

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dennis Biddle

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Biddle, Dennis
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle,
Dates:	November 18, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:50:29).
Abstract:	Social worker and baseball player Dennis Biddle (1935 -) played for the Negro League Chicago American Giants in 1953 and 1954. After injuring his ankle in 1955, Biddle became a social worker in the Wisconsin corrections system. In 1996, Biddle founded the organization Yesterday's Negro League Baseball Players to support the surviving members of the Negro League baseball teams. Biddle was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 18, 2008, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_134
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired social worker and former Negro League Baseball player Dennis "Bose" Biddle was born on June 24, 1935, in Magnolia, Arkansas.

Biddle's career in baseball began in 1953 when he was seventeen years old. He was playing in the state championship in Arkansas for the National Farmers' Association. A scout and booking agent for the Negro League Chicago American Giants saw him pitch a no-hitter in the championship and asked him if he would like to try out with the Chicago American Giants. Biddle played for the Chicago American Giants in 1953 and 1954. Because he was only seventeen years old when he played, Biddle was entered into the Congressional Record as the youngest person to play in the Negro baseball leagues. In 1955, the Chicago Cubs were interested in purchasing his contract from the Chicago American Giants. Unfortunately, on the first day of spring training, Biddle jammed his leg and broke his ankle in two places while sliding into third base. The injury never fully healed and Biddle's baseball career ended.

At the age of twenty-two, Biddle went back to school in 1958. He received his B.A. degree in social work from the University of Wisconsin. Biddle worked for the next twenty-four years with the State of Wisconsin as a social worker in the corrections system. After retiring from the corrections system, he began working for a social service agency in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, called Career Youth Development (C.Y.D.). In this capacity, he continues to work with underprivileged youth and juvenile offenders.

In 1996, Biddle founded the organization, Yesterday's Negro League Baseball Players LLC to support the surviving members of the Negro League baseball teams and defend their economic interests.

Biddle was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 18, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dennis Biddle was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 18, 2008, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Social worker and baseball player Dennis Biddle (1935 -) played for the Negro League Chicago American Giants in 1953 and 1954. After injuring his ankle in 1955, Biddle became a social worker in the Wisconsin corrections system. In 1996, Biddle founded the organization Yesterday's Negro League Baseball Players to support the surviving members of the Negro League baseball teams.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Biddle, Dennis

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Biddle, Dennis--Interviews

African American baseball players--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American social workers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Chicago American Giants (Baseball team)

Occupations:

Baseball Player

HistoryMakers® Category:

SportsMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, November 18, 2008. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, Section A2008_134_001_001, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Dennis Biddle was born on June 24, 1935 in Magnolia, Arkansas to Percilla Glover Biddle and Dezzie Biddle. His mother's family lived in Arkansas, where they held the rights to a vast amount of land and mineral resources. In the 1840s, the family lost these rights when Biddle's grandfather, Jack Glover, signed them away in a state of poor mental health. A pair of white men captured his maternal great-grandfather, and he never returned to the family. Biddle's mother attended school through the third grade. There was miscegenation in his paternal family history, and his paternal ancestors also owned land and oil in Arkansas. Biddle's father worked as a laborer throughout his life and taught himself to read using the Bible. Biddle's parents met at church in Magnolia, where they married young and raised five children. Biddle's earliest childhood memories include running with his siblings and attending church.

African American baseball players--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American social workers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, Section A2008_134_001_002, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Dennis Biddle describes the sights, sounds and smells of his childhood in Magnolia, Arkansas. During his grade school years at Columbia County High School in the 1940s and 1950s, Biddle experienced the effects of segregation. His school received secondhand supplies from the local white school, including sports equipment. In high school, Biddle distinguished himself as a four sport athlete, and he was inspired by Jackie Robinson to become a Major League Baseball player. Eddie Robinson recruited him to play football at Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana, and the St. Louis Cardinals expressed interest to his baseball coach. His high school mentors encouraged him to pursue a college education, but Biddle decided to try for a professional baseball career. In 1953, after receiving a call from Frank Crawford, an executive for the Chicago American Giants, Biddle traveled to Chicago, Illinois for tryouts less than two weeks after graduating high school.

Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, Section A2008_134_001_003, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

Dennis Biddle describes his first night in Chicago, Illinois after leaving Arkansas to try out for the Chicago American Giants in 1953. He was signed by the Giants after tryouts. In Chicago, McKinley Washington, a man who had watched Biddle's belongings during the tryouts, became a lifelong mentor to Biddle. Biddle talks about his teammates and the lessons he learned from his coaches while playing for the Chicago American Giants. During that time, James "Cool Papa" Bell often shared stories about the history of the Negro baseball leagues. Founded in 1920 by Andrew "Rube" Foster, the league influenced the style of play in the major leagues, and the two leagues played all-star games against each other. Negro league managers often set up contracts for their younger players so that the league would benefit if the player went to the majors. Biddle remembers a pivotal game he pitched against the Memphis Red Sox, during which he learned the consequences of going against a coach's instructions.

Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, Section A2008_134_001_004, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

Dennis Biddle talks about Gread "Lefty" McKinnis. A former pitcher, McKinnis helped Biddle improve his throwing motion. Biddle played for the Chicago American Giants from 1953 to 1954. The team survived by barnstorming across the country and playing exhibition games. Players' salaries in the Negro baseball leagues fluctuated according to number of games played and game attendance.

In 1954, the Chicago Cubs signed Biddle as a free agent, but a base running injury ended his baseball career. He then pursued a number of jobs in Chicago, Illinois and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In Milwaukee, Biddle obtained a position with the State of Wisconsin as a social worker, during the latter part of the 1950s and 1960s. While working for the State, he enrolled in courses as a part-time student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, ultimately earning his B.A. degree in social work. In the 1990s, a players' reunion generated renewed interest in the Negro leagues in the general public and in Major League Baseball.

Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, Section A2008_134_001_005, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Dennis Biddle describes the history of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Founded in 1990 to preserve the history of the Negro baseball leagues, Biddle believes it quickly became a profit-driven institution. He fought to allocate a greater amount of museum funding for player benefits, and he called for looser regulations governing the establishment of pensions for former Negro league players. In 1995, Biddle and other former players established their own qualifications at a meeting in Kansas City, Missouri. His foundation, Yesterday's Negro League Baseball Players, grew out of these talks. Former players associated with the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum have attempted to discount his baseball history. Biddle identifies the ongoing battle for players' benefits as the most pressing concern of his foundation. Politics between former players complicate the struggle, but Biddle intends to continue the fight to ensure the right history of the Negro leagues is preserved.

Video Oral History Interview with Dennis Biddle, Section A2008_134_001_006, TRT: 0:22:39 ?

Dennis Biddle details the history of the Milwaukee Bears, a Negro league baseball team. Biddle worked with the Milwaukee Brewers to erect a plaque commemorating the Bears' 1923 season. He remembers LeRoy "Satchel" Paige as a skilled pitcher and a showman. Paige pitched for over twenty teams in both the Negro leagues and the major leagues. Biddle's relates his hopes and concerns for the African American community to his legacy. He wants to reverse the trend of lessened participation by African Americans in baseball leagues by establishing a mentorship program for Little League players. He wishes to be remembered for his work with the Yesterday's Negro League Baseball Players foundation and his determination to preserve the history of the Negro leagues. Biddle lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with his fourth wife. He has nine children and twenty-three grandchildren. He concludes by narrating his photographs.