

# The Catcher Was a Cahuilla: A Remembrance of John Tortes Meyers (1880-1971)

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*NATIVE American athletes achieved their greatest recognition in modern sports during the period from the turn of the century through the 1920s (Oxendine 1988). Among the notables were several Californians. For instance, Antonio Lubo, Elmer Busch, and Peter Calac all served as gridiron captains under Coach “Pop” Warner at Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Koerper 2000), where at various times they were teammates of the legendary Jim Thorpe (Peterson n.d.; Steckbeck 1951). Calac was Luiseño, Busch was Pomo, and Lubo was a Santa Rosa Mountain Cahuilla.*

*Another athlete with ties to the Santa Rosa reservation, John Tortes Meyers (Fig. 1), developed into one of the best baseball catchers of his era. A roommate of Thorpe when the two played for the New York Nationals (Giants) (Fig. 2), then managed by John McGraw, “Chief” Meyers counted as battery mates at New York and elsewhere, Baseball Hall of Fame pitchers Christy Mathewson (see Robinson 1993), Rube Marquard (see Hynd 1996), and Walter “Big Train” Johnson (see Kavanagh 1995). For his many accomplishments, Meyers became the first Californian inducted into the American Indian Sports Hall of Fame, presently housed at Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas. This biographical overview chronicles the life of this gifted and courageous athlete who tenaciously embraced his Indian identity while operating mostly in a white world.<sup>1</sup>*

**C**autious notes attend the childhood biography of John Tortes Meyers. Primary documentation is elusive, and Meyers’ octogenarian recollections do not always clarify contradictions in the record. Certain inconsistencies, however, are easily corrected, such as the erroneous but oft-repeated birth date of July 29, 1882, printed, among other places, on sports trading cards featuring the “Chief.” Concerned about age discrimination, Meyers, already 28 years old when he first broke into major league ball, by his own admission moved his birth date two years forward (Ritter 1966:171; Riverside Press Enterprise June 24, 1969).

In an interview with Lawrence Ritter (1966:62), Meyers reported his birth in a small Cahuilla village on the lower slopes of Mount Rubidoux, but when interviewed by George Ringwald (Riverside Press Enterprise, Aug. 23, 1964), he placed his birth in downtown Riverside at Seventh Street (between Market and Main Streets), presumably in the family quarters at the rear of his father’s saloon. His affidavit of birth lists the downtown Riverside location. Goodman’s (1993:74) speculation that the future big leaguer was born on the Cahuilla Reservation near Anza is not credible.

His father, John Mayer (not Meyers), a German-American Civil War veteran from Terra Haute, Indiana, ran the saloon until his demise in 1887 (Patterson 1971:135, 236). A misunderstanding

on the part of a grade school teacher or administrator resulted in the "Meyer" spelling (Col. John Meyers, personal communication 1997). It is not known why the son of this former Union Army captain later added an "s" to Meyer.

Before her marriage, his mother, Felicite, a noted Cahuilla basket maker of the Tortes clan, had resided at Spring Rancheria, so-named for the perennial stream (Spring Brook) just below the settlement. She may have worked as a domestic for the Louis Robidoux (later "Rubidoux") family in the 1860s (Patterson 1971:136; Riverside Press Enterprise, June 16, 1985, Sept. 16, 1990; see Holmes 1912). She bore two other children, Marion, a son and the oldest, and Christine, the youngest, who became a registered nurse. After her husband's demise, Felicite Mayer found employment at the Glenwood Hotel, predecessor to the Mission Inn, Riverside (Riverside Press Enterprise, Oct.



Figure 1. John Tortes Meyers. New York Giants publicity portrait, circa 1910. Photograph courtesy of Michele Cornejo.

20, 1969; Patterson 1971:136).

John Meyers' formal education is known in general outline. Although he attended the Sixth Street School in Riverside, later known as Lincoln School (Riverside Press Enterprise, Oct. 20, 1969), and Riverside High School, Meyers claimed not to have graduated from either grade or secondary school. It is possible that his grade school education was interrupted when his mother took the family for an unknown period of time to live on the Santa Rosa Reservation (see James 1960:143, 146). It was on the school grounds of Riverside and/or the reservation that Meyers first played baseball.

A team photograph published in 1969 by the Riverside Press Enterprise (June 24, 1969) showed Meyers at approximately age 17 seated among players, most of whom are wearing "Riverside H S" uniforms. The Mayer family was living in Riverside at the time, as the 1897 City Directory lists Felicite as owner of a home on La Cadena Drive. It is unclear why Jack, the name used by his family, failed to finish high school, but possibly his focus on baseball superseded academic goals. It was in 1898, "the year Dewey took Manila," that Jack Meyers began his semiprofessional career with the dream of one day making his living in organized baseball.

### EARLY BASEBALL EXPERIENCE

Beyond his schoolboy days, eight years of mostly unorganized (semi-professional) level ball preceded Jack Meyers' 1906 enrollment at Dartmouth College. The future "Iron Man" of the National League marked 1898 as the year he entered "bush league" pro circuits.

When not occupied in such employment as budding citrus trees, the Cahuilla catcher could often be found on the sandlots in and around Riverside. Playing first for the Santa Rosa tribal team and then for the Riverside town team, Meyers' considerable skills were showcased at least as far away as Hemet and San Jacinto. Opponents were other tribal and town teams. He also played ball at San Bernardino, where, for a time, he was employed.



*Figure 2. Three Native American athletes pose before a 1913 game between the New York Giants and Cincinnati Reds baseball clubs. Left to right, Jim Thorpe, "Chief" Meyers, and "Chief" Johnson. Photograph courtesy of Shana Meyers.*

As Jack Meyers' skills and reputation grew, he moved beyond the Inland Empire, playing in Fresno, where he worked in a raisin factory (year[s] unknown), San Diego (1902-1904), El Paso, Texas (1904) (New York Evening Telegram, June 24, 1913), and eventually for the Phelps-Dodge Copper Company club (1905) based in Clifton, Arizona. Meyers previously had a tryout in 1903 with the Los Angeles Nationals of the short-lived Pacific National League (PNL) (see Los Angeles Daily Times, April 6, 1903; Dobbins and Twitchell 1994:37-38; Zuckerman 1994; Bauer 1996). Meyers, William Traeger, and a player named Hardy vied for the catcher position (Fig. 3). Meyers did not make the cut, nor did Traeger, who later became Sheriff of Los Angeles County and a member of Congress. Statistics given in the 1904 Reach Baseball

Guide (Richter 1904) indicate that Hardy was awarded the position. Both the Los Angeles and San Francisco franchises of the PNL folded at midseason (Zingg and Medeiros 1994:19-20; Zuckerman 1994; Bauer 1994:28).

The Cahuilla catcher played for the San Diegos, a town team, in 1902-1904 (Fig. 4), in winter league baseball, where the level of competition undoubtedly seasoned the young athlete. Such teams would bring local players in contact with experienced professionals, some from the major leagues. Southern California had become home for three winter leagues in the 1890s, owing especially to the desire of major league owners to maintain the conditioning of some of their players while allowing the "baseballists" to supplement incomes in a game not yet characterized by



Figure 3. Meyers, Traeger, and Hardy at 1903 Los Angeles Nationals tryout. Courtesy Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.

astronomical salaries (Norris 1984). The favorable climate in the California Southland provided a magnet for many players who eschewed miserable winter weather in the east.

It was while playing for the 1905 Phelps-Dodge Copper Company semi-professional team at a tournament in Albuquerque that Meyers had his fateful meeting with Dartmouth's Ralph Glaze, a soon-to-be Walter Camp First Team All American football player (see Walsh 1951:214). Glaze was one of many college athletes who ventured into summertime semi-pro baseball, usually playing under assumed names.

Glaze's enthusiasm for Meyers was immediate (Glaze 1967). Not only was the big catcher affable and quick-witted, but he was talented, had never attended college, and since he was an Indian, would be eligible for scholarship monies from Glaze's alma mater, an institution with a commitment to educating Native Americans. Meyers' new friend set about

convincing the Riverside product to go east in the fall and began plotting the strategy by which a potential collegiate athletic star might gain admission to Dartmouth.

## DARTMOUTH

John Meyers' fondness for Dartmouth College never abated. "Once a Dartmouth, always a Dartmouth," he was wont to say when asked to reminisce on his college days, which lasted but one year for this member of the class of '09 (Ritter 1966:164, 1990:149). "Chief Tortes," as he was known at the Hanover, New Hampshire campus, was openly and warmly welcomed for more than just his athletic potential.

Historically, Dartmouth has long recruited Native Americans. Eleazar Wheelock founded Dartmouth under a charter granted by George III in 1769. The college was an outgrowth of Moor's Indian Charity School, also founded by the Congregationalist minister, but about 19 years earlier, in Lebanon, Connecticut. The second Earl of Dartmouth, impressed with the work begun by the minister and his English missionaries, became trustee of funds for Indians who were scholastically qualified. The major impediment to Meyers' academic and collegiate athletic progress was simply that he was not qualified to matriculate. Tutors might be sought to address his academic deficiencies, but more problematic was Meyers' lack of an earned high school diploma.

When Ralph Glaze, playing for the Trinidad, Colorado, Big Six Athletic Club, first met John Meyers at the Southwestern Tournament in Albuquerque, he enlisted one of the umpires, James J. Jeffries, undefeated world heavyweight boxing champion, to persuade Meyers to attend Dartmouth (Glaze 1967). Next, the collegiate sports hero and future Boston Red Sox pitcher enlisted Dr. Ben Beshoar, team manager for the Big Six, to produce a high school diploma for Meyers. Taking his own diploma and a chemical to efface the name, Beshoar inexplicably supplied the name of Ellis Williams, the Clifton team's left fielder, to the sheepskin. Interestingly,



Figure 4. The San Diegos, a town team, circa 1902-1904. Meyers is standing at far left. Courtesy Shana Meyers.

the registration certificate from Dartmouth gives Meyers' father's name as John Tortes and his father's occupation as "hunter." Similar shenanigans were common in turn of the century sport - to protect a collegian's eligibility, conceal a ringer's identity, etc. With his new but unwieldy moniker, Ellis Williams Tortes Meyers was Dartmouth bound, where, it was hoped, he might possibly star in three sports - football, baseball, and track and field (as a weight man).

Soon after arriving at the college in September, 1905, "Chief Tortes" joined a local fraternity, Kappa Kappa Kappa. Failing to make the Freshman football squad for lack of any experience in that sport, Jack Meyers played on the scrub team. His less than sterling performance in the classroom aroused the suspicions of a dean who contacted the high school that issued the now doctored diploma.

Summoned to President Tucker's office, the six foot tall Cahuilla was confronted with the problem of not being 5'6" and having red hair, the physical description of the original recipient of the document (see Ritter 1990:152).

Now ineligible for sports, he reenrolled as a special student. Meyers participated in spring training, and he played catcher for a local team, the Yannigans, occasionally finding himself in competition against the Dartmouth nine. Meyers also kept busy training horses and dogs in town (Boston Herald, December 17, 1913).

Ever popular in the Hanover community, the "Chief" entertained especially audiences of admiring boys with his imaginative stories of life on the Plains. He enjoyed a put-on, and must be considered the suspect source of some of the inaccurate, even bizarre, published references to his ethnic origins. Sports writers often neglect to check "facts," particularly ones that add

**Table 1**  
**STATISTICS FOR JOHN TORTES MEYERS**

Year Club	League	Pos	G	AB	R	H	TB	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	PCT
1906 Harrisburg/Lancaster	Tri-State	C	40	132	16	31	42	6	1	1		3	.235
1907 Butte	Northwestern	C	90	353	47	91	123	6	10	2		9	.258
1908 St. Paul	American Association	C	88	329	45	96	120	19	1	1		4	.292
1909 New York	National	C	90	220	15	61	84	10	5	1	30	3	.277
1910 New York	National	C	127	365	26	104	125	18	0	1	62	5	.285
1911 New York	National	C	133	391	48	130	169	18	9	1	61	7	.332
1912 New York	National	C	126	371	60	133	177	16	5	6	54	8	.358
1913 New York	National	C	120	378	37	118	155	18	5	3	47	7	.312
1914 New York	National	C	134	381	33	109	135	13	5	1	55	4	.286
1915 New York	National	C	110	289	24	67	90	10	5	1	26	4	.232
1916 Brooklyn (a)	National	C	80	239	21	59	75	10	3	0	21	2	.247
1917 Brooklyn/Boston (b)	National	C	72	200	13	45	60	7	4	0	7	4	.225
1918 Buffalo	International	C	65	204	28	67	83	14	1	0		2	.328
1919 New Haven	Eastern	C	84	276	39	83	114	18	2	3		9	.301

(a) Released via waivers by New York to Brooklyn, February 1916.

(b) Released to Boston (by Brooklyn), August 16, 1917.

Statistics compiled by Ray Nemeec, Society for American Baseball Research.  
Table provided by Ray Nemeec.

color to a story. In researching this biography it was not surprising to read on sporting pages and elsewhere that Jack Meyers' father and grandfather were "feathered chiefs" of the "Cohuilla" [sic] tribe of Michigan, that migrated to Riverside, California (e.g., McDonald 1967:56), that he was a Huyakawa, and that he was a "full-blooded" Mission Indian.

It was through the Dartmouth baseball coach, Tom McCarthy, that Meyers landed a job, midseason, with the Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) club in the Tri-State League (see Ritter 1990:152), then coached by future Hall of Famer Billy Hamilton, a former Philadelphia Phillies player with one of the best lifetime steal records in the majors (Ivor-Campbell et al. 1996:75). "Sliding Billy" Hamilton was manager of the Harrisburg Senators, and he signed the Dartmouth freshman to a 250 dollar a month contract for the 1906 summer. He was released after his first several weeks with the Senators and signed by Lancaster, but later in the season he may have

returned to Harrisburg (The [Harrisburg] Patriot, August 3, 1912; but see also the New York American, June 16, 1912).

#### MINOR LEAGUE PLAY, 1907-1908

Jack Meyers hoped to continue his college studies, but when, at the end of the season with Harrisburg his mother fell ill, he returned to California at her request. When she recovered, it was too late to begin another year at Dartmouth, and so Meyers remained in the Southland. Through connections from his copper company bush league experience, he ended up playing in 1907 for the Butte Montana Rustlers of the Northwestern League (The Butte Miner, May 28, 1907). He was then sold to St. Paul of the American Association where he spent most of the 1908 season. It was in St. Paul that Meyers met his wife (New York American, June 16, 1912). Meyers' minor and major league statistics are shown in Table 1.

Between Butte and Saint Paul, the

Cahuilla catcher kept his edge playing semipro winter ball in San Diego with the Pickwicks of the Southern State League, also known as the Southern California League. Because San Diego was passed over in its quest to become a 1903 charter member of the Pacific Coast League, a number of boosters dedicated themselves to at least preserving winter baseball (Norris 1984:7-8). The Pickwicks, sponsored by a San Diego theater, were an outgrowth of that effort, and they played most of their home games at Athletic Park, at 26th and Main Streets in San Diego. There, fans might watch Meyers and his teammates engaged in intercity battle with the Ralstons or going against the Los Angeles based Dyas or Cline teams (San Diego Union, November 3, 1907). Meyers was a heavy hitter (.390 BA) in the 1906-1907 season. He played well in the 1907-1908 season during which he once caught for Walter Johnson whose services had been secured for a several game series against the Pacific Coast League champions, the Los Angeles "Looloos," also known as the Angels. In the much ballyhooed so-called "Coast Championship," the L.A. club prevailed, three games to two (Thomas and Carey 1995:39-41; see also Kavanagh 1995:28). Parenthetically, in the first game of the series, Johnson pitched superbly, throwing a shutout, but his catcher threw out three runners and accounted for three of the Pickwick's five hits (Thomas 1995:52). Nearly two years later, the former Fullerton Union High School pitcher and the Cahuilla catcher were again battery mates on the "All Nationals" which played Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics in a post-season barnstorming tour (Thomas and Carey 1995:44; Thomas 1995:69).

Meyers' tenure with the Harrisburg, Butte, Pickwick, and Saint Paul organizations provided the "baseballist" a level of experience and degree of exposure to catapult his career into the big leagues. Late in the St. Paul season, after batting .292 and fielding .960, he was sold by the Saints to the New York Nationals, but he would not play in a Giants game until the 1909 season.

## BIG LEAGUE CAREER

Jack Meyers played big league ball during an especially historical period of the game. In his first year as the starting Giants catcher, 1910, baseball became the "official" national pastime when President William H. Taft participated in a new American ritual, the head of state throwing out a ball to open a season (see Kavanagh 1995:31-32). Also attending that Washington Senators-Philadelphia Athletics game was Vice President James Sherman.

It was also in 1910 that both the National and the American Leagues adopted a livelier "jackrabbit" ball (Naft and Cohen 1991:48). It was in Meyers' final two years playing with the Giants that the Federal League became a self-proclaimed "major" league, raiding the American and National Leagues for players through its short (1914-1915) existence. Meyers did not "jump league," but a fellow friend and Native American, "Chief" Albert Bender, did, only to forever after regret his decision to depart from Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics.

The Indians of sport, particularly Bender, Thorpe and Meyers, made good copy during the teens, as much for their abilities as for their ethnicity (Philadelphia Public Ledger, March 14, 1915). Grantland Rice, Damon Runyon, Westbrook Pegler, and Irvin S. Cobb all wrote extensively about these and other "Redmen." Here, Meyers could be quite accommodating to the press, on occasion donning for sports photographers the full dress of a Plains Indian chief (e.g., Arizona Gazette, March 29, 1912). One sports page caption underneath a photograph of a Plains costumed Meyers informed readers that the catcher sometimes wore this traditional dress of his tribe when he returned home to be among his people (The Augusta Sunday Herald, July 14, 1912).

Meyers had arrived too late in the 1908 New York season to see any action. With the departure of future Hall of Famer Roger Bresnahan to manage the St. Louis Cardinals, Meyers in 1909 began playing regularly along with another catcher, George Schlei, acquired in the event that Meyers failed to measure up



Figure 5. Hassan Cigarette tobacco card issued in 1912 showing Meyers (left) and Christy Mathewson (right) on the end panels. In the center panel, John McGraw (left), New York Giants manager, and Harry (Jasper) Davis (right), Philadelphia Athletics team captain, shake hands.

to his potential (Hynd 1995:155-156). It was on April 15, 1909 that the "Chief" played his first big league game, entering a contest against Brooklyn as a pinch hitter and promptly getting a single. Two days later, he made his catching debut, receiving for Rube Marquard, the game winner (Philadelphia Public Ledger, March 15, 1915).

In each of the 1911, 1912, and 1913 seasons, McGraw's starting catcher earned the title "Ironman," for even with severely swollen hands and split bleeding fingers, Meyers would normally stay his position. Another honor accorded Meyers was placement on the Grand National All-America Baseball Team. To be eligible for consideration, one must have played on a pennant winning team between the years 1871 and 1917, played in at least 50 games for the championship team (pitchers-25 games), and have had the highest combined fielding and batting record (for pitchers, percentage of victories also included) for one's position. Meyers' 1912 performance of 122 games with a .973 fielding average and a .358 batting average put the right hander ahead of all other eligible catchers. The .358 batting average was second highest in the National League for 1912. The previous year, Meyers had been third (.332),

close behind Doc Miller of Boston (.333) and National League leader Honus Wagner (.334) (Alexander 1995:154-155).

While with the Giants, the Cahuilla athlete played in three world series. New York lost all three contests. In the 1911 Series, he set a record that still stands for the most assists in a six game series, throwing out twelve runners. His good friend, pitcher Rube Marquard, holds the 20th century's big league record for most wins in a row in a single season, and Meyers caught nearly every one of those victories. He caught for Christy Mathewson, a man often regarded as America's first authentic sports hero (Fig. 5), a 373 game winner, in 214 of his games.

Nineteen sixteen found Meyers catching with the Brooklyn Nationals (Fig. 6), where he was reunited with a former coach, Wilbert (Uncle Robbie) Robinson (see Hynd 1995:192). He credited fellow player, Casey Stengel, with being the catalyst in the pennant victory (Ritter 1966:171-172; Riverside Press Enterprise, June 26, 1969). Sadly, membership on a World Series championship team eluded the "Chief" as the Dodger team lost to the Boston Red Sox, four games to one. George Herman Ruth was then a young pitcher for Boston, and Meyers recalled the Babe as a strong left hander with a "great



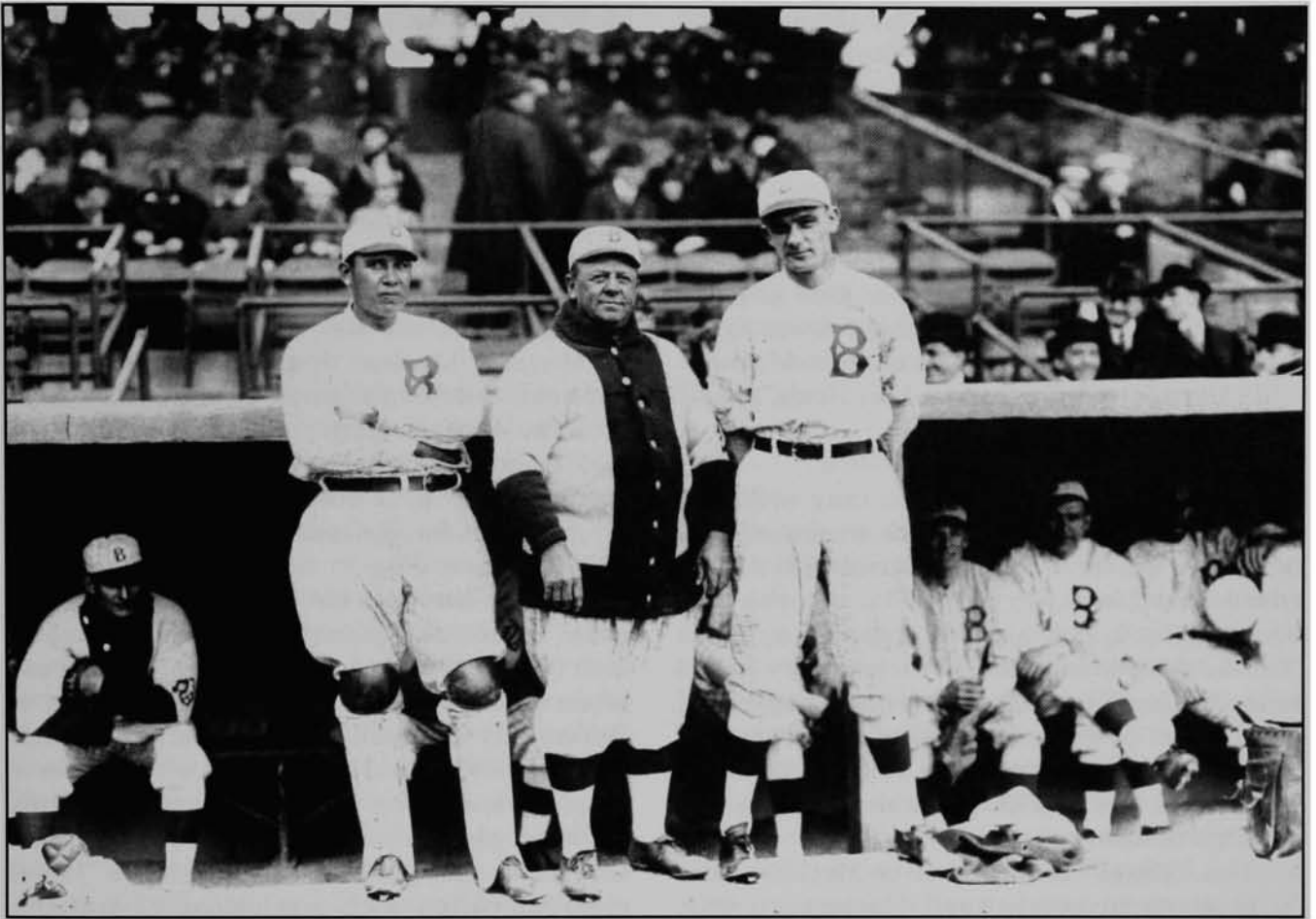


Figure 6. "Chief" Meyers, Wilbert (Uncle Robbie) Robinson, and Rube Marquard pose in front of the Brooklyn Dodgers dugout, circa 1916. Courtesy Shana Meyers.

curve that broke under your chin." Meyers told a reporter, "I liked Babe; he was a fine fellow." On one occasion the two sluggers traded bats (Riverside Press Enterprise, June 26, 1969).

The "Chief" was generous in his praise of other baseball greats, leaving sports historians with many positive recollections of some of the most notable sports figures of the era. Meyers reserved highest praise for those conducting themselves as true sportsmen and gentlemen, two labels reportedly not deserved by the psychopathic, often violent, and virulently racist Ty Cobb, arguably the greatest player of his or perhaps any era and first inductee into the Baseball Hall of fame (see Stump 1994). Meyers was sensitive to racial prejudice, but rather than voice an overtly negative commentary about Cobb, a man generally despised by his own

Detroit Tiger teammates, he chose instead to pay highest tribute to another superb shortstop with hitting ability, Pittsburgh Pirate Honus Wagner, as the greatest all-around baseball player ever (Riverside Press Enterprise, June 26, 1969). Wagner was a model of sportsmanship on the field and was a gentleman off the field. The "Chief" believed "Hans" Wagner to have had "the most colorful career during his time of any other player before or since." He had no weaknesses, and "his hands were magnets...all he had to do was to reach out and the ball would lodge in his glove" (The Monrovia Journal, August 9, 1932).

Christy Mathewson was Meyer's choice for greatest pitcher of all time (Ritter 1966:168; Riverside Press Enterprise, June 26, 1969). Not only did Mathewson have great control, but his

encyclopedic mind recorded the strengths and weaknesses of the batters he faced (Riverside Press Enterprise, August 23, 1964).

"Matty's catcher" described the pitcher's special genius:

What he had was memory. He knew the weaknesses of a thousand batters. If you ever got a smash hit off of a certain kind of ball he threw you, then you never got to see that kind of ball again from him the rest of your life [Pasadena Independent Star News, June 13, 1960].

"Matty" had the further uncanny ability to remember nearly every batter's weakness, and he would pitch to that weakness (San Luis Obispo Telegram, Nov. 28, 1936; see also *The Sporting News*, Jan. 14, 1967). According to the "Chief," Mathewson could master every batter in the National League, with a single exception, Joe Tinker. "Joe could hit him at will, and at last my friend gave up trying to fool him" (*The Oregonian*, May 2, 1933). For this, Meyers had no explanation.

The "Chief" found Christy Mathewson a "gentleman in every way." Mathewson was, however, somewhat distant and "hard to get acquainted with." This was not so of Rube Marquard, with whom Meyers had a more personal relationship. The catcher was quick to point out (Ritter 1966:171) that had modern rules been in force, Marquard would have been credited with 20 straight wins, not the official single season record of 19 (see also Kavanagh 1995:52-53). The 1916 Dodgers were loaded with ex-Giants, and the two battery mates continued to play together in Brooklyn where they were roommates (Mansch 1996:17).

An earlier roommate was Jim Thorpe, and Meyers told a deeply personal story about the ex-Olympian's grief at having been stripped of the medals he won at Stockholm in 1912. Unable to sleep one evening during a road trip, Thorpe tearfully told Meyers of the injustice he had to suffer, only because the legendary Sac and Fox athlete had played summer semi-professional baseball. In those days, many college athletes

played bush league ball for small remuneration, but aware that such participation risked loss of their amateur status, almost all signed on under assumed names. Thorpe naively competed under his own name, certain proof that he was unaware that he was violating the amateur ethic. "It broke Jim's heart," Meyers recalled, "and he never really recovered" (Ritter 1966:175; Pasadena Independent Star News, June 13, 1950; see also Wheeler 1983:158).

Meyers' kindest combination of words, "honest, forthright, and charitable," were reserved for the sharp tongued John McGraw (see Ivor-Campbell et al. 1996:107-108), the "Little Napoleon," a firebrand of a manager with a reputation for generally standing up for his players. According to the catcher, McGraw's philosophy was that his ball team never lost a game, rather any game lost was the manager's fault (Ritter 1966:166-167). Although tough and often foulmouthed, McGraw, according to Meyers, never cussed out his players (McDonald 1967:55-60). He worked to elevate the status of all players, making sure, for instance, that on the road, players were roomed at better hotels, this at a time when "baseballists" were regarded, often with just cause, as ruffians, incapable of adapting to civilized convention (see Ritter 1966:164).

Apparently, McGraw was rather fond of the "Chief." Meyers' most cherished possession was not the bat he had received from Babe Ruth, but rather a gold watch fob given to him by Manager McGraw. The catcher's mitt fob had a diamond on the clasp, and a large pearl at the center of the mitt represented a baseball (San Luis Obispo Telegram, November 28, 1936).

One of Meyers' most memorable experiences with McGraw's club was working the 31-game front end of the 1913-14, 139-day around the world baseball tour in which the barnstorming White Sox and Giants show played out on the North American continent. When the athletes reached Sioux City, Iowa, several hundred Native Americans were drawn to the game mainly by the presence of Jim Thorpe and "Chief" Meyers (Hynd 1996:205). Meyers, for what ever reasons, was not among the athletes

who boarded the "*Empress of Japan*" to complete the foreign part of the tour (Sporting Life, Nov. 29, 1913) which included competition against Japanese university teams, an exhibition game at Giza, near the pyramids and the Sphinx, an audience with the Pope in Rome for the Catholic ballplayers, and an exhibition game attended by King George V, at Stamford Bridge, outside London (Robinson 1993:158-160; Alexander 1995:175-177; Hynd 1996:205-206).

The era's fastest pitcher, even faster than Rube Waddell according to Meyers, was his friend Walter Johnson, whom the chief described as a "quiet, shy type who wouldn't push himself on anyone." Meyers' caught for Johnson when the two played winter ball for the Pickwicks at San Diego (Kavanagh 1995:28). He also had batted against the "Big Train" who, he claimed, never struck him out. Meyers was rarely fanned, but there were two hurlers who confounded the big Cahuilla, Earl "Crossfire" Moore, the Philadelphia Nationals and Cleveland Nationals "underhanded" pitcher (The Oregonian, May 2, 1933) and Hall of Famer Grover Cleveland Alexander. The year Meyers batted .358 (in 126 games), he had only 20 strikeouts, but he was victimized three times that 1912 season by Alexander, who "was fast and had a peculiar hitch that fooled a batter" (McDonald 1965:56). Alexander was the National League strikeout leader (195) in 1912. Parenthetically, 1912 was the year another Native American, "Chief" Wilson, led all of big league baseball in triples, an astounding 36, which is the record for the 20th century (Neft and Cohen 1991:622).

After playing just 47 games with Brooklyn in the 1917 season, Jack Meyers was signed to a Boston Nationals contract; however, at 37 years of age, he would last just 25 more games and 68 at bats in the big leagues. Never making more than 6,000 dollars a season from any contract (Meyers 1968:317), but receiving bonus money for the four World Series, pay for barnstorming and other off-season baseball play (Hynd 1995:161), and generous compensation for some vaudeville work (Robinson 1993:152),

the Cahuilla ballplayer could afford a comfortable home in New Canaan, Connecticut, where he lived with his wife Anna, a Jewish actress and/or dancer (William Meyers, personal communication 1995). They would later separate, and Meyers would remain childless.

With "Chief" Meyers' big league career playing out, he contemplated other opportunities. After leaving the employ of the Boston Braves, he played ball with two minor league clubs.

### BACK TO THE MINORS

One of the most amusing vignettes in the Meyers athletic saga involves George Weiss, one time general manager for the New Haven Chiefs (Eastern League). As Meyers told the story to sports writers Donald Honig and Lawrence Ritter, he abruptly quit the New Haven club shortly after the opening game in 1918. America had entered the war in Europe, and according to the "Chief," a patriotic ceremony during the club's first contest motivated the player-manager to join the Marine Corps. His departure was unannounced, leaving Weiss to wonder what had gone awry. In 1965, Meyers, with Honig and Ritter in trail, visited the office of George Weiss, then President of the New York Mets, where Meyers made a show of apologizing to Weiss for his sudden and mysterious disappearance, explaining that patriotism had inspired his behavior (Ritter n.d.). Weiss graciously accepted Meyers' humble apology and praised his former employee for service in a noble cause. Further amends involved a gift of "sacred" stones that the Cahuilla "Ironman" claimed to have received from some Kwakiutls. George Weiss appeared gracious if not a little mystified by the unusual presentation. Exiting Weiss' office and with a smile, Meyers confessed to his two companions that the stones were virtually worthless rocks retrieved from a flower pot in the basement of Meyers' home (Ritter 1990:150-151).

The joke, it would seem, was not on Weiss, but rather on the two sports writers. Here are the facts. Meyers actually played for Buffalo, the "Bison Herd," (International League) in 1918

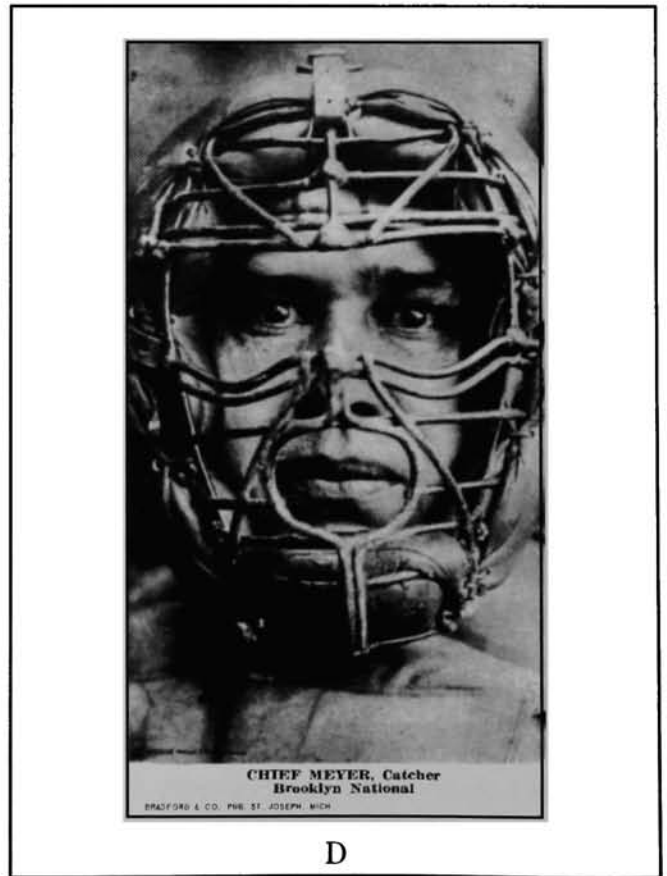
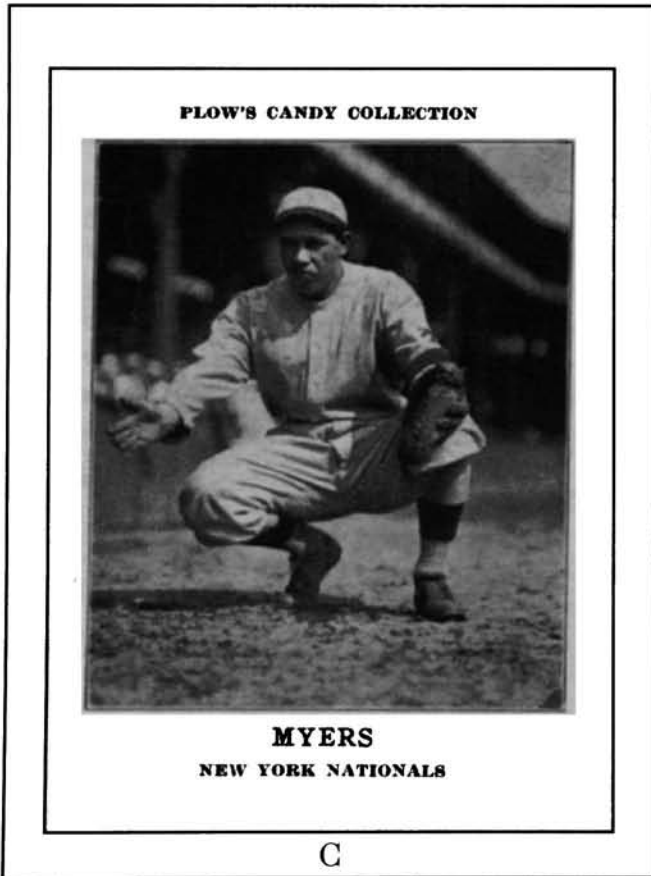
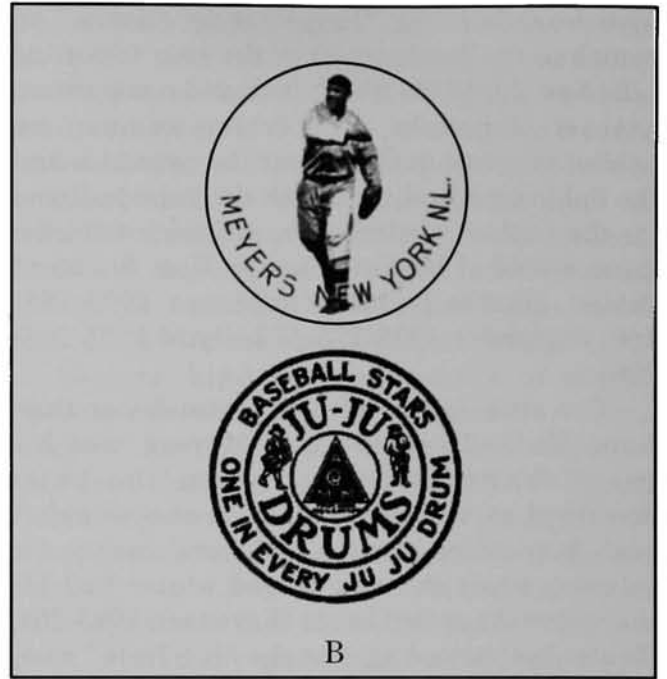
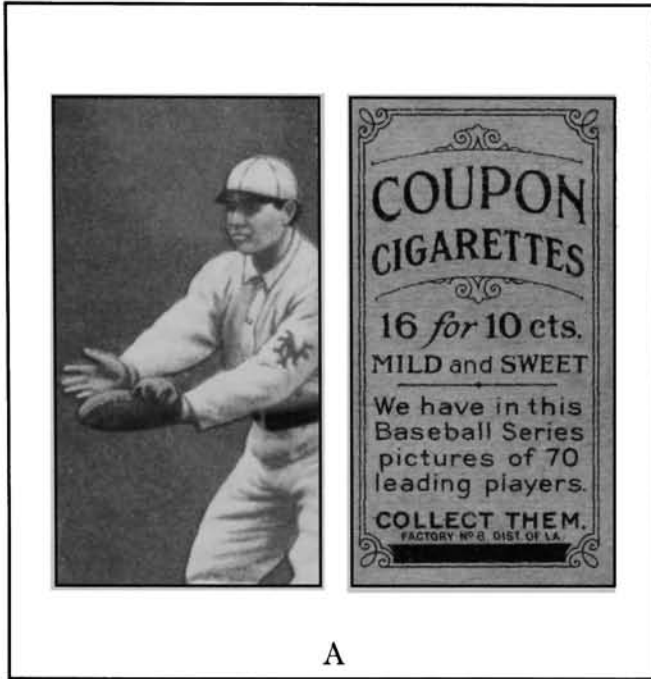


Figure 7. Baseball trading cards of John Meyers: (a) Coupon Cigarettes, 1919; (b) Ju-Ju Drum gum, 1910; (c) Plow's Candy Company, 1912; (d) Fleischmann Bakery, bread card, 1916. Cards b and d from the Larry Fritsch collection. Card c from the Bruce Dorskind collection.

from May 8 through July 31, not the New Haven club. He joined the Marine Corps on October 31, but Armistice occurred on November 11. Private Meyers was honorably discharged on March 17, 1919. It was in 1919, after, not before, he had served but a short time in the armed forces, that Meyers became a member of the New Haven Chiefs (Eastern League). A 1919 team photograph in *The Reach Official American League Baseball Guide of 1920* shows Meyers standing behind George Weiss. Meyers' 1919 statistics are given in Table 1. Meyers was depicted as a minor league player on only one kind of tobacco trade card, which was issued in 1919, and it associated the athlete with New Haven (Fig. 7a).

All of this reflects Meyers' sense of humor. As stated before, he enjoyed a put-on, and this spoof had a special twist with the writers believing Weiss the object of the joke, when in fact Weiss and Meyers were undoubtedly laughing up their sleeves at these antics. One wonders if the "Chief" had first given Weiss any warning as to what was about to transpire.

### AFTER ORGANIZED BASEBALL

After disposing of his home in New Canaan, Connecticut, Meyers returned to southern California and found employment as a construction foreman for the San Diego Consolidated Gas and Electric Company. He played briefly in a semi-pro league in San Diego, but he quit in disgust after being booed by unappreciative fans.

The Great Depression precipitated much turmoil in "Chief" Meyers' life. First, losing much of his wealth in the stock market crash (William Meyers, personal communication 1995) and then his job with gas company cutbacks, the former professional star gravitated through several employments in rapid succession.

It was probably with his departure from the Gas Company around 1931 that the "Chief" became a boxing inspector for the California State Athletic Commission, a position he seems to have held at least into 1935. His famous name

helped Meyers secure a job as a car salesman for the Richards and Bowman Ford dealership in National City (New York Evening Post, Feb. 23, 1932). It was around this time that he picked up some work umpiring in San Diego and Mexico (New York Evening Post, Feb. 23, 1932). Nineteen thirty two was a whirlwind year, and soon, through the influence of John McGraw, Meyers signed a contract to scout (March 1932) for the Cincinnati Reds, searching out young California talent (New York Evening Sun, Jan. 23, 1933).

Next, Meyers became proprietor of the Marigold Gardens Restaurant in Duarte (The Monrovia Journal, August 9, 1932). His name had been an important asset. Advertisements invited customers to eat and dance at the "Chief Meyers' New York Giants' Marigold Gardens" (The Monrovia Journal, Oct. 13, 1932), which also featured free psychic readings. In 1932, the "Chief" helped coach the "Fighting Gobs," an American Legion junior baseball club (San Diego Union, June 12, 1932).

By the close of 1932, Meyers had a staff position with the National Baseball School in Los Angeles (Los Angeles Times, Nov. 24, 1932). The school was run by Jess Orndorff who had once played five games for the Boston Nationals in 1907. A Sporting News article (March 16, 1933) announced that Orndorff was putting together an Old Timers team to tour the United States playing against organized clubs as well as semiprofessional nines.

The list of former big league notables included "Wahoo" Sam Crawford (Detroit Tigers), Ivan "Slasher" Olson (Brooklyn Dodgers), Johnny Butler (Chicago White Sox), "Ping" Bodie (New York Yankees), Harry Hooper (Boston Red Sox), "Pudgie" Gould (Cleveland Indians), and Bob McGraw (Philadelphia Phillies) (The Sporting News, April 27, 1933). It was planned that the former stars would instruct young baseball hopefuls in the fundamentals and fine points of the game in a one to two hour period prior to any Old Timers game (Jess Orndorff, communication to Baseball Magazine, 1933).

By April of 1933, the barnstorming Old

Timers had begun a tour that scheduled perhaps as many as 90 games in an itinerary that included competitions in Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, New York, Brooklyn, Detroit, and Boston. The team had played well in locations such as Needles, Oakland, Bend, Grants Pass, Seattle, Longview, and Tacoma, and at one point boasted an 18-2 record. With insufficient revenue to pay expenses, however, the tour disbanded at Salt Lake City.

Soon after the Old Timers club folded, Meyers landed a role in the movie *Laughing Boy* (released in 1934), a story of Indian life filmed near Tuba City, Arizona. Film publicists described how Meyers had laid out a ball diamond that incorporated a desert butte for a backdrop, and MGM spokesmen further reported that Meyers was teaching Navajos "how he formerly nailed the screwball of Mathewson." In the 1960s, he was a frequent guest of the Dodgers and Angels in Los Angeles, but he also attended games at Shea Stadium in New York and at Candlestick Park in San Francisco (*The Sporting News*, Jan. 14, 1967). He appeared on the "Today" program as well as the Ed Sullivan Show (Sept. 25, 1967). He was hosted by the Macmillan Company in New York, all expenses paid, as part of the fete announcing publication of Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times* (1966), which featured Meyers in one chapter (see also Ritter 1968, 1990). Also in late life, Meyers spoke at sports testimonials and entertained his Riverside Elks Club and American Legion cronies with baseball stories and recitations of "Casey at the Bat," a poem that had been popular in early twentieth century vaudeville, especially when delivered by some hero of the diamond. An extensive search turned up no record that the "Chief" ever presented this poem on stage, but he did do some vaudeville, performing in a skit titled "Curves" with Christy Mathewson and actress May Tully in 1910, earning about 500 dollars a week for a 17 week run (Robinson 1993:152; Hynd 1996:55). Athletic and stage fame brought acquaintances and friendships with well known entertainers, including Lillian Russell, W. C. Fields, and Will Rogers. In his

later years, Meyers found relaxation and comradery with well known baseball friends, people such as Walter O'Malley and Lefty O'Doul.

Economic stability returned to Meyers' life in late 1933. On September 4, he was appointed Chief of Police for the Mission Indian Agency of Southern California (see *San Bernardino Daily Sun*, September 5, 1933; *Riverside Enterprise*, September 21, 1933), working for John W. Dady who in July had taken on the superintendency of the Agency at Riverside. In his capacity as a lawman, Meyers' enforcement duties covered 30 reservations from San Diego to Santa Barbara. He served the Indian Service, a branch of the Interior Department, for a number of years. The one time baseball great also served as the elective spokesman of the Santa Rosa Band.

## DISCUSSION

Jack Meyers became one of the most readily recognized ballplayers of his time, his image appearing on dozens of advertising giveaways and premiums offered to customers of cigarettes, cigars, confectionery products, bakery goods, clothing, and sporting magazines and newspapers (Figs. 5, 7 and 8). His athleticism, affable personality, and ethnic identity coalesced into continuous good copy and a celebrity status that developed in tandem with a host of friendships and acquaintances reading like a who's who of early twentieth century baseball. The "Chief" had caught for two of the first five inductees into the Baseball Hall of Fame (Walter Johnson and Christy Mathewson), but beyond these and many other accomplishments, there emerges a greater dimension to the Meyers story.

The Cahuilla ballplayer and other early Indian competitors integrated into modern sport were cause and effect in social forces molding the national psyche. Few institutions are perceived as more American than the national pastime, and big league participation between the late 1890s through the early 1920s of a number of Native Americans - Thorpe, the

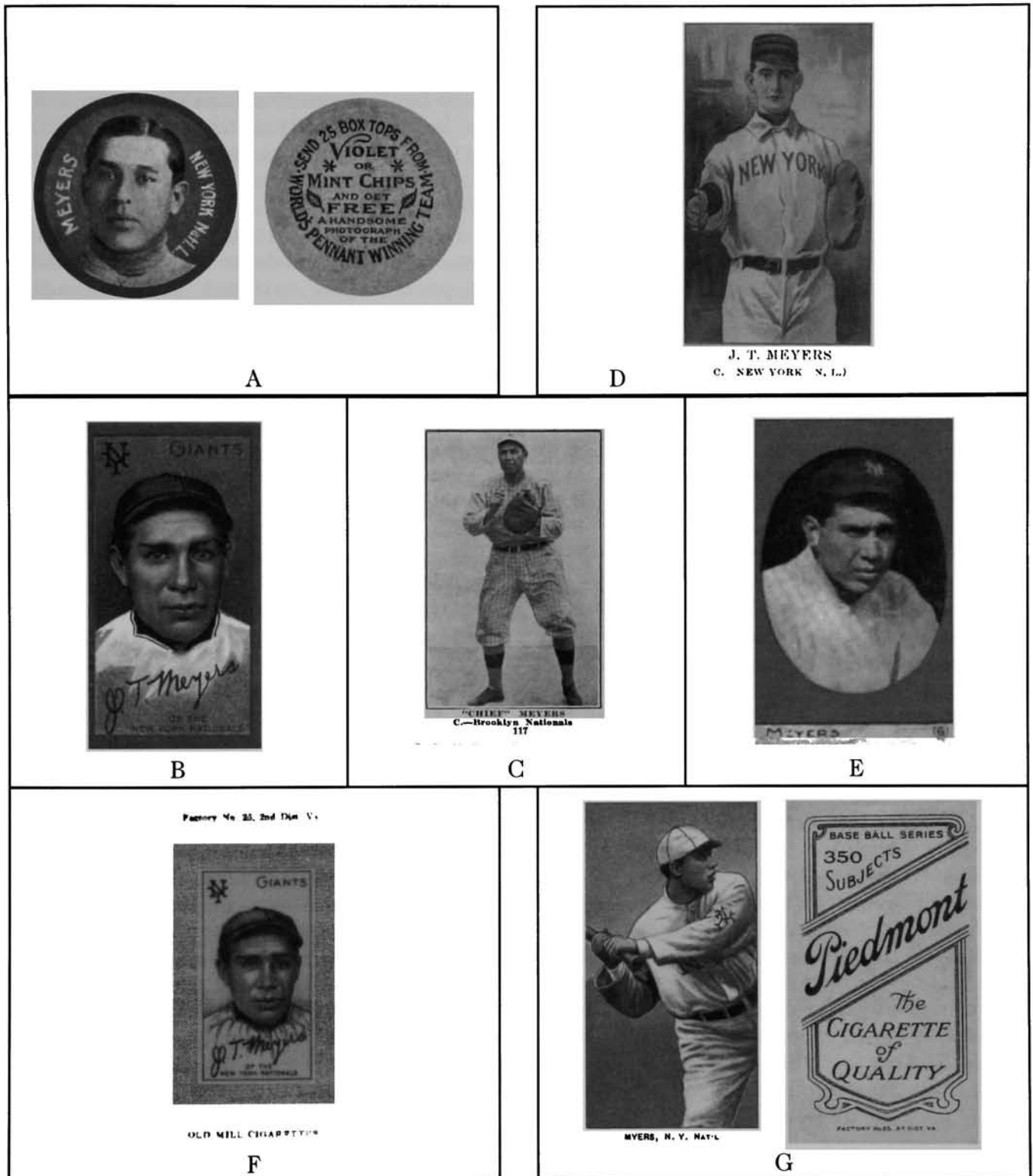


Figure 8. Baseball trading cards of John Meyers: (a) Colgan Gum Company, 1912; (b) American Tobacco Trust, 1911; (c) Collins-McCarthy Candy Company, 1916; (d) American Caramel Company, 1909, generic player shown, not John Meyers; (e) Derby Cigars, 1909; (f) Old Mill Cigarettes, 1911 colored silk; (g) Piedmont Cigarettes, 1909-1911. Cards a and e from the Larry Fritsch collection.

several "chiefs" (Louis Sockalexis, Albert Bender, Owen Wilson, George Murphy Johnson, Moses Yellowhorse, and Meyers) and others (e.g., Louis LeRoy, Jim Bluejacket and Austin Ben Tincup) helped mollify white America's racial and ethnic prejudice.

A popular solution to the so-called "Indian problem" was mainstreaming Native peoples. To this end, many Indian youths were exposed to publicly supported schools where games were regarded as an avenue for adapting to the dominant culture, and consequently, beginning in the final decade of the last century, interaction in sports between Indians and whites increased dramatically (Oxendine 1988:159-160). These circumstances coupled with the rise of big time athletic programs at Carlisle Indian Industrial School and at Haskell Institute as well as opportunities afforded by colleges and athletic clubs brought recognition to a number of Native American athletes. Inevitably, some were integrated into the professional ranks. Nonwhite participation on dominantly white big league teams undoubtedly raised the question of whether other minorities might similarly gain entrance to the majors, thereby sowing the seeds for more dramatic events in sports social history.

Indian ballplayers helped draw paying customers to the game at all professional levels (e.g., Thomas and Carey 1995:30-31; Bauer 1996:80; Alvarez et al. 1997:48-49), yet, participation was no panacea for ending prejudice (Thompson 1983). Meyers recounted that Indians in organized baseball were at times made to feel like "foreigners" (Ritter 1966:164). Even McGraw, who relished the possibility of having baseball's first all Indian battery, Thorpe pitching to Meyers (Robinson 1993:153), once called Thorpe a "dumb Indian" (Wheeler 1983:153). Stereotypes endured, and sports writers could be insensitive in the extreme. For instance, above one newspaper photograph of Meyers and Thorpe, bold letters announced "Two Good Indians" (The St. Louis Republic, March 23, 1913), an obvious reference to a hateful attitude prevalent in the 19th century that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian."

Despite such negatives, Native Americans at high levels of competition appeared to be represented out of proportion to their numbers in the larger population (see Thompson 1983). Inevitably, minority entrance into the high profile sports arena exerted pressure on nonathletic institutions to level their playing fields, if only slowly.

Beyond the first three decades of the century, however, Indians became less visible in sports at the national level. Oxendine (1988:Chpt. 12) documents this decline and its causes, citing first reduced opportunities to participate at the collegiate level, particularly after Carlisle closed its doors in 1918 and Haskell de-emphasized sports around 1930. Were it not for his attendance at Dartmouth, it is arguable whether Meyers would have ever gravitated to the majors.

Further, Oxendine describes a social climate among Indian youth that eroded confidence with regard to competition with non-Indians. Recent years, however, have witnessed a resurgence of participation in a number of competitive venues, especially long distance running and team handball. Celebration of the accomplishments of athletic notables such as John Meyers should fuel Indian pride, adding momentum to this trend.

1. Many details of John Meyers' life were gleaned from newspaper clippings that lacked press attributions and dates. The majority of these derive from one of Meyers' personal scrapbooks. Corroborations for such detail came from many sources including interviews with family members and people who had a personal acquaintance with the "Chief," letters, notes penned on photographs, etc.

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