

In 1947, blacks and whites couldn't legally marry each other in most Southern states. Restaurants, hospitals, and schools were racially segregated. And poll taxes, literacy tests, and other restrictions prevented most blacks from voting.

But on April 15 of that year, one of the events that helped change racial attitudes in the U.S. took place not in the courts or in Congress, but on a baseball field in Brooklyn, New York. Twenty-eight-year-old Jackie Robinson made his debut as first baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers on opening day against the Boston Braves, and America's pastime was officially no longer segregated.

It wasn't front-page news the next day—*The New York Times* mentioned it in its sports pages—but it later came to be seen as a civil rights milestone: Robinson took the field a year before President Harry S. Truman ordered the integration of the military, seven years before the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, and more than a decade before the civil rights movement became the focus of the nation's attention (see *timeline*, p. 20).

"He embodied the realization of the American Dream," says John Wilson, a history professor at Vanguard University in California and author of a book about Robinson. "Robinson was really an instrumental factor in us getting beyond our prejudices and coming closer to realizing our national ideals."

Right Man for the Job

Robinson's early life seemed to prepare him well for his role as a trailblazer. Born in 1919 in Cairo, Georgia, he grew up mostly in Pasadena, California. He was raised by his mother, Mallie, who took in washing and ironing to support her five children. (Robinson's father, a sharecropper, abandoned the family when Jackie was an infant.)

When the Robinsons moved to an all-white neighborhood in 1922, someone burned a cross on their front lawn. But the way Mallie Robinson handled such incidents left a lasting impression on Jackie.

"My mother never lost her com-

posure," Robinson recalled in his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*. "She didn't allow us to go out of our way to antagonize the whites, and she still made it perfectly clear to us and to them that she was not at all afraid of them."

Robinson excelled at sports from childhood. In 1940, he became the first athlete at UCLA to earn a letter in four sports—football, basketball, baseball, and track—in a single season.

With the U.S. fighting Germany and Japan during World War II, Robinson was drafted in 1942. In a segregated Army, he became one of the first blacks to attend Officer Candidate School and graduated as a second lieutenant.

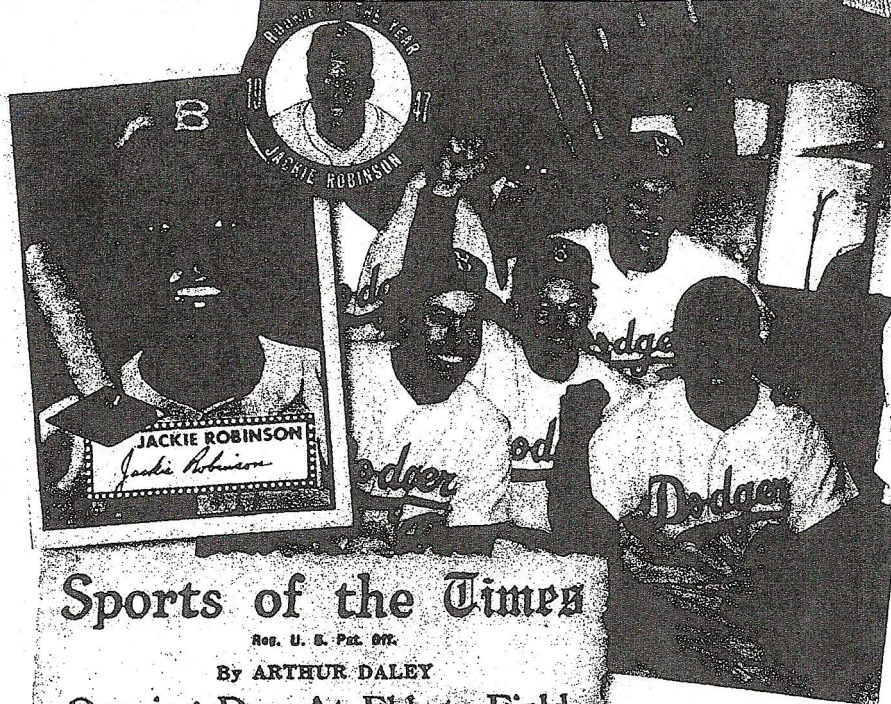
One incident nearly derailed his military career. While stationed at Camp Hood, Texas, he refused to move to the

back of the bus, as blacks were supposed to do, on a trip to the neighboring town of Temple. The driver summoned the military police, and the incident led to a court martial. But Robinson was acquitted of all charges and received an honorable discharge in 1944.

Though the major leagues had no written rule against black players, the "color line" had been observed since the 1880s. Team owners feared that white players would quit rather than play with blacks.

But Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, hated baseball's whites-only policy. The war had created a shortage of baseball talent, and Rickey figured it was the right time to sign some promising black players.

Robinson, a good ballplayer who had experience playing alongside white



Sports of the Times

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

By ARTHUR DALEY

Opening Day At Ebbets Field

The muscular Negro minds his own business and shrewdly makes no effort to push himself. He speaks quietly and intelligently when spoken to and already has made a strong impression. "I was nervous in the first play of my first game at Ebbets Field," he said with his ready grin, "but nothing has bothered me since."

A veteran Dodger said of him, "Having Jackie on the team is still a little strange, just like anything else that's new. We just don't know how to act with him. But he'll be accepted in time. You can be sure of that. Other sports have had Negroes. Why not baseball? I'm for him, if he can win games. That's the only test I ask." And that seems to be the general opinion.

The New York Times' April 16, 1947, story about Jackie Robinson's debut with the Dodgers; a 1952 Topps baseball card; a 1947 Rookie of the Year button; and the team celebrating in Brooklyn's locker room after a victory over the New York Yankees in 1952.