

**Transcript of Buck O'Neil interview
August 22, 2000**

*Interviewed by Fay Vincent
Transcribed by Lucinda Baker (2018)*

Part 1

Fay Vincent: Buck, thank you for being here with us. I think what we'd like to do is start at the beginning. Could you tell us your first memory of baseball? When did you hear about baseball? What's your earliest memory of playing ball?

Buck O'Neil: My father was a baseball player. My father was a sawmiller and all the sawmill towns were, you know and all the sawmill towns, they had a baseball team and my father was on that team. And, I was the bat boy, I'd go around with them. I always had good hands. I could catch the ball, even when I was this high. And, uh, the men would throw me the ball and I'd catch the ball and ...oh, I was a ham, you know. And they loved it. They'd throw me tenners and nickels and things like that. That's when, you know, I become attached to baseball. But, uh, good baseball...see I seen good baseball all my life, Mr. Commissioner. I saw, uh..oh, the *Giants(?)* trained in Sarasota, Florida. Up north of me 50 miles, in Tampa, the New York Yankees. That was Miller Huggins, the New York Yankees. South of me was Connie Mack and the Philadelphia Athletics. So, I'd seen great baseball all my life. My uncle's from, uh, he lived in New York. He was a railroad man. He came to spend a couple of weeks with us one summer. And, uh, I'm telling him about the great baseball players I've ever seen, the greatest baseball players in the world. He said "John?." I said "yes, sir." He said "How do you know they're the greatest baseball players in the world?." I said "Well, they're in the Major League!" He said "You know what. I'm coming back this fall and I'm going to take you and your father down to West Palm Beach. I want you to see some other baseball players." I said "Yes sir." Appeasing an old man, but I knew I'd seen the best baseball players in the world. I'd seen Ruth, I'd seen Cobb, I'd seen Walter Johnson. You know. Anyway, he came that fall ...took us down to West Palm Beach. And over at Palm Beach at the Royal Poinciana Hotel, Rube Foster and the Chicago American Giants. They represented that hotel, played twice a week, Thursdays and Sundays. And over at that place was another hotel, they played another hotel, the Legends on Sundays. And over at another hotel, another big tourist hotel was C.I. Taylor and the Indianapolis ABC's. And, uh, so, before going to, uh, going to uh that...the Tampa Tribune was the great paper and we could look at the Sports Section there and the guy, kid, would come by my house and we would spread the paper out in the back yard and we would talk about what happened in the Major Leagues. And, I would probably emulate Babe Ruth. Another kid ..he would emulate Ty Cobb. Another kid would go to Walter Johnson. That's what we did! Now going to Palm Beach, over at the Royal Poinciana, that's Rube Foster. Rube Foster had eight guys on that ball club could steal 30, 40, 50 bases. Who could hit the 350 or better. It was the type of ball I've never seen before because it was quick. See Major League Baseball was to me was this! You could go

get some popcorn or soda or whatever you want until Ruth came up or some of the big hitters or some of the big stars. But with this, nah ah. You couldn't leave because you might miss something you never seen before. Cause these guys, man, might steal second, steal third, steal home, if you wasn't smart and it was that kind of baseball. So when I got back to, uh, to Sarasota, my uncle subscribed to the Amsterdam News, that was in New York City. And my father subscribed to the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Independent. So, now, we don't get the paper, these are weeklies, now we don't get the paper until around Tuesday. But Tuesday evening, everybody would come to my house and we'd spread these papers out in the yard. Now. The guy would be Rube Foster, another guy would be C.I. Taylor. Another guy would be Boojum Wilson. (Another guy would be oh..oh..Canon Ball Dick Ready. Oh. Because it gave me a hope that I'd never had before. Because all the guys I'd seen making a living playing baseball, they were white. So now, this is a chance for me to make my living playing baseball. So, that's it.

FV: From that moment on, you knew you were going to be a baseball player.

BO: Yeah, yeah! I did. I wanted to play, I wanted to play ball! I wanted to make my living playing baseball.

FV: Buck, thinking about this aimed at people fifty or more years from now, can you tell us a little bit more. What life was like growing up in the, uh, segregated South. Obviously, you had a relative who had been a slave; you had some people who had experienced some of the real horror of black history. Tell us a little bit about that.

BO: It was just so unfair. You understand what I mean. It was just so unfair.

FV: Yeah.

BO: See, my people had been here since the beginning. You know. And here's a man could come from Europe. Yeah, he could come from Europe, be here two days, and, it was everything was alright with him. But, with me, as long as I'd been here, we built this country, my people did.

FV: Uh, huh.

BO: And it was just so unfair of the treatment that we had to go un...that we had to go, go, to, to suffer these indignities. Yeah, just like you had a different drinking fountain. At the railroad station, you had to sit in a different place, I couldn't sit where I wanted on the train. It was just so, just so humiliating really for me to have to do that. But one thing about it, for me, I don't think it was as bad to me as when I did go east. See I knew where to go in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi. See in the North, I could walk into a restaurant but they wouldn't serve me. You know, so many things happened that decade, that actually hurt me more than the South.

FV: Talk about the school system and your experience in Sarasota when there was no high school.

BO: Well, they uh, a lot of people actually said to me "Now I know you hated it because you couldn't play major league baseball." I'd say "No, no, no. If I was going to hate, it would be actually that I couldn't attend Sarasota High School. I couldn't have matriculate to the University of Florida." That was because, you know, I played some of the best baseball we

played in this country. So that didn't hurt me as bad as the education part because, because I'm in Sarasota 1924 and they're building a brand new high school, Sarasota High School. I'm running around, I'm going to Sarasota High School. My grandmother says, "Sit down son." I said "Yes, ma'am." She said "You aren't going to Sarasota High School." I said "Why Grandma?" She said, "Sarasota High School is for white kids." I cried. She said, "Don't cry because, one day, all kids will be able to attend Sarasota High School." I'm going to tell you what. Three years ago, Sarasota High School gave me an honorary diploma. And what they did was they invited every kid at Sarasota College to my graduation. And, they had so many kids they had to move it out of the auditorium. They moved it in the football field. And when I walked out there, the kids were singing "Buck, we're glad you're home. Buck, we're glad you're home." And, it made me feel good all over. Because the kids that were singing to me were the great-great grandchildren of the people who wouldn't let me attend Sarasota High School. For only one reason—this beautiful tan that I boast of. That was the only reason. And, uh, and uh. And I said a few little words "Now, this is Martin's dream." Because the children that was singing to me were white children, black children, Native American children, just like Grandma said. All children, now, can attend Sarasota High School.

FV: Now, Buck, when you were young, what led you to, what did you come to believe things would change whether here in society or in baseball? Did you believe that as a young kid, did you have hope that things would change?

BO: Of course. Of course. I always did believe. See, in 1920, when Rube organized the Negro National League, what he was thinking is he would organize the black baseball players. The National League would take a team and the American League would take a team. That was his thinking in 1920 and we always hoped, and lived in that hope, is that it would happen one day.

FV: Growing up in Sarasota, going back to the social elements, the future generations might not be able to comprehend how you withstood the kinds of pressures and unfairness of it all. Could you talk about whatever role faith might have played in your being able to cope as well as family?

BO: Well, one thing I always did believe and I was from a Christian family, is we just always believed it was going to change one day, these things would change and we believed it in a way that was hard to deny. Actually because talk about hate! We should have been the one doing the hating but we didn't. No. We didn't. We didn't. We didn't hate. They always tell me "But, I know you hate what people have done to your people, what people have done to you." I tell them "Well, I never learned to hate." I hate cancer. Cancer killed my mother and my wife died two and a half years ago from cancer. I hate cancer. I hate aids. A friend of mine, 35 years old, died of aids three months ago. I hate aids. I hate what the Klan would do, I hate what the skinheads would do. I hate what a crooked politician would do but I can't hate a human being. I, uh, I learned long ago that you don't actually, you don't see things for different things because, uh, my personal revenge would be to give you these hands that were so mistreated but they never took away the tenderness. But, if you know me, you got to love me because I love you.

FV: Buck, thinking about the restaurants, people will say "Why didn't you just go into those restaurants and why did you sit where you were told to sit"? Why didn't you do what future

generations did. I think it was because they don't understand what the law was in the South. Just speak to that.

BO: It was against the law. I would have been arrested. My father would have been arrested had he gone into the restaurant, had he took the wrong seat on the train. Again, it was just, it was a, this was the law! And, it was so, so, just like I said. It was so degrading. And, if I worked for you, my grandmother, my mother would put arrangements, this was people, this was the circus people, when they got ready to go to New York. They would go along with them and they'd have to ride on a different car. And listen to this, I'm feeding them everything, you know what I mean, and I don't care what you think of me. I'm doing all of this for you and when I get ready to leave, I don't care what you think of me, I've got to join a different part of this. You just segregated me and you wanted me to feel insecure. Now, back in baseball, why we won the majority of those ballgames, Commissioner, it wasn't because we were better than the major leaguers because they were picking the best to play against us but, actually, we wanted to prove to the world that we, they weren't superior because they were white and we weren't inferior because we were black! So we did things that the Major Leaguers couldn't afford to do

FV: Talk about your early days learning how to play baseball. I mean, you're eight, nine, ten years old. Did you play in the neighborhood?

BO: Oh, yeah, everybody played ball. At Booker Grammar School, I played on that team. We had a team. We had a grammar school team. And on that same field, the field at the school, the men when they got off from work, they would come and practice on that field. They'd get their talent up to see us practicing and we would see them practicing. Oh, it was, actually baseball was a social event in the black neighborhood. It's a social time, even when we played here, in Kansas City. Church service... 11 o'clock. Nah ah. When the Monarchs are in town, it's 10 o'clock so they could come to the ball park and they came looking for, it was a social event then. You'd come with your friends and you wanted to look your best.

FV: Now did your parents support baseball? Did they like it? Obviously your father played. Did your mother; was she happy you were playing ball?

BO: Yeah, yeah, and one. She was happy I played ball. All the kids played ball. It was something to keep me out of mischief, uh, but one thing. When I left Sarasota, to go to my semi-pro ball club. Actually, my father put gas in the car for me to get out of town. And I went along with that. My mother wasn't so, she said "I don't know why you're going away; you got no money." And she was a little against that.

FV: When was it obvious that you could make that semi-pro team; that you were a ball player like your father?

BO: Oh, well, what happened is, what happened is you know that little elementary school team? I'm in 8th grade now; they played Thursdays and Sundays. So, this Thursday afternoon, uh, the first baseman for the ball club, he had to work so Andrew Brown, who ran the ball club, came by the school and asked Mrs. Booker, this is a Thursday, "Well, can John come and play with us today?" She said yes. So I went to play first base for them that day. You know that other player never played again. But what he did, not that I was that good, but what he did, he was an older feller but what he did, he taught me a lot of things about playing first base.

FV: And how did you get to college? You make a point in your book that lots of guys in the Negro Leagues had college experience.... How did you get to college?

BO: Well, I got to college on this, see I finished eighth grade. When I finished eighth grade, that's when I started thinking about going to high school. But, I had to go to work. I went to work on Palmer Farm. Palmer Farm, they needed a box boy. And the man at the farm asked everybody "why would you want to be a box boy at Palmer Farms?." And, I was the last kid and I said "Yes, sir. I want to be the best damn box boy that Palmer Farm ever had." He said "You got the job." I got that job and I was a good box boy. I had that deal lined up and they paid a dollar a day. I was so good they paid me a dollar and a quarter a day. And you know how hot it can get in Florida. And my father was a foreman on this farm. So at lunchtime, it's hot, I'm sweating. So they had a lunch. My father and the older folk are eating on one side of the boxes. I'm on the other side of the boxes by myself and I said "Damn! There's got to be something better than this." I didn't know my father heard me. We get off the truck that night and my father says "Son..." And, I said "Yes, sir." "I heard what you said behind the boxes today." I said, "Oh." See I thought he was going to reprimand me for saying "Damn!" because he'd never heard me say "Damn!" before. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I'd ever said "Damn" before but it was hot that day. And, uh, he said, I'm seventeen years old now, he said, "I'm playing baseball every weekend with a young man named Hazely and he went to Edward Waters College and he's teaching over there at that Booker School. Why don't you talk with him? You're a good athlete! You might get a scholarship." I called him. I called Lloyd Hazely. I called him and told him what I wanted. And he came to my house that night and brought Mrs. Booker with him. And, he called Coach Arch Clemends up at Edward Waters College. Said "Coach, I got a young man here that's a good athlete, I'm sure he'd be good for your program." And he said, "Well, Hazely, I'm sure he's a good athlete but is he academically sound enough to come to Edward Waters?" He said, "I'll let you talk to Ms. Booker." Ms. Booker got on the phone and Ms. Booker say "Yeah, he's alright." Because what Ms. Booker had done, she said "Now, this 8th grade education is not enough. I'm going to teach night school. I'm going to teach summer school." I'll tell you what—I went to night school and summer school for about three years. So, she said "Yeah. Coach, he can handle it." So I get there, report, see I've got my high school now, because in Florida, at the time, there were only four high schools for black kids in Florida.... in Miami, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach, Tampa. So I got that, got my high school. Got my high school, doing good. Got two years college! Yeah, on that scholarship! And some of the guys that played on that team would go north every year and play ball in the summer. They'd say, "Why don't you go north and play ball with us this summer?." I said ok. And I went north to Miami Giants, a good semi-pro ball club. We went north, all the way into Canada. We had a good year and then got back to Miami and the man that ran the ball club said "Why don't you stay here and play ball with us?." It's the weather. They ball here year round. I said, "No, man, I got to go back to school." He said, "You're always talking about Ms. Booker. How much money does Ms. Booker make?." I said "Sixty dollars a month." He said "You made more money than that playing with us! Now you think about that." I said, "Well, ok." I get to my room that night and I called Mama. I said, "Mama?." She said, "Yes, son." "I want to stay down here and play ball this winter." She said, "Boy, you got to go back to school." I said, "Mama, I need more money than Ms. Booker." She said, "Son, Ms. Booker can work on that job until she's 70, if she cares to. But, what are you going to do when you're 35 or 40 years old and can't play baseball

anymore?." I said "Mama, let me talk to Papa?." Being a man, he's on the farm, he's proud of what I do. His son hit a home run, he's reading the paper where I did this or did that. And he was real proud of that. He said, "I'll tell you son, you can stick with baseball this winter but next winter, you got to go back to school." I said, "Yes, sir." Alright! So, that winter, went down there, had a good winter. Next summer, went north again. And, we get back in the fall and it's time for me to go back to school. I get back to Miami and Adolph Luque was there waiting for me. "I want you to come to Havana and play on my ball club. I'm going to pay you \$400 a month and all expenses paid." That was the end of the education, right there. And, you know Commissioner, I had a wonderful career, really. But, I don't know what I might have been, had I been able to attend Sarasota High School or matriculated to the University of Florida.

FV: When you received this offer, did you hesitate at all or was it Havana here I come?

BO: It was "Havana, here I come!" You know what I mean? They're giving me \$400? \$400 a month? Oh man!

FV: Now Buck, what would a good teacher have been making in the north? That was a lot of money, by any standards.

BO: Of course!

FV: One of the myths in those days, that some of the players, some of the Negro League players, guys not playing big league baseball were not making a lot of money. But, \$400 in the twenties, by those standards, \$400 was a lot of money.

BO: Of course! Actually, it was a lot of money! It's a myth! What a lot of people don't realize is that some of the Negro League ball players were making more money than the major league ball players. At the time, the minimum salary in the major league was \$5000. And Josh Gibson was making a thousand dollars a month playing over here. And he was making maybe \$3000 playing Cuba, Mexico, yeah!

FV: I think Doby told us that he took a pay cut going in to the big leagues.

BO: I know Satchel did. Yeah. I know Satchel did.

FV: Now tell us about how the baseball career developed after that. You went to, uh, Cuba and you played well. Tell us about what that baseball was like.

BO: Now that was great. Because the best Cuban ball players were playing with and against the best Negro League baseball players in the world. It was outstanding baseball. And, then over here, see, the Negro League was so different and the soul of the game. That was the Negro League because the Negro League was the third largest black business in this country. First was black insurances. Because these insurances would sell ten or fifteen cent policies, just enough to bury us. But the North Carolina Mutual, the Atlanta Life, , the Metropolitan actually ensured our homes, our properties, they made millions. And, next, Madam C.J. Walker. Madam C.J. Walker had a school of cosmetology in every principle city of the United States. She made millions. Yeah. And next was Negro League baseball. All you needed was a bus and a couple sets of uniforms and you'd have twenty of the best athletes in the world.

FV: Tell us about some of the players you saw play in Cuba. That was your first exposure to the real big-time baseball, was it not?

BO: Yeah. I saw Martine Diego. Might have been one of the best ball players that ever lived. Martine, he's in the Hall of Fame in South America. He's in the Hall of Fame in Cuba. He's in the Hall of Fame in Mexico. And, he's in Cooperstown. He could play all the positions. See, when he wasn't pitching, he played outfield. See, I've seen him when he led the League in pitching, and he'd led the League in hitting. That was Martine, Martine Diego. Great pitcher. Great great player. Adolf Luque. Gonzales, all of these guys. Outstanding baseball players.

FV: Were the people in the Cuba nice to you?

BO: I was still able to, listen to this! In Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico—I was a baseball player. When I got back home, I was a black baseball player. Um, yeah.

FV: You talked about the sport being ingrained, you've talked about the social aspects of baseball in the black community. Was it much the same in Cuba?

BO: Oh, yeah. Oh man. Yeah, everybody came to the ball game in Cuba. Yeah, they loved baseball. They still love it. That's why they developed so many, in Latin countries, they love baseball and they play baseball, like a kid here. Like a Frank White, a Frank White couldn't coach baseball in the high school here because he doesn't have a college degree. When the guys finish major league baseball here and they go home, the government gives them a job, running, coaching baseball. He doesn't have to have that degree. This is why they're so good. These guys coming over here can play.

Parts 2 through 6 coming soon.