

Baseball's 'black' trailblazer - The peculiar story of Effa Manley and her Negro League team

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She was a woman caught between two worlds, both of them black. One was the world of cotillions, concerts and charity work - of black high society. The other was the workaday world of baseball. In both worlds, however, Effa Manley always thought of "her boys" first. And her boys were the Newark Eagles, the great Negro League baseball team of the 1930s and '40s.

You can see Effa Manley merging both worlds in a 1938 photograph taken at old Ruppert Stadium in Newark where the Eagles played their home games. The "baseball Effa" is standing on the top step of the Eagles dugout and, at the request of the photographer, has donned a Newark team cap and jacket. She smiles not at the camera, but out at the field, at her players, whom for the 13 years she owned the team along with her husband, Abe, she treated with both a smothering affection and an iron fist. The other Effa is there, too, the "high society Effa," a woman of uncommon elegance who owned a mink stole, Oriental rugs and a Lincoln. In the photo, beneath the cap, is her neatly coifed hair, carefully applied lipstick, and light summer dress.

Two Effa Manleys, two slices of black society, and one little-known fact.

Effa Manley was white.

Born in 1900 to Bertha Ford Brooks, a white seamstress married to an African American, Effa grew up in a hardscrabble corner of Philadelphia. While married, Effa's mother had an affair with a prominent white fancier, John M. Bishop, for whom she had done some work. Effa was their offspring. In what was surely an unusual public scandal for the time, Brooks' husband, Benjamin, sued Bishop for alienation of his wife's affections and won a \$10,000 settlement. Not long after, Brooks divorced Effa's mother. When Bertha Ford Brooks married again - to another African-American - Effa's immediate family included six siblings - all of them half black.

Blond and hazel-eyed, Effa grew up in a black neighborhood, played with black children and for all intents and purposes was treated as being black. In fact, being black was exactly what she thought she was. Not until Effa was a teenager did her mother tell her fair-haired daughter the story of the true origin of her birth. The revelation had little effect on the course of Effa's life. When she was in her 70s she once mused, matter-of-factly, to an interviewer: "I've often wondered what it would be like to associate with white people."

"My sense of Effa is, it wasn't a decision (to live as an African American) that she agonized over," says Larry Hogan, a professor of history at Union County College who has written extensively on the subject of the Negro Leagues. "She grew up in a black world, with a black family and black neighbors. It was natural. It was her world."

After graduating from William Penn High School in 1916, Manley left Philadelphia and headed to New York City. Although she settled in Harlem, one of the largest black neighborhoods in the United States, she traveled downtown every day to a milliner's where she worked as a sales clerk - and "passed" as a white woman. The choice to be Caucasian from 9-5 was a choice born of economics, pure and simple, and it was a world she freely left behind at the end of the day to return home to Harlem.

"I think she knew when she cut her ties and left Philly that she wanted to re-make her life in one of the world's most vibrant black communities of the time," says James Overmyer, the author of "Queen of the Negro Leagues: Effa Manley and the Newark Eagles." "She had big ideas, she was ambitious and she wanted big things. She could have made herself over as a white, but she didn't."

Instead, in 1933 she met Abraham Lincoln Manley, an African-American 15 years her senior, at a Yankees game. A year later they were wed, and on their marriage certificate both are listed as being "colored." From then on, Effa Manley not only lived and relaxed, but also worked in a black world. Abe had made a small fortune in the illegal numbers game in Philadelphia, and was essentially retired when he met Effa. In 1934, he formed the Brooklyn Eagles and two years later moved the team to New Jersey and merged them with another Negro League team, the Newark Dodgers. (The Dodgers were so named not for the major league team, but after a Newark nightclub called Dodger's Bar and Grill).

From 1935 to 1948, (the club relocated to Houston in 1949 but disbanded in mid-season), the Newark Eagles produced some of the finest baseball players in the history of the sport. Among them, five Hall of Famers: Ray Dandridge, Leon Day, Larry Doby (from Paterson), Monte Irvin (from Orange), and Willie Wells. Effa's official position with the team was business manager, which meant she was responsible for everything from scheduling games to purchasing uniforms and equipment, to public relations.

As owners of a baseball team, the Manleys were considered well-to-do - by that time they, too, had moved across the river to a three-story brick house at 71 Crawford St. in Newark. Baseball, however, was not a sport of the social elite. Still, the Manleys, and particularly the vivacious and always elegantly attired Effa, became prominent citizens of the city. Effa's charm and connections even convinced some of the great black stars of the 1930s and 40s, such as singer Lena Horne and heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, to make special appearances at Eagles' home games. Even after the team's demise, Effa continued to be a recognizable name to the black public. In 1949, she was featured in an Ebony magazine article on "How to Stay Young After 40."

Effa was also extraordinarily committed to social and civic causes. She was a member of the NAACP as well as the Urban League, and once organized a strike of white businesses in New York that would not hire African-Americans as sales clerks. She was also a tireless fundraiser, almost all of them for black causes, such as Newark's Booker T. Washington Community Hospital. In 1940, sounding one of her typical calls to Newark's black residents, Effa sent out a publicity flyer for an Eagles' benefit game:

"This hospital is the only one in the State offering an opportunity for colored physicians and nurses to get hospital training. This is a civic responsibility that no one should shirk and everyone should be proud to meet."

The post-Depression era was not an easy time to run a baseball business, and so for most of their dozen years in existence, the Newark Eagles operated on a shoestring - something the Manleys were especially adept at. In addition to pinching pennies, the Manleys set strict standards for their players both on and off the field. When appearing in public, players were required to wear suits and ties and polished shoes. And in 1943, when they didn't have enough new uniforms to go around, Effa instructed the new uniforms be given to the infielders first, as they played closest to the grandstands and the paying customers.

"They were always doing things for the community," says Overmeyer, "and they got their players involved in that, too. (Effa) understood that business would be better, and they'd be more successful, the closer they got to their fans. She had an excellent community relations instinct, and not a lot of baseball team owners had that back then."

Community and public relations would not be enough to keep the team afloat. When the Eagles were finally disbanded in 1948, just two years removed from their Negro League Championship season, it was due in large part to the integration of the major leagues. If the existence of black teams helped black players break down the color barrier on the field, the dozens of black team owners in the Negro Leagues had no such luck with the color barrier in the front office.

"Major League Baseball, the administrative side, has been very behind where they should be in terms of black participation . . . The Negro League owners, the front office, the publicity people, the general managers - they all got left behind. We've finally caught up with the ballplayers, but in the executive world, that story still needs to be told. (Effa's) legacy will only be realized when all that black administrative talent is allowed to rise to the top."

After Abe died in 1952, Effa, who had no children of her own, continued to live in Newark for a few more years before selling her Crawford Street house and moving for a time back to Philadelphia. Eventually Effa relocated to southern California and when she died in 1981 at the age of 81, it was in a nursing home run by a former Negro League player.

In the years following the couple's ownership of the Newark Eagles one cause remained

constant for Effa: pushing for the admittance of Negro Leaguers into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. In 1971, the Hall's Special Committee on the Negro Leagues made Satchel Paige, the great pitcher for the Kansas City Monarchs, and briefly the Cleveland Indians, its first pick. Currently, there are 18 players who have gained admittance to the Hall on the basis of their Negro League careers, a circumstance that owes much to the persistence of the "glamour girl" of the Negro Leagues.

Appropriately, Effa may join some of her boys later this month when another committee appointed by the Hall of Fame votes on candidates from a list of 39 Negro Leaguers and pre-Negro Leaguers, including Effa and four other Newark Eagles players. If she is elected, which seems likely, she will become the first woman ever inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

If color is a state of mind, Effa Manley's life may well be its shining example. Culturally, psychologically, sociologically Effa Manley was a black woman. That she lived and thrived in a black world was not by choice, but rather because "being black" was who she truly was.