

**Transcript of Buck O'Neil speech at SABR 26 convention
June 26, 1996, Kansas City, Missouri**

Transcribed by Lucinda Baker (2018)

Note: There are many instances of clapping and laughing during the recording. I have only noted a small number of these instances. The only voice on the recording is Buck O'Neil's.)

Buck O'Neil:

It doesn't get any better than this.

In the past, grappling, groping, never last. In my body, in my heart, and in my mind, but now on an old man's tongue, and so my song has not been sung. But now with the help of SABR, they're singing the song of the Negro League baseball player. Thank you, SABR. Thank you very much.

(clapping)

I've done a lot of things that I liked doing. Yes. I hit the home run. Didn't hit it often enough. I hit the grand slam home run. I hit for the cycle. Yes. I stole home base to win a ball game. I done a lot of things I liked doing.

I traveled across this country with this man, Bobby Feller. And to tell you the truth, the ... some of the Major League ballplayers that played with Bobby Feller, some of them made more money on that tour than they made *all* season. And you know, the Negro League Ball Players made more money than they made *all* season with this man right here.

Oh but I've done a lot of things ... a life. I shook hands with our dear president, President Truman. I shook hands last year with President Clinton and I hugged Hillary.

(clapping and laughing)

So, I've done a lot of things that I liked doing. But I'll tell you what. I'd rather be right here, right now, talking to this SABR group than any place I've ever been. Yes. I enjoy this, I relish this because you've done so much for me and the Negro League players. With your stats, we're able to get more Negro League ball players in the Hall of Fame. And we're going to get them there. We're going to get Smokey Joe Williams there. Yeah. We're going to get Smokey Joe Williams there. We're going to get these great baseball players there. We're going to get all these ball players there that should be there. We're going to get them in the Hall of Fame.

And, I'll tell you what ... God has been so good to me. Yeah. I've got still my five senses. Yeah. I'm 84 years old. Got all my organs. Some of them still work. *(clapping)* Yeah, now you guess the one that's not working.

But anyway, I want to tell you about the Negro League. It was formed right here in Kansas City. When you go down to the Museum, you're going to be right a block from the *(inaudible)* YMCA

where Rube Foster, J. L. Wilkerson, some other owners of the Negro League Teams ... they formed the Negro National League in 1920. Right here.

And I'll tell you what, I don't want you to believe that the Negro League was anything like (*inaudible*). Nuh, uh. I don't want you to believe that the Negro League was anything like the latest RPO program. No! Wasn't like that. Let me tell you something about that Negro Leagues. With me, coming from the Carrabelle fields in Florida to play with the great Kansas City Monarchs was just like a white kid going from the textile mill in Georgia, South Carolina or the cotton fields in Alabama to play with the New York Yankees! This was tops for me! And I really really enjoyed it ... great Kansas City living! Kansas City was wide-open and here I come to Kansas City. You should have seen me. I had two brand new suits. Looking good, I thought! (*laughter*) But when I walked on Eighteen Street and Vine, they wasn't wearing the kind of suits I was wearing. (*laughter*) So I went to the pawn broker Hearst. I said "Mr. Hearst, will you give me — take my two suits and give me one suit like these boys are wearing?" He gave me the zoot suit. And, and.. I was strolling up 18th Street and Vine, swinging that cane. And I ... I had arrived.

Yeah, this was the Negro League. At 11 o'clock, every Sunday morning, in the black world, that's church time. Sunday morning service. When the Monarchs came in town, the service was 10 o'clock so they could get to the ball game. And they came, they came in droves. They marched from 18th and Vine to 22nd and Brooklyn to see Newt Allen, Newt Joseph, see the great baseball players. The Monte Irvins. Yeah. The Elston Howards. They would come to see these great baseball players.

Actually, the league was actually something. It was outstanding, because I'll ... I'll tell you what. We put a lot of people in the ballpark. And I think one of the reasons that kept us out of the major leagues for so long ... we played at Yankee Stadium. We got 30-45,000 people at Yankee Stadium. Over in Brooklyn, on that same Sunday, they'd maybe have 20,000 [for a Dodgers game at Ebbets Field]. Of that 35,000 we had, 99 and nine-tenths percent black. Mr. Ripley, I mean Mr. [Branch] Rickey, the astute business man that he was, he saw all of this. This was a brand-new clientele. And he wanted some of that cause he was in competition in New York with the great New York Yankees and the Giants.

So, this is one of the reasons Jackie Robinson and, when you say Jackie Robinson to me, the hair comes up on the back of my neck because actually when Rickey signed Jackie to that contract, it changed a whole lot of things that this country had needed changing. Yeah, when he signed that guy to that contract, hey, when he signed him, that was before Brown versus [Board of] Topeka — that was the separate but equal thing in the school system. That changed ... that's when it started changing. Yeah! Martin Luther King was a sophomore at Morehouse when Jackie signed that contract so it was a great thing for this country. And a lot of people would say and they want me to say that Jackie wasn't the right man, it should have been Satchel [Paige], it should have been Josh [Gibson] ... and a lot of people are saying this.

He picked the right man. He picked the right. Let me tell you something that man did. What he did [for] us ... We had been going to a filling station in Oklahoma for 20 years. We never used the restroom because a sign on the door said "Whites Only." We got to the door and the man

came out, he put the hose in the tank. He said, “uh ... boys, I really enjoyed you last night, you played a great baseball game and, uh, a whole lot of people came to see you. It was wonderful.” Jackie gets off the bus and he started to walk towards the restroom. And that guy says “Hey, boy, where you going?” Jackie said “Well, I’m going to the restroom.” He said “Boy, you know you can’t go to that restroom.” Jackie said “Take the hose out of the tank.” (*laughter*) The man looked around and he thought a little, see. Cause we got a 50-gallon tank on this side and we got a 50-gallon tank on that side (*more laughter*). He’s not going to sell a hundred gallon of gas to one customer until we came again! (*more laughter*) You know what he said? “You boys can go to the restroom ... but don’t stay long.” (*laughter*) That was Jackie. Jackie ... we had become accustomed to the policy. Yeah. So we had ... we would do these things but, from that day on, the Kansas City Monarchs never got gas at a station where they couldn’t go to the restroom. We never played ball in a town that they didn’t have a hotel for us to stay in. We never played ball in a town that didn’t have a restaurant for us to play in ... It was this way. Jackie! Jackie started us ... He told us, “What are you doing with this? ... You’re spending your money. And a lot of people say, the time come up and somebody said “Nigger.” But I always combat that with “You call me whatever you want to call me but you know what I am? I am an American. And don’t you forget it. I just happen to be a black man but I’m an American just like you.” And you ... and I demand, I demand all of the things an American should have. Yes. And there’s always been more good people than bad. Yeah. But the only thing I hold against your fathers or your grandfathers ... They let the bad do these things. They let. They turned their heads and let the bad do it. They ... I, I can handle it ... the bigotry because I love the man, I don’t love the things they would do. I don’t like the things the Klan would do. No! I don’t like the things the Klan would do but I can’t hate a man. That’s one of God’s creatures, so how could I hate him? No, I don’t. I love him! I love him.

I made a friend with a man from Louisiana named Scotty in Louisiana and we were over at a clinic at Southern University ... that Louisiana Southern University, a black university, the biggest black university in this country. And, we’re, uh, I’m hitting fly balls to two outfielders in right field. One was black and one was white. We had a young scout, this was his first year, a white scout. He’s from Mississippi. And, uh, he was feeding me the ball. He’s giving me the ball for hitting. And he’d catch them when they come in. So this is what he was doing. So I’ve got these balls out there ... ten or twelve balls for hitting and playing catch. And he said, “You know what Buck ... that nigger looked pretty good.” I said, “Which one?” (*laughing*) And so, three years later, three years later, I’m in Mississippi. He and his wife asked me over to his house for dinner. And, well, we’d been friends. And, uh, he had a son. His son was about ten years old. And we were eating dinner. And the scout says, “Hey Buck, you remember those two kids we worked out in, uh, at Southern University. What’s up with them?” And I said, “I hired the nigger.” And his son said, “which one?” (*laughter*) And the nigger happened to have been Lou Brock. Yeah. Actually, but I made a plan, I could have left him in the dark and not been friendly with him.

But no! That’s not, that’s not my way. That wasn’t the Monarch way! No! That wasn’t the Monarch way! Let me tell you about the Monarch ... the Kansas City Monarchs. When a kid would come here, he would come from Arkansas, somewhere, from some cotton field in overhauls. We would send him down to *Ma's(?)* Tailors down on 18th Street. Let him buy two

suits of clothes. He bought them on time. When he'd come back, on payday, he'd put something down on the suits. That's the Kansas City Monarchs. And, another thing. We had a kid came out of Louisiana, the cotton fields. And had an excellent mind. A good ballplayer. And he'd always come downstairs and he would buy the paper. He would meet everybody downstairs and he would say "Hey, come on Pop! Come on! Let's read about what happened in the Major Leagues!" And I'd say "Ok!" And I would read the paper and he would get on the bus and he would read that paper back of the bus and he would repeat verbatim what I had read in that paper! So one morning we had, he had that paper back there like he was reading it and the paper was bottom-side up! I didn't say nothing and after we got to the city, I say "You can't read?" And he say "Noooo." But he said, "But I sure wish I could." I said "Well, we will show you." I got a primer and Henry Smith and I every night, we would teach that boy, we taught that boy to learn how to read. Then after the baseball season, after the baseball season, he went to school. He went to school and actually finally got his high school diploma! That was the Kansas City Monarchs.

Here in Kansas City, the people always telling me, "Now, hold on Buck, you're too soon, you came too soon." That's why we wrote the book (*I Was Born Right on Time*.) I was right on time. I didn't come too soon. (*clapping*) Segregation, segregation was a horrible thing. Segregation was a horrible thing, but I'll tell you what. [In] baseball, we did something about it. Yeah! We started changing the things in this country that should have been trained, changed but we're here.

I'll tell you what I could do. I stayed at the Street's Hotel, 18th and Vine. The Street's Hotel wasn't as elaborate as the Muehlebach Hotel where you lived, but the bed was clean. Yeah. The food was good. The food might have been better because they were the best cooks in the world. They were black. And I could come downstairs. I could come downstairs on Sunday morning and sitting over there in the corner [was] Duke Ellington. "Hey, Buck! How ya doing?" Over here could be Count Basie. Sitting at the table with him could have been Sarah Vaughan. "Hi Buck! How ya doing?" And, I'd say "How's Sarah?" This was Kansas City! I was making one hundred dollars a month. Got a dollar a day for meal money. So I glory when one of these kids get five million dollars. Yes! (*laughter*) But let me tell you! That was during the Depression.

Having that dollar a day [for] meal money, I could go down to the Rose Room which was in the Street's Hotel, have ham and eggs, yes, a cup of coffee for 25 cents. I only ate two meals a day. For dinner, I could have a Kansas City Strip, a baked potato, some beans, and a dessert for 35 cents. Now, I know all you people quit smoking, just like I did, but I smoked Camel cigarettes. I got a pack of Camel cigarettes for 15 cents. Yeah. The matinee. Go to the show at the gym right up the street from me. Yeah. Go to the hotel and down the street was the Lincoln Theater. I could go to the matinee for 10 cents where played. Yeah. Heard all these names and off of that dollar and I'd still have 15 cents to play with. (*laughter*). And that hundred dollars a month. I took \$50 a month and sent it to Luella. That was my mother. Yeah.

This was just that time, that time when the money wasn't there but, uh, the money is there now and the ballplayers are getting it. And they always tell me that, well, you, the ballplayers aren't as good now as they were when you played. Well, I'll tell you what. The athlete today is better than any athlete ever been because he's in better shape. But the thing about it is, it's hard to see another Bobby Feller. The reason it's so hard to see these guys or Koufax because, in that day,

the best athletes in the world played baseball. Yeah. Because football, basketball was more or less a college game. And to make a living, a good living was to paying. So what we had, we had the greatest white athletes in the world playing baseball. The greatest black athletes in the world playing Negro League baseball. Yeah. And I don't know if some of the owners want to see this kid pitch. They told me, Frank Duncan told me, uh, if he throws you a fastball right here, take it, because it's going to be jumping off your bat. *(laughter)* You're right! That fastball! But what Frank didn't tell me, that damn curveball he had! Whew!! He had a great curveball! All of these things! But you learn these things. Yeah!

I'm not going to keep you here all day but I could talk to you all night about this great game of baseball but I want to put this on your mind. I will not let no commissioner. I will not let no president of any baseball league. I will not let any owner of a baseball league. I will not let any head of any union spoil baseball for me! And I want you to do the same! Come to the ballpark! This is OUR sport! Baseball! Come out! I want your kids, your grandkids to play baseball! Play baseball! It's a great, great sport! So, don't let anybody spoil it! I saw but I'm over it now! Black Sox Scandal! Yeah! Lot of people, lot of people left the ballpark and that's how baseball gets tainted. And then here comes this broad-shouldered, skinny-legged guy with the prettiest swing I ever saw hit the ball out o' the ballpark! That was Babe Ruth. He brought baseball back. The people started loving baseball again. Then Bobby Feller went to war. Ted Williams went to war. Yes. [Joe] DiMaggio went to war. The great baseball players went to war so that happened. But they didn't let it spoil baseball because they came back. They came back. I didn't let that spoil baseball because they came back, they came back.

So this is my game. I made this my living here for sixty-five years, man, and baseball can't define me! I'm not going to make it foul me! I love baseball! Baseball is mine, yeah. That's why I wrote the book. I wanted to tell you the story about Bobby Feller. I wanted to tell you the story about Henry Mason. I wanted to tell you the story about Slick Surratt. Jackie Robinson. I want you to know about these great athletes. They wanted on that baseball field. All Monarchs made great citizens! Yeah!

So don't go around feeling sorry for me or the guys that played in the Negro Leagues. A writer told me, I eulogized Satchel Paige and he said, "Uh, Buck! Isn't it a shame that Satchel Paige didn't get a chance to pitch against the greatest ball players in the world? When he was in this prime?" I said, "Listen! Whoever said he wasn't playing against the greatest ballplayers in the world?" Yeah. *(lots of clapping)* Now, buy that book before you go on out of here! *(laughter)* I asked Ella, "Are you going to sell my book when you're downtown?" And she'd say, "Yes, I need a new dress." But I want you to buy the book. But as I said, I could talk all day but I'm not going to. I told you all before I was 84 ... and I need to go to the bathroom. *(a whole lot of clapping)*