



Everything Michigan

Frank Lester uses Negro League Baseball to shine light on black history

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By Susan Harrison Wolffis | Muskegon Chronicle

Larry Lester flunked American history in college.

It's not the career path he'd recommend taking, but it makes a point — one that Lester, now a celebrated author-historian, travels the country to deliver.

"I did not see how (history class) affected me," he says. "I didn't see any use for it."

His father strongly disagreed.

The elder Lester introduced his son to the likes of George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglass, Satchel Paige and other African-Americans who made history — even if they weren't always included in the history books.

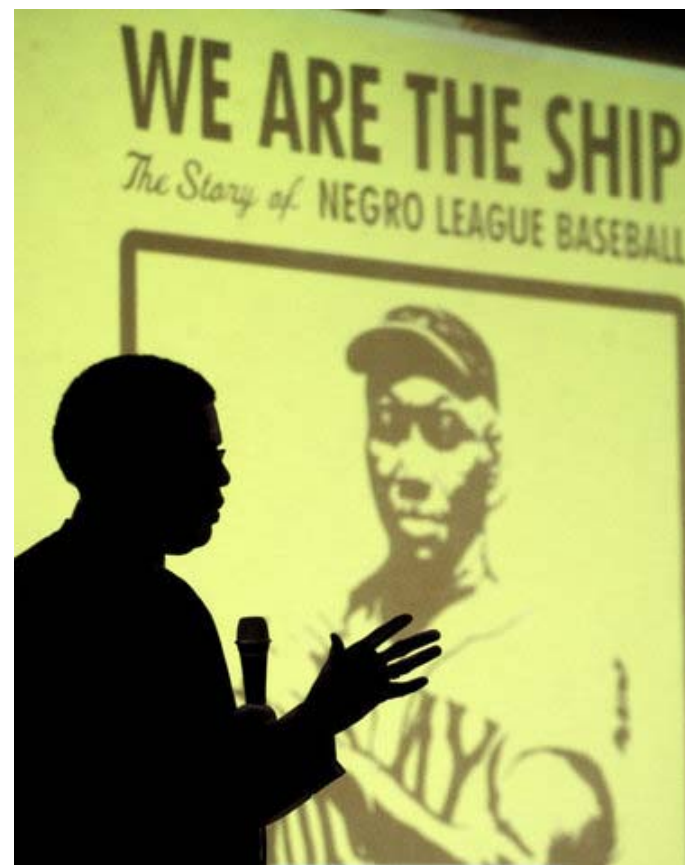
"For whatever reason, they were left out," Lester says. "When I finally read about them, I said: These are people who look like me ... this is my history. This is black history."

Lester, who is one of the founders of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Mo., has been in Muskegon this week, in the closing days of Black History Month held every February, to talk about two of his favorite subjects.

History and baseball.

"This is it," Lester says. "Sports, social justice and history: They all come together."

Lester will be among those speaking on a panel at 4 p.m. today at the Muskegon Museum of Art as part of the ongoing art exhibition, "We Are The Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball." On Thursday, he gave a "standalone" lecture on the leagues at the museum.



Chronicle/Matt Gade

Larry Lester speaks to a group of people attending Lester's special lecture entitled 'The Negro Leagues' on Thursday night at the Muskegon Museum of Art. Lester, one of the founders of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, is here with the exhibit 'We Are The Ship' at the art museum.

He has made it his life's work to tell the stories of black baseball players, gifted professional athletes shut out of whites-only Major League Baseball until 1947 when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier and signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Lester, who is retired from Sprint in Kansas City, has spent more than 35 years researching the Negro Leagues players' statistics, their actions on the field and off, and the impact on their place in history. He has interviewed hundreds of players and their families and written their histories, as individuals and as part of the league. He worked as the research director and treasurer for the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, dedicated to getting the players' records on the record. And yet, he knows it is not the number of home runs or bases stolen that are the real story.

It is the conversation between people — white and black — that inevitably follows his lectures.

"You have to have a dialogue to break down the barriers," Lester says, then adds a favorite lesson of his. "We need to study history to understand who we are."

That, in a sentence, is why Black History Month is important to celebrate, says Doris Rucks of Muskegon, a retired Grand Valley State University professor who has her doctorate in African studies.

"Black History Month gives us the opportunity to find out who we are," she says, "not only as black Americans, but as an entire country."

Rucks, who retired as the coordinator of women's studies at Grand Valley, was in the audience Thursday night when Lester spoke.

"For years, African-Americans were not included in the national curriculum or dialogue," Rucks says. "If a piece of us is missing, then all of us are missing. ... It makes all of us more whole to know all of our history."

IF YOU GO

What: "We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball"

When: Through March 13

Where: Muskegon Museum of Art, 296 W. Webster

Information: Call 231-720--2570 or visit www.muskegonartmuseum.org.

Cost: Special presentations are free.

Negro League Baseball Memorabilia Clinic

When: 1-4 p.m. Saturday

Discuss and consult with Louis Manley Jr. of Detroit, head of the Michigan Chapter of Negro League Players.

Negro League Baseball Panel Discussion

When: 4 p.m. Saturday

Panel features Larry Lester; Melvin Duncan and Eugene Johnson, former Negro League players for the Detroit Stars; Leslie Heaphy, Kent State University professor; Thomas Tuttle, sports writer; and Renee Rasberry, daughter-in-law of the late Ted Rasberry, former owner of the Detroit Stars and Kansas City Monarchs.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

- Black History Month is an annual celebration of achievements by black Americans and a time for recognizing the central role of African Americans in U.S. history. The event was the brainchild of the late Dr. Carter G. Woodson, an African-American historian who founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Woodson proposed Negro History Week as a way to encourage people to learn more about black history. He selected a week in February that included the birthdays of both President Abraham Lincoln and black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. The first Negro History Week was celebrated in 1926. In the early 1970s, the celebration became Black History Week to reflect the changing language used to describe African Americans. In 1976, during the United States' bicentennial celebration, Black History Week was expanded to a full month.

There is so much to be learned from the likes of Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, who was signed by the Cleveland Indians in the American League just 11 weeks after Robinson went into the National League.

“These men integrated society without protests and anger ... in a nonviolent way,” Lester says.

But there were immense struggles for the two pioneer ball players, those who went before them and those who followed in their footsteps.

“The men in the Negro Leagues overcame adversity throughout their professional lives,” Lester says. “We can learn so much from them.”

Lester has been the subject of intense media interest — in a recent front page story in The New York Times and on ESPN last Sunday — because he is working to purchase headstones for the unmarked graves of African-American athletes.

“It’s the right thing to do,” he says.

So many of the athletes played ball during the days of segregation when salaries were low, pensions were nonexistent and most hotels and restaurants were off-limits to people of color. When members of the Negro Leagues couldn’t find a place to stay when they were playing on the road, they’d bunk in an African-American funeral home or ask to stay in the county jail overnight.

They overcame such indignities, Lester says, by “conducting themselves as professionals on the field and off.” The players always wore suits, ties and “stingy brimmed hats ... and had the utmost manners.”

“You know what they say, actions speak louder than words,” he says.

Lester, who started college hating his history class, has spent thousands of hours, reading African-American newspapers on microfilm, collecting anything he could read about the Negro Leagues from 1865-1950. It was “grass roots research,” he says. He shunned traditional history books for the newspapers that recorded current history.

He wanted to know specifics of the ball games — attendance, the starting lineups, the winning pitchers. But it was just as important to him to learn about the social climate of the day, what else was happening in history, what black entertainers were doing, the effect of desegregation in the military.

Because of his research, Lester is convinced baseball would have been integrated earlier if finances hadn’t gotten in the way.



[Enlarge](#)

[Matt Gade | The Muskegon Chronicle](#)

Larry Lester one of the founders of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, talks with Montrell Owens, 13, an eighth grade student at Muskegon Heights Middle School Friday morning, February, 25, 2011. Lester had just finished making a presentation to students at the school and Montrell made it a point to meet Lester before he left. Lester is in town as part of the 'We are the Ship' exhibit featuring Negro League Baseball at the Muskegon Museum of Art. Photo available for sale call 231-725-6368

[Larry Lester Speaking about The Negro Leagues](#) gallery (7 photos)

When the all-white Major League teams were on the road, the Negro League teams rented the ballparks.

"The owners would have lost money if the teams were integrated sooner," he says.

It is just one example of what he has learned, a piece of history set against the backdrop of baseball — America's national pastime.

It is a story for all ages, he says.

On Friday, Lester turned his attention to the youth of the community, visiting Muskegon Heights Middle School at the invitation of Dana Bryant, the school system's superintendent.

"I think a lot of kids have no idea what this group of people (Negro League players) sacrificed," Bryant says. "We need to plant the seed ... the knowledge of what they did."

For Lester, it was a chance to talk about his own school days when he couldn't see any connection between history and life.

"We need to learn from the past so we can celebrate the future," he says. "Man, we can learn so much."



Chronicle/Matt Gade

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