

“True Womanhood” on the Baseball Diamond: The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League

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Baseball has long been considered a “man’s” game. This has not stopped scores of women, from all social classes, on college campuses and off, from playing the game they love. Because the social definition of the role of “true Women” was limited to domestic duties through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women who played baseball often tried to maintain their femininity in dress and appearance in order to maintain some modicum of social acceptance. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), which was founded by Philip K. Wrigley and which operated from 1943-1954, is an excellent example of how women engaged in a nontraditional pursuit were able to gain social acceptance by attempting to conform to social definitions of femininity while engaged in that pursuit.

Wrigley founded the AAGPBL in Chicago when it appeared that men’s major league baseball would have to cease operations during World War II. Women’s softball was extremely popular in Chicago at the time and Wrigley hoped to attract fans to big league parks to watch women play until the men returned from war. Though the AAGPBL was originally founded as a softball league, league officials continually modified the rules until, by 1954, teams were using an official 9 inch men’s baseball and playing on a field with 85 foot basepaths, 5 feet shorter than the official men’s diamond. The AAGPBL had great support from fans in league cities like Racine and Kenosha, Wisconsin, South Bend, Indiana, and Rockford, Illinois. Attendance peaked in 1948 when almost one million fans flocked to games.

One of the reasons women’s baseball gained such a following was probably due to the fact that Wrigley and subsequent league owners insisted that players look and act like “All-American” girls. League rules forbade players from appearing in public in slacks or shorts. In 1951, league rules specifically stated: “Masculine hair styling, shoes, coats, shirts, socks, T-shirts, are barred at all times.” In 1943 and 1944, league members attended charm school and, throughout the league’s twelve year existence, chaperones assigned to every team ensured the girls compliance with league rules.

Despite enjoying great popular support for many years, the AAGPBL folded after the 1954 season. While a number of reasons contributed to the demise of the league, including the resurgence of men’s baseball thanks, in part, to televised major league games, the resurgence of the “cult of true womanhood” after World War II helped quell the league as well. While women were accepted in factories, on loading docks and in baseball uniforms during the war, these women were expected to return to traditional pursuits in the postwar period.

The AAGPBL was not the first opportunity for women to play baseball. Scores of women played baseball before its creation and scores have played since its demise. Their acceptance by society at various times offers interesting insight into changing attitudes toward women’s proper role in society.