

***“Along the Unpoliced Boundaries of a National Pastime”:
Negro League Baseball and the West Baden Springs Resort
By Carrie Schwier***

During the years directly preceding and following the turn of the century, West Baden became a major training headquarter destination for the sports world. When southern Indiana textile manufacturer and banker Lee Sinclair bought the West Baden Inn in 1888, a subsequent renovation included the addition of a covered three-quarter mile bicycle / pony track, the lower level which offered horseback riders a protected track for a ride and the upper level which was used as a bicycle track by day and a lighted promenade for walkers by night. The real attraction however, was most certainly the electrically lit baseball diamond inside the track which attracted hotel guests who enjoyed gambling upon the outcomes of the games.

Thus while major league teams such as the St. Louis Browns, St. Louis Cardinals, the Boston Red Sox, the Chicago White Sox, the Chicago Cubs, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Philadelphia Phillies, and the Cincinnati Reds made West Baden their spring training headquarters from 1897 through the mid-1920s, the hotel spawned its own team comprised from the hotel black wait staff. Named for the mythological gnome that was said to guard the Wiesbaden spring in Germany, the Sprudels battled their rivals the Plutos from the nearby French Lick resort nearly every day, primarily as a spectator sport and gambling opportunity for the hotel guests. The Sprudels went head to head against top teams such as the Indianapolis ABC's, the St. Louis Giants, and even some of the visiting major league teams such as the Cincinnati Reds and the Pittsburgh Pirates.¹

The following guide is meant to provide a means to delve further into the history of baseball at West Baden and in particular, the black hotel teams the Sprudels and the Plutos which often competed against major baseball leagues during their spring training.

African Americans in Indiana

With the boom of the Springs Valley resorts just before the turn of the century, workers were needed to staff the hotels and both resorts recruited individuals from the black community to fill traditional service positions such as waiters, maids, porters, and bell-boys. A study by Coy Robbins (1994), an expert of African American genealogy in Indiana, titled *Forgotten Hoosiers: African American Heritage in Orange County, Indiana*, meticulously lists census data for African Americans in the region from 1820 to 1910. With a chapter specifically dedicated to the Springs Valley Resorts, Robbins documents that in 1880 there was only one African-American living in French Lick township of Orange County. By the time of the 1900 census there were 124, while the 1910 census again showed a dramatic increase to 325 blacks living in the township, with 101 of those listing their occupation as waiter, followed closely by porter and bell-boy. Two thirds of these individuals were born in the state of Kentucky (p. 114-116).

In general, when doing research on the history of African Americans in Indiana, four reference sources come to mind. Robbin's study focuses specifically upon the community of Orange County, Indiana, while three titles by Emma Lou Thornbrough – a long-time, highly regarded professor at Butler University -- cover the history of the African American community throughout Indiana.

Considered “a pioneer in writing Indiana's African American history,” (Thornbrough and Ruegamer, 2000, p. ix) Thornbrough's *The Negro in Indiana Before 1900: A Study of A Minority*, was originally published in 1957 and was re-published in 1993 by Indiana University Press.

¹ West Baden *Journal*, March 15, 1898, March 5, 1907, March 12, 1907, M (O'Malley, 1958)
Indiana Libraries, Vol. 31, Number 2

Divided into two parts, the first covering 1816 until the close of the Civil War, and the second beginning in 1865 and ending with the turn of the century, the volume covers the population movements, economic and social patterns, educational reform as well as the political atmosphere of the times. Thornbrough outlines in the preface to the First Edition that the white population thought that the “colored population was inherently inferior...Negroes themselves were demonstrating the fallacy of the popular belief by the progress they were making in spite of the obstacles thrown their way” (Thornbrough, 1993, p.xi). Of particular note within this context is her chapter on social organization which discusses the role of the church in the fight for educational and civil rights; fraternal and social societies which provided social support and entertainment for the community, as well as the expansion of the Negro press and early development of the professionalization of black baseball teams such as the Indianapolis Browns and the Black Diamonds which “stimulated race consciousness and pride” (Thornbrough, 1993, p. 383).

Six years later, as part of Indiana’s observance of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, Thornbrough published *Since Emancipation: A Short History of Indiana Negroes, 1863-1963* which served as a “summary, covering the trends and developments which I consider most significant.” She went on to acknowledge that relatively nothing had been published covering the African Americans in Indiana in the twentieth century and she surmised that the publication “will serve as an introduction and will cause others to investigate more thoroughly subjects which I have neglected or treated in a summary manner” (Thornbrough, 1964, vii). Not surprisingly though, it was Thornbrough who continued that investigation and in 1994 nearly all aside for the final chapter of Indiana blacks in the Twentieth Century was complete. Six years following her death the manuscript was finally published, including a final chapter and editor’s introduction written by Lana Ruegamer as outlined by Thornbrough. The publication chronicles the effect of the great migration of blacks to Indiana during World War I and II to work in war industries, the increased segregation of the 1920s, the impact of the national civil rights movement upon Indiana and the turbulence and advancement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Negro Leagues and the History of Baseball in the United States

With roots dating back to the early nineteenth century, early baseball leagues - aside for a short period of time - did not specifically exclude African Americans from participation. As a result, approximately 70 African American men played in the major and minor leagues before 1890 (Heaphy, 2003, p.12). However, as segregation laws tightened across the country nearing the turn of the century, these men were forced from their teams by an unwritten “Gentleman’s Agreement,” which effectively put an end to black and white players playing together professionally. However, as historian Jules Tygiel (2002) observed, “while organized baseball rigidly enforced its ban on black players within the major and minor leagues, opportunities abounded for black athletes to prove themselves against white competition along the unpoliced boundaries of the national pastime” (p.56). As avenues decreased for blacks to play alongside white players, blacks began to create their own opportunities. The first known exhibition between black and white professional teams occurred in 1885 when the Cuban Giants – a team of hotel waiters organized by Frank P. Thompson to entertain the hotel guests – faced off against the New York Metropolitan (Heaphy, 2003, p.15). Over the following decades Thompson organized other similar hotel teams, and the practice spread to other hotels across the country, including the twin resorts of French Lick and West Baden.

Today a wealth of reference materials exist documenting the complex and long history of the Negro leagues, the oldest being Solomon White’s *History of Colored Baseball from 1907*. One of the early pioneers of black baseball, Solomon was both a player, manager, and its first historian chronicling the first twenty years of its development beginning with the establishment of the Cuban Giants in 1885, the deepening racial segregation through the growing strength of the league into the 1906 season. White’s publication, which was reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press to include an additional biographical sketch and primary source documentation, is considered the basis for most of what today is known concerning the early history of the Negro leagues (White, 1995, p. 11).

More recent reference volumes include James Riley's *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues* and the *Society for Baseball Research's The Negro Leagues Book from 1994* which include an alphabetical compendium of biographical and team histories, team rosters, league standings, a Negro Baseball Register and records of players. Other titles such as Mark Ribowsky's *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues: 1884-1955* (1995) and Leslie Heaphy's *The Negro Leagues: 1869-1960* (2003) document the history of the leagues in a more narrative form and as Heaphy outlines in his introduction, "explore the importance of...not only the game of baseball itself and individual athletic achievement, but broader historical and social issues...why the Negro leagues developed, what kept them alive and why they disappeared" in order to "enhance our understanding of sport history, American history, and in particular race relations" (p.6). In rich detail he covers subjects such as the strategic importance of the traveling leagues the role of the press, the role of teams in urban communities, and the move towards integration. Of particular note is Heaphy's 80 page bibliography which is organized topically by both player and subject which in itself serves as an excellent roadmap for research.

Finally, Lawrence Hogan's *Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball* (2006) is drawn from an extensive study commissioned by the National Baseball Hall of Fame which sought to create a "comprehensive study on the history of African Americans in baseball, from 1860-1960." The resulting 2005 report *Out of the Shadows* included an 800 page manuscript, massive bibliography, and database of player statistics.

Baseball in Indiana

When focusing specifically upon the state of Indiana, Paul Debono's (1997) *The Indianapolis ABC's: History of a Premier Team in the Negro Leagues* is really the only scholarly publication of note to cover what Debono refers to as "a premier team in Negro League baseball, with a long, storied history" (p.2). However, despite the fact that the title of the publication is dedicated specifically to the ABC's, Debono weaves together a wealth of primary and secondary source material concerning the history of black baseball in Indiana, using the ABC's as a focus point from which to explore larger political

and societal influences. Beginning with the early foundations of baseball following the end of the Civil War, Debono goes on to outline the origins of the team – which, according to early newspapers coverage, derived from a local saloon team at the beginning of the twentieth century -- early rivalries, the role of the local black press, their glory years, the impact of the First World War through 1940 when the team would take the field for the last time.

Of particular note within the focus of this article, several of Debono's early chapters focus upon two of the ABC's primary rivals from the south, the West Baden Sprudels and the French Lick Plutos, the first of which would merge with the ABC's in 1914. In the chapter "Black Baseball and C.I. Taylor at an Indiana Health Resort," Debono outlines in great detail the early formation of the twin resort teams, their rivalry, and their subsequent rivalry with other regional white and black teams such as the Cincinnati Reds, the Chicago American Giants, and the Indianapolis ABC's.

The Black Press and Professional Baseball

Prior to the founding of the Negro National League in 1920, according to Debono (1997) "black newspapers preformed the duties of a league governing body... The papers were the only record of wins and losses... advocated fairness and sportsmanship...relentlessly demanded that African American players be treated equal with white players..." and "provided most of the vital history of African American professional baseball" (p.44). In his chapter covering the black press of Indianapolis, he outlines the role which the *Indianapolis Ledger* (1879-circa 1890), the *Freeman* (1884-1927), the *Indianapolis World* (1883-1921), the *Ledger* (1913-1925), and the *Indianapolis Recorder* (1895-present) had upon the success of baseball within the state while Brian Carroll's *When to Stop the Cheering? The Black Press, the Black Community, and the Integration of Professional Baseball* places the role of the press on a national scale.

Publications such as the *Freeman* and the *Indianapolis Recorder* focused upon local news and events while also including national and international coverage.

Their sports pages published game summaries and results in articles such as “Even Break in Series: West Baden Sprudels and French Lick Plutos Win Three Each” (1909), “Cincinnati vs. Sprudels” (1912) which reported upon a match-up between the white team of the Cincinnati Reds, or reported that “The Sprudels are playing every day and winning a majority of their games” (“Base Ball,” 1922). Other national newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* kept the public abreast of the teams in articles such as “American Giants Lose: West Baden Sprudels Win Exciting Game, 7 to 5” (1913) and “A.B.C.’s and American Giants Split First Two Games of Crucial Series” (1923).

Other Relevant Historic Newspaper and Manuscript Collections in Archives and Museums

As outlined by Dick Clark and Larry Lester (1994), it was not only the black press which covered these rivalries. Their publication includes a geographical listing of those newspapers which regularly featured these Negro League games including those white papers which “traditionally featured noteworthy coverage on the subject.” For Indianapolis, these newspapers were the *Indianapolis Star* and *Indianapolis News* (p. 371-373).

On an even more local level, the weekly *West Baden Journal* - under the control of Lee Sinclair, owner of the West Baden resort – began publication in March of 1894. With W. J. Prow serving as the editor, the paper primarily served as the publicity arm for the hotel and thus the publication serves as an excellent source, as it documented the daily activities of the resort including regular coverage of visiting major league teams using the resort grounds for spring training.

While many of the previously discussed secondary source publications only briefly mention the Sprudels of the West Baden or the French Lick Plutos, they each serve to place the teams within a wide historical context with the State of Indiana and the nation as a whole. Other primary source material such as newspapers from the era as well as some small manuscript collections serve to provide the details for that context.

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