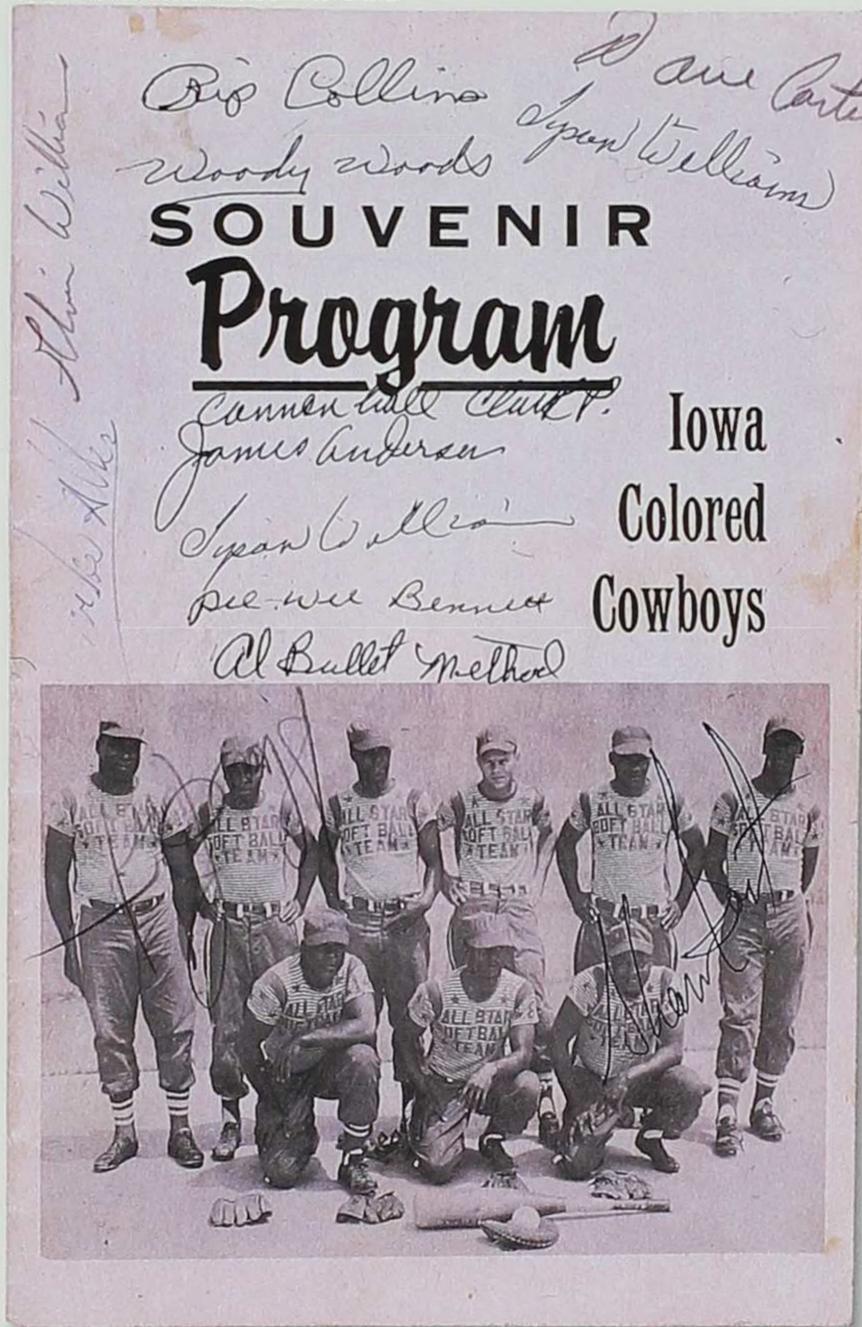


# One in a Million

On any given summer night in the early 1960s, hundreds, sometimes over a thousand Iowans watched the Iowa Colored Cowboys play softball. These were jocular exhibitions, composed of older players, aimed to amuse a general audience rather than impress baseball lovers. An almost all-black team, the Cowboys are commemorated in this cover photograph on a 1960 game program (right). Recently acquired by the State Historical Society of Iowa, the program documents not only African Americans' participation in Iowa ballplaying, but also how integral barnstorming was to baseball's development as the national pastime.

As Negro League historian Donn Rogosin has pointed out, barnstorming showcased professional baseball to a rural white public "starved" for the game. Supplemented by Negro League players and local teams, these lucrative, often interracial, traveling events involved both competition and entertainment, similar to the promotional atmosphere of a Harlem Globetrotters performance. Because of the late-19th-century ban on blacks from the major leagues, such a "baseball minstrel circuit" enabled black players to participate in the game's emergence as the nation's most popular organized team sport in the early 20th century, while it also enhanced the push for the major league's desegregation.

These exhibitions often included fast-pitch softball. While all-white Iowa teams dominated the sport throughout the state, black teams did compete, though perhaps only in these comic troupes. Originally named the Sioux City Iowa Negro Ghosts in



The only autograph that can be matched to one of the players pictured here is for Rip Collins, top row, first on left, the team's traveling secretary and business manager, who also played third base and outfield. The rest of the players who signed the program remain unidentified.

1933, the team, pictured here, reorganized in 1960. Rechristened the Sioux City Iowa Colored Cowboys, the traveling softball team—billed as "a Ball Circus, America's greatest summer sports show" by General Manager Henry Fisher—comprised gifted ballplayers who embraced their role as entertainers. Red Strickland (*top row, middle*), perhaps the Cowboys' only white player, was one of their top hurlers. But he also played to the crowd, noted one of the program's writers, enthraling spectators "with an assortment of between the legs, behind the back" pitches. According to another program account, Marland "Showboat" Buckner (*not pictured*), a great defensive first basemen and "more than adequate with the

bat," was notorious for his "side-splitting" antics, including wisecracks, bat spinning, and embarrassing the umpire.

Sometime during a game, their opponents would rest while the Cowboys separated into two teams for an inning of fun. They played shadow ball, where players mimicked the game's live action without a ball in play, and slow-motion ball, a prolonged performance of the third out.

By the 1960s, the color line had dissolved, leaving exhibitions like these as an outlet for senior ballplayers. Although it is not clear when the Colored Cowboys folded, the photograph and program conjure up much about baseball's grassroots appeal.

—by Lori Vermaas, Editorial Intern