

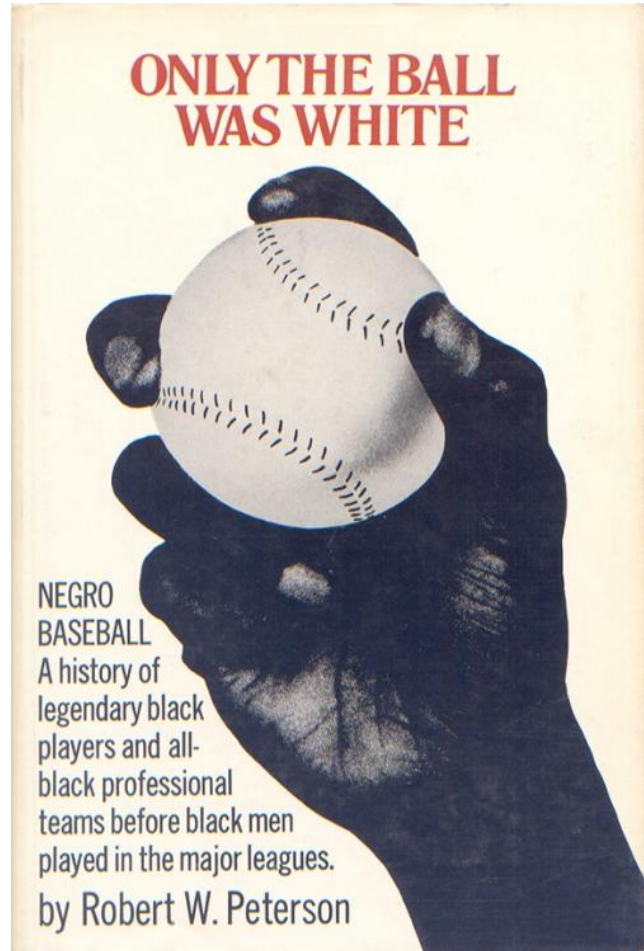
Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of "Only the Ball Was White" by Robert Peterson

The Baseball Book That Changed My Life
By [Larry Lester](#), October 27, 2015
For the *National Pastime Museum*

I have been prompted by the question, "What has been the most influential baseball book in your life?" There have been so many, including Ed Linn's *Veeck as in Wreck*, Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer*, and Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Our Times*. However, these classics will never surpass Robert Peterson's *Only the Ball Was White*, published in May of 1970. The seismic impact of his book shook the baseball world like the archaeological discovery of the Lucy fossil in 1974. Its aftershocks lifted black baseball from the abyss with untold stories and unheard voices.

As a youth, I lived on Brooklyn Avenue, just a few blocks south of Municipal Stadium, home of the mostly white Kansas City Athletics. In my confined universe of living in an all-black neighborhood, attending an all-black church, and going to an all-black school, my playground begged the question, "Where are all the black ballplayers?" To satisfy my curiosity, the nearby griots would talk about the players from Negro League teams, such as the Kansas City Monarchs, Chicago American Giants, and St. Louis Stars.

They would tell me ghostly stories about Cool Papa Bell, who was soooo fast . . . well, you know the story, and the redonkulous home runs hit by a burly catcher named Josh, and the surreptitiousness of a high-leg-kicking, big-footed pitcher named Satchel, who lived nearby. Yeah, right!



And ghosts they were. Gentlemen like Bell, Gibson, and Paige were not in any books I found. During my high school years, mine eyes discovered Satchel Paige's autobiography with David Lipman, *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*. This book was important, not for its insight or in-depth reporting, but for the fact that it was among my first books about the exploits and fantasy tales about my friends Pamela's and Bob's dad. Along with Linn's book, I often read Lipman's X-Files before dozing off to baseball heaven. However, any little leaguer knew enough about the game to know that Paige's book was colorful, uniquely entertaining, and littered with tall tales. Withstanding all of the hyperbole of *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*, it gave birth to my first "boo-yah" before Stuart Scott came along. The truth was out there somewhere!

Now in college, Peterson's *Only the Ball Was White* thankfully changed my perspective and became the unvarnished truth. It was like diving into a genie bottle, meeting the wizard of Oz, and getting a heart, a brain, and enough courage to research this dark chapter. It was truly m-a-g-i-c-a-l. It was one-stop shopping! His book had biographies, anecdotes, commentary, year-by-year standings, some stats, photographs, summaries of the East-West All-Star and World Series games, and an all-time register of every player, official, and owner in the ebony game. What a treasure chest of information—so much that it led, years later, to my company's mantra, "We are drowning in information, but starving for knowledge."



Josh Gibson is tagged out at home during the 1944 East-West All-Star Game at Comiskey Park.

Peterson had been inspired by memories from his boyhood. In his preface, he wrote: “One summer day in 1939 a kid squatted on the bank behind home plate at Russell Field in Warren, Pennsylvania, fielding foul balls (which could be redeemed for a nickel each—no small consideration in those days), and saw Josh Gibson hit the longest home run ever struck in Warren County. It was one of many impressive feats performed by touring black players that excited the wonder and admiration of that foul-ball shagger. This book is the belated fruit of his wonder.”

Only the Ball Was White was not just a book, but a shining beacon of hope that there was much more to the National Pastime than had been told, written, or eyeballed. Robert Peterson was the guardian of that beacon. This guardian fueled my grander ambitions to research beyond my superficial dreams. The book became my *SportsCenter* to analyze unheralded icons like Smokey, Biz, Mule, Turkey, and Bullet Joe. After reading Peterson’s classic, I went from ringside to inside with my fight to get recognition for these forgotten Negro League pioneers. After reading Peterson’s book, I became a devout Methodist. Not in the religious sense, but by becoming more methodical in my research. For as Peterson branded in Part 1 of his book, “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.”



Author Robert W. Peterson, c. 1970

Source: Peterson Family, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)

Peterson’s work changed our mindsets about the somewhat glorious National Pastime. The book was a catalyst for change. We learned that to celebrate the Major Leagues without recognizing the Negro Leagues was like one hand clapping. Peterson spawned a virtual cottage industry of books about black baseball, of which some exceeded his original research. Let’s remember Peterson was the genesis of this new movement. In his memoir *Hardball*, newly elected Commissioner Bowie Kuhn confessed that Peterson’s book served as an impetus to establish a special Hall of Fame committee in February of 1971 to determine the worthiness of these Negro League legends. In this uphill battle, Kuhn “found unpersuasive and unimpressive the argument that the Hall of

Fame would be watered down if men who had not played in the majors were admitted.” His critics cried, “The rules are clear,” and they “need 10 years of major-league service.” The naysayers added, “Where are the statistics to support them?”

Statistical compilation was just unfinished business. Difficult, but not impossible! As Peterson generically noted in his book, “Tracing the course of the organized Negro Leagues is rather like trying to follow a single black strand through a ton of spaghetti. The footing is unfirm and the strand has a tendency to break off in one’s hand and slither back into the amorphous mass.”

Through no fault of their own, the barred black players, however, did play in the same Major League ballparks, on the same diamonds, with the same Wilson WC1500 baseballs, and using Louisville Slugger bats, and they were subjected to the same rules and regulations. Furthermore, in competitive play between the white foul lines, the Negro Leaguers won their fair share against their all-white counterparts in postseason affairs. This truth made their case bulletproof!



Satchel Paige (center) with his wife Lahoma and their son Bob during Paige’s Hall of Fame induction.

A byproduct of Peterson’s book resulted in Leroy “Satchel” Paige becoming the first inductee in 1971, followed by Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard the next year. Subsequently, before the special committee disbanded in 1977, Cool Papa Bell, Judy Johnson, Oscar Charleston, Martin Dihigo, Pop Lloyd, and Monte Irvin were elected. In essence, one man at each position. This all-star nine was hardly representative of the true sample size of worthy black players. There was more work to be done.

Inspired by the limited nine black inductees, I took Peterson's baton and ran to Cool Papa Bell's house in St. Louis for a chat. While in the arch city, Bell suggested I contact Normal "Tweed" Webb, a local baseball historian, who had been a batboy for Rube Foster's Chicago American Giants. Over several visits, Webb tutored me on recordkeeping and interviewing players while strongly urging that I join the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), an organization of like-minded baseball nerds.



The author with Bell at the legend's home on Dickson Avenue (now Cool Papa Bell Avenue) in St. Louis in the mid 1980s.
Source: Larry Lester

Following Peterson's read, and then Webb's directive, I met Dick Clark, chairman of the Negro Leagues Committee of SABR. With Clark's help and encouragement, the committee was able to add more than 800 names to Peterson's original 2,760 register entries. Researching the Negro Leagues became our sanctuary. Toward that goal of a more comprehensive history, Clark and I published *The Negro Leagues Book* in 1990, an encyclopedia of information with team rosters, team histories, rare photographs, biographies, and numerous lists.

Now with this pedigree as an editor, I went from a finger-painting kindergartener to a Picasso advocate. Pablo Picasso once said, “ Give me a museum and I’ll fill it.” And that’s what I did. Classmate Horace Peterson, executive director of the Black Archives of Mid-America, drafted me, Buck O’Neil, and others to start a Negro Leagues Baseball Museum (NLBM). Peterson admittedly knew little about baseball, but he felt a need to fill this historic void, and he tagged me with the responsibility. As research director and treasurer, I developed the NLBM’s business plan, program initiatives, and exhibit designs. We created a licensing program of sports apparel that generated \$1.4 million in royalties over the next four years.

Leaving the NLBM in 1995 to start my own business, I met Bob Peterson in 1998, at the first Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. As keynote speaker, he spoke about the challenges of getting his landmark work published. He also talked about the Negro Leagues as being second only to the black church as a linchpin in the black community. He mentioned that Jackie Robinson’s successes on the diamond did more for race relations than any number of sermons from those days. He added Negro League baseball was not just black history, but American history, and he finalized his speech by encouraging us that resurrecting this history was doing a service to all Americans, not just African-Americans.

One of my proudest moments came in 2000 when I co-chaired a comprehensive study of African-American baseball from the Civil War up through the mid-1950s, aptly called “[Out of the Shadows](#),” **for the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown**. Project findings from this academic study germinated the creation of another special committee in 2006, to honor Negro League veterans. That year we selected a Guinness record 17 new Negro League pioneers, executives, and owners, bringing truth to Part 3 of Peterson’s “And the Walls Came Tumbling Down.” Robert Peterson was a member of that task force, but he died at 80, just before the final tallies were announced.

In his book’s epilogue, Peterson called for giving full honors at Cooperstown to Negro League stars. “So long as the Hall of Fame is without a few of the great stars of Negro baseball,” he wrote, “the notion that it represents the best in baseball is nonsense.” Mission complete!

From the dark roads to the bright lights of Cooperstown, Peterson brought these men out of the shadows. Motivated by Peterson, many of us argued against the sins of dark-skin omissions. They were told to stay down, but today they stand up. This awakening produced a couple hundred new autobiographies, team narratives, and general histories about black baseball. I am truly proud to be a pupil of professor Peterson and to passionately share his inspirational message to any listening ear.