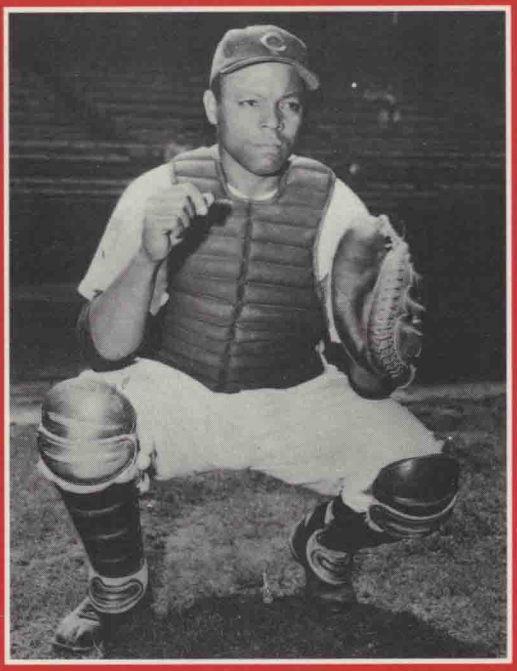
20 Years Too Soon

Prelude to Major-League Integrated Baseball



Quincy Trouppe

A Missouri Historical Society Classic Reprint

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Prelude to Major-League Integrated Baseball

Quincy Trouppe

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20 Years Too Soon was self-published by Quincy Trouppe in 1977. The text of this revised edition has been edited as needed. "Poem for My Father," by Quincy Troupe, Jr.; the Introduction, by Larry Lester; and the captions to the photographs are original to this volume.

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THE
FUTURE YOUNG PLAYERS
OF ALL RACES,
AND HOPE THAT IT WILL
IN SOME WAY HELP TO KEEP THIS
GAME CLEAN AND STIMULATING

Foreword

In the past two decades the American Negro athlete has come of age, largely because of expanded opportunities resulting from vanishing barriers of prejudice and discrimination.

The advent of Jackie Robinson into major-league baseball in 1947 was perhaps the turning point in the tremendous surge of the Negro on the American athletic scene. Professional baseball, with thanks to Branch Rickey, can take much of the credit for providing the leadership necessary to bring the dream of equality in all sports one step closer to reality.

This book serves two important purposes. First, it provides insight into some of the interesting experiences of a great Negro baseball player, one whose playing career (in the Negro and Mexican Leagues) lasted long enough for him to enjoy one year with the Cleveland Indians. The amusing episodes and keen observations described certainly enrich the folklore of our national pastime. Second, this book is an excellent source for teaching sound baseball principles. The chapter on scouting is quite outstanding.

The wealth of information and "inside" baseball contained in the following pages make a valuable addition to the rich heritage of the sport.

Dr. Sam Shepard, Director
Elementary Division of Public Schools
St. Louis, Missouri

Acknowledgments

I hope baseball fans all over the world who read my book will thoroughly understand why I had to write it. I identify myself and many other blacks with a poem written by Dave Malarcher. In the poem, a beautiful flower grows in the middle of the jungle, never seen by the outside world. After playing one year with the Cleveland Indians, during my twenty-second year of playing and managing professional baseball, I know I could have had several great years in the big leagues had I been able to start earlier.

I'd like to express my gratitude to the following men who made great records for themselves in baseball and found the time to write giving their opinions of my ability:

Birdie Tebbetts, Major League Manager
Monte Irvin, Baseball Commissioner's Office
Joe Black, Major League Pitcher
Bob Feller, Major League Pitcher
Bernardo Pasquel, Mexico City Club (Owner)

In addition, I would like to say something about the editor of my book. Tariq Muhammad has done a great job in helping me prepare it. I'm very grateful to him.

I also wish to thank Dr. Sam Shepard for his Foreword. Growing up in St. Louis, he saw me play and is familiar with my athletic career. Dr. Shepard was an outstanding athlete himself and officiated for many years as a referee around the country.

Preface

From the time I was ten years old and a student at L'Overture Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri, the most important part of my life has been centered around baseball. For me, baseball was something like a mother, father, and best friend, all rolled into one. When I felt low and disgusted with everything, it gave me a lift. When I was riding high and the wind of glory was caressing my ears, it brought me down to earth.

I started going to see the St. Louis Stars play when I was twelve. They were a member of the Negro National League. Because I did not have even a dime to spend, I had to figure out a way into the park. It didn't take long; I soon learned to hustle balls, the rule being that anyone returning a ball fouled over the stands into the street would be admitted free. I had a special spot that really seemed to hold luck for me, and I always got my ball, though sometimes the game was well under way before I got in.

Looking back, I realize I watched everything that went on during those hard-to-come-by games and through them learned baseball at an early age. I know what I observed there was a great help to me in starting pro ball as a young man.

The men I watched were real professionals and knew how to play, but most were not quick to give a youngster a helping hand. A young player had it rough. The kids then had to have guts, or they failed to become players. The experienced players would not tell a youngster how to make a play, but when a mistake was made by the rookie, there was hell. It was even harder being a young black player, because most blacks did not have much of a future in the game. I suppose the only reason I even entered baseball professionally was because of my love for the game.

My greatest years in baseball were from 1932 to 1943. During that time I played with some of the finest black teams in North and Latin America; some of the most colorful years of my baseball life were with teams in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, as well as the United States. Because the Negro League did not keep a day-to-day record of its players, I have made use of newspaper clippings of that period to recall my activities. However, the records were well maintained in Mexico and Puerto Rico, and they show that I gained several high honors during the years I played in Latin America.

In 1933, when the Bismarck, North Dakota, season ended early, I finally had a chance to see a game between white players, a game played at Sportsman Park in St. Louis. I was never so let down. Though I never saw Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Ty Cobb, George Sisler, Harry Hielman, Al Simmons, Jimmy Foxx, Lefty Grove, or many of the others play, I had grown up accepting the idea that white baseball was superior to black. I was expecting to see a ball club of white players perform in a way much superior to the caliber of baseball I had been playing.

I had even heard many Negro fans say that Negroes could not play well enough to get into the big leagues, but my experience in the Negro League gave me a chance to come in contact with all kinds of people, including whites who said that the Negroes who ran down black players were wrong. I heard many whites say if certain black players had been white they would be stars in the majors.

After watching the game that day in Bismarck, I was absolutely sure that I played well enough to be in the majors. I played as well as any of the players I had seen that afternoon, but they were white and I was black. I knew I had a great arm. I could think, I had good hands, and I could run faster than the average player. I know, had I been given the opportunity, I would have had a great record in major-league baseball.

In 1944 my big wish to manage a pro baseball club came true. I managed for seven years in the United States and Latin America. In 1952 I gave up being a player-manager after receiving an offer to play with the Cleveland Indians. It was at this time, over twenty years after my start in professional baseball, that I got into a major-league park for the first time. For all of my life, the radio had been as close as I had ever been to a big-league park; the great white baseball players of my childhood days moved in a world I did not know. The impossible dream of playing in the majors was fulfilled then in 1952, though too late, and for too short a time.

In 1953 I signed to scout for the St. Louis Cardinals. I scouted twelve years for the team, and during that time I recommended the signing of such players as Ernie Banks, Roberto Clemente, Vic Power, and Frank Herrera, all of whom have made good in the big leagues.

In spite of the frustrations of the color barrier, baseball opened doors for me that would have been barred otherwise. It brought me into contact with some of the greatest players in the game. It revealed new vistas that were more educational than a doctor's degree.

Because of this great national game, I have lived a life comparable to the wealthiest people in the United States. There were tears, too. But the happiness and the sadness always blended into something that made my life more complete.

In this book, I have brought all of these experiences—happy and sad—together so that today's fans will be able to appreciate what had to be overcome to enjoy a world of integrated baseball. I hope that you will enjoy reading about my years in baseball as much I have enjoyed playing the game.

Quincy Trouppe
1977

Poem for My Father

By Quincy Troupe, Jr.

father, it was an honor to be there, in the dugout
with you, the glory of great black men swinging their lives
as bats, at tiny white balls
burning in at unbelievable speeds, riding up & in & out
a curve breaking down wicked, like a ball falling off a table
moving away, snaking down, screwing its stitched magic
into chitling circuit air, its comma seams spinning
toward breakdown, dipping, like a hipster
bebopping a knee-dip stride, in the charlie parker forties
wrist curling, like a swan's neck
behind a slick black back
cupping an invisible ball of dreams

& you there, father, regal, as an african, obeah man
sculpted out of wood, from a sacred tree, of no name, no place, origin
thick branches branching down, into cherokee & someplace else lost
way back in africa, the sap running dry
crossing from north carolina into georgia, inside grandmother mary's
womb, where your mother had you in the violence of that red soil
ink blotter news, gone now, into blood graves
of american blues, sponging rococo
truth long gone as dinosaurs
the agent-oranged landscape of former names
absent of african polysyllables, dry husk consonants there
now, in their place, names, flat, as polluted rivers
& that guitar string smile always snaking across
some virulent, american, redneck's face
scorching, like atomic heat, mushrooming over nagasaki
& hiroshima, the fever blistered shadows of it all
inked, as etchings, into sizzled concrete

but you, there, father, through it all, a yardbird solo
riffing on bat & ball glory, breaking down the fabricated myths
of white major league legends, of who was better than who
beating them at their own crap game, with killer bats,
as bud powell swung his silence into beauty of a josh
gibson home run, skittering across piano keys of bleachers
shattering all manufactured legends up there in lights
struck out white knights, on the risky edge of amazement

awe, the miraculous truth sluicing through
steeped & disguised in the blues
confluencing, like the point at the cross
when a fastball hides itself up in a slider, curve
breaking down & away in a wicked, sly grin
curved & posed as an ass-scratching uncle tom, who
like old sachel paige delivering his famed hesitation pitch
before coming back with a hard, high, fast one, is slicker
sliding, & quicker than a professional hitman—
the deadliness of it all, the sudden strike
like that of the "brown bomber's" crossing right
of sugar ray robinson's, lightning, cobra bite

& you, there, father, through it all, catching rhythms of chono
pozo balls, drumming, like conga beats into your catcher's mitt
hard & fast as "cool papa" bell jumping into bed
before the lights went out

of the old, negro baseball league, a promise, you were
father, a harbinger, of shock waves, soon come

Contents

Introduction
The Gentleman Quincy Trouppe, As I Knew Him

By Larry Lester

Quincy Thomas "Big Train" Trouppe was not a superstar baseball player. He was an exceptional athlete, who, when given the opportunity, excelled at America's national pastime.

Quincy was born on Christmas day, 1912. William Howard Taft was in the White House, the Boston Red Sox had beaten the New York Giants in the World Series, and the statue of Queen Nefertiti had just been discovered in Egypt. At the time, milk for baby Quincy was thirty-four cents a gallon, and a loaf of bread cost a liberty-head nickel.

At a young age, his family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, were he attended Toussaint L'Overture Elementary School and later graduated from Vashon High School. He attended Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, for two years.

Quincy's years in professional baseball began in 1930, when he joined the St. Louis Stars as a pitcher, fresh out of high school. In his debut game against the Detroit Stars, he threw four innings and only gave up one hit. For his initial efforts he was paid eighty dollars a month, plus two dollars a day for meals. The Stars soon discovered he was a better hitter than pitcher, though, and converted him to catcher, officially signing him to the team in 1931. He played one more year with the Stars before the effects of the Great Depression broke up the Negro Leagues.

The 1932 season found Trouppe making whistle stops with the Detroit Wolves, Kansas City Monarchs, and the Homestead Grays. Ninety-three-year-old Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe remembers the rookie Trouppe as "always a gentleman. He was one of the better young catchers to come along. He could catch and throw that ball. He was also one of the better hitters, a dangerous hitter. You couldn't fool him at the plate. Yeah, he was a good ball player. He was a number-one ball player in my book."

As black baseball was recovering from the depression woes, Quincy found other paths to display his athletic abilities, traveling the AAU boxing circuit. Just before opening day of the 1936 season, Trouppe won the AAU Junior

Heavyweight Championship in Providence, Rhode Island, defeating Jimmy Robinson from Philadelphia for the crown. He was awarded the Governor Theodore Francis Green Trophy for his efforts. 1936 was also his last year playing baseball with the semipro Bismarck, North Dakota, Cubs, where he had played since 1933. Disgruntled with segregated life in professional baseball, he regretfully retired in 1937. The next year, he received a call from the Indianapolis ABCs, with whom he spent two seasons, but the brief tour was only a recurrence of the tough travel schedule of black baseball in America.

In 1939 Quincy married his high-school sweetheart, Dorothy Smith, but soon after left the States for a baseball career in Mexico. From 1939 to 1944, Trouppe found solace and fame there, batting over .300 each season he played, first with the Monterrey Carta Blanca team (1939-41) and then the Mexican City Reds (1942-44). It was while playing in Mexico that Quincy learned of the birth of his two sons back at home—Quincy, Jr., in '39, and Timothy in '41. A daughter, Stephanie, would be born to a second marriage in 1953.

Life and baseball were fairly free from racial prejudice in Mexico, allowing Quincy to refine his managerial skills. It was also in Mexico that he decided to change his last name from *Troupe* to *Trouppe*. Though Quincy, Jr., has speculated that this may have been a small attempt to create a new identity in Mexico, Quincy, Sr.'s, own reasoning was straightforward: "My family always spelled it with one *p*, but when I went to Mexico, they spelled it with two *p*s and pronounced my name 'Troo-pay.' I liked the way it sounded and I've used it ever since." In this revised edition of *20 Years Too Soon*, the name *Troupe* is used until 1946, about the time he changed the name; in this Introduction, I have used *Trouppe*, because that is how I knew the man.

In 1944, Trouppe hesitantly joined the Cleveland Buckeyes, owned by Erie, Pennsylvania, hotel owner Ernest Wright. The next year as manager, Quincy reached the pinnacle of his career. Succeeding former all-star outfielder Roy "Red" Parnell as manager, he guided the Buckeyes to Cleveland's first championship title. The '45 team won the pennant by fourteen games over the Birmingham Black Barons, the widest margin in league history. The Buckeyes blitzed the Negro American League with a 53-16 record behind Trouppe's brilliant handling of a young pitching staff. They continued their conquest by defeating the powerhouse Homestead Grays of the National League in a shocking four-game sweep of the Negro World Series, beating a team that everybody thought was unbeatable. The Grays had won nine consecutive league pennants and were heavy favorites because of established stars like Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Cool Papa Bell, and Ray Brown. The Jefferson brothers, Willie and George, along with Gene Bremer and Frank "Big Pitch" Carswell, made up a strong Buckeye starting rotation. The Cleveland foursome gave up only three runs in thirty-six innings, holding the great Josh Gibson to a paltry .125 average. Meanwhile, Trouppe hit a sizzling .400 and led the team in total bases.

In an interview with writer John B. Holway, Quincy recalled the ease with

which they swept the Homestead Grays:

> All we had were young guys. [Avelino] Canizares, [Sam] Jethroe. "We going to run you," I told Willie Jefferson. "You're my pitcher." Willie beat them 2-1. The next game we played in League Park [Cleveland]. They had us beat. We tied them up [in the seventh inning]. I got a double and Josh had a passed ball. [Grays Manager] Vic [Harris] walked the bases loaded to pitch to [Gene] Bremer. He hit a double against that high screen in right field to win it [4-2]. The third game in Washington [D.C.] Willie's brother George shut them out on four hits and we won four to nothing. He had so much stuff that nobody could touch him. Happy Chandler was out there looking at the game. The fourth game went to Philadelphia and we won 5-0. Raymond Brown pitched that ball game for the Grays. He was past his prime then. Brown was good back in the thirties—that's when he was really good. I got two hits off his knuckle ball that night. Big Pitch Carswell pitched another four-hitter and we beat them 5-0.

Quincy had total command behind the plate, as his pitching staff held the Grays to a .168 series batting average. That year was one of Trouppe's finest moments.

Future major-league rookie of the year Sam Jethroe, probably the most talented player on the team, remembers, "Quincy pulled us through in '45 to beat the Homestead Grays. He kept us on our toes. You know how players can get sometimes. He kept us focused." Willie Grace, who hit a home run in the Grays-Buckeyes series, recalls the Big Train as "one of the most knowledgeable men about baseball I ever knew," and explains how Quincy, in his role as manager, kept the team, in Jethroe's words, "on our toes":

> There was not a better scholar in baseball than Quincy Troupe. You almost had to be a scholar of the game to play for him. He knew baseball inside and out and expected you to know it too. Every year he was there [in Cleveland], we were winners. He lived baseball twenty-four hours a day. We would be riding on the trains some nights, and he would want to have a meeting at two or three o'clock in the morning. Especially if he could get four or five guys together to discuss strategy. Sometimes, we would be riding along in the bus and pull off alongside the road somewhere, at a roadside stop, and if they had a picnic table we would go over there and have a meeting and talk just baseball, all baseball.
>
> With the team we had, we felt like we could beat anybody. In fact, we did . . . the entire season. We didn't have what you would call outstanding stars, we just had good ball players at every position and Quincy's leadership. He was right up on everything that was happening. He didn't miss a trick on the field. Little things you wouldn't think about, Quincy would pick up on everything, all while he was catching and managing. He knew every

weakness on a ball club. He was that type of guy.

After winning the Negro World Series in 1945, he joined the American All Stars team in Caracas, Venezuela, with such legends as Roy Campanella, Buck Leonard, Jackie Robinson, Gene Benson, Verdell Mathis, Sam Jethroe, and Roy Welmaker in the lineup.

An equal opportunity manager, Quincy hired the first white player in the Negro Leagues when he signed pitcher Eddie Klepp to a Cleveland Buckeyes contract in 1946, but Klepp failed to survive the season. Local segregation laws in many southern cities prevented him from making field appearances with a black team. That season, the Buckeyes struggled to a 26-27 record. They returned to the throne in 1947 with a 42-23 record to meet the mighty New York Cubans in the World Series. With pitchers Willie and George Jefferson gone, the staff's aces Vibert Clarke and Sad Sam Jones proved to be no match for the bats of Minnie Minoso, Claro Duany, and Silvio Garcia. The Cubans, behind the pitching of Luis Tiant, Sr., and Dave "Impo" Barnhill, beat Quincy's troops four games to one.

After capturing the Negro American League pennant but losing the series, Trouppe managed the Caguas, Puerto Rico, Criollos to a 33-26 record in the 1947-48 winter league. The Criollos defeated Mayaguez in seven games to capture the championship. He was awarded the title of "Honorary Mayor" by the city of Caguas.

After his tremendous success in bringing two league titles to Cleveland, he was hired by the Chicago American Giants in 1948 as manager. The once-powerful American Giants were the league's doormats in 1946 and finished next to last in 1947. Despite Trouppe's best efforts, the American Giants remained in the cellar. Riley Stewart, a pitcher for the '48 Giants, expressed his thoughts about his former manager:

> He was one of the few managers that would fit in in any era. Any era, now or in the past. He was so far ahead in strategy than most managers. I played for [Olan] Jelly Taylor in Memphis and Candy Jim [Taylor] in Chicago and Trouppe was the best manager of the lot. He was a real gentleman. He was clean-cut, and well dressed. He was a model for the guys on the team. He never cussed. He might say "dawg gone." I never played for a finer gentleman. And he knew the game—very well! I respected him more than any manager I ever had. Not even the great Candy Jim was the teacher that Trouppe was.

In 1949, his final year in the Negro Leagues, Quincy joined the New York Cubans as a catcher and assistant coach to tutor Ray Noble, who would later catch for the New York Giants. His winning spirit and influence in the Negro Leagues is reflected by the won-and-lost records of teams he played for. His teams totaled a lifetime winning percentage over 60 percent, good enough to

win a pennant in most years.

A typical scouting report on six-foot, three-inch, 215-pound Trouppe might have read: "An excellent receiver . . . Has exceptional knowledge of the game . . . A superior handler of pitchers. He possesses a powerful throwing arm . . . that few base stealers will test. Has average speed on the base paths. Country-boy strong . . . A switch hitter with power from both sides of plate . . . can hit for a high average." Another catcher, Othello "Chico" Renfroe, remembers the switch-hitting Trouppe as hitting prodigious home runs from his right side and line-drive shots from his left side. Renfroe recalls Trouppe as "a demon at the plate, left or right-handed."

He was thirty-nine years old when he finally made his debut in the major leagues on April 30, 1952. Yes, he was twenty years too late. A few days later, on May 3, he caught former teammate Sad Sam Jones, forming the first black battery in the American League. But his catching skills had diminished when Cleveland Indians pitcher and teammate Rapid Bob Feller met him in spring training. Nevertheless, Feller remembers the Big Train as a fellow with "great personality, which made him very likable, and he was very hard working." He adds, "Quincy was a very good receiver. He had an excellent arm, kind of like a Roy Campanella or Gabby Hartnett. He was very good calling pitches and blocked the bad pitches very well."

Rapid Bob also recalls, "As far as a major leaguer, Quincy just came in a little too late because he couldn't get in during his prime. It's a shame because there's no doubt in my mind that he would have been a very good major leaguer if blacks had been allowed into the big leagues when he was in his prime."

Trouppe made only eleven plate appearances in six games, with only one hit, for the Cleveland Indians. After his short stay with the Indians, he was assigned to their Indianapolis minor-league club, where he hit .259 in eighty-four games. Now, at the age of thirty-nine, Trouppe decided to hang up his spikes. The next year, he returned home to St. Louis, where the Cardinals hired him as their first African American scout, a position he held for the next five years. He recommended Vic Powers, Roberto Clemente, Al Smith, Minnie Minoso, and Ernie Banks to the Cardinal organization, but the club declined his advice.

Quincy was let go by the Cardinals in 1957 and soon headed to California to start a new chapter in his life. He married his third wife, Bessie Cullins, in 1964. They became proprietors of a senior citizens' home in Los Angeles, California, called the Queen Anne Manor, where Effa Manley, former Newark Eagle owner, once resided. They also operated a restaurant called the Dugout. After they sold the senior citizens' home, they moved to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where Bessie preceded him in death in 1988.

Quincy then returned to his roots in St. Louis, Missouri. During the next few years he and I conversed by telephone on a weekly basis, becoming close friends. He enjoyed sharing his baseball travels with me, and I loved hearing about

them. He seemed to always have something good to say about the lesser-known, but nonetheless talented, players. He frequently boasted of how Avelino Carnizares was such an outstanding shortstop, Gene Bremer was a tough pitcher in the clutch, and Willie Grace and Parnell Woods were very underrated hitters.

We also talked on several occasions about revising and republishing *20 Years Too Soon,* which he had published himself in 1977 and had since gone out of print. He wanted to leave a legacy; he wanted to leave something that would tell what black baseball was like from a player's perspective. I would be the one to help rewrite it and pull it together. But after many unsuccessful book contracts, the prospects for Quincy's book looked dim. My commitments as Research Director for the newly organized Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, were increasing to an unmanageable level, and my volunteer efforts to rewrite his book were gradually put aside. Fortunately, the Missouri Historical Society Press agreed to republish this rare history in 1993, where the editing tasks eventually fell to Tim Fox, in close collaboration with myself and Quincy Troupe, Jr.

This book, though, is only part of his legacy. He was—and still is—nationally known for his extensive photograph and motion picture collection (almost all of the Negro League footage shown in the recent Ken Burns documentary *Baseball* is from Quincy Trouppe's collection). Without a doubt, he was the most prolific photographer of Negro baseball history. He chronicled every event in his lengthy career through photography and film. Today, historians, researchers, film producers, and fans struggle for precious access to this exclusive media chapter in black baseball.

In spite of these achievements as a baseball historian, Trouppe will probably never receive his just due as a baseball player; he will probably never be enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Playing in the shadows of celebrity teammates like James "Cool Papa" Bell, Chet Brewer, Ray Brown, Ray Dandridge, Sam "The Jet" Jethroe, Buck Leonard, Leroy "Satchel" Paige, Jackie Robinson, Wilber "Bullet" Rogan, Hilton Smith, Norman "Turkey" Stearnes, George "Mule" Suttles, "Smokey" Joe Williams, and Willie "Devil" Wells tends to ensure one's anonymity. What's more, his published records simply do not reveal Hall of Fame numbers. For example, though he played in eight of the coveted East-West All Star games, the second most of any catcher (Josh Gibson played in eleven), and led his teams to six victories, he batted a humble .200 in fifteen at bats.

However, the true worth of a pure athlete like Quincy is immeasurable. Baseball statistics, be they for hitting or fielding, have qualified barriers; pure genius is unbounded by such narrow guides as a batting average or an RBI total. Quincy stood above the threshold of creative genius. Besides, history should never be reserved for the "great" men and women, and baseball history especially should be all about the people we know and cherish. Quincy T. Trouppe was a man loved by everyone. He was not a flashy,