An assault on fear and ignorance

A short biography of Branch Rickey, who invented the baseball farm team system and signed Jackie Robinson to a major league contract.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, Special to the Star Tribune

As Black History Month gives way to Opening Day in Major League Baseball, it's time to remember -- or learn about -- Branch Rickey. A devout Methodist and a die-hard Republican, smart, self-righteous and competitive, Rickey had a profound impact on professional baseball in the 1930s, inventing the "farm system," which discovered and developed young players. When World War II ended, Rickey outdid himself: As general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he signed Jackie Robinson to a major league contract, breaking the color barrier.

In this economical and eloquent biography, Jimmy Breslin pays homage to Rickey, demonstrating along the way his fidelity to what he deems "the true calling" of journalists: "to reach into the sky and try to change some of the sour patches of earth beneath."

The great achievement of Rickey and Robinson, Breslin suggests, was their assault on ignorance and fear. Mississippian Clay Hopper, manager of Jackie's minor league team the Montreal Royals, Breslin indicates, asked Rickey with tears in his eyes whether he really believed that "a colored man can be a human being." And Robinson faced down prejudice, expressed more virulently and violently, every day.

Baseball's odd couple prevailed, of course. As Jimmy Breslin reminds, each of us -- and all of us -- are better because of them.