



Bill Veeck bought the Cleveland Indians in 1946 in his first foray into owning an MLB team. But four years earlier, Veeck attempted to buy the Philadelphia Phillies with the intention of stocking the bankrupt club with Negro Leagues stars.

Magical Maverick

BILL VEECK'S INNOVATIVE SPIRIT NEARLY INTEGRATED THE GAME DURING WORLD WAR II.

By Larry Lester

With self-deprecating humor and a keen sense of branding, the savvy and visionary promoter Bill Veeck was an unapologetic maverick.

Driven by divine love of the game and a profound connection to his fan base, Veeck understood his supporters in a way few others could. He chose to sit among the fans in the stands, engaging in genuine conversations, rather than isolating himself in a private suite. He personally answered fan mail, demonstrating his authentic care and accessibility. For Veeck, the National Pastime was more than a profession — it was his lifeline, his caffeinated adrenaline, and his utmost magical pride and ride in baseball.

Veeck lived by the mantra, "Tradition is the albatross around the neck of progress." But he was far more than his famed attendance-boosting stunts, which included sending 3-foot-7 pinch-hitter Eddie Gaedel to bat and the infamous Disco Demolition Night that resulted in rioters damaging the Comiskey Park field as vinyl records exploded. There was also the ever-popular Ladies' Day, staged weddings at home plate and live animal giveaways.

Veeck's revolutionary and innovative ideas set him apart from his fellow club owners, with many becoming iconic elements of baseball's culture and lore. Initiatives like securing corporate sponsorships for giveaways of rain gear, miniature bats, commemorative baseballs and drinking cups were unconventional at the time and spoke to his impact on the sport. His remarkable creativity in keeping fans entertained, even during rainy-day delays, solidified his reputation as a true maverick in baseball's stratosphere.

All this and more earned Veeck election to the Hall of Fame in 1991. But his greatest attempt at changing the game may have come before he ever began his career as a big league owner.

Against the backdrop of the United States entering World War II following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the mindset of some Americans may have shifted toward considering the integration of baseball. The stark hypocrisy of the era — where Black soldiers were deemed qualified to stop bullets on the battlefield but not eligible to stop baseballs on the playing field — perhaps gave Veeck both the motivation and the opportunity to challenge Jim Crow's influence over the game.

Veeck reflected on that subject in his book "Veeck — as in Wreck":

"Let me make it plain that my Philadelphia adventure was no idle dream. I had made my offer to Gerry Nugent, the president of the fast-sinking club, and he had expressed a willingness to accept it. As far as I knew, I was the only bidder. The players were going to be assembled for me by Abe Saperstein [booking agent] and [Andrew] Doc Young, the sports editor of the Chicago Defender, two of the most knowledgeable men in the country on the subject of Negro baseball. With Satchel Paige, Roy Campanella, Luke Easter, Monte Irvin and countless others in action and available, I had not the slightest doubt that in 1944, a war year, the Phils would have leaped from seventh place to the pennant."

In 1942, after a decade of ownership, Philadelphia Phillies owner Gerry Nugent filed for bankruptcy and sought a “golden parachute” from National League President Ford Frick. The previous year, Veeck had purchased the Triple-A Milwaukee Brewers of the American Association for \$100,000, driven by hopes of one day owning a major league franchise. On Oct. 22, 1942, a *Sporting News* article suggested that Veeck had made an offer to purchase the struggling Phillies and planned to rebuild the team with Black players from the Negro Leagues. Whether an oral agreement between Veeck and Nugent was reached during their Nov. 4 meeting remains unverified.

However, such a bold move faced immense resistance. Overcoming the league owners’ majority approval and Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis’ staunch enforcement of baseball’s longstanding color line — rooted in the “separate but equal” doctrine established by the Supreme Court in 1896 — was virtually impossible. The systemic racial barriers of the time made the prospect of a team infused with Black talent inconceivable.

In his biography, Veeck mentioned that Phillies Cigar, a local company, expressed willingness to financially support the purchase. Despite this potential backing, Frick informed Veeck that the Phillies had already been sold to lumber dealer William Cox, reportedly for about half the price Veeck had been willing to pay.

Veeck later reflected on prejudice, stating: “What offends me about prejudice is that it assumes totally unwarranted superiority. For as long as I can remember, I have felt vaguely uneasy when anybody tells me an anti-Negro or anti-Semitic or anti-Catholic joke. It only takes one leg, you know, to walk away,” referencing the loss of his lower right leg while serving as a Marine during World War II. It was his call to action for baseball’s gatekeepers.

Imagine if Veeck had been allowed to rebuild the 1942 Phillies — who suffered a dismal 109-game losing season — with Negro League stars from that year’s East-West All-Star Game. What if Josh Gibson, the legendary slugger who hit more home runs in one season than Phillies catcher Mickey Livingston managed in 10, took over behind the plate? At first base, what if batting champion Buck O’Neil replaced Nick Etten, while the versatile and hard-hitting Sam



Larry Doby joined the Cleveland Indians in 1947 after Bill Veeck had purchased the team. The next year, Doby — the first Black player in American League history — led Cleveland to the World Series title.

Bankhead of the Homestead Grays stepped in for Al Glossop at second base. What if 10-time All-Star slugger Willie Wells, known for his brilliance at shortstop, took over for Bobby Bragan, who never played in an AL/NL All-Star Game. At third base, we could install Hall of Famer Ray Dandridge for Merrill “Pinky” May.

In the outfield, imagine 39-year-old James “Cool Papa” Bell, who could still motor and had a .410 OBP, in place of 36-year-old center fielder Lloyd “Little Poison” Waner, who was at the end of his Hall of Fame career. On the corners, Sam “Jet” Jethroe and Willard “Home Run” Brown could bring a combination of swiftness and power, replacing Danny Litwhiler and Ron Northey.

And what if the Phillies’ pitching rotation were completely transformed? Aces Leon Day, Verdell Mathis, Satchel Paige and Hilton Smith could replace struggling hurlers like Tommy Hughes (career 31-56 win-loss record), Rube Melton (30-50), Si Johnson (101-165) and Johnny Podgajny (20-37). This formidable

lineup would surely have drawn more than the Phillies’ reported league-low attendance of 230,183 in 1942.

In July 1947, Veeck demonstrated his unwavering commitment to social progress by signing Larry Doby from Effa Manley’s Newark Eagles, making Doby the first Black player in the American League. The decision prompted an avalanche of roughly 20,000 letters, many protesting the signing. Veeck responded to the backlash with a form letter that read: “I’m sure you would agree that any man should be judged on his personal merit and allowed to exploit his talents to the fullest, whether he happens to be black, green, or blue with pink dots.” He passionately asserted, “So I am one man who has documentary proof that prejudice is indivisible. The jackal, after all, doesn’t care what kind of animal he sinks his teeth into.”

When Doby was introduced to his new teammates in the clubhouse, he recalled that all but three Cleveland Indians players shook his hand. By the end of the season, Veeck had released the trio — a testament to his unwavering support for Doby during a challenging integration process.

Reflecting on Veeck’s passing in a 1986 *Chicago Tribune* article, Doby said:

“I always had complete faith in Bill. I didn’t question his integrity. He didn’t play games. He didn’t have one set of values in church, and another set out of the church. He didn’t play political games.”

Doby added: “I always felt I’d get a fair shake from Bill. In my opinion, he was one of our greatest humanitarians. I always felt Bill was kind of magical, and he would deal with you on a lot of different levels.”

Veeck’s widow, Maryfrances, celebrated those qualities when she spoke on his behalf during the 1991 Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony. She described him as follows: “Life was not wasted on Bill Veeck. He was born with a great joy of living, tremendous energy, integrity. He was curious, imaginative, creative, spontaneous, stubborn, intelligent, opinionated, witty. He was such fun to be around, a pied piper. He was magic!” ●

Larry Lester is a curatorial consultant for the Hall of Fame’s ongoing Black Baseball Initiative.