

**Teacher Guide**  
**Primary Source Set**  
**Baseball: Across a Divided Society**



[\[Live Oak Polka\]](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200033411/default.html)

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The decades between the close of the Civil War and the beginning of World War II were a time of profound social turmoil in the United States. While baseball as a sport was becoming tremendously popular around the still-young nation, Americans experienced the sport in various ways reflecting their social and ethnic backgrounds.

### **Baseball and the Urban Classes**

Baseball appealed to Americans of drastically different economic positions. While baseball had been known as a “gentleman’s game” in the mid-nineteenth century, its increasing popularity pulled in men and women of the working world who claimed the game as their own. In factory towns and cities across the country, workers found leisure in a sport that was likely much less physically demanding than their own jobs. By 1900, baseball became a popular sport for urban youth, played in improvised neighborhood fields called sandlots. Other young people played a variation of baseball called “stickball” in local streets among crowded tenements, the name

derived from the use of less sophisticated equipment. Fans of modest means sometimes saw games by climbing on a pole with a view of the field.

On the other hand, affluent Americans were better able to afford seats at the field or stadium - seats much closer to the action or in luxurious private boxes. With the invention of the automobile, the genteel family could drive to a professional baseball game dressed in their best clothing for the occasion. As professional baseball expanded into the twentieth century, the baseball teams themselves became an investment. This laid the foundation for modern baseball with the creation of large stadiums in major urban areas.

## **Baseball in the American Heartland**

Baseball remained popular with the small town and rural populations in which baseball had taken root during the nineteenth century. Small family farms and plots were a much more ideal place to play baseball or a simple game of catch than the urban sandlots. However, the social and economic disasters of the Dust Bowl during the 1930s and early 1940s displaced rural families – sometimes derisively called “Okies” and “Arkies” because of their origins in states such as Oklahoma and Arkansas. After years as agricultural migrants in states such as California and Arizona, they were resettled into migrant camps by the Farm Security Administration. The FSA was created in 1937 to provide assistance to the rural poor and agricultural workers, and the camps were established to reorganize the migrants into stable communities. Some FSA camps held baseball games during “field days” where migrant families could pursue the pastime.

## **Minorities in Baseball**

In African American communities, the development of baseball as a popular sport confirmed the segregationist practices that were spreading throughout various states.

Segregation began in earnest by the post-Civil War era in 1868, when the amateur National Association of Baseball Players barred integrated teams. The late nineteenth century saw black players gradually excluded from organized baseball leagues, and the first all-black baseball league was founded in 1920.

Many early baseball clubs that attempted to hire black players risked facing public scorn and scrutiny from their leagues. Though baseball at the time reflected a climate of segregation, fans within the black community watched with enjoyment as their favorite players competed. Independent clubs with all-black rosters, such as the Cuban Giants, formed in 1885, competed and won against many clubs including some with all-white rosters.

Until Jackie Robinson began to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, black players had few opportunities to play in any integrated clubs and even fewer to play in major league teams.

The history of Native Americans in baseball points to the social divisions and issues that existed in American society during baseball’s dramatic expansion as the national pastime, though Native American participation in baseball has been comparatively less extensive than that of African Americans. Many Native Americans encountered baseball through “Indian schools,” which largely separated Native Americans from their communities in order to teach them to adopt the habits and beliefs of mainstream American society. Louis Sockalexis, of the Penobscot Nation, was the first Native American to compete in the major leagues beginning in 1897 with the Cleveland Spiders. He faced treatment similar to that which Jackie Robinson would encounter 50 years later. He was subject to insults and racial slurs, and promoters portrayed him in stereotypical ways.

A number of Hispanic players born outside of the United States played on teams in the States and left their mark on the sport. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of

these players were born in Cuba. Baseball's popularity also spread throughout Cuba through cultural contacts with American sailors and Cubans who studied and lived in the United States. When Cuba was still a Spanish colony, a ban on the sport had the effect of popularizing it among the many Cubans who resented Spanish rule. Armando Marsans became the first Cuban-born player to play for the major leagues on July 4, 1911, for the Cincinnati Reds. Cuban-born players encountered fewer obstacles than players of other ethnicities, and African American players such as those of the New York-based Cuban Giants passed themselves off as Cubans in order to avoid racial barriers.

## Suggestions for teachers

Consider the ways in which baseball has had an effect on the following areas:

- Advertisement
- Education: school teams
- Entertainment/ recreation
- Ethnic diversity/ International appeal

Evaluate the social classes and groups represented in this set of items.

What is the subject of the image? Why was the image created? Who was the audience for the photo? Why are there so many team shots and fewer action photos?

Create a timeline: research the items, and discuss what was happening in history at significant points.

What is the role of play and leisure? What are the differences between fans who watch a sport vs. a participant?

Consider the interdisciplinary nature of baseball and research one aspect.

- History (civil rights, baseball timeline, strikes)
- Music (baseball songs, music performed at games)
- Uniforms and equipment (Compare equipment and uniforms in the images to that of players today)

## Additional Resources

[American Treasures – The Mighty Casey \(Exhibition\)](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri090.html)

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri090.html>

[Baseball \(Themed Resources for Teachers\)](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/community/cc_baseball.php)

[http://memory.loc.gov/learn/community/cc\\_baseball.php](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/community/cc_baseball.php)

[Baseball and Jackie Robinson \(American Memory collection\)](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/robinson/)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/robinson/>

[Baseball Cards 1887-1914 \(American Memory collection\)](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bbhtml/bbhome.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bbhtml/bbhome.html>

[Baseball Sheet Music \(Performing Arts Encyclopedia\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/search?query=memberOf:baseball&view=thumbnail&sort=titlesort&label=Baseball%20Sheet%20Music)

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/search?query=memberOf:baseball&view=thumbnail&sort=titlesort&label=Baseball%20Sheet%20Music>

[Early Baseball Card \(Exhibition\)](#)

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri021.html>

[Grand Baseball Match \(Exhibition\)](#)

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri073.html>

[Jackie Steals Home \(Lesson Plan\)](#)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/robinson/intro.html>

[Pictorial Americana – Baseball \(Prints and Photographs\)](#)

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/picamer/paSpbase.html>

[Rounding the Bases \(Lesson Plan\)](#)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/00/base/index.html>

[Spalding Base Ball Guides, 1889-1939 \(American Memory collection\)](#)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/spalding/>

## Citations: Baseball: Across a Divided Society



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"Georgia Caine and Anshutz Sisters Going to Baseball Game." Photograph. July 14, 1909. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.04056>



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"Amateur Championship Game, Telling's Strollers vs. Hanna's Cleaners...Attendance 100,000." Photograph. Cleveland: Miller Studio, September 20, 1914. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pan.6a29473>



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