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'Chief' Bender biography a gem; Vincent's history off base

NON-FICTION | Two books mine baseball's past

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BY KEVIN CANFIELD

Recommend (1)

Tom Swift believes the legacy of Charles "Chief" Bender, the first great Native American Major League Baseball player, is incomplete, and unfairly so.

"In perpetuity he should be remembered as a pioneer," Swift writes in his wonderful and impressively thorough new biography, **Chief Bender's Burden: The Silent Struggle of A Baseball Star** (*University of Nebraska Press, \$24.95*), "but with rare exception he is remembered as, well, a pitcher."

There are worse fates, needless to say, than to be recalled primarily for one's athletic talents. But Swift's point is valid. For example, I consider myself a very big baseball fan, and before reading his book I couldn't have told you a thing about Bender's groundbreaking status; I just knew that he was a really good pitcher a long time ago.

Bender was much more than just good, however. For a few years before World War I, Bender was among the best in the game. Connie Mack, who managed Bender as a member of the Philadelphia Athletics, described the right hander as the "greatest money pitcher" in baseball, and Grantland Rice, the best-known sportswriter of his day, said much the same.

But despite their admiration for his prowess on the mound, many members of the press corps had a penchant for racially tinged prose clunkers. Swift notes the same publication that praised his "brains" and called him "a student" of baseball would also laud his performance in the 1910 season by noting that the "Chief" was "shooting poisoned darts at the palefaces this season."

This would continue long after he quit the game. "After he was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame," Swift writes, "The Sporting News said it was a 'long-delayed feather for the Chief.' Bender's obituary in the same publication carried the headline: 'Chief Bender Answers Call to Happy Hunting Grounds.'"

In a sense, this kind of talk was a product of an era. And according to Swift, Bender never publicly complained about the way he was perceived and described by the media. But circumstantial evidence -- Bender's recurring health problems, heavy drinking, a reported nervous breakdown - gives weight to Swift's assertion that racial prejudices of the day "must have affected him in profound ways."

Swift's mission is to reassert Bender as an important figure in the history of the game, both as a player and a groundbreaking figure. His book does well in both ways.

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Former Major League Baseball Commissioner Fay Vincent's **We Would've Played for Nothing: Baseball Stars of the 1950s and 1960s Talk About the Game They Loved** (*Simon & Schuster, \$25*) is less successful at digging up new angles on the game's history. The book, the second in what Vincent describes as an "Oral History Project," features interviews with mid-century greats like pitchers Whitey Ford and Robin Roberts and sluggers such as Frank Robinson and Harmon Killebrew.

Each chapter has its own individual voice, as Vincent wisely gets out of the way and lets each player speak directly to the reader. As a result, most of the entries are engaging. Carl Erskine recalls staying at a YMCA in Brooklyn even as he was winning games for the Dodgers, a living arrangement I don't think any contemporary Major Leaguer has had to consider. And Robinson talks about his preparation in a time long before 24-hour sports news. "I used to get up in the mornings and I couldn't wait

to get the newspaper," he says, "because you weren't given all this advance information you're given today."

But Vincent's hands-off approach sometimes hurts the book, and too much feels obvious. Serious fans will find more they didn't know in Swift.

Kevin Canfield is a local free-lance writer.

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