

Brooklyn boss keeps his word  
to a Negro dentist

# Branch Rickey KEEPS HIS 40 YEAR

By Mark Harris

TWICE in his life Branch Rickey made solemn promises. They were important promises—important to Rickey, a white man with a strong sense of justice, important to Dr. Charles L. Thomas, a Negro.

His second promise was the first to be realized. Dr. Thomas, a tall, athletic Albuquerque, New Mexico, dentist (one of two Negro dentists in the state) recalls that the second promise was made "about the time Dizzy Dean was in his prime."

It was in St. Louis, where the dentist practiced for a brief period before moving to Albuquerque 25 years ago. "I called Rick and he invited me down to his office at Sportsman's Park. We talked about old times, but we didn't go to the ball game together that afternoon. You see, Negroes weren't permitted in the lower grandstand at that time. Rick said to me: 'Tommy, some day we'll have that changed.'"

It's been changed.

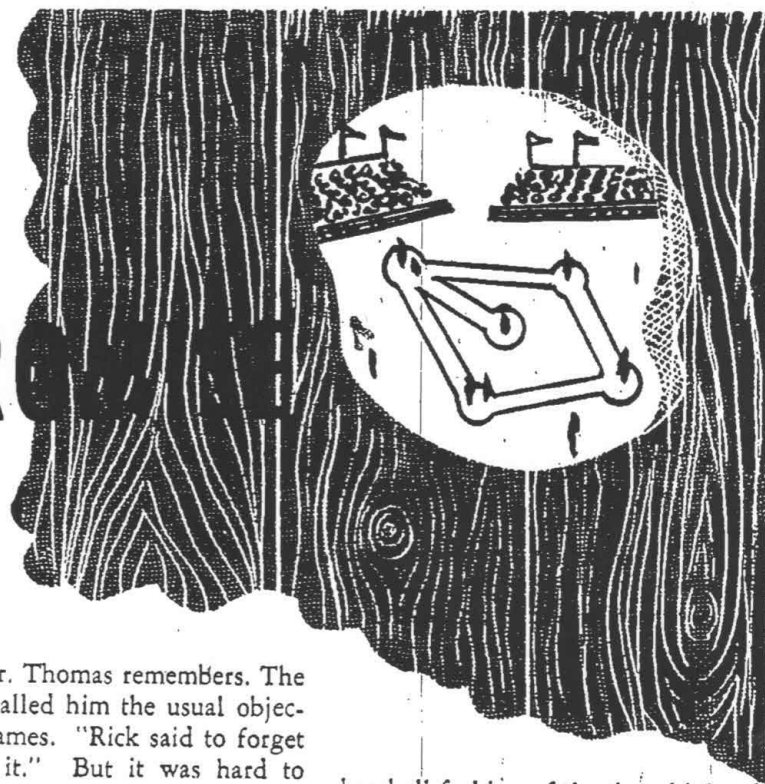
But the 40-year-old first promise;

too, has been kept. The keeping of the promise establishes a notable date in the history of baseball and in the history of the forward march of the Negro people.

The date was Opening Day, 1947; the place, Ebbetts Field, Brooklyn; the actors, two baseball teams, three umpires. And behind the scenes, Branch Rickey, the Brooklyn Dodgers' boss. With the cry "Play ball," the promise was kept, for 40 years ago, in South Bend, Indiana, Coach Branch Rickey of the Ohio Wesleyan University baseball nine, said to Catcher Charles L. Thomas: "Tommy, some day we'll have that changed."

It had been a long grind for the coach and his players, through Ohio and down into West Virginia, then back to Indiana, and Catcher Thomas had not exactly enjoyed himself. He had been the first Negro to play on the baseball diamond of the University of West Virginia, and the fans had been rough. "I tried not to

# PROMISE



notice," Dr. Thomas remembers. The fans had called him the usual objectionable names. "Rick said to forget it, ignore it." But it was hard to forget, ignore.

South Bend meant trouble, too. The Grand Hotel wouldn't register Catcher Thomas. "Rick still said, forget it, and I tried, but of course it was not the kind of thing I could forget." And Rickey, advocate of forgetting, pledged that he would not forget. He said that someday, somehow, he would do something about the whole business of discrimination.

Dr. Thomas thumbed the pages of a felt-bound yearbook, issued to him at Ohio Wesleyan in Delaware, Ohio, in 1905. "Here's a picture of our team," he said, a nostalgic note in his voice. It was a picture of eleven young men, dressed in the

baseball fashion of the time, high collars and severe red-black stockings. Across the front of the uniforms, in large letters, OWU.

"This is Rick," he said, pointing to Coach N. Branch Rickey, wearing a bow tie and a stiff white shirt. "This is me," Dr. Thomas said, pointing to one brown face among the players. "And this is our mascot," a Negro boy named Ernest Settles, now a successful citizen of Plainfield, New Jersey.

Also among his souvenirs Dr. Thomas retains a photograph of the Zanesville, Ohio, high-school football

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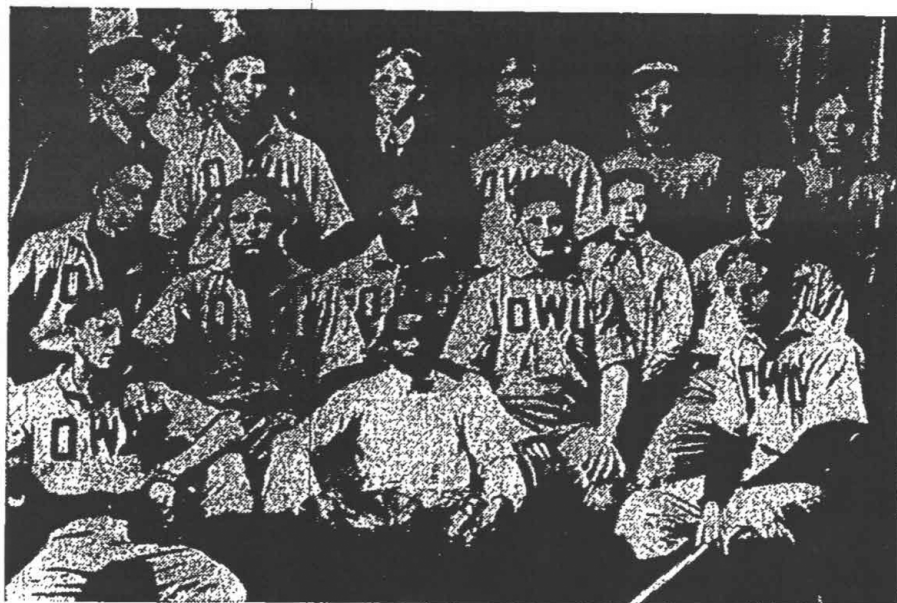
squad of 1901—twelve men in all—and again two faces darker than the rest, his own and that of Louis E. (Bub) Colston, still a resident of Zanesville.

"Now please don't give people the idea I'm claiming credit for the signing of Jackie Robinson. That's Rick's doing," Dr. Thomas insisted, gently closing his treasured memory book. But the dentist agrees that perhaps Rickey's early experiences with prejudice while Thomas' baseball coach at Ohio Wesleyan played a major part in his recent role as the first major league magnate to break down color discrimination in the big leagues. Branch Rickey himself seems to agree. Shortly after he signed Robinson to a contract he was quoted as follows by

the Associated Press:

"It has been on my mind for years, ever since I coached baseball at my alma mater. The West Virginia team at first refused to play us if our catching star, Charlie Thomas, was in the line-up. Later we went to South Bend for a game with Notre Dame and Charlie was refused a room in a hotel. I finally prevailed upon the manager to put a cot in my room."

Dr. Thomas, still a keen baseball fan and an acute student of the fine points of the game, notes that, after leaving Ohio Wesleyan, Rickey went to Michigan, where he discovered George Sisler. Sisler later became one of the game's great first sackers. More recently Sisler, employed as a Dodger scout, was assigned by Rickey



The 1903 Ohio Wesleyan University baseball team with Coach Branch Rickey (rear row, extreme left) and catcher Charles L. Thomas (center), only Negro player on the team. Negro mascot is Ernest Settles of Plainfield, N. J.

to comb the Negro leagues. From among the scores of promising athletes he saw in action, he chose Robinson as most likely to succeed in the bigtime.

And Robinson is succeeding. As one sportswriter put it recently: "Robbie was first a curiosity; he's now a first baseman."

Dr. Thomas and Branch Rickey also played side by side on an Ohio Wesleyan football eleven early in the century, both of them in the backfield. They played in only two games, however. "Rick was ineligibleized. He had played in a couple of professional games in Dallas," Dr. Thomas explains.

Dr. Thomas was born in Zanesville, Ohio. Modestly he suggests that he might have been a big-leaguer himself but for the color ban. "Hank Gowdy, the famous Giant catcher, once told me so," he says, still modestly. Dr. Thomas played with a number of highly-rated semi-professional teams—the Philadelphia Giants, and in Cleveland, Columbus and Zanesville.

"I think," he admits, "that some boys who had less on the ball than I did went up the ladder." But they were white boys, and there was no Branch Rickey around at the time.

"Not a finer man lives than Rick."  
A man who keeps his promises.

### Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary



A YOUNG colored girl and two young men traveling on a train headed for New York happened to be seated across from one another. They decided they might just as well become better acquainted, so one of the fellows announced, "My name's Paul, but I'm no apostle."

"Well, my name's Peter," declared the other man, "but I'm no saint."

"My name's Mary," said the girl hesitantly, "and I don't know what to say."

Gladys Glad