

Wesley Branch Rickey

(since the school didn't offer one). After completing his schooling, Rickey, who was then in his late teens, was encouraged by James Finney, a school superintendent and coach, to take an exam to become a schoolteacher. After a course of intensive self-study, Rickey earned a teaching certificate and taught for two years in a school in Scioto County. Rickey learned early that he had to show his command of the class by standing up to rowdy students, which he did on two notable occasions, using his fists to put strong, older boys in their place.

In March 1901, Rickey enrolled at Ohio Wesleyan University (OWU) in Delaware, Ohio, a Methodist school. He had not been expected to go to college and had to talk his father into letting him attend. Rickey played on the OWU football and baseball teams in his freshman year. To help pay school costs, he also played baseball during summer vacation for a local semipro team, earning $25 a game. When he returned to school, Rickey found to his surprise that playing for money had caused him to lose his athletic eligibility. The president of OWU, Dr. James W. Bashford, gave Rickey a way to get back his eligibility by suggesting that he sign a paper denying the charges that he had played for money, but Rickey said he could not do so and attest to something that was false. In the spring of 1903, the OWU baseball coach resigned and Bashford, who had been impressed by Rickey's honesty and character in the loss of eligibility incident, asked Rickey, who was in his sophomore year, to take over as the school's baseball coach. During his first season, Rickey witnessed a couple of notable instances of overt racism against the only black player on the OWU team, first baseman Charles Thomas. These incidents made an "indelible" impression on him.

Tentative Steps in the Big Leagues

Rickey graduated from OWU in 1904 with a B.Litt. degree. Meanwhile, he had become a professional baseball player during the summer months, when on vacation from college. He played minor league baseball for two consecutive seasons and at the end of the 1904 season was promoted from the Dallas team in the Texas League to the Cincinnati Reds, who were in need of help at Rickey's position, catcher. He joined the Reds in September, but was sent packing (and never got into a game) after the manager found out that Rickey, because of religious scruples, refused to play baseball on Sundays. Rickey made it to the major leagues again in 1905 and played parts of two seasons as a catcher for the St. Browns. He also played in 1907 for the New York Highlanders (the team that eventually became the Yankees), but an injury sustained during the offseason while throwing a ball in the OWU gymnasium had impaired Rickey's throwing ability and ended his playing career prematurely.

Becomes Major League Executive

While playing professional baseball, Rickey continued to coach at the college level. He spent two years as football and baseball coach at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. In 1906, he was married to Jane Moulton.

In 1907, Rickey enrolled in the University of Michigan Law School, from which he earned a law degree in 1911 while also coaching the university's baseball team. In 1911, he set up a short-lived law practice in Boise, Ohio with two former OWU fraternity brothers, but the practice foundered, and Rickey soon returned to the University of Michigan, where he took up coaching again. His University of Michigan team included the future Hall of Famer George Sisler, whom Rickey would later sign to a contract with the St. Louis Browns.

Rickey was hired in 1912 by Browns owner Robert Lee Hedges (who had known Rickey from his playing days with the Browns) as a scout and then, shortly thereafter, in 1913, became an executive assistant in the Browns' front office. Rickey was also appointed field manager at the end of the 1913 season and served in that capacity for the next two seasons before being replaced by the Browns' new owner, Philip De Catesby Ball, who retained Rickey in a front office role. In 1917, Rickey accepted a higher-paying job as president of the Browns' national league counterparts, the St. Louis Cardinals. The Browns' owner, Ball, objected to Rickey's departure and undertook legal action in an unsuccessful attempt to enforce provisions of Rickey's contract with the Browns. Rickey volunteered to serve in the First World War, was commissioned a major, and served in France during 1918