NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. February 13, 1920. I’m Sally Helm.

The Paseo YMCA is no stranger to meetings. There are meetings of Midwestern missionaries. Of something called the Texas Club. Of the board of the directors at a local hospital. The YMCA is a key institution in Kansas City—especially if you’re Black. It’s a place where young Black men without a place to stay can get a nice room for about $2 a week. Eat in the cafeteria. Play piano in the lobby. It’s a place where Black kids can take swimming lessons at the indoor pool – the only one in town that Black swimmers are allowed to use.

And today, more than a dozen men have come to this brick building on Paseo Street for a very important meeting. The topic of the meeting is not Missionaries, Texas, or hospitals. The men are here to talk baseball.

Baseball, at this time, is the most popular sport in America. But Black players have been shut out of the Major Leagues for over 30 years. And so, they have their own professional teams. The Chicago American Giants. The Detroit Stars. And the hometown Kansas City Monarchs.

Black baseball players have their own teams. But they don’t have their own league. And lately, a lot of people have been calling for exactly that. One prominent Black team owner wrote a big article about it this very month. He said, “We produce splendid players, men of brilliant talents, many of whom could play rings around the average ballplayers in the white leagues if they were given the opportunity.” Still: these Black teams don’t see the same popularity or financial success as their white counterparts. The problem, the owner writes, is simple: quote, “Lack of organization!” (Exclamation point).

So that is why these men have come to Kansas City. To get organized. And they do.

Rube Foster runs the meeting—he’s the manager and owner of the renowned Chicago American Giants, and already a legendary figure in the world of Black baseball. In some ways, he has the most to lose from forming a league. Because he’s already doing so well on his own. But Foster is in. In fact, he’s so in that he’s already gotten started. He pulls out a document and presents it to the group – a charter for the new Negro National League. Foster has even picked out a motto.

Sally Helm: One thing I was wondering, the, the motto of the league that they announced is we are the ship all else, the sea, what does that mean?
Bob Kendrick: I think it meant that it was the Negro leagues’ declaration of independence. They were sending a message to major league baseball that a new player had arrived on the scene to be reckoned with.

Sally Helm: So, the ship is the Negro leagues, and what’s the sea?

Bob Kendrick: The sea is everything else that's in his way. *Laughter*

Sally Helm: Today: they were the ship, all else the sea. How did Black baseball survive when segregation became the unofficial policy of the major leagues? And how did Black players, owners, and managers join together to create something that no baseball fan could ignore?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: A lot of times, a story about Black baseball begins with the name Jackie Robinson. But when Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, in 1947, he was not the first Black athlete to play in the Major Leagues. He was just the first in six decades.

Before Jackie Robinson, there was Bud Fowler, who started playing professional baseball in 1877.

And Fowler was far from the first Black baseball player.

Bob Kendrick: Really, Sally, there's remnants or evidence of black folks playing baseball even as enslaved people. So, it's certainly it wasn't new that we were playing the game. We just didn't have many places to play the game from a professional standpoint.

Sally Helm: That's Bob Kendrick, president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. You may recognize his voice—we talked to him last year for our episode on the life of baseball superstar Henry Aaron.

Bud Fowler was also a star player—you just might not have heard his name. He started out as a pitcher. And he had a great rookie season. For any baseball fans wondering he pitched 130 innings with a 2.08 ERA. For non-baseball fans: that is very good.

Bob Kendrick: Despite how talented he was and the fact that he outperformed so many of the people that he was playing with, he would always get kicked off these teams.

Sally Helm: White players sometimes even tried to literally kick him off the field. Fowler also played second base, and players would sometimes try to slide right into him—try to take him out. To protect himself, Fowler invented an early version of shin guards—specially shaped pieces of wood that he'd slip into his socks. Today, you can see the modern version on the shins of every catcher from little league on up.
In general, the game looked very different back then. Pitchers threw underhand. Batters could ask to have the ball pitched low or high. And Bud Fowler didn't even use a glove—he caught balls barehanded. A distinction he shared with the last Black major leaguer before Jackie Robinson—Moses "Fleetwood" Walker.

**Bob Kendrick:** Moses Fleetwood Walker was a bare-handed catcher. Ouch.

**Sally Helm:** Walker was a standout player in college, and left school in 1883 to sign with the Toledo Blue Stockings. And in August of 1883, almost right away, white players begin a racist campaign against him.

We talked about this with Phil S. Dixon, who's written several books on the history of Black baseball. He told us, that summer, Walker's team was set to play an exhibition game against the Chicago White Stockings, who will eventually become known as the Cubs. The leader of the White Stockings is Cap Anson. He is the best player of his era. Many consider him baseball's first superstar.

**Phil Dixon:** So, people are listening, and what Cap Anson says is pretty important in that particular time.

**Sally Helm:** And Cap Anson says… he won't play against a Black man.

**Phil Dixon:** When he says that he doesn't want to be on the ballfield with Fleet Walker, Fleet Walker’s in trouble.

**Sally Helm:** Walker actually isn't even supposed to play in this game. He's suffering from a sore hand—which'll happen if you're catching over one-hundred pitches per game, without a glove.

But that is not enough for Anson. He wants Walker totally out of sight. And he threatens that if he doesn't get his way, he won't play.

But the manager of Walker’s team, the Toledo Blue Stockings, he doubles down. He calls Anson’s bluff and tells him; I'm putting Walker in the lineup. You can either play or lose the money you've made on ticket sales. Bob Kendrick told us:

**Bob Kendrick:** Ultimately, he relented and played the game, but said, well that ain’t gonna happen anymore. And that started that whole movement.

**Sally Helm:** The whole movement against Black players in the major leagues. The reason that after Fleetwood Walker, there won't be another until Jackie Robinson.

Cap Anson was saying out loud something that had been brewing behind the scenes in baseball for years.
**Bob Kendrick:** Now the other guys may have shared that same sentiment, not nearly as outspoken. So, you need that front guy to kind of get you the courage to fall in line. But on the flip side of that, you likely had some other guys who didn't feel that way. You know, because I've always believed that great athletes want to compete against great athletes, because the only way you can measure how good you are, is by playing with and against the very best.

**Sally Helm:** But ultimately, Anson's campaign to make professional baseball unwelcoming and hostile towards Black players… that carries the day. You can even see it show up in statistics from the next season in 1884, when Walker’s team gets moved up to the major leagues. Phil Dixon told us, one of the pitchers on Toledo that year, Tony Mullane:

**Phil Dixon:** He didn't like Fleet Walker being on their team. So, he refused to take signals from a black man.

**Sally Helm:** Normally, the catcher signals to the pitcher which pitch to throw—a fastball, a curveball. And if the pitcher ignores him—if a catcher doesn't know what's coming—it can be dangerous.

**Phil Dixon:** And the whole year, whenever Mullane threw a curveball, and he had a pretty good one at that time, Moses Fleetwood Walker never knew when it was coming.

**Sally Helm:** Mullane was quoted as saying "I used to pitch anything I wanted without looking at his signals."

And if you look at the numbers, you can see that it's true. Mullane led the league that year in "wild pitches"—pitches that got away from the catcher. And Walker, in turn, led the league in "passed balls"—pitches he was supposed to catch, but didn't.

You can also see the hostile atmosphere in the physical evidence from the time:

**Phil Dixon:** If you look at many team pictures from that period, very seldom do you see the white guys with their hand around the black guy’s shoulder or something like that, but you'll see them take those same positions with other white players.

**Sally Helm:** Two weeks before the end of the season, Toledo cuts Moses Fleetwood Walker. It could have been because of injury, poor performance, the racial pressure the team experienced throughout the year. Or some combination of all of those. But after Walker leaves the league, no other Black player will join a Major League team for more than six decades.

**Bob Kendrick:** There was no written doctrine, just a verbalized agreement amongst players, managers, and owners that essentially said, if you allow a black to play with you, you can't play with us.
**Sally Helm:** It was called the "gentleman's agreement." And it established baseball's color line.

But this is not the end of Black baseball. Far from it.

Black players now can't play in the Major Leagues. So Black teams begin to spring up around the country. And one of the people leading that charge—is none other than Bud Fowler. The first Black professional baseball player. The guy who invented those wooden shin guards.

He now sees that Black Players need their own teams. And so, he starts one: the Page Fence Giants out of Adrian, Michigan. He plays for that team, and for others: the Smoky City Giants, The Kansas City Stars.

These teams were traveling around the country, playing games as they went. It was known as "barnstorming."

**Bob Kendrick:** They took the game on the road and people loved it. The towns would shut down to watch these ballplayers play.

**Sally Helm:** And it was the whole town. Black and white fans would both come out to the ballpark to see these teams. Barnstorming is freewheeling. Exciting. And… chaotic.

**Bob Kendrick:** It was just too haphazard. Guys jumping from team to team... and it needed structure.

**Sally Helm:** Enter: a pitcher named Rube Foster.

**Bob Kendrick:** Rube Foster was lightyears ahead of his time. He is credited with having invented what we now know to be the screwball. Rube Foster was an absolute genius. Rube Foster, without question, is the greatest baseball mind this sport has ever seen, yet most baseball fans still don't know who the heck he is.

**Sally Helm:** Foster started playing baseball as a kid in Calvert, Texas. And the sport was a lifeline – literally. Dixon told us, all of Foster's siblings had died from tuberculosis, and in order to avoid the same fate himself...

**Phil Dixon:** One of the prescriptions that doctors gave was to be outside as much as you can. And through that Rube Foster was out and he started playing baseball.

**Sally Helm:** By the time he's a teenager, Foster is playing for independent Black teams throughout Texas. And at first, he's kind of underrated.

**Phil Dixon:** He's the largest pitcher that anyone has ever seen. And many times, he would go into town, the white fans come out to see him and they’d laugh. They’d laugh because
they would think this guy's overweight, out of shape. He's not going to beat anybody, and
at the end of the game, you know, he might win one to nothing. And, he was the last man
laughing.

*Sally Helm:* In fact, he's developing a reputation as the best Black pitcher in America. And he's
playing on these barnstorming Black teams. He goes from Chicago to Michigan and finally joins
the premiere Black team of the era, the Cuban X Giants.

*Phil Dixon:* Man, this guy is on fire. The major leagues would come out to see him pitch
and they knew that he was in a league by himself, but they weren't about to break that
color barrier no matter what it took.

*Sally Helm:* After he joins the X-Giants in 1902, Rube Foster makes an important move. He's
still an amazing pitcher, but he also starts to get more involved with the business side of the
game.

*Phil Dixon:* He starts to become a player advocate. Generally, he's going to be the highest
pay player on the team. But he's not just satisfied with that. He wants the other guys to
receive more money. So that's where he starts to fight for those guys. And then when he
doesn't get enough money from one owner, he decides, hey, I'm going to jump to the
Philadelphia Giants and I'm going to take a few of these guys with me.

*Sally Helm:* By 1907, at age 28, Foster has become both a player and a manager for Chicago’s
Leland Giants. Bob Kendrick told us; he starts to encourage a distinct style of play on his team.

*Bob Kendrick:* Fast, aggressive, daring. They'd bunt their way on, they’d steal second,
they'd steal third. And if you weren't too smart, they were stealing home.

*Sally Helm:* To enforce this, Foster would actually fine his players:

*Bob Kendrick:* As much as $5, if you were tagged out standing up. You were supposed to
slide. Rube would draw a circle down the first baseline and a circle down the third
baseline. And if every one of his players couldn't drop a bunt inside that circle, he would
fine them.

*Sally Helm:* The Leland Giants are *good.* They're playing teams around the country and around
Chicago. And Phil Dixon told us, in Chicago...

*Phil Dixon:* Just so happens that Cap Anson had a team in the city league.

*Sally Helm:* Cap Anson. One of the first superstars of baseball. The man who refused to take the
field against Fleet Walker. The man many consider responsible for the color line. He was still
playing baseball in 1907. He was 55. Which, for a baseball player, is very old. He was playing
first base and also managing a local independent team called Anson's Colts. And apparently...he now had no issue playing against Black ballplayers.

**Phil Dixon:** At that particular time Cap Anson needed the Leland Giants to make money. He was in financial straits.

**Sally Helm:** One particular matchup, on May 6, 1909, went as follows. Here’s a quote from a newspaper at the time: "The Leland Giants walked all over the Anson Colts Sunday at the latter's grounds. Rube Foster doing the pitching act, and he could scarcely do enough to get warmed up as Anson's orphans were such easy meat, the big fellow felt sorry for them and only defeated them 8 to 1."

But, satisfying as it must have been for these Black players to beat Cap Anson, Black baseball as a whole was starting to feel some strain. Bud Fowler had begun organizing these teams about twenty years earlier. And by this point, the lack of a centralized structure meant that Black baseball wasn't thriving as much as it could be. And teams faced economic pressures.

**Bob Kendrick:** They needed to have a structure that essentially would mirror the success of major league baseball.

**Sally Helm:** Rube Foster sees that.

**Bob Kendrick:** And that is what led him down that path of working to pull those other independent black baseball team owners together.

**Sally Helm:** Foster begins laying this groundwork in the 19-teens. He thinks working together in a Black nationwide league is one path that might help Black baseball thrive. But at the same time, Foster still believes it's also possible that the major leagues will eventually realize that the color line is absurd and give it up. After all: look at all the amazing Black players on these amazing Black teams.

But during this same period, there are forces of racism brewing in the North that make integrating the Major Leagues look ever-more impossible. Large numbers of Black Americans had moved to Northern cities during what was known as the Great Migration. They hoped to escape the Jim Crow South—but now, those same forces were turning up in the North. The Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. And in the summer of 1919, things come to a head across the country.

In Chicago, the summer is brutally hot. On Sunday, July 27th, temperatures reach 96 degrees. The scorching heat sends thousands of people to the shores of Lake Michigan. Including 17-year-old Eugene Williams and his friends. As the group of boy’s floats in the Lake on their raft, they cross an invisible, informal, color line in the water itself—the line separating the white and Black sections of the 29th Street Beach.
A white beachgoer sees the raft—and starts throwing rocks. Some witnesses later say they saw Williams get hit. Others say he slipped to avoid getting hit. But what we know is that Eugene Williams drowns that day in Lake Michigan.

Afterwards, violence erupts across the city. It happens mainly in the city's Black neighborhoods, and leaves 38 people dead, over 500 injured, and 1,000 Black families homeless after their homes burn.

It's soon after the riots that Rube Foster gives up for good on the idea that integration is coming to the major leagues. And instead goes all in on the prospect of a Black Baseball League. Historian Robert Kuhn McGregor wrote in his book *A Calculus of Color*, quote: "Though he never once referred to the summer's violence, to argue that his thinking was not affected by events would be to strain belief in coincidence beyond any reasonable breaking point."

The following winter, Foster is finally ready to make this league happen. Now...he just has to convince the other independent team owners to join in with him.

**Bob Kendrick:** Foster had to be a master salesman. Cause the other guys were having to relinquish that independence and that couldn’t have been an easy sell.

**Sally Helm:** But he calls a meeting in Kansas City. And makes his pitch.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** By the time Rube Foster calls that meeting in Kansas City, at the Paseo YMCA, he already owns one baseball team, and has a partial stake in four more. So, when it comes to giving up his autonomy as a team owner to a nationwide league:

**Bob Kendrick:** No one had more to lose than Rube Foster.

**Sally Helm:** Because he's doing great on his own. Winning games. Making money. But it's also clear that Black baseball as a whole will be better off if they work together. Organize. Share resources.

And a nationwide league won't just help baseball players, or baseball fans.

**Bob Kendrick:** In many instances, wherever you had successful black baseball, you had thriving black economies.

**Sally Helm:** Foster has already seen this firsthand in Chicago. His team drew Black fans from the surrounding community, and also white fans from outside the community—all of whom then patronized Black businesses. Foster also held several community benefit games each year. The proceeds went to Black civic organizations.
So, he comes to Kansas City already committed to a National Black baseball league, and all that it represents. And in fact, he’s already put in a ton of work to make it happen. He’s even recruited some of the country’s most prominent Black sportswriters to help draft the league’s bylaws. And at the meeting, he presents his fellow owners and managers with the charter he's already written. The corporate papers have been filed.

**Bob Kendrick:** He was very, very convincing in what he said. He was able to get them to join into this effort. And that was kind of the birth of the Negro Leagues.

**Sally Helm:** The opening game is played on May 2, 1920. Eight thousand fans turn out to see Foster's American Giants face off against the Indianapolis ABCs. Foster's team loses *that* game. But, after a 62-game season, they emerge as the league's first champions. And the style of baseball that Foster encouraged—daring, athletic, exciting—will become signature play for the entire league for years to come.

The Negro National League was an immediate success.

**Bob Kendrick:** For the African American community, the Negro Leagues was everything. Now, because it was ours, it was inherently ours and we were proud of it, and we supported it and it was more than a sporting event. It was more than entertainment. This was a social event. Oh, you went to see, and you went to be seen.

**Sally Helm:** The Negro Leagues continue to thrive, through a few iterations, over the next several decades, until...1947.

When Jackie Robinson enters the Major Leagues, it's the beginning of the end for the Negro Leagues. Other star players start getting signed to the Majors. Here's Phil Dixon.

**Phil Dixon:** When the ballplayers are gone, the fans follow. So now they're gonna give their allegiance to a major league team, and they don't care if your team is all black.

**Sally Helm:** And Bob Kendrick reminded us, it was always about more than baseball.

**Bob Kendrick:** When we lost the Negro leagues, we lost a tremendous catalyst that sparked economic development in so many African American communities, 18th and Vine, where the museum operates today is no exception. The South Side of Chicago, Harlem in New York, these places where, again, typically wherever you had successful black baseball, you have thriving black economies. And so really, I'm not sure, Sally, that the African American community realized what it was losing when we lost the Negro League. We were so excited about the possibility of integration.
**Sally Helm:** It seems to me like, it's like what you're talking about with the black business districts too, it kind of is an example of kind of the devil's bargain of integration in a way where it's like…

**Bob Kendrick:** Well, yeah, no, you're absolutely right. The old adage is, be careful what you ask for you might get it. And cause what we asked for was integration. What we wanted was equality. Those two are not the same. They are nowhere near the same.

**Sally Helm:** Equality has been elusive. While baseball has seen many Black stars since Jackie Robinson, there have only been 6 Black general managers in major league history, and no Black majority team owners. Black baseball is alive, but much of that power and autonomy has been lost since the Negro Leagues faded away.

And it's taken a long time for this history to be recognized. In December of 2020, Major League Baseball announced that statistics from the Negro Leagues would finally be counted with the same weight alongside Major League stats from that same era. And in December 2021, Bud Fowler, the first black professional baseball player, was finally elected to baseball's Hall of Fame.

Kendrick says:

**Bob Kendrick:** This story is not a “woe is mine” kind of story. These amazing athletes never cried about the social injustice. They went out and did something about it. Again, you won't let me play with you. Okay. I'll create my own league. And when you stop to think about that, that is the American spirit at her absolute finest.

So, while America was trying to prevent them from sharing in the joys of her so-called national pastime, it was the American spirit that allowed them to persevere and prevail. So, in essence, you make a way when there seemingly is no way.

**Sally Helm:** These players, managers, owners… they became the ship. All else, the sea.

[Credits]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.
Special thanks today to our guests, Bob Kendrick, president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and host of his own podcast, *Black Diamonds*, and Phil S. Dixon, baseball historian and author of *Andrew "Rube" Foster, A Harvest on Freedom's Fields* and also many other books.

This episode was produced by Ben Dickstein, sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jimmy Gutierrez. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julie Magruder, Julia Press, and me, Sally Helm. Our researcher is Emma Fredericks. Our executive producers are McCamey Lynn and Jessie Katz.

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