***They Played the Game* by Norman L. Macht**

**Review by Alan Zaremba. Associate Professor, Northeastern University.**

Norman Macht’s, *They Played the Game* is a collection of interviews the author conducted with former major league baseball players. Sometimes the players who are interviewed, coached or managed as well. The subtitle of the book is “Memories from 47 Major Leaguers.” Except for brief prefatory paragraphs that precede each player’s interview, the book is just that--nothing more or less--reflections of players about their days in the game.

The author deserves much credit for being able to secure and conduct these nearly fifty interviews over a period of close to thirty years. The players were involved in baseball anytime between 1912 and 1981, and were interviewed at various times between the 1980s and 2008.

I am glad I read this book and I believe fans of the game will find it a similarly enjoyable read. I was most attracted to players I’d seen play or heard about and thought, consequently, that those readers of an older generation might enjoy the book even more. I imagined my dad sitting in his chair, smiling throughout as he went through, *They Played the Game.*

The anecdotes are often amusing. Bob Turley claimed that after a season in the minors his club took on a local team in an exhibition. He struck out every batter in the first five innings and in one inning, nobody but the first baseman and the catcher bothered to take the field behind him. Joe Adcock raised horses and called one, “Touch ‘Em All” because that is what his first base coach used to say to him as he passed by the bag in a homerun trot. In a minor league game, pitcher Monte Weaver took a line drive to his face. Out ran the manager who also paid the bills and was the groundskeeper. When he reached Weaver, ostensibly to offer help or at least comfort, the multi-tasking manager’s advice was succinct: “Don’t get blood on your uniform.” Sid Hudson, a pitcher in the ‘40s and ‘50s commented that he was able to get on a hot streak during which he almost pitched two no-hitters. In recapping one, eventually a one hitter, *The Washington Post* wrote that a player “saved a hit diving to his right for a hard-hit ball and threw to first.” Quipped Hudson: “I never saw [that guy] dive for anything in his life.” Hudson also played for a manager with one of the more intriguing nicknames; Bill “Rawmeat” Rodgers, so dubbed because the manager liked to eat raw steak.

There’s a good deal of talk about pitchers knocking down hitters, miserly owners, and how, “modern players” can’t slide or bunt or do other fundamental things that players used to work hard at. Most of the players are self-deprecating, or at least attempt to be. But I was amused by a few comments like this one from Richie Ashburn: “The best bunter I ever saw was me.”

Many of the players came from rural locations and several of these were from southern states who played before Jackie Robinson entered the league. It is unfortunate that more interviews did not discuss issues of race. I think it would have been valuable to the reader to hear how these players felt about black players and integration. John Roseboro, a black catcher for the Dodgers in the ‘50s and ‘60s talks about race, and Billy Bruton another black player comments that when he stopped playing in 1964, there were no coaching jobs available for black players. Another player refers to his manager as “a good manager” but someone who had it out for Robinson and instructed his players to harm him. The manager only retracted his edict when Robinson seemed to thrive on the targeting. Only then did the manager tell his players, “let’s play everyone the same way.” No egalitarian thunderbolt there. The interviewee commented that “trying to hurt Robinson was costing us games.” If a goal of the book was to depict an era via these interviews, a weakness is an absence of discussion about race.

The arrangement of the book is also interesting. The interviews are presented in alphabetical order. Joe Adcock is first, Don Zimmer last. It might have been more valuable to present these in some chronological order, with perhaps an accompanying commentary. Those who played during the depression vs those who played during the war, and those who played post integration.

I thought of a number of questions as I read through the book. Why did the author pick these particular players? They all are interesting in one way or another but so are hundreds of others so why these and not others? Were any interviews excluded because of comments made? Were euphemisms used to protect players who might have spoken in ways that could be deemed offensive.

There is no information about how the players were guided if they were. Extrapolating from the content, it seems like the author might have just said “talk about your experiences” and if there was hesitation said, “why not begin with how you got started in the game.” Some memories are several pages, others—like Zimmer’s-- only a couple. Why did that interview end abruptly while others rambled on? I wondered how much, if at all, the author prompted or prodded the player to talk about this or that beyond the few bracketed questions the reader can see while reading. Why do some players talk about their careers after baseball and others do not? Some players like Roseboro were not all that welcoming, how did the author entice the players to speak to him? Macht comments that he did some minor editing for the sake of clarity. It must have been difficult at times because a number of the memories are disjointed as if the player went on tangents and the author had to piece together segments making the memory a composite as opposed to a fluid reflection.

The author deliberately did not fact check the stories and is clear in a short preface that a reader might want to do that, but he does not. I liked that. The stories are what the player remembers and taken collectively they inform the reader about the times and the game. A fan of baseball will enjoy this book. If you are looking for some synthesis you may be disappointed, but readers can assume the challenge of drawing their own conclusions.