and team officials in St. Petersburg worked behind the scenes to arrange for integrated accommodations, at hotels other than the Soreno and Vinoy Park, for the Cardinals and the newly arriving New York Mets.⁶³ Many other teams also moved their headquarters to hotels where players could be housed together. Major league and local officials resolved the housing issue quietly and outside of the media spotlight and managed to avoid a repeat of the potentially explosive events of 1961.

The only exceptions to the peaceful transition came at the camps of the Philadelphia Phillies and Minnesota Twins. In both cases, blacks at the community level organized the move for integration. After the Jack Tar Harrison Hotel in Clearwater refused to lift segregation policies for the Phillies in 1962, black citizens in Philadelphia announced their intention to picket Connie Mack stadium during the regular season. Clearwater city manager James Stewart sought a stale excuse when asked to comment on these developments: "as far as we are concerned, no problem exists." The Phillies management nevertheless acceded to the pressure back home and moved its players to a hotel twenty miles away across Tampa Bay. Two weeks later, the Jack Tar Harrison changed its policy on racial restrictions and signed a contract with the Phillies for the following spring.⁶⁴ The Twins encountered a similar dilemma two years later when members of the Congress of Racial Equality in Minnesota threatened to picket home games. The only remaining team lodging in segregated facilities, the Twins moved to a new integrated hotel in Orlando.⁶⁵

Like the hard fought battles of civil rights activists, the fruits of desegregated accommodations and ball parks proved an incomplete victory for ball players. The move to integrated lodging quite often meant a downgrade in accommodations for the white players, and the black players, according to Henry Aaron, left "behind some first-rate chicken and biscuits."⁶⁶ Restaurants in many of the team hotels seated blacks behind partitions, and in most other public facilities the discriminatory policies of the past persisted. In short, change at team headquarters did not spill over into the local communities; desegregation was

61. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 3, 1961; *Bradenton Herald*, February 2, 1961.

62. On the same day of the Braves' announcement to end segregation at the ball park, a dozen black high school girls tested racial policies at Bradenton's downtown Woolworths. Except for drawing scurrilous remarks from a few onlookers, the girls were served without incident. *Bradenton Herald*, March 6, 1961.

63. Interview with Jim Toomey (former Cardinals publicity director), by Melody C. Bailey, October 11, 1988.

64. *St. Petersburg Times*, March 10, 1962; Clearwater Sun, March 11, 1962 (quotation).

65. *Orlando Sentinel*, March 14, 1964.

66. Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 154.

not tantamount to complete integration. Even after the abolition of legal segregation and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, some places in the South and Florida remained loyal to the old social conventions. One instance of the persistence in white racial sentiment was recorded in 1966, the year the Boston Red Sox returned to train in Florida. Nearby their new spring headquarters in Winter Haven, two different drinking establishments refused service to Red Sox pitcher Earl Wilson. "I think I'd rather be in Mississippi," Wilson commented on the episode. "There you know you're not wanted."⁶⁷

Although an exceptional incident by the mid-1960s, Wilson's experience in Winter Haven represented a fitting culmination in the spring training ordeal. Change in the South had been a slow and almost evolutionary process, suggesting that regional determinants in race relations circumscribed baseball's influence as a national institution. The integration of the major leagues in the 1950s had set a salutary precedent in American race relations, but it required more than mere example to affect a fundamental shift in the social patterns of the South. With remarkable success, the white-determined social structure had managed to absorb external pressures that fell short of active opposition. It was not coincidental then that the desegregation of spring training paralleled the emerging civil rights movement. When major league teams did finally integrate spring training facilities in Florida, they were still conforming to Southern society, one by that time in the midst of transformation.

67. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 28, 1966.