Critique: Interview with Leon Day

Bill Marshall interviewed Leon Day in 1980 about his memories of playing baseball between 1947 and 1951, a time when Day was somewhat past his prime as a pitcher in the Negro League. The rapport between interviewer and subject is excellent, and Bill Marshall, unsurprisingly, is extremely well prepared, remembering names and dates easily, and prompting Leon Day for anecdotes. The interview could not have been an easy one, however, and the interview as a document is not entirely satisfying. One reason is the interview’s setting: a bar or other noisy public place. Day, earlier in the day, had participated in a ceremony honoring him as one of the great pitchers of the Negro League, and was waiting to watch a replay of the ceremony on television. The interview ends abruptly when the television news special begins and apparently is not resumed.

The other reason for difficulties with this interview is Day himself. Day, only about sixty-four at the time of the interview, is completely sharp, remembering names of the cities where his team traveled (Buffalo, Syracuse, Schenectady) and details relating to baseball (Jackie Robinson’s curve ball; the decline of interest in the Negro League after Robinson’s departure). Day seems to have had little contact with other prominent people in baseball, however; he isn’t able to describe specific conversations with Jackie Robinson or Larry Doby. All questions relating to the thoughts or feelings of other important people of the era receive an “I don’t know” answer.

While it must be an admirable characteristic in a human being to be able to look at the past and see nothing but happy memories, it is a difficult trait in an interview subject. Day either
avoids conflict or doesn’t perceive it. He liked Mexico and learned some Spanish. The American players had lovely apartments in Mexico. There were no fights. He did not experience segregation or prejudice while playing in Canada, except once in Edmonton. He was happy for Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby when they began playing with the Major Leagues, and glad they were opening the door for other younger players.

My assumption is that Day honestly remembers his playing days with great pleasure and is not dissembling out of some conscious or unconscious desire to avoid talking about difficult times: even when Marshall asks Day to talk about incidents that could not evoke controversy, Day’s comments are meager. Prodded to talk about a train journey in which a Mexican train jumped the track, Day is not able to say much more than that. He offers few opinions in general throughout the interview.

Marshall begins his interview with non-threatening questions about Day’s three summers in the Mexican Leagues, working his way gradually to more potentially difficult questions about Day’s experiences of prejudice and segregation. Day is always affable and friendly; yet, he does not have a great deal to say about his past. Day’s career as a pitcher makes the interview a worthwhile one; beyond that, however, I would imagine that other subjects have spoken about the Negro League experience more fluently and vividly than Leon Day.