

# The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League: Pioneers in Their Own Right

Clement C. GrawOzburn

Faculty Sponsor: Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, Department of History

## ABSTRACT

The war years of the 1940's saw unprecedented numbers of women entering the public realm in numerous traditionally male occupations. The war left scores of businesses, including baseball, without adequate labor. Driven by the fear that Major League Baseball would be shut-down for the duration of the war, Philip K. Wrigley created a women's league as a back-up plan to keep baseball alive. The league existed from 1943 to 1954. It eventually became known as the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). The aim of this project was to look at the stories and experiences of the women of the AAGPBL through oral history interviews and relate those experiences to the larger social developments and norms of the 1940's and 1950's. The examination focused on how these women were able to acquire the skills necessary to play baseball at a professional level traditionally dominated by men; how as women they were able to slip through the cracks of societal norms while others accepted the predestination of home and family; what not conforming to societal norms meant for these women and their interaction with their communities; and how their personal outlook on life was influenced by their league experience.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1943, Philip K. Wrigley founded the All-American Girls Softball League. He formed the league to entertain baseball fans while many of the country's men were away fighting WWII. What began as a softball league became a baseball league and eventually became known as the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). The league existed for twelve years, from 1943 to 1954. This was a period of time when women were not supposed to have professional careers outside of the home, much less careers that involved professional athletics. Girls were expected to grow up to be wives and mothers, not baseball players. As social analyst Paul Goodman wrote in his book, *Growing Up Absurd: The Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*, "...how to make something of one's self. A girl does not have to; she is not expected to make something of herself. Her career does not have to be self-justifying, for she will have children, which is absolutely self-justifying, like any other natural or creative act."<sup>1</sup>

While the societal attitudes of the day may have run parallel to the opinions expressed by social critics such as Goodman, the women of the AAGPBL proved that not all women were willing to give up their dreams and aspirations for the life of a home-maker. In the 1940's, a generation of young women filled the public workforce. These women replaced the men who had gone to war and buoyed the American economy in a time of crisis. They filled traditionally male positions in all sectors of society, but they did so while being forced to maintain an appearance of femininity. The women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League were not an exception.

The women of the AAGPBL were athletic pioneers who pursued and captured their dreams of playing professional ball in much the same way as men had for decades. They accomplished their goals while appearing to uphold societal ideals such as those expressed by Goodman. While the women of the league were definitely aware of the league's feminine image, they were there to play baseball and that was what mattered to them. Their focus was the game and how they played it. As a result, there was a disconnect between the league's presentation of the women of the AAGPBL to the public and that of the actual experience of the players in the league.

## METHODS

Eight oral history interviews were conducted with ex-players from March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2003 to January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The topics and reflections discussed during these interactions were then combined with archival research consisting of both primary and secondary sources. The main objective was to form a contextual framework of the league and the attitudes concerning women in the 1940's and 50's through which the women's opinions and experiences could be understood.

## RESULTS

During the 1940's, WWII opened the door for the women of the AAGPBL to take a greater role in the American public realm than ever before. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The massive mobilization of U.S. forces was immediate and intense. As a result, men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine were called to serve in the U.S. military. By the end of the war, more than sixteen million Americans served in the armed forces in World War II. These men left their businesses and professions to fight in the war. This in turn created a substantial demand for workers in a large number of occupations. In order to fill this labor void, Franklin D. Roosevelt called on the nation's women to take up work in those businesses and professions in need and keep U.S. production rolling throughout the war. World War II affected not only the lives of a whole generation of American men, but it became the impetus for women to take part in the public work force of American society in future generations.<sup>2</sup>

Roosevelt called for a cooperative campaign coordinated between the War Production Coordinating Committee and American industry. These campaigns successfully encouraged women to participate in the war effort. They emphasized the importance of patriotic women taking up the jobs and professions left vacant by the fighting men. They used images of young, strong women rolling up their sleeves and flexing their muscles to inspire ordinary American women to do their patriotic duty. The most telling of these images was known as Rosie the Riveter. Rosie was patriotic because she was doing her duty by working to support the war effort. In one of the more famous posters of the campaigns, Rosie encouraged women by stating, "We Can Do It!"<sup>3</sup>

Rosie the Riveter posters represented women as the strength of the business war effort. She evoked patriotism in American women that inspired participation on the home front. While Rosie gave women a sense of purpose and service in the public sector, she also celebrated an image of feminine frailty and beauty. Her eyes had long mascara laden eyelashes and her brows were plucked into perfect arches. Her lips were full, soft, and pouty and always a beautiful shade of red. Rosie the Riveter was the quintessential, strong, patriotic American woman who never forgot that she was a woman. Above all, she represented a societal ideal for American working women to aspire too. The campaigns were immensely successful. By 1943, two million women were in war industries and American production far outpaced that of Axis countries.<sup>4</sup>

In 1943, while large numbers of American women were heading to work in support of the war effort, Major league baseball team owners realized that they had a crisis on their hands. There were more than 3000 major leaguers that had joined the service or taken war related jobs and only nine of the nation's twenty-six minor leagues had enough men left to play ball. In addition, the Office of War Information had informed owners that the Major League baseball season might be suspended due to the man power shortage. Major League Baseball needed a plan of action or it would cease to exist.<sup>5</sup>

Philip K. Wrigley, bubble gum magnate and Chicago Cubs owner, was inspired by the success of the Rosie the Riveter (and other) campaigns to mobilize American women. He toyed with the idea of creating a women's professional softball league that would serve as the back up plan to save Major League baseball if shutdown occurred. Wrigley realized that there were a number of women's softball leagues in existence throughout the U.S. and Canada. According to a *Time* magazine article in 1943, there were an estimated "40,000 semipro women's softball teams in the United States."<sup>6</sup> The semipro softball teams would serve as a prime recruiting organization for Wrigley's Professional League.

From the very start, the league was interested in signing only quality ball players. They scoured the well established softball leagues of the country for talent and found it. Contracts that paid from sixty to eighty-five dollars per week inspired many women to sign contracts immediately. Helen Callaghan (1944-1949) was one of them. Helen grew up in Canada playing sandlot ball because the girls at her Catholic school were not allowed to play softball. She was excited and "...really wanted to go. I wanted the experience. I figured I was as good as they were and I could make the team."<sup>7</sup> Callaghan signed with the Minneapolis Millerettes for the 1944 season. She

went on to play four more seasons for the Fort Wayne Daises of Fort Wayne, Indiana and the Kenosha Comets of Kenosha, Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Callaghan, Mary (a.k.a., Fearless) Froning O'Meara (1951-1954) did play softball on an organized Catholic team. When Mary was in the fifth grade her town, Minster, Ohio had a Catholic Youth Organization where one of the local priests started a softball team. Mary and her sister tried out for the team and played from the fifth grade into high school. They played other girls softball teams around the community and skills were acquired completely in game situations for the coaches were just as inexperienced as the players. Mary stated, "My ability to run, hit and everything was through myself...."<sup>9</sup> She would go on to play for the South Bend Blue Sox in 1951. Froning played on two championship teams in her four years in the league.<sup>10</sup>

While the league obtained many of the early players from women's softball leagues around the country, there were many who had developed their skills playing with relatives, on men's teams, or in locally developed little league teams. Louise "Lou" Erickson's (1948-1950) father and two uncles played on local Country League City teams. At the age of sixteen Lou "would be down in the ball park shagging balls with the guys."<sup>11</sup> There was no organized ball in her school, so her "experience was strictly in the neighborhood with the neighbor kids and with these men's teams on the weekend."<sup>12</sup>

Lou's father had encouraged her to play ball and the Whitehall Wisconsin team manager sent her name into the AAGPBL informing them of her talents. She stated,

...this was all new to me, I had never heard of that league [called] the All-Americans. So they sent me a ticket to take the train out of Winona [Minnesota] to Chicago. I spent two weeks down there trying out with other rookies....There were probably two dozen other girls there.... I guess I impressed them enough....<sup>13</sup>

Lou was picked up as a pitcher in 1948 by the Racine Belles of Racine, Wisconsin. She played for the Rockford Peaches in her last two seasons (1949-50). The Peaches won the league championship both years with Erickson throwing seven shutouts and contributing 36 wins.<sup>14</sup>

While Erickson was playing in the AAGPBL, Dolly "Lippy" Vanderlip (1952-1954) was playing ball with the neighborhood kids in a honey suckle field outside Charlotte, North Carolina. They cleared the field and built a backstop, dug-outs, and benches for spectators from lumber stolen from her father. She said the hardest part was that the field "had a big mound right by the shortstop and the ball would come and hit the mound and go zooming over your head or hit you in the chops. I really wanted to play first base because I didn't want to get hit in the face with the ball....we played there every single day."<sup>15</sup> Lippy later played for a boy's team called the Selwyn Park Rebels. The Rebels were part of the Mecklenburg County Junior Baseball League in Charlotte. She was the only girl in the league and according to one newspaper article, "the best player on her team."<sup>16</sup>

Vanderlip remembered her first contact with the league was through Movie Tones, a news segment that was played before feature films. After the segment was over young Dolly turned to her mother and announced, "That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to play ball like they did."<sup>17</sup> That was 1943 or 1944 and Vanderlip would have been either six or seven years of age at the time. Little did she know that her statement would become a reality in another nine or ten years.

In 1951, Dolly tried out for the league during an exhibition game visit in Charlotte. She was told she was too young and too small to play in the league, but to try again the next year. Over the next year, Vanderlip grew three inches and practiced pitching with her father and brother. She tried out again in 1952 and was signed to the Fort Wayne Daises of Fort Wayne, Indiana where she stayed for two seasons.<sup>18</sup> Lippy played her last and most successful year (11-4) as a starter for the South Bend Blue Sox of South Bend, Indiana in 1954. After the league folded, she went on to tour with the Bill Allington's All-Americans, a traveling team who played exhibition games against men's teams.<sup>19</sup>

The women of the AAGPBL came from cities all over the United States and Canada. They came from varied backgrounds and found their way to the AAGPBL on varied paths. These young women developed their skills as a result of numerous situations, but the one thing that they had in common was their love for the game of baseball. The game was the glue that bound them together as a league, but the AAGPBL served other purposes that had far reaching societal values as well.

Wrigley's colleagues in major league baseball did not support his ideas so he turned to the businessmen of mid-sized Midwestern industrial towns for support. These ball clubs were not only entertainment for the citizenry of these mid-sized Midwestern cities but they became local community members and celebrities. Wrigley realized that with public celebrity comes strict scrutiny and inappropriate behavior would have been the end of the league.<sup>20</sup>

To Wrigley the perfect marketing campaign and image were just as important as good ball players. As a result, the AAGPBL was created with strict codes of feminine dress and decorum. A presentation of femininity at all times was an important piece of the Philip K. Wrigley marketing plan. As Fay "Fanny" Dancer (1944-1950) recalls, "The whole league was based on being feminine."<sup>21</sup> This ideal may seem to be a strange leap when combined with the aura that has traditionally surrounded the game of baseball. For fans just the word baseball would conjure up the images of a hot sweaty summer day in the stands watching pantaloon clad players facing off on the dry tan and green diamonds. As a business man, Wrigley realized that the public would only accept women playing baseball if he kept their image one of femininity, so he developed the concept of "the All American Girl"<sup>22</sup> The importance of the players image was apparent in the league's instructional literature, "It is most desirable in your own interests, that of your teammates and fellow players, as well as from the standpoint of the public relations of the league that each girl be at all times presentable and attractive, whether on the playing field or at leisure....practice the little measure that will reflect well on your appearance and personality as a real All American Girl."<sup>23</sup> The Wrigley plan was simple; the feminine image brought the fans into the parks, while the play of the players kept them coming back again and again. Long time player Levonne "Pepper" Paire stated how the marketing plan worked.

Right there you got a lot of people that liked to see the legs and laugh, but they didn't expect to see you play good baseball. We got them out there maybe because of our uniforms, maybe because of the publicity, but we kept them there because we played damn good baseball.<sup>24</sup>

The women of the AAGPBL "played damn good baseball", but Wrigley was well aware that it was image that brought the ticket buying public out to the ballpark and that was where he concentrated his promotional efforts; for ultimately the "All American Girl" was nothing more than an entertainment product.

The women were baseball players, but due to the league product they were not allowed to forget that they were women baseball players. The makeup, the skirt, the presentation on and off the field were things that didn't let the players forget that they were women. Joyce Hill-Westerman (1945-1952) described her reaction to the league's product:

You had to look very feminine. That's what they wanted, look feminine but play like men. That's what they expected. You had to have long hair and wear dresses and you had to wear those uniforms. When I first saw those uniforms I said, 'oh, I'll never play for them.' Because you didn't show your legs in those days. Especially in Kenosha [Wisconsin], you know. Then later I thought, well I guess you have to play in those uniforms if you want to play.<sup>25</sup>

Wrigley must have realized that he was dealing with young women who had rebelled in one way or another against the popular social conceptions that left them confined to knitting, cooking, and other types of traditionally feminine domestic duties. Joyce Hill Westerman grew up outside Kenosha, Wisconsin on a farm where the lines of femininity and masculinity were somewhat blurred, yet never completely absent. She would work in the farm fields right next to her brothers and other men whom would compliment her on her hard work, but she was told by her aunt that she was "never going to amount to anything....[because] she's playing with the boys and she'll never be a good home maker."<sup>26</sup> Westerman summed up the attitudes towards women as, "...that's the way it was. Now my other sisters weren't that way, so they were O.K., you know."<sup>27</sup>

Many of these young women ball players, like Westerman, had come from farms and other working class families for whom the qualities of a female socialite were to a large extent foreign. Dolly "Lippy" Vanderlip related a story from her childhood that demonstrated the type of rebellion that the league was trying to contain. She stated,

I used to play kickball with the boys at school. My mother bought me five new dresses to start school and that was supposed to be one for every day. Well the first five days I had come home they were torn up because I had been playing football, kickball, or something. And this was when I had started school in the first grade. They had torn off the sash in the back...ripped off the arms...torn out the hem and ripped the skirt from the [waist] of the skirt. My mother dressed me in blue jeans the next week and sent me to school. The school called her and told her that I couldn't dress in blue jeans. My mother told them that the only thing they could do was to keep me in at recess [it] was the only way they could keep me from playing ball. They tried that, but I jumped out the window and went to play anyway.<sup>28</sup>

This type of competitive need to play sports was a common trait among the women of the AAGPBL. While this was a trait that Wrigley was looking for during game play on the field, he realized that it needed to be packaged and presented in a certain manner or the public would never support the league.

The feminine appearance of the ball players on and off the field was so important to league administration that it created "A Guide for All-American Girls: How to Look Better, Feel Better, [And] Be More Popular." The great emphasis placed on the proper conduct (i.e. appearance, proper dress, and etiquette) are apparent in the foreword of the pamphlet *A Guide for All-American Girls*,

....You have certain responsibilities because you too, are in the limelight. Your actions and appearance [both] on and off the field reflect on the whole profession. It is not only your duty to do your best to hold up the standard of this profession but to do your level best to keep others in line. The girls in our League are rapidly becoming the heroines of youngsters as well as grownups all over the world. People want to be able to respect their heroines at all times.... We hand you this manual to help guide you in your personal appearance. We ask you to follow the rules of behavior for your own good as well as that of the future success of girls' baseball.... A healthy mind and a healthy body are the true attributes of the All American girl.<sup>29</sup>

The guide's foreword served several functions for the league. First and foremost it was the code of conduct that laid down the rules for the players. There were separate sections such as proper introductions, proper speech, proper sportsmanship, and proper dealings with the public (fans, chaperones, etc.) The guide's subsections dealt with the intricacies of Etiquette. Second, it was the establishment of standards of dress and appearance that created the feminine mystique of the Wrigley promotional plan. Third, it was a guide to physical fitness containing health and training tips. These sections dealt with the stretching exercises and routines for the shoulders, for the chest and upper back, for the ankles and knees, for the abdomen and waist, and for general circulation. Finally, the "...Guide For All American Girls" was a document of counsel.

The "afterword" of the Guide, taken from chapters written by Esther Sherman in *Health by Stunts* (a war department pamphlet) established the double standard that the women faced as they embarked on their professional ball careers. Sherman stressed that "the majority of the general public [and] medical men" saw more vigorous forms of activity as unsuitable for women and "looked upon [them] with more or less disapproval." She goes on to disagree with this popular assertion stating, "...we point out that vigorous play taught to girls...leads to a confidence in self.... alone [it] can develop and store up in the girl a reserve strength which will stand her in good stead through the emergencies of her life."<sup>30</sup> By the inclusion of Esther Sherman's writings in the afterward of *A Guide for All-American Girls* the league was warning the players of the attitudes of the day and indirectly sending the message that what they were undertaking was something that should be done with purpose and pride.

The team was where the women demonstrated the most purpose and pride, for they were there to play baseball. Many of the women may have not liked the uniforms but the league image, they decided, was what they had to endure if you wanted to play. The players were there to play the game and the coaches were there to teach baseball and win games. While the league as an organization focused on the image, the game of baseball was the focus of the women; it was their reality. The players had great reverence for the coaches. They described them as great guys or made comments about them singing to them on the bus, but the most frequent comment concerning coaches was "he taught me a lot about baseball." Bill Allington was especially admired for his coaching abilities (he was considered the most successful coach in the league). Dolly Vanderlip Ozburn described her initial contact with Allington as a rookie in 1952.

When you came home from the road you had practice the next day. It may have been three o'clock in the morning, but you had practice the next day. And course I was a rookie I got to practice all the time. He would say, 'Outfielders and Vanderlip!' OK, then he would say, 'infielders and Vanderlip!' Then he'd say pitchers and catchers, which included me anyway. [Vanderlip was a pitcher] Then he'd say, 'outfielders, infielders, and Vanderlip!' ...I got to the place where I would never let him finish..., he'd say, 'outfielders,...' and I'd say, 'AND VANDERLIP!!!!' and everybody would laugh.<sup>31</sup>

Allington was known for his practices. Ex-players continue to describe his daily practices and game situation tests that he gave during bus trips. His intensity and passion for the game was seen by his players as the reason for his success in the league.

It was the lessons of baseball, taught by coaches such as Bill Allington, that the women would remember most about their time in the AAGPBL. After the league folded in 1954, many would go on to coach softball and baseball themselves for schools and other organizations with teams. Ruth "Boots" Ries-Zillmer (1951-1952), who played with the Rockford Peaches, coached girl's softball in Walworth, Wisconsin from 1976-1980. During her time coaching she noticed that the passion that she felt for the game was not present in the young girls on the team. She said, "They just didn't have the same interest that I had. When I coached them they did well, but they just didn't have the same interest."<sup>32</sup> It was the passion for the game that these women ultimately found during their time in the league. It was a passion that would affect them for the rest of their lives.

Nearly thirty-five years after the shutdown of the league, the women finally received the recognition they deserved. In November of 1988, the AAGPBL was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. The ceremonies were attended by a large number of ex-players, their families, and their friends. Many of the women had not seen each other in over thirty years. It was a well deserved acknowledgment by a baseball community that had long ignored the contribution of the AAGPBL to America's past time.

The women of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League carved a place for themselves in U.S. history. They ignored the societal ideals that expected them to only reproduce and keep the home fires burning. They successfully navigated the fine line between societal expectations of femininity in the community and professional athleticism on the field. They acquired athletic skills that women were not supposed to possess and did so with pride and purpose. Ultimately, they inspired future generations of young women by daring to crack the seal on the American gender role envelope.

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- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
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