Ethnicity and Pre-professional Baseball

Tom Gilbert, May 2020

<u>The overwhelming majority of Amateur Era baseball players that we know anything about belonged to one of two ethnic groups: white, native-born American Protestants and African American native-born Protestants.</u>

There are two reasons for this: who the early baseball men were and where they lived.

The culture of pre-professional baseball is alien to us, mainly because the America that produced it is so different from the country we live in now. Modern professional baseball likes to wrap itself in the flag. 19th-century Amateur Era baseball also exploited patriotism, but the patriotism that gave us baseball as a national sport was more aggressively nationalistic and more assertive of American exceptionalism than the modern version. Part of the ideology of the modern professional game is that baseball is a mechanism for acculturating and assimilating immigrants. Learning to play and] watch baseball is regarded as an Americanizing experience that teaches our values. When the descendants of immigrants from a particular ethnic group appear in MLB uniforms, it is seen as a sign that that group has made it and has become fully American.

It is a shock to go back in time and discover how homogeneous and how nativist the "fathers of baseball" and the institution of amateur baseball were. Nativism is not only integral to baseball's DNA, it is part of the reason that baseball exists as a modern sport. When you look at it from a class point of view, the members of the prominent Amateur-Era baseball clubs belonged to an even narrower demographic; few were from very low or very high socio-economic backgrounds. The early baseball clubs of both races were similar in class identity as well. The famous Pythian club, an African American Philadelphia organization that was formed in the mid-1860s, was made up of doctors, lawyers, teachers and merchants – the kind of men who, if they had been born white, might have joined the Knickerbockers or the Gothams.

In other respects, however, race and baseball are a different story. African Americans played baseball in the pre-professional era, but the racism of the NABBP and that of the mainstream press kept the African American baseball scene apart and in the shadows. We only know that it existed from scattered mentions in print and from the fact that competitive African American clubs emerged in the post-Civil War years. We do not know much about where they came from, but they could not have come from nowhere. Integrated baseball clubs may have been virtually unknown in the Amateur Era, but as baseball went national, it crossed racial lines.

Before summarizing what I learned from researching the off-the-field lives of Amateur Era players and their clubs, a caveat is necessary.

In the 1980s I used to listen to the Yankees broadcast duo of Bill White and Phil Rizzuto. A recurring part of their schtick was that the serious and sophisticated African American White would troll the Italian American Brooklyn street kid Rizzuto, often wandering into the minefield of race. It never got mean spirited because of Rizzuto's innocence and because of the affection between the two. I don't remember either actually stepping on a mine, but they sometimes came close. During one game White challenged Rizzuto to name the five Italian American major leaguers who had hit 40 homers in a season at least once (several more have done it between then and now)? Over the following two innings, Rizzuto came up with Joe D, Rocky Colavito, Jim Gentile and Rico Petrocelli, but he could not think of the last one. When he gave up, White told him, "Roy Campanella." "He's not Italian," Rizzuto spat out, "he's…" White let Rizzuto twist in the wind for a few seconds, before countering with, "his father was Italian; he had an Italian last name. You accept the others as Italian on less evidence than that -- how do you know Jim Gentile's mother wasn't named O'Hara?" Rizzuto was quiet for a couple of seconds. Then he said, "Hey! You're right again, White! I remember now; Campanella *spoke Italian*! Sure, he was Italian!"

It is not a simple thing to determine the ethnicity (or religion or class identity) of a baseball player, especially a dead one. When I was researching my new book, I often faced the problem of trying to determine what kind of people belonged to a particular Amateur Era baseball club. Usually, I could get a general idea by pinpointing the identities of most of the members, finding out where they lived, what schools or church they went to, what fire company or militia unit they belonged to, and what they did for a living. Even so, it was often impossible to completely nail down ethnicity or religion for an individual. Surnames do not always help. A Kelly can be Irish American, Scots-Irish or descended from people who lived in southwestern Scotland; the name may have come down from, say, a great-great grandfather and the rest of the family could be Swedish. Or it could be an adopted or Anglicized name; a Kelly might be descended from an Italian born Occhielli. (I have a good friend named Kelly whose family is 100% German Jewish). In America, religion can be changed fairly easily. Even if you have every possible written record – and even if you know what group his teammates or friends considered him to belong to – the fact remains that ethnic and religious identity ultimately come down to personal choice. My grandfather was born in Nebraska; his grandparents were Czech immigrants who emigrated to the US in the 1850s, but his parents were, like him, born and raised in the US. Yet I have an insurance document from the 1930s where under "nationality" he put "Bohemian." Incidentally, he grew up in a community that was close to 100% Catholic, but he was a Lutheran. As a historian, I would not feel certain that a given player was, say, Irish American or Catholic unless I had credible evidence of the player identifying himself as belonging to one of those categories.

Ballplayers of the early Amateur Era had more in common than being born in the USA. They were New Yorkers. Until shortly before the Civil War baseball was played almost exclusively in and around New York City. Before it became America's national game, it was called the New York game. As late as the late 1850s, not only was baseball identified with a particular city, but it was also largely restricted to New Yorkers from a narrow range of class strata and professions. Despite the aspirations of clubs like the Knickerbockers to the status of "gentlemen," very few amateur baseball players belonged to the upper classes of society. Neither the working poor nor struggling recent immigrants had the time or inclination for participatory sports. The monied upper classes of New York and other eastern cities suffered from congenital Anglophilia. This difference in culture was expressed in their choice of sports. To the extent that NYC had a class analogous to European aristocracy, its members preferred yachting, cricket, thoroughbred horseracing, shooting, boxing and blood sports over baseball. They were also far more accepting of gambling than the emerging urban bourgeoisie, who found gambling morally odious.

It was this urban bourgeoisie -- upwardly mobile white-collar workers and professionals, and economically comfortable artisan and tradesmen such as butchers, shipwrights and printers – from which the earliest Amateur Era baseball clubs that we know much about drew their members. They were overwhelmingly native-born, white and Protestant -- the same kind of people who in the 1840s and 1850s populated urban volunteer fire companies and citizen militias. Typically, these institutions shared a nativist ideology; many, for example, excluded anyone born outside the US, even those born in the UK. In 1830s and 1840s New York, a movement arose to create a national sport – something that existed in the UK, but not the US, where different games, including different bat and ball games, were played in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and elsewhere. The movement had two goals: to legitimize exercise as a serious adult activity and to use sport as an instrument of national unification. Supporters of this movement chose baseball because, unlike cricket, which many of them had watched and played, it was completely American -- untainted by association with the UK or any other foreign country. According to William F. Ladd, a founding member of the Knickerbockers, "the reason [we] chose the game of baseball instead of—and in fact in opposition to—cricket was because [we] regarded baseball as a purely American game; and it appears that there was at that time considerable prejudice against adopting any game of foreign invention." As baseball began to spread beyond the NYC area, e.g., to Boston and Philadelphia, it found like-minded local allies from similar classes and professions.

The Knickerbockers, Eagles and Gothams were founded in the 1840s and early 1850s. Their members were not selected for athletic ability alone (or in the early Amateur Era, perhaps not at all), but because they belonged to a community of shared background, culture and values. Like the city they lived in, they were overwhelmingly Protestant. As a society, antebellum New York was also racist and virulently anti-Catholic. Irish Catholics were particularly despised. The O'Brien brothers Matty and Pete, who played for the Atlantics, were popular in the baseball community despite being Irish American and Catholic, but one explanation for this is that they were not immigrants; both were born in Brooklyn. Still, their ethnicity and religion set them apart and were frequently remarked upon.

The Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* of 5/24/67 printed the following anecdote about Thomas Dakin, a native-born WASP military officer, mainstay of the socially exclusive Putnam club of Brooklyn and two-time VP of amateur baseball's national governing body.

> The other incident was rather of a funny character, and one over which the officers have not got done laughing yet. Lieutenant-Colonel Dakin…had occasion to gallop in great haste…a daughter of "beautiful Erin," standing upon the platform, seeing the dashing Lieutenant-Colonel coming up in this manner, had her admiration excited and exclaimed, "Oh! My! What a fierce-looking officer! He must be an Irishman!" Anyone who knows the genial Dakin can imagine the effect of the remark on his comrades.

Presumably, those who knew "the genial Dakin" also knew that his geniality did not extend to the Irish.

Interestingly, Jews do not seem to have been targets of the hatred of nativists -- or even their notice. In researching the lives of hundreds of baseball men from this period, I found several Jewish baseball players, but never encountered any evidence of antisemitism in amateur baseball. This reflected the views of the emerging bourgeoisie of that time. New York City's small Jewish community was long-established and assimilated in all ways except for religion; New York's first synagogue was formed by a group of Sephardic Jews who arrived in the 1640s, 145 years before the first Catholic church was established. New York's native-born Jews were so similar to and compatible with the Protestant mainstream that the presence of Jewish baseball players, though even rarer than that of Catholics, was hardly mentioned.

Doggett's city directory of 1845/46 gives a picture of New York City's religious makeup at the time of baseball's emergence as a popular sport. It lists 205 houses of worship. 16 are Roman Catholic and 9 are synagogues. 180 are Protestant, including: 21 Baptist, 5 Congregational, 17 Dutch Reformed, 4 Quaker, 3 Lutheran, 24 Methodist Episcopal, 29 Presbyterian and 8 listed as "African-American Protestant." To put it in percentages, Jewish synagogues made up (4.4%) of all houses of worship; Catholic churches made up 7.8%. Compare this to today, when there are 296 Roman Catholic parishes in New York City, serving 2.8 million people, almost 30% of the city's total population. If we read the New York City newspapers of the 1830s, 40s and 50s, we discover that the African-American baseball scene, which we know from circumstantial and other evidence existed, is almost never covered. The obvious reason for this is the lack of interest on the part of the mainstream press in anything that African-Americans in general were doing, saying or thinking. We also discover that baseball's tolerance of the Jewish community and its intolerance of Roman Catholics, the Irish in particular, were typical of the larger community.

The *New York Clipper* of 3/27/1869 ran a piece by "Paul Preston Esq." [the pen name of Thomas Picton, born in New York City in 1822]. He writes: "Few persons can imagine, nowadays, the intensity of animosity which pervaded the native-born population, in my younger days, against professors of Romanism, and in particular against those of Irish origin…strange to say, fraternal privileges, universally extended to the fair daughters of Judea by the haughtiest landowner's son were invariably withheld from those of Romanish communion, while to intermarry with a [Catholic] belle, in this wise tabooed, was regarded as an enormity, surely followed by social outlawry."

According to an article in the *New York Times* of 3/24/1854, "Probably 6,000 Jews are to be found in the city of New York. Their children attend the same schools with our children, and, until we reach their religious peculiarities, there is little to distinguish them from others of our citizens."

These views were more or less shared by the urban bourgeoisies of Boston, Philadelphia and other eastern cities that took up baseball and formed clubs on the New York model in the late 1850s and the 1860s. The vast majority of members of the Amateur Era clubs in those cities were native-born white Protestants. The exceptions – mostly players who were born in Ireland or in the UK – were rare and exceptional in other ways. Like Al Reach, Andy Leonard and Fergy Malone, they had emigrated to the US in infancy or as young children or played at the very end of the Amateur Era or both. American nativism was intensified by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Irish Catholic potato famine refugees in the period of 1845-1851, along with large numbers of Germans, many of them Catholic, but this did not begin to affect the institution of baseball until well into the professional era. The reason for this is that, both then and now, people who immigrate from non-baseball playing countries after a certain age – say, around 10 or 12 -- virtually never master playing baseball. The impact of the sons and grandsons of Irish and other immigrants on baseball would have to wait at least one or two more generations, as well as for the advent of professionalism, which eroded the sport's nativist culture and values by incentivizing the selection of players by merit.