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## Baseball From The Catbird Seat: An Interview with Walter "Red" Barber

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*William J. Marshall, Jr.*

The following is edited from an unrehearsed interview with Walter "Red" Barber for the University of Kentucky A. B. Chandler Oral History Project and was conducted by William J. Marshall, Jr., on 27 June 1987 in Tallahassee, Florida.

Mr. MARSHALL: When we talk in terms of broadcasting, the first rights to televise a game were bought in 1939. You employed one television receiver, which was provided to Larry MacPhail, and you did the broadcast?

Mr. BARBER: Yes. That was a rather historical turning point. And that use of a television receiver for one afternoon is the first fee that television paid sports. Now, of course, television owns sports. It owns the World Series. It says to the commissioner when we want to play it, and it's said it owns all college football, and we'll play football games when it wants to and not when the college wants to play. Television is a big change in our civilization. It's changed our civilization a great deal more than it's changed sports. I don't think we've stopped to realize how completely changed our civilization is. The news that we get is all shaped by television. Our living habits are shaped now by what we want to see on television. We have become a more physically static race of people because of all the time we spend looking at television. And when you're looking at television, you're not doing anything but looking at it. You're not even thinking. You're just sitting there like a human lump of something.

There is no way under the sun that Ronald Reagan could have been even governor of California or president of the United States without television. His enormous popularity, despite all of the scandals that have been brewing, is a direct reflection of what he projects on TV. He stands there as a polished actor and a very handsome man, and I'm not in any way trying to take anything away from my once fellow broadcaster who used to do recreation games in Des Moines, Iowa. I don't think he ever did a live

baseball game in his life, but he recreated Chicago Cubs games there in the studio of radio station WHO in Des Moines. But there's just one extreme example of the impact of television.

And I go to this length to go back to that August afternoon in 1939, and to think how things began to happen. "Doc" Morton was in charge of this infant industry. I don't know whether he even called it television or not. It didn't have the name that it has now. I had known Doc Morton for a couple of years earlier. Well, Morton became sort of my contact at NBC and made two or three efforts to have me come in and do some work for him, which went no place because I had a very wonderful job at Cincinnati doing baseball games every day, working in the studios at WLW, which was then the world's most powerful radio station—half a million watts power. I have sort of a stubborn streak, too, and why was I going to give up a good job just to go drifting off to NBC in New York City without any knowledge of what I was to do and certainly what I was going to be paid?

You see, there'd been five years, '34-5-6-7-8, in which none of the New York teams broadcast, or allowed to be broadcast, any of their home games. They were deathly afraid of the impact of radio—especially the Giants. The Yankees were also most adamantly opposed. MacPhail broke the ban when he said he was going to broadcast the Brooklyn games, and so he forced the other two teams to go on the air in self-defense, and they didn't like it!

So Morton calls and asks me, at my convenience, would I stop by? He wanted to ask me to do something for him. So I went into his office, and he said, "Red," he said, "we've got this thing, television, and," he said, "we've done one baseball game, Princeton at Columbia, and," he said, "Bill Stern,"—Stern was their big sports announcer then—"Bill Stern broadcast it. But," he said, "I want very much to do a big league baseball game."

At that time they were just doing odds and ends, anything you could find to do. And the idea of television paying sports or anybody else a fee—never heard of! So Morton said, "There's no reason for you to go to the Yankees. Ed Barrow hates radio, so he would doubly hate television. In fact, I doubt if he's even seen it. And the same thing with Horace Stoneham of the Giants." And he said, "I don't know MacPhail, but I know that it depends on how you meet him, how you approach him, his reaction, because I understand he can be very rough or he can be very pleasant. Now," he said, "you know MacPhail. You worked for him in

Cincinnati for three years. He brought you here to New York." He said, "Would you do me a personal favor?"

Isn't this wonderful? The great television industry! Now here's the program director of it asking me, "Will you do me a personal favor? Will you go to MacPhail and get permission to allow NBC to broadcast a baseball game from Ebbets Field? Any baseball game he selects." "Well," I said, "Doggone it, I'll try."

Well, MacPhail, as you know, is quite a pioneer. In Cincinnati, when he took over the Reds in '34, he flew his ball club to Chicago—the first time that a major league club had ever flown in a pennant race. He believed very much in radio and pursued it. He broke the ban in New York, and he put in the first night games. He put in the first season ticket plan. I know this sounds like it's unbelievable, but that was what was going on in those days. MacPhail and Branch Rickey, between them, brought baseball into the modern age. Rickey with the first farm system and second with the black ball player.

So, I went in to see MacPhail, and the conversation was extremely brief. I said, "Larry, would you like another first?" He said, "Yeah. What is it?" I said, "Televising a baseball game." "Sure." And I said, "Well, call Doc Morton at this number." He picked up the phone and called Morton, and he said, "I understand you want to televise one of our baseball games out here." And, oh, Morton, you could almost hear him just brewing. MacPhail, looking in his schedule saw a Saturday doubleheader with the Cincinnati Reds, who were fighting for the pennant and who won it that year. And they had the big ball club with Paul Derringer and Bucky Walters and Ernie Lombardi. And, of course, that doubleheader on a Saturday at Ebbets Field had long since been sold out. So MacPhail said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll let you broadcast the first game of that doubleheader."

Well, that was it, and that's all there was to it. We had two announcers at Brooklyn in Al Helfer and myself, and it was very easy. I just went over on the TV side. I was asked to, of course, and did the announcing and Helfer did the nine innings of baseball.

This was, of course, black and white TV. Nobody had ever thought about color. We had two cameras. They put one camera on the ground floor, behind the screen behind home plate, and that was the cover shot, and then they put a second camera on the upper deck, right out in the crowd at the back of third base, and

that's where I sat. There was no such thing as a monitor. I was supposed to have an ediphone connection with Burke Crotty—the director down in the truck, but right at the start of the ball game the phone line went out. I never heard from Crotty during the game.

So there I was. The only way I knew which camera was in use was when its red light came on and the direction in which it was pointed. So I just had to guess that they were looking out there at the pitcher and, of course, to keep the audience, what there was of it—I don't know if there were five hundred people who had a television set that afternoon in New York or not—in order to keep the audience informed how the game was going. I did, you might say, basic radio play-by-play, whether they could see it or not. And I know that in one of the reviews afterwards, praising the telecast, they said, "You know, at times you could even see the ball."

Then in order to finish the telecast, I had arranged to interview some players in front of the camera that was sitting behind home plate at the ground level. So before the doubleheader began I arranged to have Bucky Walters, manager Bill McKechnie of the Reds, manager Leo Durocher, Tot Pressnell, and Dolf Camilli come over to that spot in front of the TV, and I just simply walked from up in the stands in back of third base, through the stands and down to it, and everybody waited for sound. They sat there until the announcer got there.

So that is how television began. And when you think about it, the interviewing of the players, the doing of the play-by-play, outside of adding color and more shots and this, that, and the other, I don't know if it's changed so drastically or not.

Mr. MARSHALL: The basics are all there. You did some advertisements, too, didn't you?

Mr. BARBER: Yes. We had three sponsors at Brooklyn that year, Procter and Gamble for Ivory Soap, General Mills for Wheaties, and Mobil Oil and Mobil Gas. And NBC said, "Well, we'll give you a commercial for each as a thank you for letting us come in." I recall that the sequence was, I think, Ivory Soap first. Well, that wasn't too difficult, because I was sitting right alongside this camera. So they just turned the camera onto me, and I picked up a bar of Ivory Soap and just talked about it being a lovely soap—things like, "99 and 44/100% pure" and that was that commercial. Then, a couple of innings later, I put on a Mobil Gas

attendant's service cap, and the camera turned back on me and I picked up a can of Mobil Oil, and I just ad-libbed a few words about Mobil Oil.

Of course, I was very familiar with those products, because I was doing the radio announcing in those days. I did them every day, so it wasn't difficult to lip some of the lines that I'd been using and ad-lib them. There were no cue cards, and there was no assistant director saying, "You're on!" The last commercial was for Wheaties. When the camera turned on me, we shook some Wheaties into a bowl. I sliced a banana very quickly, put a little sugar on it, poured a little cream and held that to the camera, and I said, "This is a breakfast of champions!" And I don't think that commercial's ever been improved on.

Mr. MARSHALL: Back in the early days of television did you ever envision that it was going to be as big as it is today and control the game the way it has?

Mr. BARBER: No! And neither did anybody else! A lot of people say they did then, but nobody had any idea or any comprehension as to the enormous impact and the unbelievable amount of money that would come in. Nobody could envision it. It grew so slowly. Television was put in the deep freeze during World War II, because it was too expensive in materials and in manpower, and the military had no use for it then. In fact, very few people knew what to do with it. But, after World War II, it just mushroomed. And every time you turned around, it had gone another step forward. But, if you look at the initial rights for television for the World Series, which I think Commissioner A.B. "Happy" Chandler negotiated, you would say, "Oh, my goodness!"

Mr. MARSHALL: In fact, I think that he negotiated a contract for the World Series and All-Star Game in 1950 for something like \$6 million for six years, and he was criticized in some quarters for that.

Mr. BARBER: I remember looking up a reference for my book 1947.<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* contained information that the World Series that year had been sold by Commissioner Chandler. I think, it was either \$60,000 or \$65,000. You can check it.<sup>2</sup> But the thing that made the story was, Rheingold Beer had offered to buy it for \$100,000, but Commissioner Chandler, being a teetotaler, did not want baseball associated with beer. And so he sold it for less money to Gillette and, I believe, the Ford Motor Company. Now that's the first time that the World Series was sold. And 1947 was

the first time that the World Series was on television. That was the high watermark for radio coverage of the World Series. Radio had it all in 1947. But, by 1948, it was beginning to be an entirely different story.

Mr. MARSHALL: Right. The owners feared the growth of television and radio and its geographic impact.

Mr. BARBER: Not so much television. It was radio that frightened them. When radio came along, nobody knew what to do with it. Most baseball people were saying, "Why give away something that you are trying to sell?" In those days baseball survived by its gate sale, by some signs on the fences, by selling ball players, by selling programs, and by what they got from the concessionaire. Now, here comes radio, and it's not paying anything.

I can understand in those primitive days, especially when you are thinking in terms of cloudy weather, threatening weather. See, it's threatening weather that hurts the crowd. It is not threatening weather or rainy weather at the time of the game. The fan is either in the ball park or he's not, but he's got to make up his mind three, four, or five hours beforehand. "Am I going to go? Am I going to get the family put together?" This is what they were afraid of. A fellow gets up in the morning, looks around, sees a lot of clouds and says, "Yeah, there's a genuine doubt whether they'll play or not. I'm not going to go. Particularly when I can sit home and hear it."

It was Mr. William Wrigley, Sr., in Chicago, who owned the Chicago Cubs, sold chewing gum in enormous amounts, who knew the value of advertising. After all, he was having to sell an awful lot of packages at five cents apiece in order to support his enterprise. So, he was quite alert to all promotions, and he opened Wrigley Field in Chicago to any station that wanted to come in—for no fee!

The first regular season play-by-play was done by Hal Totten in 1924. When Totten started doing it, and he was a rewrite man on the Chicago *Daily News*, nobody who got into radio had had any experience with it. It's unbelievable when you think about it, how so many people developed an industry that nobody had ever heard of. When television came along, we had experienced people and the promotional ability of radio. Mr. Wrigley proved that radio in Chicago increased his gate because it made it a family game. Therefore, he's got a whole family chewing gum as well as coming to see his ball game. People like MacPhail and Rickey, who are

not hidebound by old-fashioned traditions, they're perfectly willing to look at a new situation instead of looking back.

So when MacPhail got to Cincinnati, in 1934, he began experimenting with radio. He didn't broadcast all of his games in 1934. I think he broadcast about sixteen or eighteen live games, and he wouldn't say that year when he was going to broadcast them until suddenly he'd just notify the radio station, "You can broadcast this game."

Mr. MARSHALL: The idea essentially would be, the more people you're able to reach—and radio and television would reach more people—the more that you might get to come to the ball park to see the real thing.

Mr. BARBER: What radio did was it made it a family game. Radio taught women baseball. Until radio came along, as Frank Grayson of the Cincinnati *Times* said one time, "You know, it used to be they'd call it 'Ladies Day' out here, and there'd be a handful of them. But," he said, "there wouldn't be a single 'lady' among the bunch!" A ball park was rough. It was dirty. The restrooms were filthy. The attendants wore any sort of dirty uniform, and they were rough, and if you didn't give them something, they wouldn't give you a good seat, or they wouldn't dust it off. It was a very rough business, and baseball did not like to have that explored, brought back. MacPhail was one of the pioneers in clean restrooms. He *demand*ed that the women's room be absolutely spotless, and he put fresh uniforms on the vendors, and he demanded courtesy from them. If he caught one of them taking a tip for a seat, he dismissed him. MacPhail was the pioneer of a clean ball park. The first thing he did at Cincinnati when he took over a bankrupt ball park was paint it. And he did the same thing at Brooklyn, did the same thing at Yankee Stadium. He realized that women would not go into a ball park, a lot of women, unless that ball park was fastidiously clean, and the attendants were courteous and had proper habits. This first year, MacPhail, you might say, experimented at Cincinnati, and he also was doing some other things with radio. He demanded that at noon—in '34 everything was afternoon games—he demanded that I interview from the ball park for fifteen minutes a ball player or ball players, or anybody I wanted to get on, talking about that afternoon's game—who was going to pitch, who was going to play. Well, that's routine promotion now, but MacPhail broke the ice on that. And this is what I mean by saying that sometimes I'd



finish this interview at 12:15 and MacPhail would say, "Okay, you can do the play-by-play this afternoon if you want to." And the station, of course, was very happy to do it. That was a smaller station, of course, WSAI. They had very few commercials. They didn't have anything that they couldn't dispose of. They were *delighted*.

And MacPhail began to realize that year that women were now getting interested. Women were now talking about Paul Derringer, and he began to notice, increasingly, families were coming especially on Saturdays and Sundays. And, after that, every game was broadcast.

Mr. MARSHALL: In the late forties and early fifties, the minor leagues, from the highest classification on down, became quite worried about the proliferation of broadcasting, because it started to go all over the country.

Mr. BARBER: When I was a boy, Bill, in Sanford, Florida, you had the motion picture show, and there was a Class D baseball team for some years, and they would play in the afternoon and on certain holidays, like the 4th of July.

And then radio brought the world into the home, and that began changing our civilization. And so, while minor league baseball had been needed as a medium to entertain people all over the country, suddenly that need was no longer there. And the minor leagues became not so much to entertain people, but to train young players for the major leagues. And then came television. You have cameramen, you have directors, assistant directors. You have beautifully made commercials. And, in fact, I think television now, with some of the lousy programs—I think you have to look at commercials to get any entertainment. And television over the years has developed a wonderful group of commentators—Vin Scully and Joe Garagiola for instance. There's nothing about a baseball game that those two don't give you along with the camera.

Right after World War II they began to televise games on a fairly regular basis. The cameramen didn't know baseball, and they didn't know where to focus. The directors didn't know baseball. And you'd be sitting there, and by that time you've got monitors. You'd be sitting there trying to talk about something, and there's another picture on the screen. But, of course, we learned. It didn't take very long before some of those cameramen got to be just as sharp as they could be, because you can't just

wait for a baseball play to happen. You've got to sense it's coming and be there. The director now has a dozen different cameras, and he's got all the pictures there in front, so it's just a matter of switching.

Mr. MARSHALL: I read one piece<sup>3</sup> where you talked about early television, and you compared it with your radio experiences. You were frustrated with television, because the camera wasn't where you wanted it to be.

Mr. BARBER: The final scene of 1948 in the World Series? Bill Veeck. I was frustrated. I was angry, because here is Veeck, who had bought into and developed the Cleveland Indians, a team that at the time had the largest attendance of any ball club in history. Here is Veeck walking on a wooden leg, and he didn't have a coat on, just a white sport shirt, and at the end of game six his ball club is now world champions. So here comes this crippled man stumping along, with his coat on his arm, and he is now the owner of the world champion ball club. And there was nobody out on the playing field. He was just walking across the field, across home plate, to join his players in his clubhouse. And to me it was the most perfect picture. It was the summation. I had made it a rule that I never asked for a camera shot over the air because I would embarrass the director. And I never did, except that one time. And I just kept saying, "Get the camera on Veeck! Get the camera on Veeck! He's back of home plate. Get the camera." They never moved that camera!

Mr. MARSHALL: Today we have instant replays.

Mr. BARBER: Oh, today they'd have had Veeck getting out of his seat and coming across.

Mr. MARSHALL: You had a very simple philosophy of broadcasting, and that was to report what took place.

Mr. BARBER: Yeah.

Mr. MARSHALL: You said something regarding broadcasting that I'd like you to react to and that's, "to listen, to learn and think and transmit."

Mr. BARBER: They are very good words, because the most important thing for a play-by-play man, or an analyst, is his pre-game preparation. In ad-lib work, you have done seventy-five to ninety percent of your work before you ever go in the booth. It's very important that you have an inner confidence that you can do it. I never went in a booth with any doubt in my mind that whatever happened in a game I could cover it, because I had done

my pre-game preparation.

Some announcers haven't got any sense. They do an interview, and they do all the talking. But you listen when you are down in the dugout, in the clubhouse. You talk when you get to the booth. And, naturally, you think about your work. I had two interests in my life in the years I broadcast baseball—my family and my work. And I started my preparation as soon as I started looking at the morning paper. I would see little things of national interest, international interest, little personal notes. I kept a whole string of them, because you have to fill in between pitches. People used to say, "Well, you give us so much more than the ball game." On my scorebook I had all sorts of pencil notations about little items, so if there came a lull, I didn't have to worry about what I would say. I had little things I could talk about.

With regard to learning, I spent the years that I broadcast reading only good writers. The writer who was most beneficial to me was Winston Churchill and his five-volume history of World War II, because there was a man that used direct, exact, pungent English. When you read Churchill you could understand him. And that's the way I wanted to broadcast. I wanted people to understand, and I stayed away from the big words.

Mr. MARSHALL: What kind of a routine would you follow on a game day?

Mr. BARBER: Well, we always had breakfast together, and when we were living in New York, Mrs. Barber read the *Herald Tribune*, and I read the *New York Times*. And, also, I would read the afternoon papers, especially if there was a night game, because I wanted to know what these other writers were saying.

And I always planned my day. If it was a night game, then I got a nap in the afternoon so that I would be rested. And I scheduled my arrival at the ball park to be exactly two hours before game time. If you get to the ball park before two hours, there's nobody down on the playing field. The players aren't out there. So you waste your time and you waste your strength sitting in an empty lot wondering what to do. You get there two hours beforehand, and that is when the extra players come out, and the pitchers who weren't working would come out, and they'd start taking batting practice. And you would just stand around the back of the cage and listen.

And by being there that early I would be there well ahead of the writers. Most of the writers, though, were very lazy and didn't

come until the last minute, and sometimes they'd come after the game had started and say to another writer, "Give me a fill-in."

But by being there early, when the manager first came out, I would have his undivided attention. I'd say, "Hello! Let me see your batting card!" And he'd reach in his pocket, and I would look to see any changes from the day before. And then I would begin my interviewing by saying, "I see you've got another second baseman. Why?" And I would begin to find out. Then I would also ask, "Anybody have any baby overnight? Is anybody sick?" Then I'd ask the manager, "Who's going to pitch tomorrow?" or anything else that was pertinent. Or if somebody was hurt, I'd say, "When will Richardson be back able to play?"

I didn't ask any questions that I didn't have any right to. I never had a ball player in my house, and I was never in a ball player's house. I did my work. And when you flew on an airplane, the action would be at the back end of the plane where they're playing cards. I sat up in the front, and I never went back there. I didn't know what went on back there. I didn't know what went on in the hotel room. I didn't want to know. It is just as important what you *don't* know as what you *do* know, and I liked to think that I never asked a ball player a wrong question over the air, which translated into the fact that I never had any problems getting ball players to go on. They were happy to go on. In fact, Jackie Power at Yankee Stadium used to book them, and they used to say to Jackie, "Hey, Jackie, get me on there with Red." Mr. MARSHALL: In other words, you, at least from all appearances, wanted to adopt a neutral posture.

Mr. BARBER: I heard Bill Klem, who was the great umpire, say that there was nothing to umpiring, really. You just umpire the ball. Have you thought about that? It's either fair or foul; it's a ball or a strike; you're safe or you're out; the run scores or it doesn't.

I tried to make broadcasting a profession. I realized, and this would be especially so in the radio days, I realized that my job was to report a game to millions of people who couldn't see the game. And every one of those people had a different wish, a different hope, a different fear of how the game would be played. This listener wanted the batter to get a base hit, and this listener wanted him struck out. And my function was—to go back to Klem's definition of umpiring—was to *umpire* the ball. I'd *broadcast* the ball. I didn't care who hit it or caught it, and I did

everything that I could to eliminate caring who won or who lost.

And one of the things that I've appreciated over the years, was a story told by Tom Meany who was writing for the *World Telegram*. And he was late and jumped in a taxicab to go to Ebbets Field, and the radio was on. The driver stopped for a light, and he didn't know who Meany was, but he just sort of remarked over his shoulder, "The trouble with that Barber is he's too fair!" I've always appreciated that. I didn't have the slightest problem of switching ball parks, switching leagues, switching sponsors. People just accepted the fact I was going to give them the ball game.

Mr. MARSHALL: You talked about recreating ball games and traveling with the team.

Mr. BARBER: Yes, those are two different worlds.

Mr. MARSHALL: Right. I guess it was the period 1945 to 1948 that the switch-over came for almost all the ball clubs, where they had the radio announcers switch.

Mr. BARBER: MacPhail, he was the pioneer. He put the Yankees on the road. He wanted every Yankee game broadcast live. He wanted his announcer to see the game, and he did it in 1946.

Well, you have to remember that money was coming in slowly, especially from radio, and to broadcast live you've got to buy a lot of telephone lines. You've got to travel at least an engineer, two announcers, an agency man, and finally a statistician. That's pretty good extra expense. MacPhail was the only one who had his games on live in '46. In '47 I went to Mr. Rickey, and I said, "While I don't want to travel, we're going to have to travel." We didn't do the Brooklyn broadcasts on the road until July of '48.

And very quickly, within a year or two, all the broadcasts were traveled. They had to, because, naturally, no recreation can stand up against a live broadcast. You can't tell me a fellow in a studio can take a Western Union skeleton report and make it compete with a man who is sitting at the broadcast seeing it right now!

Mr. MARSHALL: And so that changed your life.

Mr. BARBER: Oh, yes. And her life [points to Mrs. Barber]. And that's when she began paying the tremendously heavy price of having a broadcasting hobo. That's when she began raising our daughter. There's so much tragedy among baseball players and their families because of the excessive travel. Mr. Branch Rickey used to say that the great unwritten book about baseball is the effect of the wives, of women on the players.

Mr. MARSHALL: Let's talk about Branch Rickey. You mentioned

earlier in the interview that Rickey and MacPhail dominated baseball.

Mr. BARBER: I said they brought it into the modern era. And they did. What have we got in baseball now that those two men didn't bring in?

Mr. MARSHALL: Very little! Was Rickey the dominant individual in the game at this point in time?

Mr. BARBER: Rickey changed the game more than any other single man. Now, MacPhail changed it in many, many ways. MacPhail modernized it. MacPhail took advantage of the airplane; he took advantage of radio; he took advantage of television. He created the first season ticket sale in 1934 in Cincinnati. He was a master of promotion, of publicity. He rebuilt three bankrupt ball clubs—Cincinnati, Brooklyn, and the Yankees were in sad shape after Jacob Ruppert had died. MacPhail laid the foundation for two pennants and a championship in Cincinnati. He laid the foundation for a pennant at Brooklyn and a near miss the following year. And, again, you know his record over at Yankee Stadium during the World Championship in '47, and then he quit. But these are all changes in which MacPhail was ahead of the times.

Mr. Rickey created two situations that changed the game. When Rickey had the St. Louis Cardinals first, the ball club was absolutely financially destitute. They didn't have a second set of uniforms. I think one year they had to stay in St. Louis because they didn't have money enough to go to spring training camp. In those days, baseball was very loosely run, and if John McGraw, of the rich New York Giants, wanted or needed a shortstop, he looked around, and he saw the one he wanted out of an opponent. Jerry Nugent of the Phillies always needed money, so, "Sure, for \$50,000 you can have my ball player." The Cubs, they had money. Wrigley had money. A lot of chewing gum going on. They'd buy a player. They bought Dizzy Dean, you know. The dominant clubs didn't train them, they bought the finished product!

And Rickey, down at St. Louis, did some thinking. He said, "I can't compete financially with these other people. There's no way. I don't have any money. And I'm not going to get any money. There must be some way I can compete. I can create a core of scouts. I can send them around the country. I can have training camps. I can select the best of these young players. I can have a

lot of minor league teams, and I can have my managers as teachers. And their job is not so much to win a game or win a pennant, but teach and train these players how I want them to play." And they had the Cardinal farm system. And the Cardinal farm system suddenly, without any money, beat the mighty Yankees who had all the money in the world in 1926. That revolutionized baseball. From then on, you couldn't use your money to go get a player. Rickey had those players, and he made you pay dearly. He would also make you give him a player in exchange, too. So, all the teams had to go into the development of their players, and that's when minor league ball really came to its height, because of the absolute need of training your players, finding them, training them, schooling them, and having a place for them to develop step by step by step.

One of the faults we have in major league baseball today is that we don't train the young ball players—to use Mr. Rickey's expression—in "the pleasing skills of the professional." They rush them, bring them along.

Then the other thing that Rickey did when he revolutionized baseball was the breaking of the color line. When he did that, he changed American history. I went to the University of Florida. Mrs. Barber went here to Florida State College for Women. If someone had said to me when I went over to Gainesville, in 1928, that there'd be a black football player, I would have said, "You better send for the wagon, because that's crazy, could never happen." When Jackie Robinson was signed in 1946, in spring training camp, he was first sent to a training school for young players at Sanford, Florida. This is where I grew up. And the word came to Mr. Rickey, "You'd better get that nigger out of here in twenty-four hours." And they knew that they weren't joking, and they got him out of there. He had ball players at a former naval air training station at Deland where he could control everything, and that's where Montreal was training, and that's where Robinson went.

But that's how critical that was. That's how big a change it was. Now, you've got more blacks, many of whom are star players. It's just unbelievable what Mr. Rickey developed. I can understand that Senator Chandler, Governor Chandler, Commissioner Chandler, feels that he hasn't been given due credit, but he didn't do what Rickey did! And nobody else was going to do it.

Mr. MARSHALL: When Rickey brought Robinson in, do you feel he was looking at this as a move to integrate baseball as opposed to actually making Brooklyn a better franchise than any of the other National League franchises?

Mr. BARBER: I don't know and can't know everything that goes on in another man's mind. But I can tell you this—knowing Mr. Rickey and his intelligence and his quickness of mind, that once he saw Robinson's ability, and once he saw Roy Campanella's ability, and once he saw Don Newcombe's ability, he said, "Oh, man, I'm moving into the tall cotton, and I'm going to get the best of these first." And then it was Bill Veeck at Cleveland who brought in Larry Doby, and Veeck came right out and said that, "While the picking is good, I'm going to pick one." And I know that "Bear" Bryant at the University of Alabama, he lost some football games to some teams that had Negro players, and Bryant in his Alabama pride said, "Well, I'll tell you what. If we're going to win, we'd better get some, too." That was the chain effect of that.

I'm certain that Mr. Rickey thought ahead of just about every eventuality that he possibly could. For example, in three hours he instructed Robinson about everything that would happen to him. Mr. Rickey was a man who didn't use profanity. He told Robinson every word he would hear and every word his wife would hear. Robinson used to get mad, but then sometimes he would say to me, after a big rhubarb down on the field where he'd been abused, Jack would say, "You know, last night I got mad, and then, you know, Red, I started to laugh, because I just kept hearing everything what Mr. Rickey told me I'd hear."

Mr. MARSHALL: You knew Branch Rickey very well?

Mr. BARBER: Not as well as I would like to know him. I don't know anybody that knew Mr. Rickey very well, except his family. He was a deeply devoted family man. The people that worked for him knew him or knew certain facets of him. Lila and Mrs. Rickey used to sit and watch ball games together, and once in a while we would have dinner together, the four of us. And our daughter Sara was always welcome to come and sit with Lila and Mrs. Rickey. And Mr. Rickey would take me into his confidence and talk to me sometimes when he was troubled, because he knew that I would not use the material. Mr. Rickey was a very complex man. You could come much closer to knowing MacPhail than you knew Rickey, because Mr. Rickey was never out of control. MacPhail, man, he would go wild! I never stayed. That's one of



the reasons I never got in trouble with him. But I never had any difference with Mr. Rickey, and I felt a warmth for him, and I dedicated *Walking the Spirit* to Mr. Rickey and to my father.

Mr. MARSHALL: In talking to some of the players who worked for Rickey, either with the Cardinals or the Dodgers, they seem to have deep respect for him, but not a real liking for him.

Mr. BARBER: Mr. Rickey was a very sound businessman, and he was running baseball when baseball had to survive. I doubt that Mr. Rickey ever got much money from radio or television. In those days, a ball player was paid about what he could negotiate from the owner based on his performance from the past season.

The money that ball players are getting now is not only from television, and there's some from radio, but because of one of the most important and influential men in the history of sports, Marvin Miller. When he formed the ball players' union, that changed the *whole* deal. He kept getting one more concession, one more concession. Then when he finally got free agency, then you have George Steinbrenner and these others. A lot of ball clubs today are going to be in debt for years to come. And the ball players give them nothing.

Mr. MARSHALL: You once said of Jackie Robinson, "I can truthfully say that he has done more for me than I will ever be able to do for him."

Mr. BARBER: That's right.

Mr. MARSHALL: What did you mean?

Mr. BARBER: I told you earlier that I grew up in Sanford, Florida, and they ordered the Brooklyn Dodgers to get the Robinsons out of town in twenty-four hours. And that meant something serious. And when you made Branch Rickey make a move like that to get Robinson out of there, it was serious. It had to be! Rickey never talked about it as such.

I was born in Columbus, Mississippi, and that was as Deep South as you'll find. My family came to Sanford when I was ten. And then I went to the University of Florida. There wasn't a black student there. So when Mr. Rickey told me in 1946, all he said was, "There's a Negro out there who's coming. I don't know who he is, but he's coming." And as well as I knew Mr. Rickey, I knew it was coming. And I came home and told Lila all about it, and I said, "I'm going to have to quit. I don't think I can go through with this." I was the creature of my place of birth and my environment. As I often put it, because I don't know how to put it

better, that song in *South Pacific*, "You have to be carefully taught." I had been beautifully taught, completely taught. When Mr. Rickey told me when he was going to do it, I couldn't believe it.

But Lila being the wonderful person she is, she said, "Well, you don't have to quit today. Let's have a martini." And I began to do some thinking. And the first thought that came to me was that I've got the best sports announcing job in the world, and I basically created it. And I don't know where I'll get another one like it. Then I began to think a little deeper, and I had to face the fact that I had no choice of the parents I was born to or where I was born. I could have been born black just as well as born white. Then the thought went on—well, who am I to be so proud about the fact that I had white skin and just by chance? No decision of mine. I didn't do it.

Then I went back to Judge Landis's pre-World Series admonition in 1935, in which he stressed that the job of the announcers—in those days all the networks broadcast the World Series—the job was not to try to play, not to criticize the players, merely report what they did. Not to second-guess the managers, just report what their decisions were. And certainly not to try to umpire, just report what the umpires did and the reaction. You were free to report everything that you can see in the ball park, but leave your opinions in your hotel room and report it. My job was merely to report what this black player did, just as any other ball player did. And once I got that through my head, I had no further problem. And I never had any problem.

Mr. MARSHALL: Did Jackie Robinson, knowing of your background, appreciate the fact that you reacted that way to him?

Mr. BARBER: Robinson never said to me, "I hear that you are saying nice things about me or handling me well," or this, that, and the other. Mrs. Robinson hasn't, and you wouldn't expect that. I know that I had a very warm personal relationship with Jackie. He would talk to me. And several times he was on the verge of saying some unfortunate things to writers, and I interrupted him saying, "Now, wait a minute, Jack. I don't think you want to say what you're about to say." And he looked at me and would say, "Thank you." We had a fine working relationship, and that's all I wanted, and that's all he wanted, and I know that Mrs. Robinson is always very pleased to see Lila and me whenever we meet.

Mr. MARSHALL: Let me switch to Happy Chandler. How was he perceived by those of you in the Dodger's organization? I'm not talking just about you, although I'd like to know how you perceive him. In your book *1947* you wrote a lot of things about him. But how was he perceived by Branch Rickey and his staff? Was he talked about in positive terms, with disdain, or somewhere in between?

Mr. BARBER: I told you earlier that Mr. Rickey was always in command of himself, always in control. I don't think he ever said many things that he hadn't thought about saying. I would say that Mr. Rickey never had an opportunity to feel very friendly or warm toward Chandler.

You have to understand that it was a war between Rickey and MacPhail, after Rickey dismissed MacPhail at Columbus, Ohio, even though Rickey recommended MacPhail for the job at Cincinnati and again at Brooklyn. But there was a bitterness there. And after Landis died, the owners had to come up with a new commissioner. And Rickey wanted a baseball man, a trained baseball man. He wanted Ford Frick. Well, if Rickey wanted Ford Frick, MacPhail was dead certain it wasn't going to be Frick. Whatever Rickey wanted, MacPhail wasn't going to have. I understand, although I wasn't there, that the owners wrangled, and as a desperation compromise MacPhail, a very powerful and persuasive figure, came up with Chandler.

Now, I think this has been well stated many places. There's no question that Chandler owed his office to MacPhail, and Rickey was bitterly disappointed, and Frick was a good baseball man. He had been in baseball all of his mature life as a writer, publicist for the National League, and then president of the National League. Baseball has its own codes. It's a whole world, and a man coming into this world of baseball has to know something about it, or he is in deep trouble! He is at the mercy of different owners, and he's at the mercy of his own staff, who get to provide him with data. So, that didn't sit well with Rickey. When you're a big, strong man and a man of ability, and especially when you're opposed by another big, strong man, you don't like to be beaten. Rickey was humiliated, I guess that's the best word, by MacPhail, by Chandler. Then came the explosion in Florida, from Havana, Florida, in which Chandler—you've read Durocher's book<sup>4</sup>, and you've read Arthur Mann's book.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. MARSHALL: Right.

Mr. BARBER: He was a trained writer, and I can't, to this day, understand why Chandler did what he did. He had given Leo a promise in California, "Leo, you walk the straight line and you're my boy." And Leo walked it. He lived like a saint. I was at training camp in Havana. Leo had his meals in his room. He wouldn't be seen with anybody. He'd come out and go to the playing field, do his work, and go up to his room and stay. Nobody ever was more faithful to his word than Durocher. The only testimony anybody's got from a trained writer, about what went on in there was in Arthur Mann's book. And when Chandler said to Rickey, "What about your man?," meaning suspending Durocher, Mann said that Rickey simply said, "Happy, what are you talking about?" So, now, here is Rickey with the first black player on his hands, and Durocher was the man that Rickey counted on integrating Robinson, because Leo had the gall of a brass monkey. Leo was afraid of no one. As a young ball player he gave the hip to Ty Cobb, threatened to beat Babe Ruth in the clubhouse.

I mean, Durocher was some fellow! Durocher was Rickey's man, and Durocher had been carefully schooled about this. Durocher broke up the threatened revolution of the Brooklyn Dodgers in Panama, when he got them down and he said, "I understand you're going to have a petition. Well, you know what you can do with that. He's going to play. He's a good ball player. He's not afraid. He can hit." And he said, "Any of you that don't want to play with him, Mr. Rickey will accommodate you by sending you somewhere else, and furthermore," he said, "you better wake up, because he's not the first one. They're coming and, boy, they're going to come hungry, and they're going to take your job if you're not careful." And he broke it up. So, here is Mr. Rickey's strength with this terrible challenge of Robinson. And Durocher had already straightened out his ball club. He had it under control.

Well, so now Chandler strips Rickey. He broke his word to Durocher. What do they say in the Bible about a contract between God and people? I don't care what Chandler or anybody else says, I saw Durocher, and so did everybody else. The writers were simply aghast. They couldn't believe it!

And this is where Chandler was playing politics. He said he had a letter from a Supreme Court justice that said, "Durocher's done so many bad things and you, as commissioner, had better get him

out of baseball." Chandler said to Rickey, "You know," at the meeting he said, "I've got a letter from a mighty big man in Washington." Chandler was absolutely adamant. He wouldn't do anything about letting Durocher come back that first year. I mean, that's the record. It's an ugly record. But it happened.

So you ask me, how do I think that Rickey felt about the commissioner? How do you think I'm going to answer it? And Chandler, as he said himself, "You're no politician if you get into a race that you know you can't win," in one of the articles that Underwood wrote. Well, he got in it.

The owners had been sick and tired of Judge Landis running their game, and they had to, after the scandal of 1919, give him those autocratic powers, and he really used them. But the owners were just waiting for that old, white haired man to die. They knew, without having even to talk to each other, there'll never be another commissioner with that much power again to take our game away from us and keep it away from us. So, when Chandler came in, he thought that he was going to be another Landis. Well, he never had a chance to be another Landis. Of course, the owners were going to see to it. If they didn't get him on one thing, they were going to get him on something else.

And, as I said in the book, Chandler had, when he wanted to turn it on, a very winsome personality. A wonderful raconteur. He could be just as charming and warm. But when he decided that just because he wanted to stay close to Versailles that he'll have the office in Cincinnati, that's when he made his first bad decision in my opinion. Because he's now in a one-team town. The American League never came to Cincinnati. Cincinnati was also the smallest town in the league, and the writers, the important writers, were based in New York. Chandler eliminated any chance of making a favorable impression by being around these important writers that he so bitterly castigates.

Chandler could win in Kentucky, but you can't be this country boy around these hard-nosed New York writers. And I don't know why Chandler didn't understand that. And you take Dan Parker, Red Smith, these fellows simply didn't understand him. I said in the book that Chandler almost had on him the same curse that Jimmy Carter had—Southerner!

Mr. MARSHALL: Which you'd understand very well.

Mr. BARBER: And I think that you might say, "Well, you were a Southerner who went up there." I had an opportunity. They

hadn't broadcast any baseball games in Brooklyn for five years, so the town is waiting. The Dodgers were theirs. But I came with five years of big league experience and four of World Series experience, and it was plain—if I may say it—it was plain from the time you turned that radio on that I knew my business, and that's all the Brooklyn fans wanted. We are hearing our team. We don't understand his language. He sounds funny. But when they found out that everything I said about a player was correct, I owned that town. In fact, the Democratic party asked me to run for the House of Representatives in Brooklyn. They said, "It's a shoe-in. You won't even have to campaign!" I said, "No, thank you! I'll stay in my own backyard. I'm not getting in that league."

But, as I tried to say in the book, in all fairness, Chandler was almost a tragic case. He was the wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong job. He wouldn't give ground. He wouldn't attempt to get on decent terms with a writer. He wouldn't even answer certain questions. He was remote. To this day, I don't know what went on in that nine-hour meeting in the room with MacPhail. Chandler also took up for the ball players about giving them some of that money from television. And the owners, who had just gotten rid of Landis, were thinking, "Now look, he's giving away our money." And I know, too, that on the other side of giving away the ball players' money—I didn't put it in the book—but he very gleefully says to this day, "I broke the union!" They started a ball player's union in Pittsburgh led by Robert Murphy. And the Dodgers were the visiting team that night and the Pirates were not going to come out of the clubhouse. But Chandler had, I think, it was Rip Sewell. He had his man, his inner man, inside. And he said, "I broke the union." Well, all he did was he defied the union. He didn't break it. He just held it up.

I was there when Chandler first came to New York to be introduced to the New York press and introduced by MacPhail. And Chandler talked about hunting and fishing and the good life in Kentucky, and he had a very broad Southern accent, still has. Mine would never stick, I don't think. But I remember feeling aghast, almost, when he wound up singing, "My Old Kentucky Home"! Granted he had a good voice, and the first place that Lila and I went when we got to New York was the Metropolitan Opera. I like music. I like singing. But here's a man that's standing in the shadow of this stern Commissioner Landis. And in front of those hard-nosed New York writers, who hadn't asked him to sing.

He volunteered it! He was offended at that and said they didn't appreciate country boys in New York. Of course, they didn't appreciate it. They didn't know what sort of a commissioner they had.

Mr. MARSHALL: And they were beginning to wonder.

Mr. BARBER: They did begin to wonder! Let me out of here!

Mr. MARSHALL: Thank you very, very much for the interview. I really appreciate it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>1947: *When All Hell Broke Loose In Baseball* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Chandler sold the advertising rights to the Ford Motor and Gillette companies for \$65,000 according to *The Sporting News*, 8 October 1947, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>Red Barber, "The Turmoil Behind The Baseball Telecast," *New York Times Magazine*, 30 April 1950, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Leo Durocher, *Nice Guys Finish Last* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Mann, *Baseball Confidential* (New York: McKay, 1951).