

**William J. Plott.** *Black Baseball's Last Team Standing: The Birmingham Black Barons, 1919-1962.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2019. 345 pp. \$49.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-7788-0.

**Reviewed by** David Lee McMullen (UNC Charlotte)

**Published on** H-Florida (June, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

It was early in the 1927 season; the Birmingham Black Barons were in St. Louis. On the mound was a young pitcher who had just joined the Barons from the Chattanooga Choo Chos, a twenty-one-year-old who was said to throw “the fastest and hardest ball in the circuit.” On this particular day the young pitcher “was throwing hard, fast and wild.” When one of his pitches came too close to the batter, the batter headed for the mound, bat in hand.

From the stands, someone yelled, “You have nothing to defend yourself with. Run, boy, run.” The pitcher raced for the dugout. The batter threw his bat, hitting in the young pitcher in the side. A woman in the stands screamed, “Murder, Murder!” and the crowd went wild. Policemen began manhandling the Baron players and a St. Louis fan jumped onto the field with a knife and headed toward one of the outfielders. Ultimately the pitcher was tossed out and the game called after only two innings of play (pp. 60-61).

The pitcher was Satchel Paige, one of the Negro League’s most famous players, a man who, when Major League Baseball opened to African American players, would become the oldest rookie in Major League Baseball history.

This is the type of detail that William J. Plott provides in his history, *Black Baseball’s Last Team Standing*. Why focus on the Birmingham team? As the *Birmingham World* noted in 1949, “Every club in the Negro American League wants to play in Birmingham because of the huge crowds, the roaring enthusiasm and of, course, the gate receipts, which top the returns of any park in the circuit. Baseball in this city is more than a pastime ... it is a passion” (p. 184).

“America’s pastime,” which baseball is often called, is a game that has been part of American history for almost two hundred years. Unfortunately, like so much of that history, it was a segregated sport. African Americans have played baseball almost since the beginning, but it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that professional baseball was finally integrated.

The author brings a unique expertise to the topic. A former journalist, he has been a member of the Society for American Baseball History since 1971 and a member of the group’s Negro Leagues Committee since that committee was created. He is also a member of the Negro Leagues Researchers and Authors Group and the author of *The Negro Southern League: A Baseball History, 1920-1951* (2015).

Baseball is a game of statistics, and Plott has compiled an impressive amount of information, including the names of players, managers, and owners, as well as year-by-year standings, spring training sites, opening day attendance, first pitch honorees, no-hitters and all-stars. He provides detail, season by season, from the team's formation in 1919 until it's last season barnstorming with the Philadelphia Stars in the early 1960s.

In his introduction, the author stresses that "this history of the team is much more about baseball than the sociology of Jim Crow, which has been well documented." Instead, the book "is about everyday baseball players, many of whom became stars in their own time" (p. 2). Among the long list of players are individuals such as baseball legend Willie Mayes and country and western singer Charley Pride, a right-hand pitcher and outfielder who played with the Barons in 1954.

At times, Plott overwhelms the reader with information, too often in a rather dry journalistic style. However, amid all the statistics, there are some interesting tidbits, such as how Charley Pride joined the team in 1954. According to Pride, "I was with the Louisville Clippers, a new team in the league, and they needed money. They sold me and Jesse Mitchell ... to the Black Barons for money to buy the team bus" (p. 229).

Another story involved Pepper Bassett, a long-time Baron's catcher, who was one of Willie Mays's early mentors. As Bassett recalled, "Willie broke in with us when he was only 16 and I tried to help him a lot," adding "Makes me feel good when I notice he's doing so well that I have helped him a little ... Willie's my boy" (p. 214).

There is no doubt that the book is extraordinarily well researched, drawing from newspaper accounts in almost thirty different states, and probably the most comprehensive record of the Black Barons and their significance in the Negro League. It is a book that helps provide greater depth to our understanding of African American history, particular black baseball.

As for H-Florida readers, there are occasional mentions of spring training in places like Orlando and Daytona Beach, games in Jacksonville, and recruiting players from places such as Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. These details help connect Florida to the larger world of the Negro League.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

**Citation:** David Lee McMullen. Review of Plott, William J. *Black Baseball's Last Team Standing: The Birmingham Black Barons, 1919-1962*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54492>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.