

Lancaster County Historical Society

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Oral History Project
OH-066 - Reeser – Transcript

Interviewee: Zan Reeser (Hershey)

Transcriber: Bev Newton

Date Transcribed: August 17, 2004

Interviewer: Bev Newton

Date Recorded: July 20, 2004

Bev Newton: Today is July 20th, 2004, and we are here in the Lancaster County Historical Society conference room, my name's Beverly Newton and today we're interviewing Ester Ann Reeser, her husband, Ed is also here as well, and today, and her days in the 1940s as far as playing baseball. What is your name (maiden) first?

Zan: Hershey

Bev: Hershey?

Zan: Yes.

Bev: Any relation to Milton Hershey?

Zan: No.

Bev: Where did you live when you were growing up?

Zan: I lived in the southern part of the county at Nine Points, till I'd say the age of nine and then we moved over to Salisbury Township in Lancaster County, off of route 340, below White Horse, everybody's heard of White Horse. That was my mother's home place, we lived there then. And I went to school in the Coatesville area, graduated from Coatesville.

Bev: And what year was that?

Zan: I'm sorry?

Bev: What year was that?

Zan: I graduated in 1946.

Bev: And then after high school, what did you do?

Zan: My father had a general merchandise store, and I worked for him. He sold everything. Clothing, groceries, feed, fertilizer, hardware...

Bev: So if anybody needed something, your dad's store was the place to go.

Zan: Right, right.

Bev: How did you get into the baseball (playing)?

Zan: They didn't have organized baseball in our area for girls. Girls from Honey Brook, I went over there and we just picked up a team and we'd get another team together and play, and my dad saw an article in our local Coatesville paper, tryouts for girls professional baseball team in Allentown. So we went up there and we tried out, and I was one of the one's that was picked that way.

Bev: What was your position? What spot did you play?

Zan: I was pitcher, but that year in the professional league they went to the overhand pitching and I wasn't sure I could handle that. So I went for right field.

Bev: How long did you play?

Zan: Just that one season, and not the full season. We went to Opka Locka, Florida, for a month spring training.

Bev: That must have been rough!

Zan: Oh, it was fun! There was over two hundred girls there. We were on a naval air base. We had workouts every morning, afternoon, and sometimes in the evening. That year they put on two extra teams. I was put on one, the Springfield Sallies, from Springfield, Illinois. From spring training then we headed back to our home base which was Springfield, Illinois. We traveled by train, at that time. We roomed in private homes, we'd rent a room by the week. We had a chaperone, she was kind of your mother, your first date person, whatever else we needed, it was great.

Bev: Where were some of the different places you played while you were with the team?

Zan: In the Midwest?

Bev: Yes.

Zan: We had Peoria, Illinois; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Springfield, Illinois; Chicago, Illinois; Miskegan, Michigan; Kenosha, Wisconsin; there was eight until that year and then they added two more. They started in 1943. But I didn't go until 1948.

Bev: How many games did you play during a season?

Zan: We played almost every day, unless we were traveling. Then on Saturdays and Sundays they'd have double headers.

Zan: They judged you on your appearance, they'd prefer you to long hair, couldn't wear shorts or jeans, you had to wear skirts or a dress. They wanted you to be ladies.

Bev: Yes, I was reading that the military was the same way. How did you meet Ed, after all this traveling around.

Zan: Well, I lived about a mile and a half from him. During the war, a lot of the kids in the neighborhood helped the farmers, picked tomatoes, and put the crops in. I happened to work for his father, we were just friends up until about '46, '47, everybody kind of knew everybody in the area, local country people.

Bev: I see you brought some things along, from your playing days.

Zan: Yes, that's the hat I wore, here's one of the tee-shirts has all the team names on the back.

Bev: Let's see, you had the Red Wings, Daisies, The Chicago, Illinois, Colleens,

Zan: Yes, Chicago, Illinois Colleens. We get a newsletter.

Bev: This is the current issue, May 2004, Vol. 4, Issue 2. The All American Girls' Professional Baseball Players Association. Great!

Zan: See, I think it was in '47, they were accepted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, in Cooperstown. So our names on the roster up there. They keep in touch fairly well. This is what the roster is at Cooperstown, only much larger. Has everybody's name on it, that had a contract. This here,

Bev: You had a contract?

Zan: That's my contract.

Bev: Oh, you have a copy of it!

Slight pause as we go through Zan's scrapbook.

Bev: How did your team do while you were playing?

Zan: They didn't do to well. But the girls just loved to play, they didn't care, I mean they played as hard as they could, there wasn't any jealousy, or rivalry, and they had good drawings, maybe one or two thousand people would come to a game.

Bev: And the ladies played in the same stadiums that the major league teams played (men)?

Zan: Yes, each one had your own field, which was Springfield, and we had our own bus, we traveled by bus from one town to the next when we had a game. We stayed in the best hotels,

and on the road they paid all our expenses. But when we were at home, we bought our meals, and ten dollars a week for room, in a private home.

Bev: I see there is a picture of the Springfield Sallies in here. (Team standing in front of bus.)

Zan: Yes. After we showered we were getting on the bus travel. The girls were from all the states, Canada, and that year we had five Cubans on the team.

Bev: On the team you were on?

Zan: No, but they were with the league. It was the five of them. Out in the Midwest they had organized softball for the girls. The Caterpillar Company they had two or three teams, where in the east there wasn't anything like that.

Bev: Did the media, were newspapers involved in reporting on the girls?

Zan: Yes. They wanted all the publicity they could get. The local papers would have a write up.

Bev: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Zan: Do I have any brothers or sisters?

Bev: Yes.

Zan: I have an older sister who passed away, and I have an older brother and a younger brother. We (Ed and I) have three children, and we have three grandchildren.

Bev: Are you in contact with any of the girls that...

Zan: I have not lately, I used to, but not lately.

Bev: Do you have any reunions of players?

Zan: They have one once a year, that's usually in California. Last year they had Syracuse, New York, but I couldn't make it.

Bev: Are you into flying? I understand that, we got your name from Jessie and Howard Eckhart, do you fly?

Zan: I soloed, and then I quit flying. My husband flies. I can go with him, that Jessie's the flier.

Bev: Are any of your kids or grandkids into sports?

Zan: My daughter, my son in high school is in football, and our daughter in high school is in basketball, she was on the all star team in their section, section A, I think it was, Lancaster County.

Bev: When you stopped playing baseball what did you do after that?

Zan: Well, I got married. I could have gone back, the next year, that's why they sent the ball to me. You weren't allowed to take these home because they were special made, they only made up so many in the winter, and that's to hold them through the season. They gave orders not to take any. When I got home I had one in my suitcase. One of the girls had...and I remember her saying, practice and come back. It was just a fun experience. My dad was into sports. He went to Millersville University. He was into baseball, football and basketball.

Bev: What was his name?

Zan: Frank Hershey, graduated in 1918.

Bev: I'm going to Millersville.

Zan: Did you?

Bev: I'm going now.

Zan: You can't beat the state colleges.

Bev: Is there anything else you can think of when you were playing that you'd like to tell us about? What do you think about the girls now getting more into sports.

Zan: I think it's great! It should have been a long time ago. Our (girls) Professional team our general manager was Max Purine, he held for stolen bases in the professional (men's) league. And we had Jimmie Fox, was a manager, Dave Bankcroft, and they had been in the men's professional league. So they coached for different teams.

Bev: And they stayed during the whole, during the whole time that the girl's leagues were in existence?

Zan: Max Purine, pretty much was, yes. They stayed with them pretty much 'til the end. It just made it fun a lot of the girls, after they get out they had saved their money, they went to college some become teachers, went on to become a MD. It would've happened if they hadn't gone to play baseball. They wouldn't have had the money. It's amazing how many got their education playing ball.

Bev: Do you remember any games where you were doing really badly or one really great? I know you were mostly in it for fun, and traveling but was there any game that went bad?

Zan: No, can't think of any. On Sundays we had the double headers. The first game they had seven innings, and the second game was five. So the rookie pitcher they said, they'd have her play the second game, it being the short game. Well, it went into extra innings, and they ended up playing twelve innings, she said, "Next time don't put me in the short game".

Bev: Did they win?

Zan: Yes, they won.

Bev: How was Chicago when you played there?

Zan: I came home before we played Chicago. Well, what happened, financially they weren't doing very well, so we really didn't have a home base, they traveled on the road all the time. Instead of having their home game at the home field, they played the team they were scheduled to, and they did that with Chicago and Springfield. Those two were traveling teams. So they disbanded them the next year.

Bev: The Chicago team?

Zan: And Springfield.

Bev: So then it goes back down to eight teams?

Zan: To the what?

Bev: There are eight teams then, in the league?

Zan: Yes, then it went back to the eight.

Bev: Do you know how many teams nationwide there were?

Zan: No, All American Girls Baseball League, that was it. And they were the only ones that played hardball. There were softball teams, but, this was the only hardball league.

Bev: This is the baseball that was used it's just a little bit larger...

Zan: Larger than a hardball, and smaller than a softball.

Bev: But not by much.

Zan: No!

Bev: They wanted you to pitch, but you

Zan: No, I didn't tell them was a pitcher 'cause when I heard it was overhand, and I never did that.

Bev: Any other memories you have of those days that...what was traveling by train like?

Zan: We come up from the south we traveled by train. They said Springfield, we'd get off at Danville, Illinois, and take the trolley. Oh, that sounds nice! But we were on there half a day or longer went through corn fields, and had wicker chairs, wood stove in the winter time, and we didn't have lunch, I had some, some of the girls had oranges and candy bars, that's what we ate. We just thought we'd be on the trolley for a short ... We were on for nearly the whole afternoon, from Danville to Illinois.

Bev: There was no organized route.

Zan: No, went through cornfields and

Bev: And they didn't go that fast,

Zan: No,

Bev: About ten miles an hour

Zan: Well a little faster than that.

Bev: Really?

Zan: Yes.

Bev: Not by much though.

Zan: No.

Bev: Were they gas powered by then?

Zan: There was just one car.

Bev: How many people could

Zan: Oh, I'm sorry, there was two. And we, there was twenty of us, so we had it pretty well filled.

Bev: Had a car all to yourself.

Zan: Yes. Yes, there wasn't anybody no one else rode it but us. At spring training, everybody wanted you to make it. They'd help you. All the other girls they hated to see anybody go home, and they, just a friendly group.

Bev: How long were you in Florida?

Zan: How long was what?

Bev: How long were you in Florida for spring training?

Zan: A month. The year before they went to spring training in Cuba. They were in Cuba for a month.

Bev: At Havana?

Zan: Yes. And maybe that's why we had five Cubans the next year, I don't know.

Bev: Because of that relationship?

Zan: Yes.

Bev: And the five Cuban ladies that came up to the States, they played mainly in the mid west? On the teams out there?

Zan: Well, they were put on different teams. They didn't stay together. At spring training if a certain team needed an outfielder, well, then they'd select somebody to play outfield, or another team needed a pitcher or two pitchers that's how they picked. And they tried to even out the teams that was kind of equal, that they were not all stars on one team or two teams, they tried to even it out.

Bev: So that's that what happened they do that today?

Zan: Yes. I'm not involved in baseball any more. Yea, it was a good experience.

Bev: What was the average number of girls on a team? Was it twenty like you say, you were traveling by trolley and there was twenty...

Zan: I think there was eighteen of us, and then we had our chaperone and the coach traveling.

Bev: Do you remember any...how did you do playing, in your playing days.

Zan: I did fair, and I played out in right field, that's the worst. I don't know, you feel penned-in in right field. Kept up with the rest of them.

Bev: Was there anyone who usually hit home runs in the pinch when you needed them, that type of thing?

Zan: Yea, girls could be a pitcher and be an excellent batter, strong hitter. Like men anymore, but my first roommate her name was Sophie Carrol (Snookie) was her nickname, she was a teacher in California, and someone said hey who's your roommate. And I told them, "Oh, you got one of the best in the league." And she was the nicest girl. But then at spring training if

they needed you on another team to train with so we were only together for about a year, maybe five or six days. They switched you around. You went to different teams to try out. Yea, it was interesting. And, my dad came back to see me when I was in Illinois. It was good to see him. Well, my mother did come later then, and my brother. Things were different. People were more friendly. Be walking down the street, they'd talk to you. It's just like you were born and raised there, they were friendly. Trying to think of anything else...Course, then no one had any auto mobiles, you traveled by bus or walked. We stayed in our own circle and we didn't we all stayed together pretty much. Each team stayed together.

Bev: What did you do in the off season? When the season was over?

Zan: Well, I was sent back home and of course the school teachers went back to school and some went back to their regular jobs.

Bev: You worked in your dad's store?

Zan: Yea, I went back and worked for my dad.

Bev: What age were you when you were playing?

Zan: I was twenty.

Bev: Until when?

Zan: Just that season. I never heard of the league until dad saw it in the paper. And he never heard of it either. Of course when I think the scout was Jimmy Fox, well not Jimmy Fox, and dad knew of him and he was glad to talk to him, that was an experience for him. It was fun. And if you made a mistake or did something wrong, they'd just send you home. They wouldn't put up with any tomfoolery.

Bev: So, no messing around with the guys, that was a big no-no?

Zan: No, and you didn't really have time, they kept us busy. We had one day a week off, or something. A lot of them were night games, well, they were all night games, except the weekends, and they were daylight. I can't think of anything else... I really lost track with the league until, we got the magazine "Reminiscing", I don't know if you ever got that, it was back in the 30s and 40s, and one of the gals from the league had an article in there, anybody who was with the All-American Girls Baseball League get in touch with her, and I did, and that's how we got in touch with quite a few, cause they didn't keep records or addresses and some didn't even have a record of their percent of anything, just didn't keep them I guess. So then I started, I got in touch with a couple of the girls and they kept me informed on what was going on in the league. They are still finding some girls that they hadn't gotten in touch with.

Bev: Yea, I think mainstream America didn't know anything about the girls league during and after the war until that movie came out, *A League of Their Own*. I didn't know until that came out.

Zan: Yea, That's when it really became and there were a lot of girls from Pennsylvania, cause all the games were out in the Midwest. But there's one gal that lived in Exton, near Philly, one from Reading, Pennsylvania, which I never met them, but they I don't know how they found out about it.

Bev: Are you connected to the Internet? Have you explored any of the websites?

Zan: What?

Bev: Do you have a computer?

Zan: No, I don't

Bev: I thought there might be some you might have found something

Zan: There probably is, but we don't have, no.

Bev: Well, this is a lot of nice stuff that you brought along.

Zan: I think that one article might have been in the Smithsonian. Once in a while you'll see maybe a little item in the paper where one passed away, which if I wasn't associated with it that wouldn't mean anything to me. You just don't see that much about it anymore.

Bev: Do you know if the Smithsonian has done an exhibit about the Girls Baseball League?

Zan: A lot of them have. They travel, they go to colleges and talk, and different historic societies, and hall of fame for their local township or state.

Bev: You said you did some lecturing about your days

Zan: What's that?

Bev: Didn't you say that you had done some lecturing about your time playing baseball? Where all did you lecture at?

Zan: West Chester Historic Society, local historic society, high school, nursing home, and that's about it.

Bev: How long, did you do that for a year, or a couple years? How long of a time did you lecture?

Zan: It's just been probably the last five years that I lectured.

Bev: But you've more or less stopped lecturing at different places now?

Zan: Yes. Plus, I went to the schools and the historic society, after I come home there was some young girls wanted to know the basics of baseball so I coached those for awhile. But there wasn't any other teams that they could play. They were twelve, thirteen year olds. And then there were some older girls later on wanted me to manage them. They got a team but it wasn't organized baseball except who they could find.

Bev: Yea, like pickup games.

Zan: Yes. It was fun. It's time for the girls to get into

Bev: Yes it is. I know soccer and basketball is getting more and lacrosse. I did see in East Petersburg that the Stingers won. They're the State Champ in softball. Sports are out there it's not organized league.

Zan: Our granddaughter is eight, now this summer she might get into soccer camp. Cause they didn't have that for girls years ago, and they didn't know the basics and then they got in high school and started playing soccer. Where the other townships or school districts they had summer camps and started the children in elementary school and I think it's great. And now the girls sports, now they're doing great very well in Lancaster County. Basketball and soccer and hockey it's great. Plus they're getting scholarships to school, and that should be.

Bev: Thank you Zan for coming in.

Zan: You're welcome.