

Children's Literature

Rising Again: Recovering the Story of Louis Sockalexis

J. Allen Bryant

The moon is going to rest, and so soon will I.
—Louis Francis Sockalexis, December 23, 1913

It happened in the middle of June, on New York City's already legendary Polo Grounds. A sports reporter, described the crowd as "explosive ... For weeks there had been a buildup in the press." Photographers jostled to get pictures of the player at the center of all the attention—a rookie in the major leagues who was preceded by tales of remarkable feats of athleticism.¹

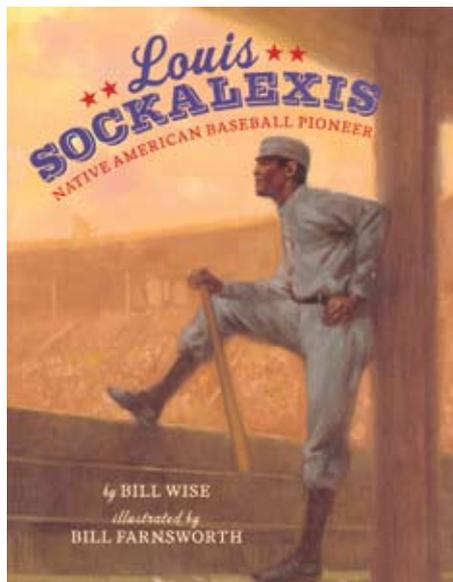
This young man's abilities on the diamond, however, were not the only reason for the clamor. The spectators were curious to see the first non-white player in major league baseball history. When the rookie stepped up to the plate, he was met with racial epithets from fellow players. Slurs and derisive chants also rained down from the stands. With almost inhuman serenity, he smiled at the hooligans and waved to some friends who had made the trip from his home state in support. Facing a pitcher who would later be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame (the fastest and most intimidating pitcher of the era according to many baseball historians), the rookie blasted the first pitch past the rope line for a homerun.² The crowd hushed, and the batter dashed lithely around the bases.

America's Game

If the reader is not an avid baseball aficionado, he or she will certainly be forgiven for assuming that the above tale is about Jackie Robinson, known for "breaking baseball's color barrier as a first baseman for the Dodgers on April 15, 1947, and whose elegant and dignified response to racist acts makes him one of America's civil rights heroes."³ The above story, however, is about Louis Sockalexis, a Penobscot Indian from Maine, as he faced pitcher Amos Rusie. Sockalexis debuted as a Cleveland Spider

in 1897, a half century prior to Robinson's achievements.

In his 1944 baseball history classic, *They Played the Game* Harry Grayson includes a chapter on Sockalexis and states, "popular imagination has made the fabulous Sockalexis a mythical figure."⁴ Yet, in the ensuing decades, many sports writers and baseball fans seem to have forgotten the Native American from Maine. Luckily, there is a powerful antidote to this amnesia. It comes in the form of the beautifully depicted and powerfully written children's book, *Louis Sockalexis: Native American Baseball Pioneer*, by Bill Wise and illustrated by Bill Farnsworth, which won the Carter G. Woodson Book Award for Grades K-6 in 2008.⁵



A Legendary Face-Off

The author, Bill Wise, is an eighth grade teacher from Gorham, Maine, who grew up hearing tales of Sockalexis's baseball career. Sockalexis technically broke baseball's color line when he made his debut in Louisville, Kentucky on April 22, 1897. Wise has chosen to tell the story of the subsequent legendary face-off with Amos Rusie in New York City on Wednesday June 16, 1897, when the Cleveland Spiders played against the New York Giants. It's a good choice for the narrative. This face-off was a major story of the season and arguably the highlight of Louis Sockalexis's all-too-brief

major league career. That one ballgame provides a powerful and appropriate snapshot of the challenges Sockalexis faced—and of how he rose above adversity. It is also as captivating as any dramatic climax that a novelist or screenwriter might dream up.

Hooked on Baseball

Wise begins the book with Sockalexis's childhood, relating how he came to love baseball. Louis was born on Indian Island in Maine on October 24, 1871. As his biographer, Ed Rice, points

out, this is the same year as the inaugural season of organized baseball in America. (While this fact is as much circumstance as social studies, it is the kind of “oh, wow” bit of information that can hook children’s interest, pique their curiosity, and give meaning to a timeline.) Jesuit priests educated Sockalexis, and it was one of them who first noticed and encouraged his affinity for athletics. It was a chance meeting with a local group of white boys, however, that would change Louis’ life forever. Wise describes this first taste of baseball and its egalitarian effect on Louis and his playmates. “For the rest of the day,” he writes, “Louis played baseball with the boys. They took turns pitching and catching, hitting and fielding. It didn’t matter that Louis was Native American and the boys were white. All that mattered was baseball. Louis was hooked.”

Defying Stereotypes

Louis’ life on the Penobscot reservation is illustrated beautifully, but the images are as important for what they do not show as for what they do. The reader sees a counterpoint to the usual iconic images of American Indians on the Great Plains. Here we see a New England reservation in the late nineteenth century. There are no feathers, teepees, or powwow council fire, and people dress as they do in the adjacent white neighborhood. Sockalexis’s father, Francis, is a logger—a job that seems quite removed from the image of Native American men on palomino ponies in an arid landscape.

Depicting Racism

The second portion relates Sockalexis development as a baseball player (from his star-turn at Holy Cross College to his signing with the Cleveland Spiders) and how society reacted. On page 10, Louis stands with his bat draped across his shoulder, the sun shining down upon his proud and determined countenance. On page 11, Farnsworth’s depiction of hate-filled audience members is stunning, as one young white man bends at the waist screaming with spittle spewing from his angry mouth.

Similarly, Wise’s narration does not shy away from the racism directed at Sockalexis. Wise writes of spectators who mocked “the Indian playing a white man’s game.” Some of Sockalexis’s teammates “didn’t want a Native American in the starting line up.” (This treatment is, of course, reminiscent of the attitude many of the 1947 Dodgers had about Jackie Robinson. Some of those players went so far as to circulate and sign a petition to owner Branch Rickey that said, “they did not wish to play on the same team as Jackie Robinson or, it was implied, any other black player.”)⁶ The newspapers casually referred to Sockalexis in racist language by calling him “The Deerfoot of the Diamond,” “Chief Sock-em,” and “The Savage.”⁷

A Context of Tragedy

Even during the narrative describing the game Giants versus New York, Wise reminds the reader that, as he came to the plate, Sockalexis heard Giants fans yelling, “Strike the chief out” and

“Get a tomahawk, not a bat.”⁸ Sockalexis told a reporter from *Sporting Life* that, “If the small and big boys of Brooklyn and other cities find it a pleasure to shout at me I have no objections. No matter where I play I go through the same ordeal.”⁹

Teachers could point out that Sockalexis became a rookie less than seven years after the 1890 tragic massacre at Wounded Knee. Libbie Custer, widow of General George Custer, was still “touring the country heralding her husband’s bravery and cause in dealing with the issue of ‘the red man’”¹⁰ and Geronimo was still a prisoner of war at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The social climate in the United States for the young Penobscot might fairly be described as hostile.

A Suspenseful Climax

The third and final section of the book covers the titanic game that occurred that June day in 1897. In my judgment, Wise’s dramatic telling of these few minutes is fairly true to the available historical evidence. Wise has Sockalexis standing tall at the plate amid the derision of the Brooklyn fans when he notices a group of Penobscot Indians (which includes Louis’s father, Francis Sockalexis) who have traveled from the reservation in Maine to cheer him on. This moment appears to be loosely based on Brian McDonald’s biography of Sockalexis, *Indian Summer*, which states that some time after the game Sockalexis “would find out that his father was among” the Penobscot spectators.¹¹ Unfortunately, McDonald’s account offers no citations for its quotations or anecdotes. Although I’ve not been able to confirm this detail with any of the contemporary reports or with Ed Rice’s fine biography of Sockalexis, it is certainly a logical supposition to believe that, if a group of Penobscot made the trek from Indian Island to Brooklyn to cheer on their native son, Francis would have been in the group, and that his son might have seen him in the stands.

A moment later, Sockalexis did, indeed, blast a pitch from his first time at bat out of the stadium for a homerun. There were even two outs from earlier batters as Sockalexis stepped up to the plate. Sockalexis was triumphant. Wise and Farnsworth draw their book to a close with Louis jogging toward first base, a peaceful and proud smile on his face. The spectators, viewed on earlier pages as they hurled insults, have now doffed their caps, a gesture true to the period. Wise succinctly states, “He had won their respect.”

Aftermath

Sadly, this would be Sockalexis’s last homerun in the major leagues. A devastating ankle injury and an on-going battle with alcoholism ended Sockalexis’s career. Wise provides this coda and some of Sockalexis’s impressive statistics in an afterword, followed by a list of the author’s historical sources. A brief notes section for teachers discusses the continuing dispute over the origin of the Cleveland Indians baseball team mascot, “Chief Sock Em’.” Some argue that the team name and mascot are a tribute to Sockalexis, but I’ve seen no solid historical evidence

to support this rather wistful suggestion. Wise also makes the adult reader aware of a claim that a man named James Toy was the first American Indian to play professional baseball, explaining why most historians have discounted this claim.

Classroom Resource

This book opens up a world of possibilities for social studies teachers. Too often American Indians are absent from our curricula, except when they pop up at Thanksgiving time or appear defeated in wars for land. This fine book is one powerful way to address the problem. Social studies teachers could place Louis Sockalexis alongside heroes like Sequoyah, Chief Joseph, Geronimo, the Code Talkers, and Wilma Mankiller. The story of Louis Sockalexis could help American Indian Heritage Month (November) become a time when the diverse history of Native Americans is truly taught.

When teachers approach the topic of civil rights more generally, Louis' heroic struggle against racism could take its place beside those of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Caesar Chavez, and others. His break through major league baseball's color barrier could be placed side by side with Jackie Robinson's better-known achievement.

The book also provides an opportunity for young students today to examine a current and controversial issue: whether Cleveland's baseball team (and numerous college and high school sports teams) should continue to use Native American images as mascots. Students can discuss whether the cartoon character Chief Sock 'Em honors, or insults, Sockalexis. Such a conversation, if carefully prepared and conducted, holds the promise to move America's future in a more thoughtful, sensitive, and equitable direction.¹²

A Useful Memory

"The moon is going to rest," Louis Sockalexis is supposed to have said on the evening of December 23, 1913, "and so soon will I."¹³ The next night, Christmas Eve 1913, his heart gave out. He was found by some loggers with whom he'd been working. Grayson called Sockalexis "the most tragic figure in baseball history."¹⁴

Margaret Davidson has written a popular juvenile literature book, *The Story of Jackie Robinson, Bravest Man in Baseball*.¹⁵ It in no way diminishes Jackie Robinson to also acknowledge the bravery of Louis Sockalexis, who paved the way for other Native American athletes like Jim Thorpe, John Meyers, and even the 2008 Heisman Trophy winner and Western Cherokee Sam Bradford. Indeed, it is not a hyperbole to state that Louis Sockalexis helped pave the way for Jackie Robinson, himself. Over a couple of days, the teacher could read each book aloud, or students could read them in small groups, and then compare and contrast the two "true stories" that occurred in two different generations.

Louis Sockalexis: Native American Baseball Pioneer can help social studies teachers drive home the message that civil rights

pioneers came from various ethnic groups, rose up in many settings, and fought over many decades. Millions of people—not just a few famous heroes—took personal risks to assert the freedoms that today hold our quilted American society together as one. Perhaps with the publication of this children's book, Louis Sockalexis can rise again in splendor, like the full moon over a green field one evening in the middle of June.

Notes

1. Ed Rice, *Baseball's First Indian. Louis Sockalexis: Penobscot Legend*, Cleveland Indian (Windsor, CT: Tide-mark Press, 2003), 65.
2. Rice, 66.
3. Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3.
4. Harry Grayson, *They Played the Game* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1944), 67.
5. Bill Wise and Bill Farnsworth, *Louis Sockalexis: Native American Baseball Pioneer* (New York: Lee and Low Books, 2007).
6. Scott Simon, *Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 104.
7. Wise and Farnsworth, 13.
8. Ibid, 18.
9. Rice, 69.
10. Ibid, 69.
11. Brian McDonald, *Indian Summer: The Forgotten Story of Louis Sockalexis, The First Native American in Major League Baseball* (New York: Rodale, 2003), 152.
12. Ronald W. Evans and David Warren Saxe, *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1996), available at infoagepub.com.
13. McDonald, vii.
14. Grayson, 68.
15. Margaret Davidson, *The Story of Jackie Robinson, Bravest Man in Baseball* (New York: Dell Yearling, 1988).

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GET INVOLVED!

If you or your students would like to learn more about Louis Sockalexis, please visit the website I have launched: www.sockalexis.appstate.edu. There is biographical information, as well as a petition that students and teachers can sign, asking the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, to acknowledge Louis in their permanent exhibits.—J.A.B.

In the legend of Louis Sockalexis, the threads of fact and fiction are intricately woven together into a tapestry of heroic dimensions, and while separating those threads is often difficult and sometimes impossible, one thing remains absolutely clear: Without question, Louis Francis Sockalexis ranks among the truly tragic figures in baseball history, a man of immense talent and unlimited potential whose "tragic flaw".

THE STORIES of his Herculean throws from the outfield abound. One is described in the Worcester Telegram account of the '96 Holy Cross-Georgetown game: "The crowd went into ecstasies over many plays, but there was one which raised their hair.

And then, suddenly, the bottom fell out. He did not appear in the lineup again until July 8 Cleveland killed the true story of Louis Sockalexis, the pioneer they painted red - the barrier breaker they've since caged inside a caricature. Sockalexis was a pioneer paraded through newspaper copy like a minstrel made for the curious gaze of Cleveland baseball fans. A member of the Penobscot tribe, Sockalexis was, as SABR notes, the "first recognized minority" to play in the National League when he signed with the Spiders in 1897 - a full 50 years before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. In good times - Sockalexis wasn't far from a .400 average his first few mont...

This is like Rudyard Kipling rising from the grave to apologize for "The White Man's Burden." Why, after all these years?