

## Rube Foster: The Father of Black Baseball

by Scott Sosebee

*The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.*

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When we contemplate the past quite often some things are particularly hard for us to fathom or even understand. When one considers, for example, that women have been eligible to vote for less than a hundred years in the United States it boggles the mind, or that just over a hundred years ago the Wright Brothers first flew a very crude and simple craft when today we are able to fly into outer space. Another thing that makes me shake my head every year at about this time is when I think that until seventy years ago African Americans were banned from playing in the Major Leagues. That sad chapter in our history has been corrected, and while Jackie Robinson is rightfully placed at the front of the pantheon for that achievement, there very well may have never been a Jackie Robinson if there was not first Texan Andrew “Rube” Foster.

Born in Calvert, Texas to an American Methodist Episcopal minister and his wife in 1879, Foster became a baseball star, and as a young man gained the reputation as one of the hardest throwing pitchers in the state—black or white. The fact that he was African American meant that he could not be a member of white teams, so Foster began his professional career in 1897 with the Waco Yellow Jackets, a barn-storming black independent team. He was immediately a star, a player that huge throngs surged to see pitch.

A star needs a big stage, and so Foster left Waco in 1902 to sign with the Chicago Union Giants, another independent all-black team owned by Frank Leland. Perhaps the big city affected the young Texan because he immediately lapsed into a terrible slump, one that became so pronounced that the Union Giants released him, which forced him to sign with a semi-pro team in Wisconsin—a white semi-pro team, the only time he would regularly play against white players. He regained his form and left his team in the summer of 1902 to sign with one of the most prominent of the black teams of the era, the Philadelphia Cuban X-Giants. In Philadelphia he also acquired a nickname when in an exhibition game he beat and out-pitched Philadelphia

Athletics star Rube Waddell. Legendary Athletics manager Connie Mack called Foster “one of the best pitchers in baseball.”

Foster’s playing career continued throughout the early 1900s and 1910s, but more importantly he became an owner in 1910 when he took control of the Union Giants away from Frank Leland. He then formed a partnership with John Schorling, the son-in-law of Chicago White Sox owner Charlie Comiskey, and formed the Chicago American Giants, a team he built into a powerhouse. He also became a very successful entrepreneur and a fairly wealthy man, but his most important role had yet to be played.

His partnership with Schorling no doubt frustrated Foster. He was the principal owner, and his expertise and work kept the team together, but Schorling’s name was on the park where they played and he seemed to receive much of the credit for the Giants success. Foster wanted African Americans to have a league that whites did not control, one where black owners and players could not only have a venue in which to play but could reap the profits. Thus, in 1920, he became the primary organizer of the Negro National League.

The NNL became an unqualified success. It consisted of eight teams: Foster’s Chicago American Giants, the Kansas City Monarchs, Indianapolis ABC’s, Dayton Marcos, Chicago Giants, Detroit Stars, St. Louis Giants, and the Cuban Giants—a team without a home park who became a “traveling team.” Foster’s team dominated in the early years, although by 1923 the Kansas City Monarchs became the league’s best team. White businessmen saw the success of the NNL, and in 1923 formed the Eastern Colored League as a competitor to the NNL. The better-financed Eastern League would eventually lure many of the NNL stars away, but the two leagues did agree to begin holding a Negro World Series in 1924.

Rube Foster would not live to see what would become of his innovation. Foster suffered from mental illness; diagnosis in those days was far from accurate, but he became increasingly delusional and paranoid. He became convinced at one time that he was going to throw out the first pitch at the white World Series, and on another occasion, he barricaded himself in a room convinced that men were coming to kill him. Eventually, his illness became too much for him to bear and he was institutionalized in Kankakee, Illinois. He died in the asylum in 1930, and by that time fully insane. A year later, the league he had formed collapsed, but his idea of forming an all-African American professional league continued until the eventual integration of the Major Leagues ended Negro baseball.

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