

Memories of the AAGPBL in 1943 by Mary Pratt

Recently, it was suggested to me that I might submit an article for TOUCHING BASES. It was to center around the year 1943 and the Rockford Peaches. Lois made the suggestion and she reminded me of the fact that very few individuals from that era are "still with us." Only four who finished that 1943 season in Rockford are alive today. [Mary wrote this before Kammie Kamenshek passed away 5/17/10.]

In order to refresh my memory, I decided to pull out my 1943 scrapbook, and there, on the wooden carved cover, were the signatures of those who finished the 1943 season as a Peach.

Millie Warwick from Regina, Canada
Dottie Kamenshek from Cincinnati, Ohio
Dorothy Green from Natick, Mass.
Betty Moczynski from Wisconsin
Berry Melin from Rockford
Millie Deegan from Brooklyn, NY
Eileen Burgmeister from Theinsville, Wisconsin
Terri Davis from Toronto, Canada
Helen Nelson from Toronto, Canada
Marge Peters from West Allis, Wisconsin
Betty Jane Fritsh from Oshkosh, Wisconsin
Olive Little from Poplar Point, Canada
Marie Timm (Chaperone) from West Allis
Eddie Stumpf (Mgr.) from Milwaukee
K. Nelson (Business Mgr.) from Gloversville, NY

Carved in the center of my scrapbook cover was the seal GSBL. The seal was to become AAGSBL and eventually to be our current seal, AAGPBL.

Just as our seal changed over the years, so did the rules of the game. These changes involved team rosters, pitching styles and distances and length of the base paths.

Changes in team rosters usually resulted from injuries to players. It was a league policy to attempt to keep the game as competitive as possible. I was subjected to that policy in June of 1944 when I was reassigned to Kenosha because Kenosha pitchers, Lee Harney and Nickie Fox (I confirmed this change in a call to Mary 5/19/10 a.m.) were sidelined at the

time. Frequent roster changes were done quite often during each season. As a result, many team pictures were changing constantly. In 1946 and 1947 I was reassigned back to Rockford.

It was prior to 1943 that I met Dottie Green. Walter Brown, at the time, was the owner of the Boston Garden. He had decided to sponsor a softball team. They would play during the summer months. One of our special trips was to Madison Square Garden to play the Roverettes. Millie Deegan and I renewed acquaintances in 1943 when we met in Rockford. We were opponents in New York, but teammates in Rockford. Millie started at 2nd base in Rockford, but was to become an outstanding pitcher.

When I arrived in Chicago in June of 1943, I was met by Mr. Sells. I had taken the night sleeper the day before from Boston, having remained in Quincy to complete my teaching schedule. Mr. Sells put me on another train and I arrived at the 15th Ave. Stadium in Rockford. The game was in progress and Marge Peters was on the mound. That evening I became a Rockford Peach.

So many of the former Rockford players who finished that 1943 season are gone. I am aware that at this time four are left. They are Kammie Kamenshek, Betty "Moe" Moczynski, Marge Peters and "yours truly."

Many of my memories of 1943 overlap into 1944. I was unable to attend spring training in 1943, but did attend in 1944. It included a program conducted by Helene Rubinstein and her associates. Just as was portrayed in the movie, we were instructed and advised of ways and methods by which we could improve our conduct and our appearance. Their program reinforced policies and practices that had been established by League administrators.

I can still remember the impact of players from Canada in 1943, followed by the influx of players from California in 1944. That was the start of a venture in professional athletic competition for females such as I have never experienced in my lifetime. Those of us who attended the first renewal of our friendships in Chicago in 1982 might recall the remark made by Patty Berg at our banquet. She remarked that what she had done to advance competitive golf for women was now a challenge for us in professional baseball for girls and women.

From the very beginning we received wonderful fan support. Workers at the plant where Eileen Burgmeister worked before she became a Peach sponsored an evening for her. Sunstrand Machine Tool Co. also sponsored a great night for Olive Little. Olive pitched the first no-hitter in 1943. She attended our first "get together" in Chicago in 1982 with her husband. She remarked to me that her granddaughter was then competing in the Lassie League in which she played prior to coming into the AAGPBL. On many occasions fans presented Olive with jars of olives. She was certainly the "role model" that Mr. Wrigley and his associates envisioned when he established this unique league.

Many other events were held during the season. An "Appreciation Night" was sponsored by the Fraternal Order of the Eagles prior to our leaving for home at the close of the season. Many fans also attended the 1982 event in Chicago. They came with Millie Lundahl who was the chaperone.

One of my fondest memories was the event held at Wrigley Field. All four teams competed in a double-header sponsored by the Red Cross. The unique feature was that it was held under the lights. A first such event. They installed portable lights but we still had the recognition of being the first to play at the field under lights.

It would be an oversight if I attempted to name players who had exceptional ability. There were so many. I did, however, play with and against the four who were the first to sign contracts. They were Clara Schillace, Ann Harnett, Shirley Jameson and Edythe Perlick.

Dick Day, the Sports writer for Rockford, did include some interesting figures in his July 24, 1943 column: Gladys Davis (ss): Games 49, AB 172, Runs 43, Hits 64, Batting Av. .372. Leading pitchers: Berger and Nicol; Team Batting: Racine .257.

Last I heard we still had not located Gladys.

To those who participated in the League, to those who are Associate members, to those who have read and are interested in the history of the League, it is

obvious that the All American League was a combination of Softball and Baseball. All who participated were able to adjust to the changes that were made from season to season. We were and continue to be a part of a unique venture. We all live with those wonderful memories and the wonderful friendships that we made.

One of my lasting memories revolves around the opportunity I had to serve on our Board of Directors. Our Association did go through "growing pains" from the start. Initially, Individuals were asked to serve from geographic areas of the country. Dottie Green represented the East Coast. I followed in her footsteps when

she was unable to serve. Such was going on all over the country and Canada.

In 1998, I was honored to be elected to the last of the two year terms of office on the Board. It was a wonderful learning experience and I came away realizing the time and effort given by so many former

players. At the time, I served under Dolly White and she assigned me to "Public Relations." From that evolved my "Out and About" project. Arleene Noga from Canada was my contact with the Canadian players. I now have over 600 responses filed in binders. What are we going to do with our memorabilia? That was the challenge that Lois presented to us in Milwaukee!!!

When I served that two years, it was very obvious the roles that Dottie Collins "played" in the Association over the years. Originally from California, she decided to remain in the Midwest when she married Fort Wayne resident Harvey Collins. That was California's loss! She was an outstanding pitcher for the Fort Wayne Daisies and for years served in so many leadership roles for our Board. Her efforts played a great part in our All American display at Cooperstown. Ted Spencer acknowledged her efforts in her Obituary column for the Boston Globe. One of my recent projects has been to put all the written material I have saved into plastic, acid free covers. At last count I have used 800 sheets. Quite a few of these sheets include the many letters that Dottie Collins wrote in response to my inquiries.

Because I had the opportunity to play for two teams, Rockford and Kenosha, I had the privilege to play with



and against many wonderful players. There are a few that I will always remember. I played with and against "Pinky" Pirok and Dottie Schroeder, with and against Ann Harnett, with and against Shirley Jameson, with and against Audrey Wagner, and with and against Kammie Kamenshek.

To have pitched against Olive Little, Helen Nicol Fox, Sonny Berger, Dottie Collins, Mary Nesbitt and Joanne Winter was a real challenge. All pitched the "traditional softball style" in 1943-44.

The limited ¾ sidearm delivery in 1946, the full side arm in 1947, and the overhand in 1948 with the ball size going from the 12" to 11 1/2" to 10" made it a different game. Then the ball size eventually went to the 9-1/4" and the pitching distance and base paths were lengthened to Major League proportions in 1954. It was a credit to those who were able to adjust to the

different size balls, pitching distances, and base paths.

When Mr. Sells told me in an interview at Cooperstown in 1982 that he had been given \$100,000 to recruit girls from all over the USA, it was obvious that he did an outstanding job. Those were certainly highly skilled girls who played from 1943-54.

I trust that Kammie, Moe, and Marge will also follow through on Lois' request to write of some of their memories of 1943 in Rockford. I am certain that they will have additional thoughts and memories of those years. They, too, played with and against so many talented individuals. We were all so fortunate to have had that opportunity to participate. So many were not even aware of Mr. Wrigley's venture until Penny Marshall and Columbia Studios decided to make the movie. We should all be grateful for the "story" that Penny Marshall and Columbia Studios did in portraying "Our Story."