



Sir Knight Branch Rickey: The Man Who Changed Baseball the Most ©

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Sir Knight Branch Rickey in his prime as General Manager of the St. Louis Cardinals

Many if not most of the great Masonic baseball players have had their careers profiled on these pages. Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, Rogers Hornsby, and Cy Young are just a few of the diamond heroes who have been chronicled in Knight Templar. The subject of the following sketch was a mediocre player with a .239 lifetime batting average and compiled a losing record in more than a thousand games as a manager (.473). Yet as a general manager and franchise executive, he may well have had more positive influence than any other individual player. Sir Knight Wesley Branch Rickey; through his development of the "farm system," racial integration of the game, advocacy of continental expansion, and a number of lesser innovations; did much to make the sport what it has become today.

Wesley Branch Rickey was born near Little California (later renamed Stockdale) in Pike County, Ohio, on December 20, 1881, the middle of three sons of Frank and Emily Brown Rickey. The Rickets were a struggling farm family who learned the virtues of hard work raising corn sorghum, hogs, and cattle on their hilly acreage. Although Frank's family had been of the Free Will Baptist faith, he gravitated toward Emily's Methodist Protestant church, naming their son for the founder of that denomination. In 1883 the family moved to Duck Run in Scioto County, which later gained a minor fame as the boyhood home of movie cowboy (and Sir Knight) Roy Rogers. In 1892 they made their final move to another small farm at the edge of the village of Lucasville. Since Rickey had two cousins with the first name of Wesley, he stopped using this name at the age of twelve and became known simply as "Branch." By this time he had also met Jane Moulton, the daughter of Chandler Moulton, a local merchant, politician, Mason, and member of Calvary Commandery No. 13 in nearby Portsmouth, Ohio. In 1906 Jane and Branch married, a union that would endure for fifty-nine years and result in six children. The Rickets may not have had much wealth, but they were strong advocates of

education, and Branch's older brother Orla obtained a teaching certificate first, and Branch soon followed him into that profession. Orla also introduced his sibling to baseball when the elder came home from his first teaching job in the spring of 1895. The brothers became dedicated Cincinnati Reds fans, and as Orla (also a Mason) was a fair left-handed pitcher, Branch became a catcher. Branch passed his exam for teaching and taught two years at Turkey Run School, a community some fourteen miles from Lucasville. Before reaching his twentieth birthday, Rickey had completed his teaching experience and entered Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio, in September 1901.

At OWU Branch played football, basketball, and baseball and did well in his studies. In the Summer of 1902, he played baseball for a semipro team and lost his amateur status with the Ohio Wesleyan nine. However, he became the team coach and continued to play other sports. One of the more defining moments in Rickey's life was his observation of the discrimination that his African American first baseman had to endure. It would later play a major role in his own career. After his graduation he began catching for Dallas in the Texas League. Before entering professional ranks, he made a commitment to his mother that he would neither play baseball nor even enter the ballpark on the Sabbath, a promise that he zealously kept for sixty years. When Dallas sold his contract to the Cincinnati Reds without telling Manager Joe Kelly, the latter was infuriated and team owner Garry Herrmann (a Mason) was more understanding, but nonetheless returned Rickey and his contract to Dallas. In the fall, he coached football and taught at Allegheny College. Later the Chicago White Sox purchased Rickey's contract and then traded him to the St. Louis Browns, where he made his major league debut with the Browns on June 16, 1905, going hitless in three trips to the plate. Meanwhile, Branch returned to Allegheny and vowed that the following year would be his last in baseball; his prime interest was in securing money for law school. Engaged to marry Jane on June 1, 1906, he took a few days off from baseball and came home to Lucasville where he took his Entered Apprentice degree in Lucasville Lodge No.465 on May 31, 1906, and married his betrothed the following morning. The honeymoon consisted of rejoining the team on an eastern road trip. As events turned out, Rickey had his best year as a player batting .284 in sixty-one games. He also went back to Allegheny College in Pennsylvania and left the Browns in September prior to the season's end. He decided against leaving baseball, but events the following year would soon bring his playing career to an end. While under contract to the New York Highlanders, he had a miserable year at the plate. His batting average dropped to .182, but even worse his throwing arm went dead, and after thirteen runners stole bases on him in a single game, he knew it was over.



Rickey as a weak-hitting, worse-throwing catcher for the New York Highlanders-1907 Deciding to enter law school, he worked for the YMCA at OWU through the winter of 1907-1908 and also gave temperance lectures throughout Ohio during the summer and into the fall. He also campaigned for William Howard Taft for President and found time to complete his Masonic work, being passed a Fellowcraft on July 9, 1908, and raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason on August 10, 1908. He remained a member of Lucasville Lodge until 1920 when he demitted to a Missouri Lodge having had residence in St. Louis since 1913. Diagnosed with tuberculosis that winter, he spent several months in a sanitarium in the Adirondacks.

In 1909 Branch Rickey entered law school at the University of Michigan and was graduated in 1911. He also coached the Wolverines baseball team in the spring. He and two other Ohio Wesleyan alumni started a law practice, but business was so poor that he returned to Ann Arbor in the spring of 1912 to coach the Michigan nine. In the summer of 1912, the new owner of the St. Louis Browns offered him a job with the organization. By August 1913 he had become the Browns' manager. The St. Louis American League team was not very successful, but Rickey lifted them from seventh to fifth place in 1914. The next year they fell back to sixth but acquired the man who would become their greatest player in George Sisler (who later became a Mason). When Phil Ball became Browns owner in 1916, Rickey was removed as field manager but was retained as general manager. The two apparently did not care for one another personally

{although ironically, both later belonged to the same Blue Lodge). After that season Rickey was hired to become president-general manager of the St. Louis National League team, the Cardinals. Neither team in the River City had been particularly competitive, but in time, the Ohio native would build the Cards into a real powerhouse. World War I intervened, and Rickey spent several months in military service with the rank of major, instructing soldiers in how to cope with the challenges of mustard gas. Back in St. Louis, he took over the field manager's job, but he relinquished the club's presidency to Sam Breadon, a wealthy auto retailer. In 1920 Rickey must have felt sufficiently settled in St. Louis for he demitted from Lucasville Lodge and affiliated with Tuscan Lodge No. 360 on March 15, 1921. Other members of this lodge at one time or another included Phil Ball, owner of the Browns, and two members of the Spink Family of The Sporting News fame.

Branch retained membership there for twenty-three years before transferring again, by demitting on June 20, 1944, and affiliating with Montauk Lodge No. 286 in Brooklyn on October 2, 1946. Not long after departure from the Dodger organization, he demitted from Montauk Lodge on May 16, 1951, affiliating with Bellefield Lodge No. 680 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 9, 1951. He retained his membership in that lodge for the rest of his life.

According to his entries in Who's Who in America in the 1960s, Rickey was identified as a member of the Scottish Rite, Knights Templar, and Shrine, but the location of these memberships is not mentioned; however, the author was able to find the following information: Branch Rickey joined Mount Vernon Chapter No. 23, R.A.M., and Solomon Council No. 79, R. & S.M., both in Portsmouth, Ohio, probably late in 1916. A brochure obtained by Sir Knight Tim Martin, P.C. of Calvary Commandery No. 13 in Portsmouth, suggests that he and four others from Lucasville were slated to receive the Chivalric Orders on December 26 and 29, 1916. However, according to Grand Commandery of Ohio records, he took the Order of Red Cross and Order of Malta on April 23, 1917, and was created a member of the valiant and magnanimous Order of the Temple on April 27, 1917, in Calvary Commandery No. 13, Portsmouth, Ohio. Perhaps he missed the December 1916 dates and made them up the next April. Also, Branch's brother Frank joined the Chapter and Council in 1916-1917. Two persons named Moulton, likely in-laws, were also scheduled to take the Commandery degrees in December 1916. Rickey's membership in Calvary Commandery ceased in July 1933. His further York Rite memberships are unknown at this time. By 1921 Rickey had piloted the Cards to a third place finish and their first real superstar had come of age in the person of Rogers Hornsby, who won the first of six straight batting titles in 1920. During the early twenties, Branch Rickey developed one the greatest innovations yet known to the National Game; this was what became known as the "Farm System." The Cardinals either owned controlling shares or had established working agreements with a number of minor league teams. They held tryout camps all over the country supervised by Rickey's staff of scouts, signed promising players, and optioned them to these minor league teams where their development was closely watched and promoted as they progressed. The more significant "higher" minor league teams over the next twenty or so years included the Rochester Red Wings in the International League, Columbus Red Birds in the American Association, and Houston Buffaloes in the Texas League. But there were numerous others in the "lower" minors. By 1940 the St. Louis farm system included thirty-two clubs owned outright and another eight with which they had working agreements. As Cardinal teams won pennants in 1926, 1928, 1930, 1931, 1934, 1942, 1943, 1944, and 1946, the overwhelming majority of their talent pool came from their farm system. Since this setup produced more good players than the Cardinals could use, they sold or traded the excess to other teams at a handsome profit. Despite critics, other franchises soon began to develop their own farm systems, although never as complex as the Cardinals in the Rickey era and for a few years thereafter. In 1925 Branch Rickey relinquished managing the Cardinals but still remained as General Manager through 1942. Bringing six league championships and three

World Series winners to a franchise that had once been considered a perennial loser, made "The Mahatma," as he was becoming known, one of the game's top executives. An often overlooked characteristic of Cardinal strength in this period was the sizable number of other Masons within the Rickey stable of players, coaches, and minor league managers in this period. They included such figures as Rogers Hornsby, Frank Frisch, Rip Collins, Billy Southworth, Taylor Douthitt, Bill McKechnie, Clyde Sukeforth, Estel Crabtree, Burt Shotton, Les Bell, and Pepper Martin. Yet tension was brewing within the top echelons of St. Louis management. Sam Breadon wanted more control and resented the high (\$75,000) salary that the General Manager commanded.



Sir Knight Rickey as Cardinal Vice President-1925

Rickey left the Cardinals at the end of the 1942 season but soon got an opportunity to build another ball club as Larry McPhail left the Dodger organization to join the war effort and suggested Rickey to become General Manager of the Brooklyn franchise. The Mahatma soon set out to do for Flatbush what he done for the Cardinal organization. He worked to build up a Dodger farm system and generally strengthened the so-called Bums. Rickey's leadership brought two pennants to Ebbets Field, two second place finishes, and three thirds. Only in 1944 could a season be termed a failure. Ironically, the Cardinal franchise, still essentially based on the "house that Rickey built," continued as Brooklyn's chief rival in this period under the field leadership of Billy Southworth and Eddie Dyer. Branch Rickey's main contribution to the game in this era was the racial integration of the long segregated system. Rickey came from antislavery forebears and had long remembered the treatment Charles Thomas had faced as a player for Ohio Wesleyan more than four decades earlier. He knew that it would take a very special person to break the color barrier. The Mahatma found such a person in Jackie Robinson, an all-around athlete capable of keeping his temper under control in the face of adverse racial taunts and jeers. After a year at Montreal in the International League, Robinson was deemed ready and experienced an outstanding year while enduring a wave of poor treatment. Once the barrier was broken, other African Americans had succeeded in the game including such other Rickey discoveries as Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Dan Bankhead, and Joe Black. It took a decade for every team to have an African American on their squad, but Rickey's great experiment became a true American success story. Before he died Jackie Robinson was alleged to have said that Rickey had done more than anyone other than Abraham Lincoln to elevate his race.



Branch, Branch Jr, and Jane Ricky celebrate a birthday

Branch Rickey's Dodger teams in this era were a colorful bunch and among the more remembered by Brooklyn fans. They included such personalities as Duke Snider, Gil Hodges, and Pee Wee Reese, in addition to the aforementioned African American super stars. Carl Erskine and Bobby Bragan rank among the more significant Masonic players of that era, but those on the sidelines contributing to Brooklyn success in those times must take into account such figures as Burt Shotton, Clyde Sukeforth, Jake Pitler, and Branch Rickey, Jr. The latter had been raised in Baldwin Lodge No. 1047 in Baldwin, New York, in 1948 and later affiliated in 1960 with Fox Chapel Lodge No. 784 in Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania, where he remained until his death the next year. Despite his achievements in Brooklyn, a power struggle for control of the franchise had begun to shape up between Rickey and rival stockholder, Walter O'Malley. To make a long story short Rickey lost the battle, but the Dodgers continued to do well largely with the teams that he had developed. Meanwhile Branch was soon hired on November 3, 1950-by an old friend John Galbreath (of University Lodge No. 631 in Columbus, Ohio) as General Manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Bucs were badly in need of rebuilding, and the challenge would be one of his most difficult.

Under Rickey's front office direction, the initial conclusion would be that his five years at the helm were a failure as the Pirates finished seventh once and in the cellar four times in a row. The 1952 version of the Bucs would be remembered as one of the worst in modern history. Yet a closer look reveals that the core of the championship team of 1960, either came up through Rickey's farm system, had been retained and further developed under Rickey, or drafted out of the Dodger organization by him, such as Roberto Clemente and Elroy Face. As in prior times, a number of these persons were Masons (e.g. Fred Haney, Bob Friend, and Dick Groat) as were such front office figures as Tom Johnson and Rickey's successor, Joe Brown.

After 1955 Branch Rickey's Pirate connections were relatively minimal, but, as demonstrated above, much of the later Pirate success virtually had his initials all over it. In 1959 he began to conceive an idea for a third major league-the Continental. While this operation never got off the ground, it influenced the expansion moves of the other two leagues and thus served a significant purpose. In 1960 Rickey moved back to St. Louis and to a secondary position in the Cardinal

organization. Although his main job was to provide advice, it was seldom solicited and even less often followed. As Rickey biographer, Murray Polner, demonstrates, it mostly made two key figures in the front office-Bing Devine and Richard Meyer feel more insecure. But the truth was that "the Mahatma" was beginning to age more rapidly. Branch Jr. died in 1961, and Rickey himself began to fail. During a speech at Columbia, Missouri, on November 13, 1965, he collapsed and soon lapsed into a coma. Death came on December 9, 1965. At his funeral, Jackie Robinson contended that only Abraham Lincoln had done more for African Americans than Rickey. Ultimately, his remains were interred in the Rush Township Cemetery overlooking the Scioto Valley, about three miles from his boyhood home in Lucasville, where Jane (who died in 1970), his parents, his brothers, and three of his children also rest.

In his time Brother Branch Rickey ranked as one of the major figures in both sport and society. In addition to his aforementioned accomplishments, he can be accredited with such innovations as sliding pits, team air travel, batting cages, batting helmets, and promoting knothole gangs.

Masons everywhere should revere him not only for his achievements but also as one who exemplified the highest tenets of our profession: brotherly love, relief and truth.

Note: The major biography of Branch Rickey is Murray Polner's Branch Rickey, (1982). Also important is John C. Chalberg's Rickey & Robinson (2000).

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