

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: QUEEN OF DIAMONDS: EDITH HOUGHTON AND  
THE RISE AND FALL OF WOMEN'S BASEBALL

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Thesis Directed By: Professor Saverio Giovacchini

In the 1920s, women's semi-professional baseball teams known as *Bloomer Girls* were a popular form of entertainment throughout the United States. One of the best female players of this era was Edith Houghton. Houghton had a successful baseball career and even travelled to Japan in 1925 to play on a women's baseball team known as the Philadelphia Bobbies. By the 1930s, however, women were largely expected to play softball. Despite a brief revival of women's baseball during the 1940s, the idea that women play softball and men play baseball has largely persisted. An analysis of Houghton's career reveals the sociological factors that allowed women to play baseball in the 1920s and forced women into softball during the 1930s. The presence and rejection of female baseball players parallels broader changes in American gender relations, and illustrates the socially constructed nature of sport.

QUEEN OF DIAMONDS: EDITH HOUGHTON AND THE RISE AND FALL OF  
WOMEN'S BASEBALL

by

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*For Grammie and Bubs  
Who taught me to swing for the fences*

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Archivists and librarians at the New York Public Library, Temple University, and the National Baseball Hall of Fame patiently answered all of my questions and helped me uncover amazing records that made this research possible. Barbara Gregorich shared her interviews with Edith Houghton, and members of the Society for American Baseball Research welcomed me with open arms.

My soon-to-be-wife, Alyssa, had to bear the burden of my frustration and anxiety. She spent many nights patiently watching me type away in my “office” and gave me helpful critiques along the way. As I write this, I conclude one chapter of my life, just as I begin another with her. I can’t wait for our story to continue.

It seems futile to try to express my thanks for my parents in only a sentence because they deserve a whole book. They have showered me with love, encouragement, and given me every opportunity to succeed. I could not be here without them. Lastly, I must thank my grandmothers. Grammie fueled my passion for education and Bubs fueled my passion for life itself. Both of them have made me the person I am today, and for that, this work is dedicated to them.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Uncovering a Legend**

During my last semester as an undergraduate, I enrolled in a fiction-writing workshop. For one of the assignments, our professor handed out newspaper articles, which we were to use as inspiration for a short story. Students in our class wrote about aliens, romantic encounters, and murder mysteries. I wrote about a young girl who played baseball.

My story was set in the 1920s and featured a feminine protagonist named Edith Houghton. Edith began playing ball when she was six years old and joined a team of professional women baseball players at age ten. The team travelled around the country, and I chronicled the girls' adventures on the road. The female players reveled in their freedom to leave their parents' watchful eye as they danced, drank alcohol, gambled, and flirted with boys. Edith and her teammates made a living playing baseball, winning games against men, and making headlines in local papers. The story took a dramatic turn when the players traveled to Japan and all their mischief put their lives in jeopardy. The young women were stranded in Asia and one girl was washed overboard on the way home. A melancholy mood prevailed as the girls returned home, only to find that women no longer played baseball. Some of the girls, including Edith, reluctantly joined softball teams, but yearned for the day they could play baseball again. Edith got her chance when WWII broke out. Edith joined the WAVES and shocked sailors as she batted .800 on a men's baseball team in the Navy. After the war, with her best playing days behind her, Edith marched into the office of Philadelphia Phillies' president Bob Carpenter and

demanded a job. Two weeks later, she became the first, *and last*, female scout in Major League Baseball. Edith never married; her love was for baseball.

I received enormously positive feedback on the story. My teacher was impressed by my ability to create a realistic character, and my classmates applauded my creativity. Yet unbeknownst to them, my work did not belong in a fiction-writing workshop. Although seemingly unbelievable, my story was true. The inspiration for my story was the obituary of the real-life Edith Houghton. Much like my story, Houghton began playing baseball at age six and joined a semi-professional women's baseball team at age ten. Everything from the trip to Japan to becoming a major league scout actually happened. My story was no more fictional than any history textbook.

As I began more in-depth research into Houghton's life, I realized her story was much larger than that of one woman. Houghton's life reveals a story about the evolution of a sport and understanding that evolution reveals much about American culture. Edith was not the only woman playing competitive baseball and certainly not the only girl to pick up a bat and glove. By all accounts, women's baseball was a popular form of entertainment in the 1920s, so much so that a team of young girls travelled all the way to Japan in 1925. By the mid-1930s, however, it was no longer acceptable for women to play baseball. Women were relegated to softball fields, and the existence of women's hardball faded from most people's memory. I intended to find out why.

The transition from women's hardball to softball is one of the most significant and definitive revolutions in sports. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, baseball was not exclusively for men. Female teams, known as Bloomer Girls, popped up in every



major city around the country and were successful by any measurable statistic; the women boasted winning records against male opponents, attracted thousands of fans, and provided a profitable form of entertainment. Similarly, when the popularity of softball skyrocketed in the 1930s it was not exclusively for women. Both male and female teams of all ages and skill levels popped up around the country, making the sport America's most played game. By the start of World War II, however, baseball had become a male sport and softball was largely entrenched as a women's game. Understanding the social context in which this change occurred is both historically important and enlightening for modern female athletes.

The gendering of baseball and softball did not occur in isolation. The evolution of the sports was deeply ingrained in American society. Women's baseball did not prosper by its own devices, nor did it decline for no reason. Social trends such as urbanization, consumerism, and the rise of the *new woman* all fostered women's baseball in the 1920s, just as the Great Depression and professionalization led to its demise. Furthermore, as the Roaring Twenties gave way to the somber thirties, the culturally imposed ideals of womanhood shifted from the audacious flapper to the domesticated housewife.

The rise and fall of Edith Houghton's baseball career illustrates how views towards female athletes have been socially constructed. The ways in which the media, medical professionals, public policies, and academia define women have largely determined the extent to which female athletes are able to succeed. During the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women made significant progress towards social equality and established new standards of femininity. Physical education teachers promoted physical

activity for girls, and the media promoted the image of the sportswoman. Female athletes embodied elements of beauty, leisure, physical strength, and independence that defined the era. It was during this time that Edith Houghton was able to play baseball against male opponents before thousands of cheering fans.

Yet women were only able to succeed within the confines of their environment. When Edith Houghton's team, the Philadelphia Bobbies, travelled to Japan in 1925, the national media instantly labeled the trip a catastrophe. Less reported, however, was the fact that Philadelphia Bobbies won nearly one third of their games against their male opponents at Japanese colleges. Also unacknowledged was the fact that the players themselves did not consider the trip a failure. Edith Houghton and other sportswomen flourished in the 1920s, but an assumption of inferiority limited their accomplishments.

By the mid-1930s, powerful forces further institutionalized the inferiority of female athletes. The depression years witnessed a return to conservative values as growing sentiment dictated that women's rightful place was in the home. Popular media began to view the sportswoman, a symbol of leisure and beauty a decade earlier, as a threat to the proper societal structure. Academics, largely in the form of female physical education teachers, preached that women should not be participating in competitive athletics. Organized baseball pushed women out of the system and relegated women to softball, a modified, less-intense version of the game. Although women such as Edith Houghton prospered within the realm of softball, many longed for the day that they could play baseball. Once again, societal forces limited Edith Houghton and the success of female athletes in general.

For a brief time in the 1940s and 50s, it seemed as though women's baseball would make a comeback. When World War II broke out, Edith Houghton enlisted in the WAVES and was recruited to play on a talented team of male baseball players. At the same time, Philip K. Wrigley founded the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBBL) as a way to entertain civilians involved in the war-production efforts. Like their predecessors, however, female hardballers could only flourish within the gendered confines of their environment. Administrators of the AAGBBL forced players to wear skirts, go to charm school, and flaunt their femininity. Similarly, once more WAVES joined the Navy, officials asked Houghton to manage a team of softball players. The post-war years saw a reversion to traditional gendered roles. Much like the demise of Bloomer Girl teams decades earlier, societal pressure relegated women to softball in order to reassert men's authority on the baseball diamond. The ebb and flow of broader gender relations are paralleled by the continuing presence and rejection of female baseball players.

The views towards female athletics that developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century remain deeply ingrained in American society. These preconceived notions of feminine inferiority are largely the reason why the modern reader will find Houghton's career so fascinating. The fact that a woman could play competitive baseball against men, *and win*, in the 1920s and early 1930s goes against long-held assumptions about female athletics. The fact that female baseball and softball teams had comparable attendances to major league baseball teams is startling because most readers assume that women are not as athletic as men and that they do not have the same appeal as a spectator sport. The career of Edith Houghton challenges these assumptions. There was a time when

attendance at female baseball games surpassed that of the major leagues, and thousands of people paid admission to see women play, and often defeat, opposing men. There was also a time when the popularity of men's softball threatened to depose baseball as the national pastime. The career of Edith Houghton illustrates how changing attitudes in society made it impossible for women to play competitive baseball, and established softball as a feminine game.

My work draws heavily on a number of historical fields. Fundamental to this analysis is the historiography of baseball and softball. Scholars have studied the origins of bat and ball games dating as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and debunked the myth of Abner Doubleday, the game's oft-cited creator. Historians have also focused on the role of baseball and American culture, as well as the intersection between baseball and race.<sup>1</sup> Considerably less scholarship has been dedicated to the intersection of gender and baseball, although some does exist. Penny Marshall's film *A League of Their Own* brought attention to the All-American Girls' Baseball League (AAGBBL) during the WWII era. Excellent analyses of the AAGBBL by Merrie A. Fidler, Susan E. Johnson, and W.C. Madden have explored the league's history and player biographies. Additional scholarship concerning women in baseball tends to focus on the emergence of female baseball in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion on the Doubleday Myth and general histories of the game, see Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); David Voigt, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966); John Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden: The Secret History of the Early Game* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); David Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

Historians have dedicated less research to women's baseball in the 1920s and 1930s. Debra Shattuck, Jean Hastings Ardell, Gai Ingham Berlage, and Barbara Gregorich have all written about women's role in baseball from its origins to modern times. In these works, a chapter or two is usually dedicated to the Bloomer Girls and women ballplayers in the interwar years. The Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, has featured exhibits on women in baseball, some of which covered the 1920s and 1930s. Leslie Heaphy and Rebecca Alpert have also given presentations about women's baseball during this time, but have not written substantially on the topic. In addition, members of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) have written articles about female players and teams from the 1920s, but have not published substantial research in the scholarly community.<sup>2</sup>

Within the limited scholarship regarding female baseball in the 1920s and 1930s, historians often mention Edith Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies. The Bobbies were one of the premier women's teams and Houghton was their best player. A few baseball historians have mentioned the Bobbies' trip to Japan in 1925, but none have studied the trip in-depth or put the voyage into a greater historical context. In addition to scholarly literature, the most thorough coverage of Houghton's career is in Barbara Gregorich's book, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball*, which dedicates an eleven-page chapter to Houghton and the Bobbies but does not relate her life to broader trends of twentieth-century history. Similarly, Rich Westcott, a Philadelphia sports writer included an eight-page chapter on Edith (mostly related to scouting) in his book, *The*

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<sup>2</sup> There is niche within SABR that focuses on female baseball. Members range from university professors to amateur historians, all of whom are extremely knowledgeable about baseball and passionate about their research.

*Fightin' Phils: Oddities, Insights, and Untold Stories*, but fails to make a historical argument. A number of newspaper articles have also featured Edith Houghton but similarly lack historical analysis.

In general, historians have written much less about softball. Much of my analysis builds on the work of Jennifer Ring. In her book, *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't Play Baseball*, Ring argues that organized baseball intentionally dissociated from femininity by rewriting history and promoting softball for girls. Members of the baseball elite created the Abner Doubleday myth to falsely emphasize the sport's American origins, and erased the era of Bloomer Girl baseball from the record books. By the 1930s, organized baseball declared the few female baseball contracts that existed null and void, and helped create an exclusively male Little League. Ring illustrates how the idea that women *have to play* softball is entirely socially constructed.<sup>3</sup> My analysis of Edith Houghton builds on Ring's argument. Houghton's career accentuates the success of women's baseball in the 1920s and highlights the social factors that forced women into softball. The brief resurgence of women's baseball in the 1940s further illustrates the social nature of women's exclusion from the sport.

Literature concerning physical health and the perception of the body is particularly relevant to this study. Scholars have argued that the physical body became a symbol for expressing cultural concerns and aspirations. T.J. Jackson Lears has shown how the role of advertising in the 1920s created a new standard of beauty. A retailored image that emphasized active youth, beauty, and athleticism emerged as the ideal figure, largely as a result of growing anxieties about unwanted immigrants and threats to

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Ring, *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't Play Baseball* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2009).

masculinity.<sup>4</sup> A smaller group of historians has focused on the changing perception of the female body. Within this scholarship, much of the literature focuses on the role of female physical education instructors and their powerful influence on women's sport. Martha Verbrugge has argued that the female coaches at the university level acquiesced to their male superiors by promoting non-competitive sports for women. In doing so, female coaches were able to maintain their authority by becoming the leaders of an increasingly distinct and specialized field of women's sport.<sup>5</sup> While I accept many of my predecessor's arguments, they have not applied their logic to the sport of baseball. I argue that the changing perceptions of the female body allowed for women's baseball to prosper in the 1920s, and subsequently decline thereafter. The decline of the sportswoman in popular media and the specialization of women's athletics directly limited the ways in which women could compete in baseball, and ultimately forced women to turn to softball.

My work builds on the aforementioned body of literature and applies a gendered approach. Essential to this thesis is the emergence of the *new woman*—one that was out in public, strong, and portrayed some masculine qualities. Historians of the new woman encompass a broad range of ideas dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1920s. My focus, however, is largely on the new woman of the 1920s, which tended to take on more masculine attributes in the realms of athletics, sexuality, and politics. Women of

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<sup>4</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, "American Advertising and the Reconstruction of the Body, 1880-1930" in *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and the Body, 1830-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 47-66.

<sup>5</sup> Martha H. Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the twenties capitalized on the broader opportunities, and became prominent social reformers, political activists, and workers. Even still, women of this period could only prosper within confines of a male-dominated environment. Scholars such as Estelle Freedman, Nan Enstad, and Elizabeth Spelman have all convincingly shown that the perceived political and social equality of the new women was a fallacy. Although women had greater opportunities in the workforce, they faced discriminatory hiring practices, made less money than men, and nearly always worked under male bosses. Similarly, women had gained the right to vote but few newspapers and officials took their political activity seriously.<sup>6</sup> Building on previous literature, I show that women's baseball is merely another example of this common social trend. I argue that the general acceptance of new gender roles in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed women to play competitive baseball for the first time, although they continued to do so within the limited confines of their environment.

Many historians of women's studies view the 1930s as a period of regression. Amidst the great depression, they argue, society at large rejected the values of the new woman. Many Americans believed workingwomen threatened potential male jobs, and

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on the new woman see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Judith Butler and Joan Wallach, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: The Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988). 158-159; Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974): 372-393; Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, NH: Published by University Press of New England Wesleyan University Press, 2000); Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).



the iconic flapper was the epitome of waste and negligent behavior. Although female job opportunities actually expanded during the Great Depression, men worked to reestablish a gender hierarchy in various ways. Men took over executive roles in industries such as radio, cinema, librarianship, and nursing in which women traditionally had more autonomy.<sup>7</sup> Such was also the case in baseball. I apply this declensionist theory to the devolution of women's professional baseball and the subsequent creation of softball as a female sport. There was a time when women played baseball against men, but the professionalization of the sport during the depression years worked to separate male and female athletes in an attempt to reestablish traditional gender norms. Although the creation of softball increased the number of women in sport, it occurred at the expense of female baseball players and further entrenched women's subservient role.

World War II unquestionably created new opportunities for women. As men went off to war, thousands of women took on factory work and non-combat military positions. In the sport of baseball, Philip K. Wrigley founded the All-American Girls Baseball League and Edith Houghton got the opportunity to play on a male team in the Navy. A growing body of literature, however, argues that underlying biases towards

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion on the decline of the new woman see: Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

women persisted throughout the war. Government propaganda emphasized the femininity of female workers and compared women's work in the factory to housework. The military emphasized the temporary nature of female recruits and singled out "mannish women." While opportunities for women expanded, gender hierarchies remained intact.<sup>8</sup> I apply this argument to women's baseball. Although Edith Houghton and women in the AAGBBL had renewed opportunities on the baseball diamond, they continued to suffer the same hypocrisies of the pre-war years.

What the historiography of female baseball severely lacks is historical context. There has been little scholarly research into the underlying factors that allowed women to play semi-professional baseball in the 1920s and early 1930s. Likewise, many have retold the details of the Bobbies' trip to Japan in 1925, but few have reflected on the greater sociological factors at work. Historians have not analyzed the sociological and cultural factors that forced women out of baseball and forced men out of softball during the depression, nor have they studied women's baseball in the 1940s outside of the AAGBBL. This study seeks to fill in these gaps and insert Edith Houghton's career into the larger historical framework.

Houghton's career provides a useful model for studying the rise and fall of women's baseball. Truly understanding this transition, however, is dependent on a closer examination of other sociological factors at work. While this paper gives adequate

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 1-10; Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 146-152.

attention to Houghton's individual triumphs, it was often necessary to discuss additional evidence outside of Houghton's career, along with secondary literature, which helps to explain the broad changes in women's sport. Consequently, Houghton does not have the ubiquitous role in the following chapters that one might expect from a biographical analysis, yet her life is essential to tying together this historical narrative.

In Chapter 1, I uncover the largely unknown history of women's professional and semi-professional baseball in the 1920s and early 1930s. It is essential to situate Edith Houghton's career within the context broader historical trends. Changing views towards women occurred at the same time that Babe Ruth helped propel baseball to incredible popularity. Yet major league teams were reluctant to adopt the new medium of radio and only played games in America's largest cities in the Northeast and Midwest. While urbanization flourished in the 1920s, the majority of Americans still lived in smaller cities and rural areas whose only access to the major leagues were newsreels and newspaper box scores. The enormous popularity of baseball and major league inaccessibility allowed independent, semi-professional, and amateur baseball clubs to thrive at the local level. Boosted by improved transportation and rising consumer culture, these teams attracted thousands of fans and were financially successful. It was during this era of local baseball that the new woman evolved. The emergence and acceptance of the athletic, independent, public woman, allowed Edith Houghton to play baseball competitively in the 1920s and early 1930s. The popularity of local ball, consumerism, and evolving standards of femininity culminated in the success of Bloomer Girls baseball clubs, which traveled the country and played games before thousands of fans. The

success of these teams disrupts our modern expectations of female athletes and indisputably proves that baseball has not always been the all-male sport that it is today.

In Chapter 2, I examine Edith Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies' trip to Japan in 1925. The trip offers a unique perspective into the complex gender relations of the 1920s by simultaneously highlighting the new opportunities offered to women and the continuing discrimination that limited their success. The mere fact that promoters funded a female baseball team to travel across the world is a reflection of the liberalized views towards women. During the trip, the female ballplayers acted as cultural ambassadors and embodied the quintessential woman of the 1920s in their ability to travel, make money, and flaunt their independence. Yet this stereotype is an incomplete portrayal of the decade in which they lived. Although women achieved greater political and social equality during the decade, *de facto* discrimination continued to limit their freedom. Even though the Bobbies won a considerable portion of their games and fielded a team of experienced players, managers blamed the financial failure on the team's physical incapability to compete with men. The presence of chaperones and male pitchers further emphasized the perceived limitations of female athletes. Although the newspapers and government records characterized the trip as a complete and utter failure, Houghton and the other players considered the trip an unwavering success. Writers' reiteration of the dominant male perspective has further entrenched women's subordinate status. Ultimately, I argue that the trip to Japan reflects both the success and the limitations of the new woman—although they were able to play competitive sports abroad, preconceived notions of feminine inferiority limited Houghton's success as a female athlete.

Edith Houghton continued playing baseball throughout the twenties and early 1930s. Yet despite all of her talent, success, and determination, societal pressure forced Houghton to give up playing the sport she loved. In Chapter 3, I explore factors that forced Houghton, and all other women, out of baseball. I build on the work of declensionist scholars who argue that the 1930s was a regressive period for women's rights. During the depression, popular media replaced the image of the sportswoman with an image of the thrifty housewife. Men viewed the economic depression as a threat to masculinity and many individuals looked for other ways to re-establish "proper" gender roles. Edith Houghton's career reflects this trend. During the 1930s, baseball became more professionalized and manly, while softball grew to extraordinary levels of popularity. Physical educators and the media viewed the emerging sport of softball as more appropriate for the female body, and by the end of the decade, women's competitive baseball no longer existed. Although men played softball in massive numbers at the beginning of the decade, organized baseball worked hard to characterized softball as a "female" sport. Although Houghton had a successful softball career, strong societal pressures forced her out of the sport she was most passionate about, baseball.

Chapter 4 focuses on the brief revival of women's baseball during the 1940s. With the outbreak of war came expanded opportunities for women. As men were called into action, women were increasingly present in traditionally sex-segregated domains such as factory work and baseball diamonds. The relaxed gendered boundaries allowed Edith Houghton to compete on a men's baseball team in the Navy. At the same time, women baseball players were given greater opportunities in the All-American Girls Baseball league. The revival of women's baseball, however, was extremely brief and

limited by societal gender norms. Women in the AAGBBL were asked to continually prove their femininity by wearing skirts and attending charm school. Likewise, Houghton was benched in favor of less talented men, and ultimately asked to play women's softball once more WAVES joined the Navy. The brief revival of women's baseball shows that the war years brought about new opportunities for women, but did nothing to change the underlying gendered biases. The post-war society reestablished a stricter gender structure and the idea of women's competitive baseball once again disappeared.

In her landmark book, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Nancy F. Cott argues that women's condition is socially constructed; it is shaped by humans and not predestined by God.<sup>9</sup> More than anything else, the career of Edith Houghton supports Cott's claim. The fact that women were once successful baseball players illustrates their physical capability, passion, and tenacity for the game. The fact that people once came out in thousands to watch Edith Houghton play shows the potential of women's baseball as a spectator sport. The fact that men played softball shows that the sport is not inherently feminine. All of these revelations irrefutably prove that the gendering of baseball and softball is a product of the social environment in which we live.

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms *professional* and *semi-professional* to describe Edith Houghton's various baseball and softball teams. For the majority of her career, baseball and softball clubs paid Edith Houghton to play. Nevertheless, Houghton also had other jobs to supplement her income and did not play baseball or softball all year round. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to these serious, competitive, and

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 4.

commercialized teams that Houghton played for on the weekends and summer nights as *semi-professional*. For the purposes of this paper, the term *professional* refers to full-time athletes whose only source of income derived from their athletic endeavors. When Houghton played for Hollywood Girls, for example, she signed a contract, travelled with the team full time, and received substantial pay for her efforts. Although the phrases professional and semi-professional are largely subjective, they best reflect the caliber of baseball and softball that defined Houghton's career.

This thesis would not have been possible without a number of important sources. I rely heavily on a scrapbook that Edith Houghton kept throughout her life, a copy of which is now held at the National Baseball Hall of Fame. The scrapbook is filled with hundreds of newspaper clippings, photographs, contracts, pamphlets, advertisements, and news bulletins, covering everything from Houghton's early days as a mascot for the Philadelphia Police to her career as a scout for the Philadelphia Phillies. The sheer number of published articles and memorabilia is a testament to the popularity of women's baseball, and later softball, along with Houghton's incredible talent as an athlete. Additionally, Tim Wiles of the Baseball Hall of Fame conducted an interview with Houghton on June 20, 2000, which provides a unique perspective from the female players' point-of-view—something newspapers perennially neglected. Likewise, the diary of Nettie Gans Spangler has provided a wonderfully colorful account of the Philadelphia Bobbies' trip to Japan in 1925. Like the interviews with Houghton, the diary provides an intimate account of the female perspective and highlights a version of the story that has yet to be told. Other interviews with Houghton, particularly those conducted by Rich Westcott and Barbara Gregorich, have also been particularly helpful.

By contrast, records of the State Department reveal the dominant, masculine account of the trip to Japan, one that has silenced Houghton and Spangler's version and since dominated the historical narrative. Census records have also proved invaluable, as they provided substantial documentation on the Houghton family history, as well as broader patterns of urbanization that I use to highlight the popularity of local baseball. Temple University Urban Archives also preserves records related specifically to Edith Houghton, as well as newspaper clippings from the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which highlight female baseball and softball in the Pennsylvania area. The New York Public Library offers access to *The Japan Times*, an English-speaking newspaper published in Japan that extensively covered the Bobbies' 1925 trip. All of these sources are supplemented with historical newspaper articles found through the ProQuest database. Because of incredible digitization efforts, I was able to search for terms such as *Bloomer Girls*, *Softball*, *Houghton*, *Bobbies*, and countless others, which returned thousands of results. Throughout this paper, I cite articles from mainstream papers such as *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Baltimore Sun*, and smaller local papers such as the *Watervliet Record*, *Orrville Courier-Crescent*, and *The Lebanon Daily News*. The amount of articles that described women's baseball teams and competitive softball, often in headlines with photographs, is further evidence of a bygone era of female athletics.

I have done my best to connect these sources and analyze their discrepancies. To my deepest disappointment, I never had the chance to speak with Edith Houghton herself, although her surviving family has provided me with additional information about her childhood, baseball career, and post-baseball life. I accept the inherent bias that comes



with relying on Houghton's own scrapbook and personal accounts, although I have done my best to find corroborating evidence whenever possible. Throughout my research, I have developed a special connection with Edith Houghton. While my admiration of her is likely apparent, I do my best to tell her story from an impartial perspective.

By focusing on a single individual, the evolution of baseball and American culture is simplified. A noticeable shortcoming of this biographical approach is the lack of diversity. The sociological changes that affected Houghton and her teammates did not affect women of all races and classes equally. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that tracing the career of Edith Houghton is useful for sketching the creation of gendered sports and evolution of complex gender relations. Houghton was not the only woman baseball player, nor were the teams she played for the only ones in existence. Although Edith Houghton was exceptional in many ways, I hope to show that she was also representative of many women throughout each era of her life. The goal of this study is to interject Edith Houghton into the general historiography of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, I illustrate how the rise and fall of women's baseball directly reflected larger trends in American society.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**Bobbed Hair and Ballgames:**  
**Women's Baseball in the Twenties**

*"I guess I was born with a baseball in my hand or something. I enjoyed it more than anything"*<sup>1</sup> –Edith Houghton, age 100

The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created a unique atmosphere that allowed women like Edith Houghton to excel in the sport of baseball. As the center of this thesis, it is important to introduce Edith Houghton and provide insight into her family background and early days on the baseball diamond. Houghton's early triumphs on the vacant lots of Philadelphia set the stage for her phenomenal career and remained influential throughout her life. An overview of Houghton's childhood and time on the Philadelphia Bobbies, a semi-professional all-female baseball team, shows how the Bloomer Girl teams both added to a preexisting legacy of women's baseball and diverged from their predecessors. Analyzing the sociological factors that facilitated the success of Edith Houghton and her Bloomer Girl teams provides a unique way to understand the historical era in which she lived.

Houghton's early success can largely be attributed to the surging popularity of baseball in the 1920s. Fueled by the accomplishments of Babe Ruth, baseball, which was already popular, became an obsession in major cities and small towns alike. While the success of Babe Ruth and the New York Yankees has been well documented, historians have focused less on the popularity of baseball at the local level.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1920s,

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Fernandes, "100 Years Can't Dull Diamond's Sparkle," *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, February 11, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For general discussion about baseball in the 1920s see Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Geoffrey Perret, *America in the Twenties* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Ron Briley, *Class at*

major league baseball was incredibly popular, but largely inaccessible to most individuals. Major league teams were only located in the largest cities and reluctant to adopt radio broadcasting. As a result, millions of Americans living in rural towns and smaller cities relied on local baseball for entertainment. Female teams like the Philadelphia Bobbies and the Passaic Bloomer Girls thrived during the era of local ball. Houghton and her teammates travelled to small towns across the country, playing competitive games against local men for entertainment and for profit.

At the same time, a wave of consumerism took the United States by storm. A booming economy along with growing cities created a new middle class with an expendable income. As the popularity of baseball grew, entrepreneurs invested in teams and facilities. Investors hired promoters to bring female teams like the New York Bloomer Girls to their towns and charged admission to local games. The growth of consumerism developed simultaneously with the advertising industry. Not only did advertisements promote baseball games against female teams, but ad agencies helped to boost the image of the sportswoman—one that was feminine but also strong enough to overcome challenges of a modern world.<sup>3</sup> The growing economy and change in advertising allowed Houghton's clubs to thrive throughout the decade.

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*Bat, Gender on Deck and Race in the Hole: A Line-Up of Essays on Twentieth Century Culture and America's Game* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2007), 7-22; Leigh Montville, *The Big Bam: The Life and Times of Babe Ruth* (New York: Doubleday, 2006). For studies of local baseball see Thomas Barthel, *Baseball Barnstorming and Exhibition Games, 1901-1962: A History of Off-Season Major League Play* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2007); Scott Simkus, *Outsider Baseball: The Weird World of Hardball on the Fringe, 1876-1950* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion about the growth of consumerism and advertising see Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Mark Dyreson, "The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the

Similarly and perhaps most notably, was the emergence of the new woman. It is not coincidental that Bloomer Girls demanded more respect on the baseball diamond during the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Competitive female baseball teams emerged at end of the 19th century and continued to gain legitimacy through the early 1900s. As women fought for their right to vote and increased their presence in the workforce, baseball promoters and managers gradually gave female athletes more opportunities. By the 1920s, the new woman resembled a strong, athletic, sexual, and outwardly public individual.<sup>4</sup> The change in gender roles is evident in Houghton's career. By the end of the decade, Edith Houghton was playing full time for a travelling group of professional baseball players called the Hollywood Girls. Liberated social views towards women created opportunities for female athletes like Edith Houghton to emerge on the public scene as both women and baseball players.

The convergence of local baseball, consumerism, and evolving standards of femininity, overlapped in the form of women's professional and semi-professional

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1920s," *Journal of Sport History* 16, no. 3 (1989): 261-281; T.J. Jackson Lears, "American Advertising and the Reconstruction of the Body, 1880-1930," In *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and the Body, 1830-1940*, edited by Kathryn Grover, 47-66, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989); T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Gregory Kent Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswoman: Women's Health, Fitness, and Athletics, 1860-1940*, (New York: P. Lang, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> For discussion about women in the 1920s, see Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974): 372-393; Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, NH: Published by University Press of New England Wesleyan University Press, 2000); Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005); Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006); Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

baseball teams. This chapter explores the sociological factors that allowed Edith Houghton and her teams to flourish in the 1920s and early 1930s, before baseball was the all-male sport we know it today, and before women were relegated to softball fields.

### **Edith Houghton and Women's Baseball**

Edith Houghton was born into a baseball family on February 10, 1912. William Houghton, the head of the household, descended from a long line of Americans dating back to 1635. William was born in Washington D.C. during Reconstruction, and like many other young men, was introduced to the sport of baseball. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, baseball transitioned from a gentleman's game to a working-class sport. Baseball teams popped up all over the country in small towns, cities, vacant lots, and schoolyards. The Houghton family moved to Philadelphia in the 1870s where William's father, Carlos, made a decent living as a bookkeeper. Meanwhile, William Houghton got a job as a laborer and became a star baseball player for an industrial team. When William Houghton was twenty-three, he met Elizabeth Sarilla Craig, a third-generation Philadelphian. The two married and started their family in the heart of Philadelphia. With his best baseball playing days behind him, William managed a restaurant and Lizzie worked as the cashier. Houghton would later go on to manage a grocery store and earn a respectable living. William and Lizzie lived the rest of their lives in Philadelphia and had ten children. Of the ten kids, the three brothers, Bill,

Carlos, and Frank, followed their father's example and joined local baseball clubs. For the Houghton family, however, baseball was not only for the boys.<sup>5</sup>

Not long after Edith was born, the Houghtons purchased their longtime home at 2502 Diamond Street. Two miles north of the Houghton household was Shibe Park, the home of the Philadelphia Athletics and the first steel and concrete stadium in baseball history. A mile to the west of the Houghton house was Fairmount Park. Once the home to the 1876 Centennial Exposition and the nation's first zoo, by the time the Houghton family arrived, local teams used the park to practice baseball. Just a home run away from the Houghtons' front stoop was a vacant sandlot. It was here that the neighborhood kids emulated their idols, Walter Johnson, Ty Cobb, and Babe Ruth. It was here that Edith fell in love with baseball and began her improbable career.

By the age of six, Edith was spending hours at the field across from her house. She played with the neighborhood boys for hours on end, briefly taking a break for dinner and quickly returning to the diamond at dusk.<sup>6</sup> Houghton learned the game from her older brothers and her nephew, Ernest, who was closer to her in age. Ernest brought his young aunt to local games and she filled in when needed.<sup>7</sup> At age nine, Houghton competed against older boys in the neighborhood. "I hold three fingers on the ball when I want to shoot a fast one over the plate and two when I send a curve over the corner," said Houghton in her first recorded interview, "The girls my age all seem to want to play with

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<sup>5</sup> *Evening Public Ledger*, "Phila. Has a Star in Miss Houghton," April 20, 1931. Census records from 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, United States of America, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Rich Westcott, *The Fightin' Phils: Oddities, Insights, and Untold Stories* (Camino Books, INC: Philadelphia, 2008), 13

<sup>7</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, Sarasota, Florida, June 20, 2000, BL-468.2012, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library (hereafter NBHF).

rubber balls and jacks. I'd much rather take a baseball and have a catch, but I cannot get the girls to do it with me."<sup>8</sup> The sixty-pound child was hardly taller than the regulation-sized bat that she used, but could hit the ball better than the boys in the neighborhood and run faster than most of them. Before she even played on a uniformed team, people came out in scores to watch the young sensation perform on the sandlot. The young star embodied the resilient attitude that many women of the 1920s cherished, "It sure is great to get up there and to know that you are the only girl playing with a crowd of boys and that you can do anything they can do."<sup>9</sup> Houghton would spend the rest of her life reiterating this belief.

When she was not at school or at the sandlot across from her house, Edith Houghton spent her time as the mascot for the Philadelphia Police Department baseball team. Mascot for the team was not merely a comical charade. For important games, Houghton sat in the bleachers next to the Philadelphia mayor, and met with police commissioners, captains, and other local officials. Before the games, Houghton led the teams from the flagpole in rear of the stadium all the way across the field to home plate. The young mascot's most important role, however, was providing pre-game entertainment. Houghton expertly fielded ground balls and took batting practice in front of thousands of cheering fans. Newspapers dubbed her the "wonder girl of baseball" and

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<sup>8</sup> "Nine Year Old Girl Stars on Boys' Baseball Team," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, August 1, 1921, SCRC 169, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries (hereafter TU).

<sup>9</sup> "Nine Year Old Girl Stars on Boys' Baseball Team," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, August 1, 1921, SCRC 169, TU.

photographed the Houghton in full uniform.<sup>10</sup> By age ten, Edith Houghton had played in front of large crowds, on vacant lots, and in stadiums, though she still had not played for a uniformed team. That changed when she heard that the Philadelphia Bobbies, a traveling team of semi-professional all-girl ball players, were having tryouts at Fairmount Park.

The Bobbies were one of many female baseball teams around the country known as Bloomer Girls. Named after the style of pants, Bloomer Girl teams usually consisted of seven to nine women with a male pitcher and catcher. The Bloomer Girls travelled from town to town, primarily playing against male opponents in local leagues, independent minor leagues, and industrial leagues consisting of factory-sponsored teams created to boost camaraderie and morale of their workers. The Bobbies generally played two to three games a week, sometimes with doubleheaders on the weekends. The manager of the team, Mary O’Gara, typically took a portion of the ticket sales and paid the girls a flat rate of five to ten dollars per game, while a booking agent scheduled contests against local clubs in the Philadelphia area and the surrounding counties. The girls also travelled to New Jersey, upstate Pennsylvania, and Pittsburgh, winning their fair share of games against their male opponents. Most girls on the team were in their late teens to early twenties. When Houghton tried out for the team, she was ten.<sup>11</sup>

Houghton was nothing short of a baseball prodigy. Her age and size did not prevent her from securing a spot as the starting shortstop. By far the smallest player on the field, Houghton used a safety pin to secure her adult-sized cap, and punched extra

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<sup>10</sup> “Mayor Meets Butler at Police Ball Game,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF; “Jersey City Cop Ball Tossers,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>11</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles.



holes in her belt to hold up her slacks.<sup>12</sup> Houghton earned a spot as the leadoff batter and the papers raved about the young phenom. One headline read, “Local Girls Team Hits Stride and Wins Four of Last Five, Edith Houghton Stars.” The paper featured a picture of Houghton and referred to the shortstop as the “ten year old marvel.”<sup>13</sup> Another paper dubbed Houghton the “12 year old wonder” while others simply referred to her as “The Kid.”<sup>14</sup> Of all her sobriquets, the latter stuck. Wherever they went, the Bobbies attracted large crowds, many of whom wanted to see “The Kid.” Still barely in her teens, Houghton’s best playing days were still to come.

Both the players and fans took the game seriously. The girls had lessons on how to slide, regularly stole bases, and turned double plays. Likewise, newspapers referred to the Bobbies as “one of the outstanding local clubs” and recounted the box score alongside scores from the major league teams and other independent clubs. While there was some novelty in seeing girls on the field, both fans and journalists alike treated the Bobbies as another local baseball team with an exceptionally good shortstop. That shortstop happened to be a girl that was still in grade school.

When Houghton tried out for the Philadelphia Bobbies in 1922, she was joining an already storied history of women’s baseball. Historians have discovered that women played baseball since the game’s origins. David Block has found evidence of monks and

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<sup>12</sup> Westcott, *The Fightin’ Phils*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> “Bobbies Playing Smart Ball Now,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>14</sup> “Philadelphia Bobbies All Girls Club at West Lebanon Tomorrow,” *Lebanon Daily News*, August 22, 1925; “Bobbies Playing Smart Ball Now,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF; “Bobbies Drop Game By Close Score, 2-1,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

nuns playing a baseball-like game in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1798, the female heroine, Catherine Morland preferred, "cricket, baseball, riding on horseback, and running about the country at the age of fourteen, to books."<sup>16</sup> Vassar College opened for women in 1865 and fielded a baseball team the following year. By some estimates, there were over 150 female baseball teams in 18 different states by the 1880s. Most of these teams, however, were purely recreational in nature and took place out of the public eye. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, more serious players emerged and female teams began travelling around the country. Yet these travelling teams were more of a vaudeville act than a professional club.<sup>17</sup>

The small body of literature on women's baseball often mischaracterizes the nature of Bloomer Girl teams in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or neglects their existence all together. Preeminent baseball scholar, David Voigt, wrote that the presence of female players in the 1890s "smacked of a Barnum freak show promotion." Voigt went on, "After a few such exhibitions the novelty faded, to be revived sporadically in the 1930s and 40s with small success."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in her study of the All-American Girls Baseball League, Merrie A. Fidler briefly addresses the league's predecessors, "members of these teams [Bloomer Girls] were selected more for their willingness to entertain male

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<sup>15</sup> David Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It: A Search For The Roots Of The Game* (Lincoln: University Of Nebraska Press, 2005), 106-108.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Project Gutenberg Library Archive Foundation, 2006), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Debra Shattuck, "Bloomer Girls: Women Baseball Pioneers" (lecture, Yachats Academy of Arts and Sciences, Yachats, OR, July 19, 2013). Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 38-58.

<sup>18</sup> David. Q. Voigt, "Sex In Baseball: Reflections of Changing Taboos," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 12, no. 3 (1978): 393.

audiences in immodest uniforms than for their ability to play baseball. They not only were accused of being prostitutes, but of prostituting the game.”<sup>19</sup>

Even though women had played bat and ball games as long as men, the emergence of semi-professional Bloomer Girl teams ushered in a unique era women’s baseball. Bloomer Girls were more than sporadic novelties, but part of sustainable industry of serious, competitive baseball clubs throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While their predecessors were largely playing baseball for physical exercise or comic relief, Bloomer Girls played in public settings with the intention of making a profit. Furthermore, the women did not dress immodestly, but in full baseball uniforms comparable to men. Houghton and her teammates were not “prostituting the game,” they were simply playing it, and playing it well.

Although many women were playing baseball, only a few teams were talented enough to compete against men and make money in the process. Such teams included the Philadelphia Bobbies, along with the Passaic Girls, the New York Bloomer Girls, and the Hollywood Girls.<sup>20</sup> By the mid-1930s, Edith Houghton played for all of these teams and was a talented and experienced player by any male or female standard. Nevertheless, Houghton was not the only female baseball player, nor was the Bloomer Girls’ success a fluke.

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<sup>19</sup> Merrie A. Fidler, *The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Gregorich, *Women at Play*, vii-5.

## Local Baseball Thrives

The traditional historiography of the 1920s cites the emergence of Babe Ruth as a cultural icon. Ruth single handedly revolutionized the sport of baseball as huge crowds flocked to see him hit the relatively novel home run. Attendance at major league games doubled, and sometimes tripled, from the pre-war years. In 1920, Ruth shattered previous records with 54 home runs, and the Yankees became the first club to attract a million fans. Ruth's power and charisma made him one of the first cultural celebrities. The role of sensationalist media propelled Ruth's image and made baseball even more popular than it already was. The *New York Daily News* dedicated a reporter exclusively to Ruth, while newsreels dedicated a quarter of their film to baseball.<sup>21</sup> By the 1920s, baseball's popularity had reached extraordinary new heights.

Nevertheless, an important distinction that scholars, particularly those who do not focus on sport, fail to make is the influx of outsider baseball. Scott Simkus uses the term "outsider baseball" to refer to forms of competitive teams that were distinct from organized baseball. Prior to the 1950s, some of the best players in the United States played for Negro Leagues, minor leagues (not associated with major league teams as they are today), and independent professional and semi-professional teams. Simkus writes, "The national appetite for the game far outstripped the ability of both the majors and minors to satisfy it."<sup>22</sup> Although teams like the Yankees attracted more fans, local teams and barnstorming semi-professional clubs were also wildly successful.

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<sup>21</sup> Perret, *America in the Twenties*, 209; Briley, *Class at Bat, Gender on Deck and Race in the Hole*, 7-22; Montville, *The Big Bam*, 1-6.

<sup>22</sup> Simkus, *Outsider Baseball*, 2-4.

Urbanization was a critical factor in the success of both major leagues and local baseball. The 1920 census showed that more people lived in urban areas than rural for the first time in American history. Yet historians are quick to generalize the 1920 census. The Census Bureau defined urban as “all cities and other incorporated places having 2,500 inhabitants or more.”<sup>23</sup> The 1920 census found that 51.4 percent of people (54,304,603) lived in urban areas with more than 2,500 inhabitants, while 48.6 percent of people (51,406,017) lived in rural areas with less than 2,500 inhabitants. Of the urban residents, approximately 10 million lived in major cities with over a million people, while another 10 million lived in cities with fewer than 10,000 people. Historians are correct to acknowledge the importance of urbanization, but their claim that “more Americans lived in cities” is misleading to the modern reader. In 1920, nearly 75 percent of Americans still lived in cities inhabited by less than 100,000 people. The majority of Americans were living in small cities, towns, and rural areas, yet virtually all major league baseball teams played in America’s biggest cities. Although urbanization was a very legitimate phenomenon, the small town continued to dominate the United States, and baseball dominated those small towns.

Local baseball took many forms by the early 1900s. Every small town across the United States had a ball team, many of which featured rosters full of talented players. Amateur clubs, factory teams, and local leagues played in small towns, while professional and semi-professional clubs crossed state lines and toured the country. All of these teams, ranging from the Fleisher’s factory team to the Philadelphia Bobbies,

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<sup>23</sup> After the 1930 census, the definition expanded to include townships and other political subdivisions (not incorporated) with a total population of 10,000 or more, and a population density of 1,000 or more per square mile, 1930 Census.

satisfied the demand for baseball at the local level, which quickly became the defining factor of a small town's standing in the greater community. Inter-urban rivalries developed, while both players and fans used baseball as a way to show their hometown pride.<sup>24</sup> In his critical depiction of small town America, Sinclair Lewis wrote that it was not until Gopher Prairie hired a semi-professional pitcher and garnered a supportive fan base that the fictional town was "put on the map."<sup>25</sup> Lewis's sentiments reflect many non-fictional towns across the country. Newspapers not only covered the games of the Philadelphia Phillies and Philadelphia Athletics, but also gave ample space to teams of the International League, the New York-Pennsylvania League, the American Association, the Southern Association, the Eastern League, and the Blue Ridge League.<sup>26</sup> All of these teams, whether playing in urban metropolises or smaller towns, drew thousands of fans to each game.

Underlying urbanization was an improvement in transportation. Automobiles, railways, and busses allowed people to commute to local baseball games. Americans living in rural areas were no longer socially isolated. Maud Nelson's Western Bloomer Girls, a popular team in the Midwest, advertised away games in the *Watervliet Record*. The games included round-trip transportation from Watervliet to Grand Rapids, a 90-mile trip, plus admission for \$1.00.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, improved transportation allowed managers of semi-professional teams to visit small towns and arrange games against local nines. In 1921, the New York Bloomer Girls sold out games in Pennsylvania, Connecticut,

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<sup>24</sup> Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 66-68.

<sup>25</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, (1920, Project Gutenberg, 2006), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/543/543-8.txt>.

<sup>26</sup> *Lebanon Daily News*, August 22, 1925.

<sup>27</sup> *Watervliet Record*, July 29, 1911.

Maryland, Vermont, and Montreal.<sup>28</sup> Transportation allowed baseball teams at all levels of play to travel greater distances and draw larger crowds. Whether people lived in rural areas, small towns or large metropolises, by the 1920s, baseball was accessible.

Women's baseball flourished in the era of local ball. As the decade drew on, Houghton left the Bobbies to play for the Passaic Bloomer Girls. The Passaic team, although named after a New Jersey county, was also based in Philadelphia. Much like the Bobbies, the Passaic Girls played local men's teams in the suburbs of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Houghton played on Passaic for a few years and honed her craft even further. She learned the nuances of the game and matured physically, no longer needing the safety pin to hold up her uniform. In a game against the Belfield club, Houghton stole the show when she "leaped high into the air and snared a scorching drive and completed an unassisted double play before the startled crowd knew what happened."<sup>29</sup> A reporter for the Bristol Courier claimed Houghton was "without a bit of doubt one of the greatest girl players in baseball today...Edith, in addition to banging out five hits including a homer, two doubles, and a pair of singles, handled seven chances at short stop in big league fashion."<sup>30</sup> By the second half of the 1920s, Houghton was five-foot-seven and unquestionably the best girl player in Philadelphia if not the United States.

Although baseball scholars have dedicated more attention to the Philadelphia Bobbies, who were the better team by Houghton's own admission, the Passaic Girls drew similar crowds and similar publicity, particularly amongst small town teams in the

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<sup>28</sup> "Tappan Post Nine to Play N.Y. Bloomer Girls Tomorrow," *Staten Island Advance*, April 27, 1921.

<sup>29</sup> "Phila. Girls Seek Baseball Honors," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>30</sup> "Bloomer Girls to Play at Croydon Tomorrow," *Bristol Courier*, August 31, 1929.

Pennsylvania area. During a double header against the Bunker Hill nine, the Passaic Girls played “before monster crowds of fans in both morning and afternoon games.” The author went on, “Houghton was easily the star of the opening tilt, pulling in quite a few very difficult catches, and was loudly applauded by the large gathering of fans.”<sup>31</sup> In another game against the Lansdale Chryslermen, the headline read, “Edith Houghton Stars for Visitors...1500 witness game.”<sup>32</sup> According to the 1930 census, Lansdale had roughly 8,000 residents, meaning that nearly 20 percent of the entire town came to watch the game against Passaic, or people from neighboring towns travelled to see the women play. For some of the smaller towns, hosting the female players was the event of the season. When Edith Houghton and the Passaic Girls arrived in Maple Shade, New Jersey, a town of roughly 6,000 people, the largest crowd of the season came to watch the “famous invading lassies” in a “thrilling tilt” against the local club. Houghton, then in her teens, stole the show with five hits, two doubles, and a home run.<sup>33</sup> Small Pennsylvania cities such as Bloomsburg, Edgewood, Hershey, and West Lebanon all filled their stadiums when women’s teams challenged their local nines.<sup>34</sup>

For the majority of Americans living in small cities and rural towns, major league teams were not readily accessible. Improved transportation made access to local games easy, although travelling longer distances to the city was still inconvenient. Similarly,

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<sup>31</sup> “Bunker Hill Combine Takes Twin Bill From Passaic, N.J., Lassies,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>32</sup> “Chryslermen Beat Bloomer Girls, 10-8,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>33</sup> “Bloomer Girls Lose to Shaders,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>34</sup> “PA. Bobbies Lost to West Lebanon Boys,” “Hollywood Girls Lose to Edgewood,” “Large Crowd Sees Team Lose,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF. Also 1930 Pennsylvania Census Records, city populations.



major league teams were reluctant to adopt the new medium of radio. Many teams believed that broadcasting games on the radio would lead to decreased attendance, and hurt their relationship with the newspaper industry.<sup>35</sup> As a result, fans and players alike turned to semi-professional, independent, and amateur leagues. Women's teams like the Philadelphia Bobbies and the Passaic Bloomer Girls capitalized on the success of baseball at the local level and the urbanization that made it possible.

### **Consumer Culture: The Rise of the Sportswoman**

Along with urbanization came a rapidly growing consumer culture. The Roaring Twenties created a growing middle class with an improved standard of living. For the first time, many Americans had discretionary income and time to spend on leisure activities. With their extra spending money, millions flocked to movie theaters, dance halls, and of course, baseball games. Fueled by a growing advertising industry that promoted images of an athletic woman, female baseball teams were able to thrive throughout the decade.

Historian Steven Riess has argued that access to baseball improved during the 1920s and 1930s. Prior to that point, baseball was largely restricted to upper and middle class citizens. Due to industrial growth, baseball diamonds were nearly always located outside of the city center, and only accessible to those that lived in the suburbs and those that could afford transportation to the suburban fringe. The economic boom and improved transportation gave all but the very poorest inner city dwellers access to competitive baseball. Entrepreneurs allied with transit companies to build stadiums at

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<sup>35</sup> James R. Walker. "The Baseball-Radio War, 1931-1935." *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 19, no. 2 (2011): 53-60.

the end of the subway and trolley lines, and promoters marketed baseball as a cheap and wholesome activity for people of all races, classes, and genders. Admission to semi-professional games was generally between 25 and 50 cents, comparable to the price of a movie.<sup>36</sup> The changing economic atmosphere allowed more people to both play and watch the national pastime.

Baseball owners, promoters, managers, and players found unique ways to take advantage of the baseball craze and growing consumerism. Unlike today, the minor leagues were independent from the major leagues and existed to make money on their own. Owners promoted their games in the local papers and often arranged specialty games to draw large audiences and make additional money. Minor league clubs, for example, would often schedule games against independent black teams and major league players. In 1920, Babe Ruth toured the Eastern Seaboard with a group of minor league all-stars. The team played against African Americans for the steep admission price of \$1.50 and sold over ten thousand tickets per game. Likewise, managers of amateur teams and industrial teams would create rivalries to lure fans to the bleachers. On one such occasion, the managers of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan arranged for a game against the Hebrew Stars before a large crowd of paying spectators.<sup>37</sup> Amidst the growing consumer culture, baseball entrepreneurs utilized resources at their disposal to make money in the growing entertainment industry.

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<sup>36</sup> Although many baseball games did have a diverse fan base, people of different class or race would have seldom sat in the same section. Steven Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 69-71.

<sup>37</sup> The KKK had a well-known team at the time and was regularly covered in the *Washington Post*. On this particular occasion, they defeated the Hebrew Stars 4-0, Simkus, *Outsider Baseball*, 146-147.

Owners found that the most lucrative games came against women's teams. In a rare matchup between the Philadelphia Bobbies and the Passaic Girls, an ad in the paper preached, "We have the greatest attraction in baseball for all time... They have done wonders for the national pastime and are due to perform more wonders."<sup>38</sup> The advertisement was not unusual. Writers often referred to women's teams as "Female Championship of the World," and touted their winning record against male teams, even if it was false. It is interesting to note that papers stressed the talent of female baseball teams. While some papers did characterize the game as a novelty, more often than not newspapers promoted the women's ability to compete against men. The promotion of competitive baseball between men and women was not evident before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and non-existent by the mid-1930s. It is therefore necessary to understand the unique way in which advertisements and the popular media depicted female athletes during the 1920s.

The advertising industry was at the heart of the growing consumer market. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, advertising agencies became modern, professional, and omnipresent in American society.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the way in which advertisers and media outlets portrayed women was extraordinarily influential. Beginning at the turn of the century, magazines began to endorse exercise for women. Publications such as *Physical Culture*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Collier's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping* all expanded the notion of exercise, and began to equate the slim

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<sup>38</sup> "Passaic, Feminine Entry, in Baseball Ranks Anxious to Meet Philly Bobbies," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>39</sup> Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 137-197; Lears, "American Advertising and the Reconstruction of the Body," 47-61.

figure with beauty.<sup>40</sup> By the 1920s, the sportswoman was associated with youth, leisure, and sex appeal. Magazines increased their use of sportswomen in advertisements, and newspapers chronicled female athletes. In one study, researchers found that *Ladies' Home Journal* incorporated the sportswoman into 247 advertisements during the 1920s, while the sportswoman had only been used in a total of 77 advertisements the decade prior.<sup>41</sup> Bloomer Girl teams had a mutually reinforcing relationship with the advertising industry. The increased prevalence of sportswomen in advertisements allowed for greater acceptance of Bloomer Girl baseball teams, just as the popularity of women's baseball encouraged advertisers to capitalize on the growing phenomenon.

By the time she had reached her teens, Edith Houghton bore an uncanny resemblance to the iconic sportswoman featured in popular media. Photographs of Houghton often appeared alongside advertisements for upcoming games. Newspapers pictured the young star in full uniform, either throwing a ball, standing with her glove, or taking a swing. Most photographs emphasized Houghton's youth and beauty, along with her athletic prowess.<sup>42</sup> On at least one occasion, a Fox Movietone Newsreel showcased the Philadelphia Bobbies as they played before "record breaking crowds" of 4,000 fans in Virginia and Tennessee.<sup>43</sup> Through advertisement and media, businessmen changed

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<sup>40</sup> For changing notions beauty in the 1920s see Mariah Burton Nelson, "Introduction: Who We Might Become," in *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sport*, ed. Lissa Smith (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), xiv-xv; John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, "Women's Sport: A Trial of Equality," in *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports* (New York: Leisure Press, 1982), 238-241; Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswoman*, 4-7.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswoman*, 119.

<sup>42</sup> For images of Houghton in the papers see articles in Houghton Scrapbook pages 35, 54, 57, 59, 60, 80, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>43</sup> *Lebanon Daily News*, "Philadelphia Bobbies, All Girls Club at West Lebanon Tomorrow," August 22, 1925.

popular assumptions about beauty and feminism. Female baseball players, who in earlier years would have been chastised for entering a male domain, were now celebrated for both their modern femininity and athletic skill. The idea of seeing these “baseball beauties,” as the papers affectionately dubbed them, drove thousands of fans to the stands and helped make Edith Houghton and the teams she played for wildly popular in the 1920s.

Of the hundreds of Bloomer Girl teams around the United States, none was more successful than the New York Bloomer Girls. Founded by Dan Whalen, Joe Manning, and Eddie Manning in 1910, the New York Bloomer Girls achieved a national reputation under the auspices of their female manager Margaret Nabel. Nabel, as Houghton would later recall, was “all business, all baseball.”<sup>44</sup> Ever the savvy businesswoman, the Bloomer Girls’ manager created an effective advertising campaign based on the rising prominence of the sportswoman. Nabel went out of her way to give newspaper interviews, emphasizing the talent, discipline, and professional nature of her team. Nabel also printed postcards with the team photo on the front and a lineup scorecard on the back, which the team sold at the games to make additional money.<sup>45</sup> Nabel’s advertising paid off. In 1920, the New York Bloomer Girls went on a 3,500-mile barnstorming tour from Nova Scotia to Florida, setting records in attendance and ticket sales in nearly every city.<sup>46</sup> By the mid-1920s, the New York Bloomer Girls had developed such a reputation that local communities sought them out through booking agents and paid considerable

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<sup>44</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, March 7, 1992.

<sup>45</sup> Gregorich, *Women at Play*, 42-49.

<sup>46</sup> *Staten Island Advance*, “Tappan Post Nine to Play N.Y. Bloomer Girls Tomorrow,” April 27, 1921.

money to have the attraction in their hometown.<sup>47</sup> When Houghton joined the New York Bloomer Girls, the local paper in Orrville, Ohio wrote, “The advertising which such an attraction would provide Orrville is hard to realize as newspapers all over the state will be playing up the story.” The writer from the small town of 4,000 continued, “Theaters may run pictures of the contest...and publicity in the form of posters all over the state will be gained.”<sup>48</sup> When the Bloomer Girls played the Bridesburg A.A. team in July 1920, a crowd of 8,000 people came out to watch. By comparison, a major league game the same day between the Brooklyn Robins and Boston Braves drew 2,000 people.<sup>49</sup> The amazing success of the New York Bloomer Girls can be partially attributed to the idolization of the sportswoman within the growing consumer culture.

Houghton was reluctant to play for the New York Bloomer Girls full time. She was still a teenager, still in school, and the schedule was taxing. Nevertheless, when the New York Bloomer Girls team would come to the Pennsylvania area, Nabel would call Houghton and ask if she could meet up with the team. Houghton was one of the only players Nabel sought out that was not from New York, and the young star filled in as needed and played any position that was required. Although she did not play with the Bloomer Girls on a consistent basis, she had no problem developing a rapport with the team.<sup>50</sup> The New York Bloomer Girls were the premier squad of the 1920s and Houghton was one of their premier players.

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<sup>47</sup> Gregorich, *Women at Play*, 42-47

<sup>48</sup> “Bloomer Girls May Play Here,” *Orrville Courier-Crescent*, May 10, 1929.

<sup>49</sup> “New York Bloomer Girls Beaten by Bridesburg A.A.,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 6, 1920; <http://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/BSN/BSN192007060.shtml>; <http://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/PHA/PHA192007190.shtml>

<sup>50</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991; Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

The popularity of baseball in small towns along with increased emphasis on leisure and commercialization allowed women's baseball to thrive. Managers such as Margaret Nabel capitalized on emerging markets of middle class suburbia and the newfound prominence of the sportswoman in American culture. The emergence of the sportswoman, however, did not occur spontaneously, but as part of a larger period of democratization for women. The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only saw the materialization of the female athlete, but of an entirely new woman.

### **New Women on the Baseball Diamond**

The emergence of the new woman was one of the most notable changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars have used the term *new woman* in a multitude of ways to describe a broad shift in gender ideology. Historians have not reached a consensus about the timeline of new womanhood, largely because they are studying a convoluted evolution that did not begin or end all at once. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that the new woman emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when women began to shed the restrictions of their Victorian predecessors. Single women became increasingly involved in the workforce and were major participants in the growing consumer culture. The beauty and cosmetic industries boomed as women's appearance in public became increasingly important. Amusement parks, movie theaters, speakeasies, and jazz clubs all provided social spaces where single women could interact and express their newfound independence.<sup>51</sup> I argue that the new woman continued to evolve until the depression

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<sup>51</sup> DuBois and Dumenil, eds., *Through Women's Eyes*, 482-497; Perret, *America in the Twenties*, 147-170; Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart*, 24-52; Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, and Celebrity*, 1-10; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A*

years, the subject of Chapter 3, which brought forth a distinct set of socially constructed views towards women. Throughout the 1920s however, the ideal new woman was a strong, athletic, sexual, and outwardly public individual. Edith Houghton and the Bloomer Girls embody this model to the utmost extremes.

The development of the new woman challenged long held assumptions about gender roles. Historian Amy Richter has focused on the development of the new woman in the railroad industry in order to illustrate broader cultural changes at work. Richter argues that railroads, traditionally a masculine domain, served as a place in which women challenged the assumptions of female domesticity. Faced with a rapidly modernizing world in which technological progress and urbanization made it necessary to interact with people, both men and women embraced new standards of “proper womanhood.” As Richter has illustrated through her study of railroad advertisements, the ideal women began to embody “manly” values such as bravery and independence while also retaining her femininity. Railroad executives publicized stories of female engineers, and promoted images of female passengers enjoying vigorous activities like bicycling and horseback riding.<sup>52</sup> Men not only tolerated women’s appearance in public, but promoted the audacious female. These redefined ideas of womanhood reflected a modernizing environment in which women achieved greater political and social equality.

The cultural revolution of the 1920s built upon the changing societal views towards womanhood. Although some scholars make the distinction between the flapper and the new woman, in many regards the former was merely an extension of the later.

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*History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), x.

<sup>52</sup> Amy G. Richter, *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 138-160.



By the 1920s, female debutantes, whether they be chorus girls, movie stars, or ordinary citizens, flaunted their newfound freedoms in public. The flapper shortened her hair and her dress and became the preeminent, albeit controversial, symbol of the decade.

Advertisements and magazines featured women with bobbed hair and bathing suits, while actresses often portrayed strong willed heroines who shot guns, rode horses, and explored their sexual freedom. Movie stars such as Mary Pickford and Pearl White gained fame by embodying the rough and tumble qualities of men, while retaining their feminine appearance.<sup>53</sup> The new woman was a feminine, strong, and public figure, capable of sustaining the tribulations of a modern world and traversing traditionally male domains. Although conservative Americans fiercely opposed the new women, their appearance in public became a lasting feature of American society. Much like her counterparts on the railways and silver screen, female baseball players epitomized elements of the new woman by challenging the male-dominated foray of the baseball diamond.

The evolving standards of femininity did not just bring women onto the baseball field, but also into the bleachers. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same time that the new woman and Bloomer Girl teams emerged, baseball teams began to encourage female spectators. Owners believed that the presence of women in the stands would discourage unruly behavior from male fans. Teams offered free admission on “Ladies Days” which were meant to increase attendance and help to purify the game.<sup>54</sup> As the

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<sup>53</sup> Hilary Hallett, *Go West Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 61-62

<sup>54</sup> Jean Hastings Ardell, *Breaking into Baseball: Women and the National Pastime* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 30-32; George Boziwick, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 5-21; Neil J. Sullivan, *The Minors: The Struggles and the Triumph of Baseball's Poor Relation from 1876 to the Present* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), 51-52.

presence of women in public gradually increased, so too did female attendance at baseball games. By the 1920s, women were staples in baseball stadiums across the country, including Washington D.C. where First Lady Grace Coolidge enthusiastically rooted for the Washington Senators.<sup>55</sup> Images of women in the stands appeared in newspapers and songs about female baseball fans flooded the market. Jack Norworth's ballad about a young girl named Katie Casey, a knowledgeable fan that went to every game, is the most recognizable. When Casey's suitor asked if she wanted to go to the show, the ardent fan had another suggestion, "Take me out to the ball game."<sup>56</sup> Evolving standards of women's proper place in society manifested in women on the field and women in the stands.

Although female baseball existed before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the emergence of Bloomer Girl teams that women played competitive baseball in public. It is not a coincidence that these teams emerged in the 1890s and prospered in the 1920s. In addition to the other factors illustrated in this chapter (urbanization, improved transportation, local baseball, consumerism), women's baseball flourished because of the changing views towards women in general. The ability to wear baseball pants, travel around the world, and make money playing sport would not have been possible for women in earlier decades. Like Richter's study of the railroads, an analysis of women's baseball highlights the changing notions of femininity within a traditionally male domain.

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<sup>55</sup> Grace Coolidge was allegedly a much bigger baseball fan than her husband. Bess Truman was another first-lady fan. Ardell, *Breaking into Baseball*, 33-35.

<sup>56</sup> Norworth wrote "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" in 1908, years before he actually attended a baseball game. While the verses about Katie Casey are often left out, the chorus of the "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" has since become one of the most recognizable songs in the United States, second only to "Happy Birthday" and the "Star-Spangled Banner." Boziwick, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," 5-21.

As other scholars have noted, the clothing that women wore served as a way to challenge societal views towards the female body.<sup>57</sup> Women's baseball uniforms reflect this trend. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century most female baseball players wore long skirts or Bloomers, cumbersome pant-skirts. With the emergence of Bloomer Girl teams, female baseball players ditched their skirts, and ironically their Bloomers, in exchange for baseball pants. The transition to trousers gave the girls the freedom to run, slide, dive, and leap that was not possible a generation earlier. The increased mobility allowed the girls to play better baseball, and ultimately compete against male opponents. The shift to pants also reflects the changing views towards the female body. Previous generations would have scolded the women for donning men's clothing, particularly in a public setting. By the 1920s, however, fans came out in the thousands to see the female athletes in full baseball attire. The dramatic change reveals that many people were willing to accept elements of the new woman, particularly if it brought them entertainment.

Nevertheless, female baseball players went out of their way to retain feminine virtues. Newspapers often lauded the players' physical beauty while simultaneously touting their ability to swing a bat.<sup>58</sup> The Philadelphia Bobbies, as their name implies, required their players to bob their hair in the trending style. In an interview with Margaret Nabel, the Bloomer Girls' manager professed, "Players are strictly disciplined,

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<sup>57</sup> See Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Angela J. Lantham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, New Hampshire: New England Wesleyan University Press, 2000); Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>58</sup> Local Team Wins Over Girls' Nine, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

as we cannot tolerate looseness of any kind...we allow absolutely no drinking nor carousing, and we all observe a regular big-league curfew at 11.”<sup>59</sup> The interview reveals the professional nature of the club, as well as the anxieties surrounding new women. On one hand, managers complied with traditional values and distanced their teams from the negative connotations associated with the modern woman. In return, people respected the “disciplined” team of female athletes, and came out in large numbers to see women’s baseball. On the other hand, female baseball players continued to challenge traditional values by playing semi-professional baseball in a public setting. The dichotomy found players tailoring their image to meet socially acceptable norms, yet capitalizing on an evolving standard of the female body.

Women’s baseball teams also embodied the essence of the new women by offering employment. Between 1900 and 1930, women’s participation in labor grew from 21 percent to 25 percent. This gradual acceptance of women in the workplace, however, was characterized by sex segregation. Following World War I, the majority of female workers were single women confined to “feminized” jobs such as stenographers, bookkeepers, and clerks.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, single workingwomen had an expendable income with increased mobility. With her newfound freedom, the new woman was able to traverse the country, pursue leisure activities, and embrace her sexuality. Although semi-professional baseball did not fall into the typical job category for women, it offered a select few the ability to travel the country and make a decent living on their own. By the end of the decade, Edith Houghton was one of those few.

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<sup>59</sup> *The Staten Island Advance*, April 4, 1931.

<sup>60</sup> Although a few professional fields such as teaching, nursing, and social work emerged, women continued to make less money than their male counterparts. DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes*, 489-491; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 217-236.

In 1931, Houghton signed a contract to play for her last organized women's baseball team, the Hollywood Girls Base Ball Club. The Hollywood Girls were based in Boston but played games all over the country. Of all the teams Houghton played for, the Hollywood Girls were the most professional and the most organized. They also paid the most. A contract stipulated that Houghton would get paid thirty-six dollars per week in addition to any transportation and boarding costs she may incur while travelling. The contract also stipulated that Houghton "keep herself in good physical condition and health and to practice *her profession* [emphasis added] when and at such hours demanded by her Captain." Additionally, the contract stipulated that Houghton must "refrain from attending any dances or parties...and at all times refrain from the use of intoxicating liquors."<sup>61</sup> The contract provides tremendous insight into the culture of the workingwoman. The female ballplayers represented a newfound independence, athleticism, and modernity associated with the new women. The Hollywood Girls provided a way for entrepreneurs to make a profit, and clearly considered Houghton a professional athlete. Yet the owner of the club, John J. Donovan, also had reservations about paying the women so much money. Like Margaret Nabel, Donovan worried that given too much independence, the players would be prone to dancing, drinking, and premarital sex. It is clear from the contract that female baseball players embodied all aspects of modern womanhood. Managers and owners like Nabel and Donovan

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<sup>61</sup> Agreement between Edith Houghton and Hollywood Girls, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

attempted to promote the positive aspects of the new women while distancing their players from the social vices they were often associated with.<sup>62</sup>

Houghton would later recollect that her days on the Hollywood Girls were the best of her career. The season lasted from April to September and a team bus transported the team from city to city. The girls played nearly every day, often against highly skilled men's clubs before large crowds.<sup>63</sup> During a trip through the Carolinas, the Hollywood Girls played minor league teams in the competitive Piedmont League.<sup>64</sup> The team continued south and went on a two week barnstorming tour of Louisiana. Throughout the tour, the Hollywood Girls played college teams and minor league teams from the Eastern League, Texas League, and Western League.<sup>65</sup> Houghton relished in the competition, "I prefer playing against minor league teams," she later reflected, "they had better coaches and pitching and played a better game all around."<sup>66</sup> When the team returned north, Houghton found herself playing against one of the greatest players in baseball history, Lefty Grove. Grove, known for his pitching, was playing left field for the Altoona Works. When Houghton came to the plate, she smashed the ball over Grove's head and rounded the bases for an inside the park homerun before the Hall of Famer got to the ball.<sup>67</sup> The game against Lefty Grove illustrates the unique opportunity offered to female

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<sup>62</sup>As it turns out, Nabel and Donovan's fears were warranted. In an interview many years later, Houghton acknowledged that many of the girls did drink and smoke during their time on the road. See *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 4, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, August 29, 1991.

<sup>64</sup>The Hollywood Girls lost to games to the Durham Bulls, Raleigh Capitals, and Greensboro Patriots. "Hollywood Girls to Meet Patriot Outfit Tonight," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>65</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

<sup>66</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, August 29, 1991.

<sup>67</sup> It's possible this is not *the* Lefty Grove. Apparently, minor league players sometimes used famous names to boost attendance. Even still, it shows Houghton was

baseball players in the 1920s and early 1930s. For the first time, and arguably the last, societal norms allowed women to travel and gain publicity for their athletic achievements. Edith Houghton capitalized on the evolving gender norms, and flaunted her talents on the baseball diamond.

Nevertheless, the ability for women to play baseball does not inherently explain why people went to the games. While it would be impossible to make an overarching claim that described why everyone went to see female ballplayers, newspaper articles of the era reveal some interesting trends. To some degree the girls were a novelty. An article in the *Baltimore Sun* described a game between the American Bloomer Girls and the Rex Athletic Club of Washington, “For the benefit of several hundred spectators looking for something a little out of the ordinary in the way of baseball.” The writer goes on to say that the exhibition was “something of a novelty,” although he does praise the girls’ skill.<sup>68</sup> In another game between the Philadelphia Athletic Club Bloomer Girls and the Alco Club, the *Sun* claimed, “The strange, inquisitive strain that runs through man held true to form as approximately 5,000 fans packed into the Alco enclosure, hung on trees and stepped on each other’s toes to steal a peak at the female warriors.” The author went on to praise the girls’ talent despite their defeat.<sup>69</sup> In many newspaper articles, writers described the interesting novelty of seeing girls play. Particularly in small-town America where the new woman may have been less common, spectators viewed the

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playing on even terms with men. “Works Defeat Hollywood in Exhibition Tilt,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>68</sup> “With Game Lost, Bloomer Girls Play Extra Innings to Please.” *The Sun*, July 30, 1922.

<sup>69</sup> “Bloomer-Girl Nine Trimmed by Alcos.” *The Sun*, July 9, 1923.

female sluggers with awe and excitement.<sup>70</sup> Advertisers promoted the novel attractions, and thousands came out to witness the women play their local teams.

Although the mere novelty of female athletes was an undeniably a drawing factor, a certain level of competition was also expected. In a game between the Framingham Town team and the American Bloomer Girls, the manager stopped the game after the third inning when the town men piled up the score against the girls. The manager proceeded to refund admission to all of the spectators because it did not meet the advertised expectations.<sup>71</sup> This short synopsis is insightful to the true reasons that people came to watch the girls play. If people wanted pure novelty, the game could have continued, it would not have mattered what the score was, only that women were playing baseball. But this was not the case. When the competition did not meet the expectations of the managers and fans, their admission was refunded. The anecdote also highlights the female player's role as entertainers. It would have been perfectly acceptable for one male team to rout another male team without refunding the admission. When women were playing however, spectators anticipated that they would get their money's worth in entertainment value. In another example, Billie Delaney's team practiced for two weeks in preparation for their meeting with the Bloomer Girl All Stars. In front of a large crowd at Fenway Park, the Bloomer Girls beat the all-male Peanut Hustlers 5-4.<sup>72</sup> Not only did fans want to see modern women, but they also demanded competitive baseball. Like the

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<sup>70</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

<sup>71</sup> "Calls Off Bloomer Girls Game, Refunds Money." *Daily Boston Globe*, July 5, 1929.

<sup>72</sup> "Bloomer Girls Defeat 'Peanut Hustlers, 5 to 4," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 23, 1925.



image of the new women itself, baseball spectators reveled in the combination of feminine players with masculine qualities.

Women's baseball took advantage of the modern woman discourse in unique ways. Like other *new women*, the lady bat-swingers asserted their right to work, to appear in public, and to reject the Victorian principles that dominated previous generations.<sup>73</sup> Players such as Edith Houghton embodied the ideal image of womanhood through her juxtaposition of feminine characteristics and physical strength. Female baseball players both capitalized on and further institutionalized the changing perception on what constituted womanhood in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the rise of the new woman faced fierce opposition from an older, conservative segment of society, women gradually gained acceptance into male domains. Baseball was no exception.

### **The Golden Age of Women's Baseball**

It was amidst this period, burgeoning with independent baseball teams and modern women that teams like the Philadelphia Bobbies, the Passaic Girls, the New York Bloomer Girls, and the Hollywood Girls emerged. When Edith Houghton first learned to swing a bat, baseball had not been fully entrenched as a man's sport. Like their male counterparts, thousands of female athletes were meeting the demand for baseball and capitalizing on an increasingly urban and consumer based society. In response to this rapidly changing environment, societal expectations of womanhood shifted accordingly. Urbanization and improved transportation made women's appearance in public commonplace. Furthermore, advertisers argued that once-masculine virtues, such as

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<sup>73</sup> Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style*, 1-10.

strength and endurance, were now enviable virtues in a woman living within the daunting metropolis. Young women, once expected to stay in the home, now idolized female actresses, flappers, and strong female athletes. Although elements of the new woman, such as her open sexuality, still startled mainstream America, many began to accept the notion of a modern, independent woman. In addition to the other factors that made local baseball a staple of the American heartland, the emergence of women in traditionally male-dominated sectors allowed Edith Houghton and her teammates to play professional baseball.

Nevertheless, Houghton's success in baseball came with limitations that male players did not experience. While newspapers all over the country praised the talent of female teams, many also considered the women a novelty act. Patrons undeniably expected a skilled team, although large crowds also gathered to *look at* the female players. Likewise, managers of Bloomer Girl teams expected their players to look feminine on the field and act feminine off the field. Team owners asked players to bob their hair and abstain from parties and alcohol in order to put forth a product that did not threaten traditional gender roles. Most obviously, women that played baseball were still the minority. While hundreds of women's baseball teams existed, the relative number of professional and semi-professional male teams vastly outnumbered their female counterparts. Like society as a whole, female baseball players in the 1920s made substantial progress but did not achieve full equality. These limitations are particularly apparent when one looks at the Philadelphia Bobbies' trip to Japan in 1925.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**The Bobbies in Japan:**  
**Peaks and Limitations of the New Woman**

*“For young women in 1925, to be playing baseball and to be going to Japan – well, that was pretty exciting.”*<sup>1</sup> –Edith Houghton, age 89

When the Philadelphia Bobbies boarded the train at Broad Street Station on September 23, 1925 Edith Houghton was thirteen years old. The weeks that followed were filled with adventure, cultural exchange, and tragedy. Much like women’s athletics in general, the Philadelphia Bobbie’s trip to Japan in 1925 was nuanced, complex, and more significant than a game of baseball. While Edith Houghton is a central figure in this story, a historical analysis of the trip must also look past her individual accomplishments in order to show broader cultural change. As such, this chapter focuses not only on a single individual, but also on the larger group of female ballplayers and the multifaceted historical era in which they lived.

Baseball promoters capitalized on the unique atmosphere of the 1920s. While the popularity of baseball soared in the United States, a similar phenomenon occurred in Japan. Japanese eagerly adopted America’s national pastime as thousands of amateur, collegiate, and semi-professional teams prospered throughout the island nation. Japanese bought tickets to see highly competitive games and even followed American players like Babe Ruth. Additionally, improved technology made planning and executing a tour to Japan a practical endeavor. Booking agents in Japan and the United States organized the trip via telegraph and travelled via steamship. An increasingly globalized economy also motivated promoters, booking agents, and managers on both sides of the ocean. Much

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<sup>1</sup>“For a Young Girl, the Trip of Her Life,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 1, 2001.

like in the states, Japanese entrepreneurs reveled in the chance to promote a team of talented, and inherently novel, American female ballplayers. For the trip organizers, the Philadelphia Bobbies offered a unique opportunity to profit from the emerging sport of baseball in Japan within a rapidly modernizing world.

American baseball teams also travelled to Japan to improve foreign relations between the two nations. During the interwar years, negative sentiments towards the Japanese increased in the United States. Xenophobic fears of foreign radicals, along with Japanese militarism in Asia bolstered the image of an enemy nation. Scholars have argued that baseball diplomacy was the most effective way to combat this growing antagonism. Japan's embrace of the national pastime persuaded many Americans that Japan was not a backwards nation, but a country of civilized, respectable people that embraced the American values.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the way in which Japanese diplomats, businessmen, and the public interacted with and perceived the Philadelphia Bobbies had broader implications for American foreign relations.

The Philadelphia Bobbies' trip to Japan also offered a unique opportunity to capitalize on the evolving role of women in the 1920s. The fact that a group of twelve girls had the opportunity to play baseball against men and mingle with Japanese socialites is a substantial achievement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As discussed in Chapter 1, baseball

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<sup>2</sup> See John Gripenrog, "The Transnational Pastime: Baseball an American Perceptions of Japan in the 1930s," *Diplomatic History* 34, no.2 (2010); Robert Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out* (New York: New Press, 2010); Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, *Transpacific Field of Dreams: How Baseball Linked the US and Japan in Peace and War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2012); Thomas Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

was not fully entrenched as a man's game, nor had softball emerged as popular sport for women. The gender neutrality of the sport, along with greater acceptance of women in public and the idolization of the strong female body, provided Edith Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies the opportunity to flaunt their social equality abroad. Although most female baseball teams travelled within a few hours from their hometown, the same cultural factors allowed for Edith Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies to travel to Japan.

Nevertheless, the trip also highlights the limitations of the new woman. The liberalized views towards women in the 1920s did not equate to full equality. In fact, scholars have illustrated how women's perceived political and social equality during the twenties undermined any hope for lasting change and further entrenched their submissive role in society.<sup>3</sup> Estelle Freedman argues that societal views depicted the new woman as apolitical, sexually active, and fully equal to men. These generic assumptions, however, undermined the success of women who went on strike, participated in reform movements, and faced discrimination in sex-segregated industries. The excessive generalization of the new woman ultimately limited the potential for women to achieve full equality. In her powerful essay, "New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," Freedman

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<sup>3</sup> See Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing views of women in the 1920s," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974); Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: The Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 4 (1986): 645-664. Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

calls on future scholars to examine the lives of individuals to illustrate a more complex version of the new woman.<sup>4</sup>

It is with Freedman's plea in mind that I also approach this chapter from the perspective of Edith Houghton and her fellow teammates. While the trip itself reflects the new opportunities offered to female athletes, it also highlights the discrimination that continued to plague women in the 1920s. Although the Bobbies won a considerable portion of their games, the newspapers harshly criticized the team's inability to compete against their male opponents. Although the girls mingled with foreign dignitaries, befriended the Japanese elite, and won the hearts of the thousands of spectators across the country, the press instantly and unanimously dubbed the trip a catastrophe. Although nearly every surviving record considers the trip a failure, personal accounts from Edith Houghton and her teammates reveal that the players considered the trip one of the crowning moments of their lives. Most of the girls were never afraid or embarrassed, they were proud of their accomplishments and had a wonderful time throughout the entirety of trip. While the Philadelphia Bobbies and their promoters capitalized on the unique opportunity to travel to Japan, the bias towards women made perceived success impossible. Furthermore, the way in which historians have conveyed the trip's failure without considering the female perspective has further reinforced the gendered hierarchy that discretely plagued women of the 1920s. Reframed in this context, it becomes apparent that the new women were not the social equals of men, nor was the Bobbies' trip to Japan the complete failure that the traditional historical narrative has dictated.

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<sup>4</sup> Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing views of women in the 1920s," 393.

## **A Unique Opportunity: Capitalizing on Baseball in Japan**

Social and economic trends of the 1920s encouraged baseball promoters to organize the Bobbies' trip to Japan. The increased popularity of baseball on both sides of the Pacific made the sport a lucrative export. Amidst an increasingly industrialized economy, capitalism thrived in both the United States and Japan. At the same time, advances in technology brought distant entrepreneurs closer and closer together. Greater acceptance of female athletes, the emergence of baseball in Japan, and a globalizing economy created a unique opportunity for players, managers, and promoters on both sides of the ocean.

Much like in the United States, the popularity of baseball in Japan was soaring to new heights in the 1920s. The sport of baseball reached the Pacific in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan transitioned from an isolated feudal society to a modernized, international power. As part of this modernization, the Japanese government enlisted the help of foreign advisors known as *oyatoi*. Advisors helped to establish a multi-faceted Japanese economy and brought along their western customs. American *oyatoi* taught baseball to the Japanese and helped to embed the game in westernized schools. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese had incorporated Americanized physical education programs into their school systems and baseball was a fundamental component. Japanese aristocrats also studied abroad in the United States. Gentlemen such as Hiraoka Hiroshi, who apprenticed as a railroad engineer in Philadelphia, brought America's favorite sport back with him. When he returned to

Japan, Hiraoka helped to build the first railroad in Japan and taught his co-workers the game of baseball.<sup>5</sup>

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many high schools and colleges in Japan had baseball teams. Industrialization allowed for improved access to equipment, better transportation, and national papers that promoted the sport. Much like in the United States, the growing Japanese economy also fostered the growth of industrial teams and community leagues. The Tokyo Big Six League, featuring six college teams in the Tokyo area, emerged as the preeminent level of baseball in Japan. Much like professional teams in the United States, players in the Tokyo Big Six League achieved celebrity status and attracted thousands of fans.<sup>6</sup> As it did in the United States, baseball and capitalism evolved simultaneously in Japan, creating new opportunities in an increasingly international climate.

The idea of the Bobbies' trip began at the insistence of a Japanese promoter named T. Shima. Shima contacted Edward Ainsmith, a former professional baseball player who had a moderately successful career in the major leagues. Between 1910 and 1924, Ainsmith played catcher for the Detroit Tigers, the St. Louis Cardinals, and the Washington Senators.<sup>7</sup> During that same time, Ainsmith also developed a reputation in

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion on the growth of baseball in Japan, see Guthrie-Shimizu, *Transpacific Field of Dreams*, 12-20; Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*, 20-76; Fitts, Robert K. Fitts, *Banzai Babe Ruth: Baseball, Espionage, & Assassination during the 1934 Tour of Japan*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 6-10; Donald Roden, "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 3 (1980), 514-519.

<sup>6</sup> Guthrie-Shimizu, *Transpacific Field of Dreams*, 83-90. Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*, 54-94.

<sup>7</sup> Ainsmith's best years were on the Washington Senators when he played with Hall of Fame pitcher, Walter Johnson. Ainsmith also played briefly for the Brooklyn Robbins and the New York Giants.



Japan. In 1920, Ainsmith traveled with Herbert Hunter on a barnstorming tour of the island nation. During that trip, Ainsmith got his first glimpse of Asia as they played college teams and gained recognition.<sup>8</sup> After the 1924 season, his last in the majors, Ainsmith took another group of 28 young men to Japan where each of them earned \$830 playing baseball.<sup>9</sup> Ainsmith's previous exposure to Japanese baseball made him a viable candidate to manage the Bobbies' tour in 1925.

In Shima's initial letter to Ainsmith, the Japanese promoter guaranteed transportation to Japan, travel and living expenditures while abroad, and 25 percent of the gross receipts.<sup>10</sup> Ainsmith then contacted Paul Barth, who worked for R.H. Cross, a vaudeville agency and general amusement booking agency based in Philadelphia. Barth had booked games with the Philadelphia Bobbies in the past and already had connections with their manager, Mary O'Gara. As talks between the Japanese promoters, Ainsmith, Barth, and O'Gara continued, the parties agreed on a flat rate of \$800 per game, along with first-class transit for the group of twelve players along with, Mary O'Gara, Edward Ainsmith, and Earl Hamilton, another former major league player. Ainsmith and Hamilton also brought along their wives as additional chaperones for the group of girls. Noticeably absent from the negotiation was the assurance of any money to fund the trip home. This would prove to be a grave error on the part of the American booking agents.

Just as in the United States, the Japanese economy was flourishing amidst a wave of industrialization and growing consumerism. In order to fund the first-class voyage and

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<sup>8</sup> "Jefferson is Late in Coming," *The Japan Times*, October 20, 1925; Guthrie-Shimizu, *Transpacific Field of Dreams*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Gregorich, "Dropping the Pitch: Leona Kearns, Eddie Ainsmith and the Philadelphia Bobbies," *The National Pastime* 43 (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Bobbie Girls, 394.1115; Department of State, Decimal File, 1910-1929, Record Group 59 (RG59), National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP).

pay the substantial \$800 fee, the Japanese clearly had high expectations for the tour and expended additional resources to ensure its success. The Japanese backers printed advertisements in the newspapers with photos of the girls and an accompanying biography.<sup>11</sup> On a number of occasions, the Japanese boosted attendance by allowing female students in free as a special promotion in some cities. These tactics proved effective at the beginning of the tour. The first few games in Tokyo drew massive crowds of more than 20,000 people for the Bobbies' first game, while some estimates were as high as 100,000.<sup>12</sup> According to one paper, the Bobbies attracted such immense crowds that they encouraged the organization of a Japanese National League. Furthermore, the gate receipts were so large that the Japanese government decided to tax all future professional baseball games in order to claim a percentage of the receipts.<sup>13</sup> The increased advertisement and the implementation of a baseball tax are indicative of the growing capitalist market in Japan. Much like in the states, the Japanese did not simply look at baseball as a leisure activity, but as a burgeoning new market within an ever-growing economy.

Similarly, the booming economy in the United States and international expansion allowed for a transpacific expedition. Although there were a few instances that baseball

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<sup>11</sup> Japanese Newspaper, cited in Guthrie-Shimizu, *Transpacific Field of Dreams*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> The majority of sources I have found estimate the attendance at 20,000 people, although a number of articles have cited attendances of 50,000 and 100,000. In an interview, Houghton estimated the crowd at 50 to 60 thousand. See "Girl Ball Players Returning Broke," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, National Baseball Hall of Fame (NBHF); "Girl Ball Players Expect to Defeat Winsted Players," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF; "Girls' Baseball Tour of Orient a Failure," *Lethbridge Herald*, December 1, 1925.

<sup>13</sup> "Japan to Levy Tax Upon Baseball Games," *Associated Press*, December 5, 1925, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

teams toured the globe before the 1920s, opportunities were largely limited.<sup>14</sup> By the 1920s, however, such opportunities became available to semi-professional teams like the Philadelphia Bobbies. Improved technology such as steamships made crossing the ocean safer and more affordable. The advance of inter-continental telegraphy also made planning trips significantly easier. The boom economy on both continents, coupled with the wild popularity of baseball and improved technology, allowed the Philadelphia Bobbies to take on the Japanese in the mid-1920s.

The trip, however, was not the financial success the promoters envisioned. After three weeks in Japan, investors found that the ticket sales were not enough to recoup the cost of travel, board, and advertisement. By mid-November, the financial backers had lost \$10,000 and refused to spend any additional money.<sup>15</sup> Shortly thereafter, Eddie Ainsmith found out that one of the Japanese backers, T. Shima, went bankrupt, and his two associate promoters, Ohashi and Kobayashi, had disappeared. With dwindling ticket sales and no financial backing from the Japanese promoters, the Philadelphia Bobbies found themselves stranded 7,000 miles away from home. By mid-November, the Bobbies could no longer afford to pay for their own lodging. Ainsmith suggested that the tour continue in Korea, Formosa, and Western Japan. Despite a stern warning from Mary O’Gara, Edward Ainsmith and Earl Hamilton took their wives and three of the girls,

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<sup>14</sup> In 1888 Albert Spalding led a world tour in an attempt to “civilize people” through baseball, Thomas Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), x-xii; and in 1913-1914 John McGraw and Charles Comiskey led a tour of major league players and Jim Thorpe, Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*, 22-70.

<sup>15</sup> “Deck Space for the Bobbies May be the Outcome,” *The Japan Times*, November 7, 1925.

Nellie Shank, Edith Ruth, and Leona Kearns, further into Asia, leaving O’Gara and the nine remaining girls alone in Kobe without any money to their name.<sup>16</sup>

While the group led by Ainsmith would go on to face even more dire circumstances, the girls left behind in Kobe survived on good samaritanism. An American businessman, Henry Sanborn, provided shelter at his Pleasanton Hotel in Kobe and regularly provided the Bobbies with meals. It was not until November 18, exactly one month from their arrival in Japan, that a wealthy British-Indian businessman who was staying at Sanborn’s hotel saved the girls. The international entrepreneur, N.H.N. Mody, owned land in China and Japan and was a large stockholder in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. After hearing the troubled tale, Mody immediately gave Sanborn a check for \$5,000 for the girls’ repatriation. Later that day, “Uncle Henry” Sanborn and other friends the team had made in Kobe wished the Bobbies farewell as they boarded the *Empress of Russia* to begin their journey home. The girls spent Thanksgiving on the ship and arrived in Vancouver on December 1. Five days later, nine of the Philadelphia Bobbies, including Edith Houghton, returned to their Philadelphia homes with many stories to tell.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the girls who left with Ainsmith were not so lucky. Ainsmith continued to tour Asia and promote his team of female baseball players. By the time Ainsmith arrived in western Japan, however, the Japanese promoters discovered the team only had three girls left and were unable to sell enough tickets to make a profit. The girls

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<sup>16</sup> Bobbie Girls, 394.1115, RG 59, NACP; “Girl Ball Stars, Broke, Get Fare Home from Japan,” *International News Service*, December 23, 1925.

<sup>17</sup> Bobbie Girls, 394.1115, RG 59, NACP; “Deck Space for the Bobbies May be the Outcome,” *The Japan Times*, November 7, 1925; “Mody Shows He is a Real Sport, Will Not be Reimbursed,” *The Japan Times*, November 23, 1925.

were once again left without funds to travel home and by December, the remaining three Bobbies found themselves stranded in an increasingly industrialized city of that was booming from the efforts of WWI, Hiroshima.<sup>18</sup>

Ainsmith and Hamilton proceeded to contact the American Consul at Kobe where they solicited help from Consul, E.R. Dickover. The three men accosted Japanese police in an attempt to get the original Japanese promoters to pay for their return passage, but the police were of no assistance. Ainsmith then contacted relatives in the United States, who sent him sufficient funds for himself and his wife, but not for the remaining girls. With modest funding, Ainsmith brought the girls back to Kobe and left them under the care of hotel owner, Henry Sanborn. On December 27, Edward and Loretta Ainsmith travelled back to United States leaving Edith Ruth, Leona Kearns, and Nellie V. Shank in Japan.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, with the help of the American Consulate, the three remaining Bobbies were able to secure second-class passage on the *S.S. Empress of Asia*. The Canadian Pacific Steamships Company funded the trip, which left Japan on January 18, 1926. Unfortunately, just when all seemed well, tragedy struck again. On January 21, the *Empress of Asia* encountered rough seas. The captain reported gale force winds, frequent heavy snow squalls, and low visibility. During the storm, a number of crewmembers saw Leona Kearns and Nellie Shank fooling around on the second class promenade and advised them to be careful but the girls did not heed the warning. Around four o'clock, a large wave crashed into the ship and knocked Kearns over the guardrail. The captain was

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<sup>18</sup> Bobbie Girls, 394.1115, RG 59, NACP.

<sup>19</sup> It is not clear how or when Earl and Clyde Mae Hamilton funded their trip home, although sources indicate that they made the return trip before the three stranded girls, Bobbie Girls, 394.1115, RG 59, NACP.

immediately notified and turned the ship around in search of the young pitcher from Chicago. The search lasted about 45 minutes, but was called off due to low visibility. The six-foot tall Knuckleballer, whom her teammates affectionately called “slim,” was never seen again.<sup>20</sup> The tragic death put an end to an already dismal trip.

For every investor, manager, promoter, and individual who stood to reap financial benefit from the Philadelphia Bobbies’ tour of Japan, the trip was a complete failure. Many individuals lost thousands of dollars in transportation, advertisement, salaries, and lodging expenses. Amidst an increasingly international market, the idea of a women’s baseball team seemed like a surefire way to make money. This overconfidence was a fallacy in the 1920s logic. As historian, Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu points out, marginal commercial entities such as the Philadelphia Bobbies pushed the limits in the 1920s. Although the expanding economy, improved technology, and popularity of baseball made it possible for a group of female ballplayers to travel to Japan, it was not necessarily a sound investment.<sup>21</sup> Yet the economic implications were only one aspect of the Bobbies’ trip. When Houghton and her teammates crossed the Pacific, they were not only representing their financial backers but the United States as a whole.

### **Baseball Diplomacy**

Over the course of history, the United States government used baseball to spread American diplomacy. This interaction between baseball and foreign policy is the focus on Robert Elias’ book, *The Empire Strikes Out*. Elias argues that baseball embodied both positive and negative aspects of American society in order to maintain its status as the

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<sup>20</sup> Death of Foreign Citizens abroad, Kearns, Leona, 342.1131, RG 59, NACP.

<sup>21</sup> Guthrie-Shimizu, *Transpacific Field of Dreams*, 128.

national pastime. In doing so, baseball helped to impose American Imperialism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, facilitate peace between wars, and spread militancy abroad during wartime.<sup>22</sup> During the period between World War I and World War II, the United States used baseball in an attempt to maintain peace with Japan.

Just a year before the Bobbies' trip, the United States passed the Immigration Act of 1924. The law limited immigration to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality according to the 1890 census. In addition, the law barred the entry of any alien that was ineligible for citizenship, thereby eliminating immigration from Japan altogether.<sup>23</sup> The law emboldened already growing tension between the two countries. On the home front, California groups formed the Japanese Exclusion League and bolstered discrimination against Japanese-Americans. Furthermore, the two countries competed for economic opportunities in China in the burgeoning global market. By 1923, naval planners in Japan developed a war plan for a potential clash with the United States. A year later, the U.S. Navy revised War Plan Orange in case of war in the Far East.<sup>24</sup> It was amidst this environment that a group of young females embarked on a tour of the Japan.

By the 1920s baseball was increasingly accepted as a form of cultural diplomacy. Americans believed, incorrectly, that baseball was a purely American game with purely American values: democracy, sportsmanship, and physical stamina. Thus, when the Japanese embraced baseball in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they also

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<sup>22</sup> Elias also shows how the sport adopted racial segregation, Robert Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*, pg. xi-3.

<sup>23</sup> *The Immigration Act of 1924*, Public Law 68-139, 68<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess. (May 24, 1924).

<sup>24</sup> David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 29-32.

embraced the values that the sport embodied. This cultural exchange improved American's perception of the Japanese populous and even ameliorated tension between politicians. In a letter to writer Frank O'Neil, President Warren G. Harding claimed that a Major League tour of Japan in 1922 had "real diplomatic value." The President went on to say, "[the tour] will be one more of those appealing international competitions in athletics that have done so much toward...promoting of good feeling and making better understandings possible."<sup>25</sup> The *Literary Digest* predicted "baseball would be more important to peace between the U.S. and Japan than all the efforts of diplomats combined." After a successful barnstorming tour of Japan, Hall of Fame manager Connie Mack predicted, "There will never be a war with Japan."<sup>26</sup> Even Japanese Prince, Iesato Tokugawa, delegate to the Washington Conference (1921-1922), preached, "Between two great peoples, able really to understand and enjoy baseball, there are no national differences which cannot be solved in the spirit of sportsmanship."<sup>27</sup> During the 1920s, baseball was a very legitimate form of cultural diplomacy, with significant effects on the relationship between the United States and Japan.

Thus, when the Bobbies travelled across the Pacific they represented the United States as cultural ambassadors. Prior to boarding the *Thomas Jefferson*, the Philadelphia squad switched their Bobbies jerseys for white and blue uniforms with "USA"

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<sup>25</sup> "President Harding Sees Value in Tour," *New York Times*, October 6, 1922.

<sup>26</sup> "Japanese Baseball is on the Way," *Literary Digest* 69 (May 7, 1921), in Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*, 114; Connie Mack quoted in, John Gripenrog, "The Transnational Pastime Baseball an American Perceptions of Japan in the 1930s," *Diplomatic History* 34, no.2 (2010), 264; Fitts, *Banzai Babe Ruth*, 226-231.

<sup>27</sup> Iesato Tokugawa quoted in, John Gripenrog, "The Transnational Pastime: Baseball an American Perceptions of Japan in the 1930s," *Diplomatic History* 34, no.2 (2010), 264.



emblazoned across the front.<sup>28</sup> Although still playing under the Bobbies moniker, the team not only represented Philadelphia but the United States of America. Upon their arrival in Japan, the girls dined with an influential statesman, Viscount Shimpei Goto. Goto was then fourth in line to the emperor and highly critical of American immigration laws. Just six months before the Bobbie's meeting with the Japanese statesman, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran an article in which Goto alluded to a forthcoming war between the United States and Japan if the U.S. did not change its attitude toward the Japanese.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, when Houghton and her teammates met Goto on October 20, their host was more than hospitable. The girls had lunch with the statesman and later raved about his manners.<sup>30</sup> Considering the hostile relationship between Goto and the United States, the meeting was not an inconsequential feat. Goto's cordial manners and friendly demeanor cast aside any perception that the Japanese statesman was a warmongering politician. Following the meeting with Goto, the team went to a party at the American Embassy in Tokyo. On November 3, the team went to the American Council in Osaka and three days later had tea at the Kyoto Chamber of Commerce. In between these official visits, the girls toured newspaper companies, met with Japanese businessmen, and dined with celebrated Japanese actors. The meetings with influential diplomats dispelled beliefs that the Japanese government was full of militaristic radicals. Quite the contrary, they were some of the most polite individuals the girls had ever encountered, and earned the respect of the American team.

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<sup>28</sup> Edith Houghton player file, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.

<sup>29</sup> "Plain Talk by a Japanese Statesman," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 27, 1925. In a follow up article in the *Wall Street Journal* (May 29, 1925) Goto said that his statement was taken out of context.

<sup>30</sup> Nettie Gans Spangler Diary, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

In addition to their official meetings, Houghton and the Bobbies interacted with the Japanese public. As soon as the girls disembarked the *Thomas Jefferson* in Yokohama on October 19, newspaper photographers bombarded the girls with their cameras.<sup>31</sup> Houghton's youth captivated the Japanese, who showered the youngest member of the team with gifts and flowers. When the Bobbies played their first game in Tokyo, the city's mayor, Nakamura Yoshikoto, attended and threw out the ceremonial first pitch. The following game, another staggering crowd of at least 20,000 watched the Bobbies lose to the men of Nippon University 2-0. Following the game, Japanese fans flocked out of the stands to ask for an autograph and to give the girls presents. The Japanese were so infatuated with Houghton that she was told to grab her bat and glove and run to the car in order to evade the overzealous crowd.<sup>32</sup>

On the surface, these interactions are merely an amusing anecdote. In reality, however, they are a powerful form of cultural exchange between two rivaling nations. Just as the United States barred Japanese from immigrating to the United States, tens of thousands of people came to see American female baseball players. Coverage of the event back in the states forced many Americans to reconcile the image of an uncivilized nation with the image of thousands of baseball-crazed fans. If baseball was emblematic of core American values, Japan's initial reception of the Philadelphia Bobbies proved that they were just as susceptible to the American way of life as anyone between New York and California.

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<sup>31</sup> Spangler Diary, October 19, 1925, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

<sup>32</sup> "Bobbies Nine Defeated in Opening Game," *The Japan Times*, October 24, 1925; Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

Unfortunately, the financial fiasco at the end of the trip overshadowed any diplomatic gains the girls may have made. Although Edward Ainsmith, the man that organized the trip and left the team in Japan, seems partially responsible for the situation, American diplomats placed the blame fully on the Japanese promoters. American Consul in Charge, J.W. Ballantine, wrote that the “irresponsible Japanese promoters” left the girls “destitute in the country.” In a letter to the Secretary of State, Frank B. Kellogg, Consul E.R. Dickover claimed that the team was “induced to travel to the Far East by guarantees of travel expenses and a percentage of profits by Japanese promoters, who often possess no financial stability.”<sup>33</sup> For American officials in the State Department, the Bobbies’ saga was just another event that further incensed their feelings towards the conniving Japanese businessmen.

Perhaps more damage was done on the Japanese side. The Bobbies’ chaotic trip made national news throughout the United States. When recounting the story, however, some of the papers omitted Mr. Mody’s role and made it appear that the girls were sent home entirely through the efforts of the consulate. The Japanese did not take the omission lightly. The *Japanese Chronicle* reported, “Did the American paper think it too risky to mention Mr. Mody’s gift lest Mr. Saklatvala, also a Parsee, recently excluded from the United States by Washington’s order, should gloat over the acceptance of his countryman’s chivalrous aid to the Philadelphia girls?”<sup>34</sup> The article referred to an incident a few months earlier in which Secretary Kellogg refused admittance of Shapurji

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<sup>33</sup> In both instances, the diplomats sought assurance that similar situations would not occur in the future. Dickover suggested that passports of American entertainers be held by the State Department until they were there was guaranteed funding for return, although the Department of Passport Control denied the request, “Department of Passport Control,” 394.1115, RG 59, NACP.

<sup>34</sup> *Japan Chronicle*, January 27, 1926, quoted in State Department file, 394.1115

Saklatvala, a British-Indian Member of Parliament, because he was a communist.<sup>35</sup> In a follow up piece, the *Japan Chronicle* characterized the omission as “deliberate and very despicable.”<sup>36</sup> The acerbic rebuttal reflects the fragile nature of diplomatic relations. Japan perceived the newspaper’s omission as another example of American racism and were quick to bring up any supporting evidence, such as the Saklatvala fiasco, that confirmed their beliefs.

In a confidential memo to the Secretary of State, E.R. Dickover reported that the Philadelphia Bobbies had been a great embarrassment to the American government.<sup>37</sup> The fact that Dickover even brought the Philadelphia Bobbies to the attention of the Secretary of State reveals the team’s significance to American foreign relations. The way in which the Bobbies were perceived, both positively and negatively, had a palpable impact on how the Japanese viewed Americans and vice-versa. When tens of thousands of people cheered for Bobbies, they did not just applaud Edith Houghton and her teammates, but a distinctly American product. Similarly, when Americans read about the hospitable Japanese fans and talented players, they were not just reading about an opposing team but of potential allies. Regrettably, when the tour’s financial success dwindled, Americans blamed the Japanese, and the Japanese harshly criticized the United States. The quick change in feelings is a product of the tumultuous interwar era. Although the Philadelphia Bobbies did little to ease tensions between the United States and Japan, Edith Houghton and the female ballplayers established their role as cultural ambassadors. Furthermore, despite the fact that both promoters and diplomats considered

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<sup>35</sup>*The Spectator*, September 26, 1925, 3.

<sup>36</sup>*Japan Chronicle*, January 28, 1926, quoted in State Department file, 394.1115

<sup>37</sup> Bobbie Girls, 394.1115, RG 59, NACP.

the trip a failure, the Philadelphia Bobbies relished the opportunity to travel and considered the trip a monumental success. It is essential to understand their side of the story.

### **Dancing to Japan: Embracing Modernity**

The Japan tour was not only an opportunity for investors but also for the female baseball players to flaunt their social freedom. As discussed in Chapter 1, the emergence of the new woman opened up opportunities for girls across the country. By the time the Bobbies departed in 1925, Americans accepted the notion of the strong, public, woman, as long as she fit within a specific set of guidelines. Armed with confidence, curiosity, and baseball bats, the girls travelled to Japan in search of new adventures.

Edith Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies personified the stereotypical new woman on their trip to Japan. Before boarding the *Thomas Jefferson*, the Philadelphia Bobbies barnstormed in small cities all the way across the country. When the team arrived in White Fish, Montana, they played a game against the local team, which Nettie Gans Spangler, the Bobbie's left fielder, mentions in a diary entry from that day.<sup>38</sup> Spangler does not say who won the game, but spends considerable time describing the barn dance they attended that same evening. The rural westerners looked on with

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<sup>38</sup> The most substantial documentation from the girls' perspective comes from a diary kept by Nettie Gans Spangler. Spangler was raised in Philadelphia where she learned to play ball on the Odd Fellows Orphanage Baseball team. When the team left for Japan, Spangler was eighteen years old. She wrote in her diary daily and recorded events, interesting encounters, and insights into Japanese culture. In 1988, 63 years after her last entry, Nettie Gans Spangler donated her diary to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York in hopes of helping make a case for the Bobbie's admittance into the prestigious institution. The Hall of Fame has not officially admitted the Philadelphia Bobbies nor any of their players, although there has been exhibits that highlight memorabilia from the girl's trip to Japan such as Edith Houghton's Jersey.

skepticism as the city girls danced the Charleston and Collegiate.<sup>39</sup> Once the girls boarded the *Thomas Jefferson*, Spangler recounted music and dancing every night. On a particularly festive evening, the girls taught the Earl of Gosford how to do the Charleston. Houghton was only thirteen at the time but later remembered the other girls drinking and smoking during the trip. While on board, the girls also played poker and even had batting practice on the top deck.<sup>40</sup> As Edith Houghton dealt cards, danced, and launched baseballs out to sea, she personified the female rebellion from Victorian standards—she was a strong woman, outside of the home, partaking in “male” activities.

The bodacious lifestyle continued once the team reached Japan. After the Bobbies’ first game, which one may expect to be an overwhelming experience, Spangler was more excited about an after party at the house of an American newspaper man named Mr. Russell. Per Japanese custom, the girls took their shoes off upon entering the house. Not to be deterred, Spangler reported, “We danced without shoes.”<sup>41</sup> As the girls travelled from city to city, they continued to find ways to satisfy their social needs. After attending a party at the American Embassy in Tokyo, the girls travelled by train to Osaka where they arrived on October 30, “mischief night.” Spangler wrote in her diary, the girls were “not able to permit a thing like that go without celebrating” and went out on the town dressed in costumes.<sup>42</sup> Later that week, the girls attended a vaudeville show, saw a Douglas Fairbanks movie, and danced at the Social Room. When the girls travelled

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<sup>39</sup> Spangler Diary, September 28, 1925, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

<sup>40</sup> “For a Young Girl, the trip of her life,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 1, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> The girls were invited to another party at the home of a Mr. Hendles that same night, although it is unclear if they attended, Spangler Diary, October 23, 1925, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

<sup>42</sup> Spangler Diary, October 30, 1925, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

to Kobe, where they were allegedly stranded, they continued to go to dances, shows, parties, and social clubs.<sup>43</sup> In a letter to her parents, Leona Kearns, jovially wrote, “We girls are not allowed to drink the water here, so we are going to live on beer.”<sup>44</sup>

Throughout their trip, which newspapers dubbed a failure, the Bobbie girls continued to have the time of their lives.

The Bobbies’ social outings in Japan were not much different from male clubs that made the journey east. When Babe Ruth and a group of major league players went to Japan in 1934, the Americans spent considerable time socializing with their Japanese hosts. Led by the ever-charismatic Ruth, the American ballplayers mingled with Japanese businessmen, diplomats, and intellectuals. The major league players went out for dinner and dancing following games, and routinely flirted with Japanese women. Ruth’s predecessors had similar experiences. All-star teams of major league players travelled to Japan in 1920, 1922, and 1931, all of which were renowned for their drinking and partying. Like the women on the Bobbies, the major league ballplayers considered the tour of Japan a trip of a lifetime because of their experiences on and off the field.<sup>45</sup>

The similarities between the male and female trips to Japan are striking. Not only do the Bobbies’ social outings capture the essence of the modern woman, they also illustrate an unprecedented amount of equality. Like male ballplayers who travelled to Japan, the Bobbies relished in their ability to attend parties, dances, and have a good time. Moreover, the individuals the girls met abroad not only tolerated their presence at

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<sup>43</sup> Spangler Diary, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Leona Kearns to her Mother, quoted in Barbara Gregorich, “Dropping the Pitch,” *The National Pastime* 43 (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Fitts, *Banzai Babe Ruth*, 152-207.

social clubs and dances, but celebrated it.<sup>46</sup> That is not to say that women were the social equals of men. There continued to be a stigma associated with women and sex, and the players could not flaunt their consumption of alcohol like their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the Bobbies' social outings reflect the greater acceptance of women in public and improved social equality between the two sexes.

The new woman of the 1920s was not only unique in her desire to party, but also in her ability to travel outside of the home. Inherent in the trip to Japan was an extraordinary amount of freedom. At just thirteen years old, Edith Houghton travelled to the other side of the world. Edith's teammates, most of who were in their late teens and early twenties, also left their families behind in search of adventure. By the 1920s the public woman had fully emerged, and gained the ability to travel outside the home. The Philadelphia Bobbies reflected this trend to the utmost extremes. Furthermore, women of the 1920s exemplified a newfound sense of political and social equality. The Bobbies brought these views on gender equality to Japan. When asked by reporters why they made the trip, first baseman Edith Ruth said, "We endeavored to encourage girl's baseball in Japan."<sup>47</sup> When the girls went to a traditional Japanese dinner on their last night in Tokyo, Spangler wrote in her diary, "Men always come first in Japan. How silly!" The same night, the Bobbies encountered two young Japanese girls whose parents sold them to a wealthy individual in order to pay for their brother's education.<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>46</sup> "Bobbies Team Hosts to Press," *The Japan Times*, October 22, 1925.

<sup>47</sup> "Last Two Bobbies Home From Orient," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, February 13, 1926, SCRC 169, TU; Eddie Ainsmith shared similar sentiments at a press conference in Japan, "Bobbies Team Hosts to Press," *The Japan Times*, October 22, 1925.

<sup>48</sup> Spangler Diary, October 28, 1925, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.



starch inequality mortified the Bobbie girls, and clearly conflicted with their views on women's place in society. Edith Houghton and her teammates embraced women's rights of the 1920s and promoted them abroad.

Spangler's diary reads much like an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. Many of the girls embodied the quintessential bohemian woman of the 1920s. Non-stop partying, drinking, and newfound adventure defined the trip more so than the outcome of the games. The emergence of the new woman both made the trip possible and defined how the girls acted when they ventured abroad. Their perspective on the trip is vastly different from that of the promoters and managers. While the promoters found the trip a disaster, the girls had the time of their lives. Understanding the disparity between the two perspectives highlights the gendered biases that persisted through the 1920s, and illustrates how the dominant male-narrative overshadowed that of the Philadelphia Bobbies' players.

### **Imminent Failure: Limitations of the New Woman**

In his powerful book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that the story told by historians is a product of an incomplete reality. Such was the case with the Philadelphia Bobbies. During the trip to Japan there were two distinct views: one of the male promoters, managers, and diplomats that considered the trip a disaster, and another of the female baseball players, who considered the trip an unwavering success. Newspapers and official records, however, only record the perspective of the powerful male elites. The creation of records by the more powerful participants silences the weaker, and in this case, more central figures of

the story, the female baseball players.<sup>49</sup> As individuals have retold the saga throughout the years, very few have considered the women's perspective and further perpetuated the one-sided narrative. These silences in history have prolonged the gendered inequalities that plagued women of the 1920s.

Almost all surviving records illustrate that the Bobbies' trip to Japan was a complete failure. The State Department and newspapers dubbed the trip a disaster, which, by many regards it certainly was. Yet for many of the girl ball players, save for the unfortunate Leona Kearns, the trip was also the adventure of a lifetime. A male-centric point of view, one that imposed certain assumptions about the female body, social capability, and independence, determined the successfulness of the trip and the subsequent historical record. Exploring the discriminatory rules, unachievable standards, and ill-placed blame imposed by the male promoters, managers, and organizers of the trip accentuates the limitations of women in the 1920s.

One of the most obvious differences between the Philadelphia Bobbies tour of Japan and male tours was the presence of chaperones. When male teams travelled to Japan, they did so under the guidance of their managers. Sometimes these individuals merely served to determine the batting order, while other times they served to coordinate finances, book hotels, and arrange transportation. In no instance besides the Bobbies, however, did an American baseball team bring along additional chaperones to supervise the player's actions off the field. Edward Ainsmith, Mary O'Gara, and Earl Hamilton all

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<sup>49</sup> Trouillot describes 4 points at which history is silenced: when the source is made, in the creation of archives, when history is written, when history is read by the public. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995). For additional examples about the silencing of history pertaining to women, see Nan Enstand, Judith Butler, and Joan Scott.

kept a close eye on the girls. In addition, Ainsmith specifically brought his wife, Loretta, and Hamilton's wife, Clyde Mae, to chaperone the young women. Granted, some of the girls such as Edith Houghton were young and the chaperone was a reasonable precaution, yet most of the Bobbies were in their late teens and twenties, the same age as other male ballplayers that made the journey. The need for a chaperone reflected the gendered disparities that continued to plague women. Although the female players had the freedom to travel and play baseball, managers also assumed that they needed additional supervision. These patronizing assumptions were not limited to the Bobbies but of women in general. The presence of housemothers at female colleges, for example, also implied that women needed to be treated differently. Society deemed that it was okay for women to be in public, but believed they would assuredly get in trouble if given too much freedom. These gendered biases, however, were not limited to off-field behavior.

Audiences in 1925, as do those in contemporary society, made the conclusion that female athletes were physically inferior to their male opponents. In newspapers and state department documents, authors concluded that the trip ultimately failed because the Bobbies could not compete with the Japanese teams. These sources indisputably state that because the team could field a competitive team, ticket sales dwindled and the team was left stranded in Japan. Yet overwhelming evidence seems to indicate that the Bobbies' athletic talent was comparable to the Japanese men. The assumption of physical inferiority was merely a product of biased views and reflective of the inequalities that continued to plague American women.

Before the team ran into financial trouble, newspapers did not lambaste the players for their inability to compete, but praised them for their talent. Despite losing

their first game to Nippon University, a Japanese reporter wrote, “The crowd that came there to laugh and not to see baseball were disappointed. The laugh was on them, for they saw baseball, and good baseball at that.” The writer continued, “There are male teams in Japan that wouldn’t stand a chance of beating them.”<sup>50</sup> The following day, the girls played against men from the Nippon Dental College and lost by a close score of 2-1. Despite the losses, the youngest member of the Bobbies proved her baseball savvy and athletic skill. In the second game, Houghton brought the crowd to their feet when she pulled off the famous ‘hidden ball’ trick. After a Japanese player named Masuda hit a double, Houghton, who “wasn’t much larger than the ball” made a sly backhand toss to second baseman, Alma Nolan. When no one was looking, Nolan passed the ball back to Houghton who proceeded to tag the unsuspecting Masuda. The trick required perfect timing, awareness, and a keen understanding of the sport.<sup>51</sup> The fact that Houghton even considered the trick shows that the team was not simply a group of pretty women, but talented players.

In addition to trickery, both American and Japanese newspapers celebrated the thirteen-year old phenom for her skill in the field. During the game against the Nippon Dental College, Houghton not only played flawless shortstop but also backed up her teammates on a bad hopping throw and relayed a ball from the outfield.<sup>52</sup> “She was born to play baseball,” said one Japanese reporter, “The announcer in Barnum’s greatest show

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<sup>50</sup> “Bobbies Nine Defeated in Opening Game,” *The Japan Times*, October 24, 1925.

<sup>51</sup> “Bobbies Drop Game by Close Score, 2-1,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF; In MLB history, successfully pulling off a hidden ball trick is about as rare as a no-hitter, Bill Deane, “The Oldest Trick in the Book,” *Black Ball: A Journal of the Negro Leagues* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 47-54.

<sup>52</sup> “Bobbies Drop Game By Close Score, 2-1,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

on earth would without a doubt page the little lady as a wonder child.”<sup>53</sup> Ainsmith, the former major league catcher known for his powerful arm, was skeptical that such a young girl could hold her own on the diamond. Prior to the first game, he promised Houghton one Yen for every catch she made. The teenage girl fielded his throws with ease and proved to be a reliable asset to the team. Houghton would later recall, “I took him for plenty of Yen.”<sup>54</sup>

The presence of Edward Ainsmith and Earl Hamilton is also worthy of analysis. It was very common for Bloomer Girl teams to have a male pitcher and catcher known as a *battery*. Managers considered the pitcher and catcher positions too strenuous for the female body, and thus hired men to take on those roles. Managers believed that the male battery would make teams more competitive against other semi-professional teams across the country. Even when female shortstops, first basemen, and outfielders were accepted, most were skeptical about female pitchers and catchers. The presence of Ainsmith and Hamilton implied that the managers of the Bobbies did not think the women were physically capable of filling the “most important” positions. Yet evidence shows this assumption was incorrect. Edith Houghton was capable of playing any position on the field and regularly did so against male teams in the United States. Leona Kearns, the young girl that was tragically lost at sea, was a six-foot tall knuckleballer that pitched for a male team in West Union Illinois.<sup>55</sup> Other girls on the team trained vigorously, regularly played against men, and had more than enough physical stamina to pitch or

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<sup>53</sup> “Bobbies Nine Defeated in Opening Game,” *The Japan Times*. October 24, 1925.

<sup>54</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, August 29, 1991.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Gregorich, “Dropping the Pitch: Leona Kearns, Eddie Ainsmith and the Philadelphia Bobbies,” *The National Pastime* 43 (2013).

catch. There was simply no basis for the use of a male battery, aside from the ongoing cultural assumptions about physical inferiority. Although women's presence on the baseball diamond was progress, their limited roles reflect the ongoing discrimination in society as a whole.

Even if, for the sake of argument, the Philadelphia Bobbies did need the help of Ainsmith and Hamilton, which they likely did not, the presence of two major leaguers should have dispelled the notion that the Bobbies could not compete against the Japanese teams. Statistics from the games reinforce this belief. In the Spangler diary, the left fielder recorded a total ten baseball games in Japan. Although Spangler did not indicate a score in five of the games, the remaining games accounted for four wins and three losses. In no game were the Bobbies blown out and in no game were the girls embarrassed off the field. "Most of them were very close games and we won a good many of them," Houghton said retrospectively, "some of them [Japanese teams] were very fast but they couldn't hit as hard as our boys."<sup>56</sup> Over the course of her playing years, there were a number of teams that Houghton openly admitted were not talented. It would therefore seem uncharacteristic for Houghton to embellish the skill of Bobbies.<sup>57</sup>

Although records in newspapers and official state department files reflect a dramatic and dire situation, there seemed to be little concern on the part of the players. At no point in her diary did Nettie Gans Spangler mention financial hardship or waning interest in the team. On November 16, a huge crowd came out to see the Bobbies play a baseball game at the Canadian Academy in Kobe. The following day, November 17, the

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<sup>56</sup> Harry Robert, "Phillies to Get Woman's Angle in Hunt for Talent," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 15, 1946, SCRC 171, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries (TU).

<sup>57</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, August 29, 1991

girls went to yet another party to celebrate Mr. Van Ness's birthday and had "laughs galore." On November 18, the girls met Mr. Mody and they boarded the ship that evening.<sup>58</sup> As she reflected back on the trip, Edith Houghton was skeptical the team even ran out of money because Ainsmith continued to tour throughout Asia. For Houghton, the trip was not only a success, but the pinnacle moment in her illustrious career.<sup>59</sup>

An overwhelming amount of evidence indicates that the Philadelphia Bobbies were physically capable of competing with Japanese men. Nevertheless, newspapers and government officials unanimously cited the team's lack of skill as the reason for the failure. The quick reaction to blame the female athletes was the logical conclusion for male-centric authorities—when things went awry, it was clearly because the women should not have been playing baseball in the first place. Additional evidence such as the presence of chaperones and the male battery further illustrates the biased views towards women. Although the emergence of the new woman created opportunities for women to play sports, they carried with them distinct limitations.

### **The Perpetuation of Failure**

The Philadelphia Bobbies' trip to Japan is a perfect example of the dichotomous situation that plagued thousands of new women across the country. The trip simultaneously represents the freedom offered to women of the 1920s and its inherent limitations. The modern woman acted as a broker of cultural diplomacy and had a legitimate impact on U.S. foreign relations. Houghton won the admiration of Japanese fans and helped to diminish tension between statesmen. Improved technology and

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<sup>58</sup> Spangler Diary, WIB: Philadelphia Bobbies subject file, NBHF.

<sup>59</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

growing consumerism gave Japanese promoters and American booking agents the ability and incentive to send a female baseball team to Japan. The changing notions of femininity, acceptance of women in public, and globalizing economy allowed Edith Houghton and the Bobbies to play baseball and travel to the Far East. The girls on the trip fully embraced their role as socialites and spent a considerable portion of the trip partying, dancing, and mingling with the Japanese elite.

At the same time, however, a patronizing characterization of the new woman overshadowed the trip. Male managers believed that the female players were not capable of travelling on their own or competing against men. Newspapers and diplomats ultimately blamed the women for not playing well enough to draw fans, which subsequently led to the diplomatic meltdown and financial disaster. Although the liberalized view towards women created the opportunity to travel to Japan, the notion of full equality was a distant reality.

What is more concerning to the historian is the perpetual repetition of the dominant narrative. On the surface, the Philadelphia Bobbies' trip to Japan in 1925 was a failure. The team lost money and did not all return safely. Yet further analysis reveals a complex and intricate trip that is more reflective of the 1920s as a whole. Despite the perceived failure, Edith Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies had an incredible experience that embodied many aspects of the new woman. The girls flaunted their independence as they danced their way around Japan, dined with handsome actors, and participated in all of the social vices that their male compatriots were enjoying. What becomes most apparent after further scrutiny is the inherent bias against the female baseball players. Societal expectations still considered the female athletes socially



dependent on their chaperones and physically inferior to their male opponents. This discrimination, which was not limited to the baseball diamond, masqueraded under a perceived cover of social and political equality and further perpetuated women's inferiority.

### CHAPTER 3 Gendering of Sports in the Depression Years

*“There weren’t many women’s baseball teams anymore, so I had to switch to softball. I wasn’t too happy about that but I didn’t have much of a choice”<sup>1</sup>*  
-Edith Houghton

The idea that men play baseball and women play softball is an entirely socially constructed phenomenon. The reasons behind this transition have received little scholarly attention. As demonstrated by Edith Houghton’s career, women in the 1920s played baseball and played it well. These female athletes were not only talented, but also part of a lucrative industry that dominated small-town America. Amid the Roaring Twenties, the idea that baseball was exclusively a “male sport” and softball was a “women’s sport” had not yet formed nor was there any indication that it would. The gendering of baseball and softball was a direct response to sociological factors that developed during the Great Depression.

Societal views towards women changed dramatically in the 1930s. The flapper and sportswoman, icons a decade before, no longer represented freedom, leisure, and sexuality, but waste and self-indulgence. Faced with the highest rates of unemployment in the nation’s history, married women increasingly entered the workforce to supplement the household income. Many Americans, however, viewed the emerging sector of working women as a threat to masculinity. In response, individuals imposed traditional gender norms on other facets of life.<sup>2</sup> Male instructors began to prioritize boy’s athletics,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Rich Westcott, *The Fightin’ Phils: Oddities, Insights, and Untold Stories* (Philadelphia: Camino Books, 2008), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 497-506; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); 250-272; Lois, Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female*

while female teachers taught girls modified and non-competitive physical activities. By the end of the decade, physical education experts believed that softball, the toned down and less-strenuous version of baseball, was the appropriate venue for young women to get their exercise.<sup>3</sup> Female baseball players, who Americans once viewed as novel attractions were viewed as a threat to gender identity and misfits in society.

By the mid-1930s, a vastly understudied “softball craze” consumed the nation. Softball organizations marketed the sport as a game that everyone could play, allowing its player and fan base to expand dramatically. The advent of stadium lighting also broadened softball’s appeal to the working class that was unable to attend major league baseball games during the day. Softball fields were much smaller than baseball diamonds and therefore more accessible to city dwellers. The softball stadium and bleachers were relatively inexpensive, and many local baseball teams turned to softball during times of financial hardship. The popularity of softball made it a sensible replacement for promoters looking to capitalize on Americans’ love of baseball during the depression. Thousands of teams flooded the United States, and millions of people played softball in organized leagues.<sup>4</sup> By the late 1930s, softball, the nation’s fastest growing sport, seemed like the most logical place for female competition.

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*Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); ix- xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: A History of Women’s Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 151-162; Jennifer Ring, *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don’t Play Baseball* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2009), 93-94; Gregory Kent Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswoman: Women’s Health, Fitness, and Athletics, 1860-1940*, (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 112-122.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion about the rise in softball see Amy Ellis Nutt, “Swinging for the Fences,” in *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sport*, ed. Lissa Smith (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), 59-51; Merrie A. Fidler, “The Establishment of

As softball emerged, baseball went through a period of professionalization, dependent on the exclusion of women. Baseball administrators denied the contracts of female players, and further characterized baseball as a male sport. Additionally, the major league clubs began purchasing the once independent minor league teams as an elaborate *farm system* emerged. By the late 1930s, baseball executives primarily thought of minor league players as prospects for the pros.<sup>5</sup> As baseball professionalized, women's teams like the New York Bloomer Girls and Philadelphia Bobbies no longer had a place in the minor league system. When Carl Stotz founded Little League Baseball in 1939, the youth baseball organization explicitly denied girls from playing, ending the prospect of future generations of female baseball players.

Despite women's efforts to remain in baseball, Edith Houghton and her fellow hardballers reluctantly turned to softball. After a brief period of playing on men's baseball teams, Houghton found herself playing on a number of highly competitive softball leagues around the United States. Much like her stint in hardball, Houghton's softball teams were financially successful and extraordinarily popular. Houghton was once again a star, although she was only able to excel within the socially restrictive

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Softball as a Sport for American Women, 1900-1940," in *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports*, ed. Reet Howell (New York: Leisure Press, 1982), 527-540; Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 140-145; Laura A. Purcell, "The Queens and the Ramblers: Women's Championship Softball in Phoenix, 1932-1965" (master's thesis, Arizona State University, 2004), 16-21;

<sup>5</sup> Neil J. Sullivan, *The Minors: The Struggles and the Triumph of Baseball's Poor Relation from 1876 to the Present* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), 93-141; Ring, *Stolen Bases*, 45-47.

confines of the softball diamond. Houghton never felt the passion for the sport that she did for baseball. Many other women shared her sentiments.<sup>6</sup>

Despite their success in the 1920s, a variety of factors forced female baseball players out of the game they loved, and very few had the opportunity to play baseball again. By the end of the 1930s, softball entirely replaced women's professional and semi-professional baseball. Moreover, softball was increasingly thought of as a feminine game while baseball was exclusively male. The tumultuous depression years created a landscape for women's sports that largely remains to this day. This chapter not only focuses on the softball career of Edith Houghton, but also on the variety of factors that led to the demise of women's baseball and the gendering of male and female athletics, often against the will of its participants.

### **Changing Views Towards Women**

1933 was the first summer without a competitive female baseball team. By that time, even the most popular and financially successful clubs like the Philadelphia Bobbies, New York Bloomer Girls, and Hollywood Girls had reached their demise. Not coincidentally, the year also marked the establishment of the Amateur Softball Association and the meteoric rise of softball. Faced with few alternatives, the vast

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<sup>6</sup> Houghton expressed her dislike for softball on a number of occasions see, Edith Houghton, interview by Exploratorium, March 2005; Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000; Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991. Other women also liked baseball more than softball see, "Girls to Face Men's Team in Baseball Game Tonight," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF; Karlene Ferrante, "Baseball and the Social Construction of Gender," in *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon, (Thousands Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994) 245-249.

majority of women baseball players chose to join softball leagues or stop playing entirely. A select few, however, did attempt to resist the change. Edith Houghton was one of the few.

As tens of thousands of women joined softball teams around the country, Houghton continued to play competitive baseball. No longer able to travel with female teams, Houghton began playing on the Fisher Athletic Association (A.A.) men's baseball team in the Greater Olney League of Pennsylvania. In her first two games with the male team, Houghton played first base flawlessly with two hits, one being a double.<sup>7</sup> Houghton signed with the team and continued to star. One article wrote that the lady slugger often goes four-for four and "seldom strikes out, seldom misses at first and the harder the batter hits them the easier they land in her glove!"<sup>8</sup> If it was not already evident from her time on the Philadelphia Bobbies, the Passaic Girls, the New York Bloomer Girls, and the Hollywood Girls, it was abundantly clear on the Fisher A.A. team—Edith Houghton could keep up with the boys. Houghton's experiences on male baseball teams, however, came as societal views on women were changing. By the mid-1930s, papers no longer touted female baseball players. Instead, the community at large rejected the notion that women could play semi-professional baseball. As experts increasingly expected women to play softball, Houghton contested the 1930s patriarchy by playing the sport she truly loved.

The liberalization of the female body did not evolve in a linear progression as one might assume. During the first few decades of the 1900s, women did in fact shed the

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<sup>7</sup> "Quaker Maid Ups and Shows Jackie Phila. Is on Map," ca. 1933, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, National Baseball Hall of Fame (NBHF).

<sup>8</sup> Betty Starr, "Meet Edith—Smart Girl and Fine First Baseman on Men's Baseball Team," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

Victorian standards of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The trend towards liberation excelled in the 1920s, and as evidenced by the trip to Japan, was by no means complete. Yet historians have largely viewed the 1930s as a digression in women's liberties. As the Great Depression consumed the United States, Americans reverted to some traditional values. Many emphasized home-life and economical living over leisure activities, and women lost much of their autonomy in industries such as radio, film, science, and aviation.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, women lost both prestige and independence in the sporting world. In an attempt to understand the changing views on the female body and women's sport, historians have often focused on the role of physical education.

During the 1920s, the commercialization of leisure opened the door for self-proclaimed authorities on exercise. This period witnessed the emergence of doctors, nutritionists, fitness entrepreneurs, government officials, and social reformers as active participants in the exercise community. Among these professionals, there was growing consensus that physical exercise was appropriate for everyone, although there was still considerable disagreement about how much exercise was suitable for women. Experts agreed, for example, that tennis and golf were wholesome activities that provided adequate exercise, but considered track and field too strenuous for the female body. Amidst this environment, female physical education teachers emerged as the preeminent

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

authority on the nuanced subject of the female body.<sup>10</sup> Martha Verbrugge has argued that female gym teachers had a significant and lasting impact on women's sport. As broad social changes swept through the United States, gender anxieties increased. Economic and family structures altered as more women went to work. This perceived threat on masculinity was known as the "women question" or the "boy problem."<sup>11</sup>

One way that the newly emerging authorities attempted to solve these "problems" was in the school gymnasium. Schools placed greater emphasis on varsity sports for boys, while female gym teachers instructed girls in calisthenics and other non-competitive routines. By acquiescing to the growing cultural trends, female gym instructors preserved their standing as "experts" of the female body.<sup>12</sup> Female gym teachers promoted exercise for girls, as long it was not too strenuous or competitive. The female teachers maintained their status in the school system by creating a distinct sphere for women's sport, one defined by its patriarchal views towards women's athletics.

By the 1930s, the Great Depression amplified the threat to traditional sexual hierarchies. Women's participation in the workforce increased, and many worried about the impact of unemployment on the male psyche.<sup>13</sup> Faced with changing gender roles, men reasserted their masculinity through sport. Administrators allocated significantly more resources to the male athletics and the disparity between men and women's sports grew even further. The popularity of varsity sports for men increased while many schools eliminated interscholastic sports for women. Under the auspices of their male

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<sup>10</sup> Mariah Burton Nelson, "Introduction: Who We Might Become," in *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sport*, ed. Lissa Smith (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), xiv-xv; Verbrugge, *Active Bodies*, 15-37.

<sup>11</sup> Verbrugge, *Active Bodies*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-165.

<sup>13</sup> DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 498-501.



directors, female physical education teachers promoted non-competitive athletics in moderation. As such, they broadened their audience to more girls and maintained their status as stalwarts of the women's body, but did so at the expense of women's competitive athletics.<sup>14</sup>

The changing views of female athletes had a direct impact on women's baseball. Instead of competitive athletics for women, schools across the country held "play days," intercollegiate gatherings that emphasized fun and camaraderie. Collegiate women's baseball, popular since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, vanished entirely.<sup>15</sup> Female educators harshly chastised the industrial and semi-professional women's baseball teams for overworking the girls and exercising without the proper training and knowledge of the female body. By the 1930s, female physical education teachers helped to institutionalize the physical inferiority of women and greatly limited the opportunities for women that wanted to play competitive sports such as baseball.

Yet with relatively few women in college, the demise of women's baseball cannot be solely placed on the female physical education teachers. Gregory Kent Stanley argues that the shift away from competitive athletics for women was partially due to the influence of female educators, but more significantly a result of the changing tone in mass media. During the depression years, mass media replaced the sportswoman with the housewife. The sportswoman's association with youth, sex appeal, and leisure that embodied the 1920s abruptly fell out of fashion. Instead, magazines promoted traditional images of the female housewife in order to promote personal efficiency and thrift saving

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<sup>14</sup> Verbrugge, *Active Bodies*, 160-165.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Kent Stanley, *The Rise and Fall of the Sportswoman: Women's Health, Fitness, and Athletics, 1860-1940* (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 111.

techniques during financial hardship.<sup>16</sup> Advertisements depicting sportswomen declined sharply and writers chastised female athletes. This regression had a direct impact on women's athletics, particularly on competitive sports that threatened masculinity.

The increasing hostility from both powerful academics and popular media made playing baseball considerably more challenging for women. Nevertheless, almost all parties agreed that women needed some physical activity on a modified and non-competitive level. The mixed feelings towards physical exercise and femininity culminated at the exact time that softball surged in popularity. The vast majority of women acquiesced to societal pressures and adapted to the sport of softball. Only a few female baseball players were able to resist and join male baseball teams.

In addition to Houghton, the most notable female baseball player of the 1930s was Jackie Mitchell. Mitchell gained her fame while she was pitching for the all-male Chattanooga Lookouts. The team president and promoter of the Lookouts, Joe Engle, arranged for his team to play two exhibition games against the New York Yankees in 1931. As the Bronx Bombers came to town, thousands of people packed the stadium to see the game's most electrifying players in person. What the spectators did not expect was one of the most unusual events in sporting history.

With Jackie Mitchell on the mound, the great Babe Ruth came to bat. Ruth promptly swung at two pitches and watched a third go by for a called strike. The irritated Bambino argued with the umpire, kicked the dirt and stormed back to the bench. Next up was Lou Gehrig. Once again, Mitchell defied the odds by striking out the Hall of Famer

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<sup>16</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 188-89.

on three straight pitches, immortalizing herself in the annals of baseball history.<sup>17</sup>

Although some historians have questioned whether the Yankee sluggers were actually trying, the fact that Mitchell even had the opportunity to pitch against Ruth and Gehrig is significant. Like Houghton, Jackie Mitchell defied long-held assumptions about women's physical ability. In doing so, she contested the traditional ideology towards women in the 1930s.

The reaction to Houghton and Mitchell playing baseball with men is most telling. After striking out Ruth and Gehrig, pundits across the country lambasted the event. A writer in Missouri claimed that the game had become too feminized and that women would do "anything from shaving their heads to shooting their husbands, just for the thrill of getting their names in the paper."<sup>18</sup> The way in which sportswriters depicted Houghton had begun to change as well. The phenomenal press that she received as a member of the various female baseball teams virtually disappeared. Despite her decade of successful play, one article claimed that Houghton was simply a "novelty that would soon wear off." The writer went on to deride Babe Didrikson, possibly the greatest female athlete of all time, as an "ordinary girl athlete."<sup>19</sup> Babe Ruth himself claimed that women were "too delicate to play baseball" and baseball commissioner Kenesaw Moutain Landis agreed.

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<sup>17</sup> There is heated debate over the legitimacy of this story. While it is agreed that Mitchell did in fact strike out both Ruth and Gehrig, many baseball historians believe that the Yankees struck out on purpose for the sake of showmanship. Mitchell believed the strike outs were legitimate until her death in 1987. See Leslie Heaphy, "More than a Man's Game: Pennsylvania's Women Play Ball," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 7, no. 1 (2007), 22-27; Gai Ingham Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); Simkus, *Outsider Baseball: The Weird World of Hardball on the Fringe, 1876-1950* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014)

<sup>18</sup> Richard Crepeau, *America's Diamond Mind* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Dora Lurie, "Raphael Bobbies' Uphold Local Baseball Tradition," ca. 1933, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

Landis determined that the game was “too strenuous for a woman” and declared Jackie Mitchell’s contract null and void.<sup>20</sup> Tellingly, just a few years earlier Landis ruled that Margaret Gisolo, a young girl from Indiana, was eligible to play for the all-male American Legion junior baseball. The commissioner claimed, “In view of the services of our women in the World War and to the American Legion and the nation through the American Legion Auxiliary, it is held that Margaret Gisolo should not be barred on account of her sex.”<sup>21</sup> Landis’ changing sentiments towards female baseball players reflect the growing hostility towards female athletes. Baseball pundits no longer celebrated female athletes like Edith Houghton, but perceived them as a threat that needed to be eliminated from the sport of baseball.

Societal rejection of the flapperesque woman had an enormous impact on women’s sports. The increased threat to masculinity during the depression years forced Americans to look at female baseball players with skepticism. With female educators leading the charge, male sports were prioritized while women were relegated to non-competitive and modified sports like softball. At the same time, the image of the sportswoman in popular media fell out of fashion in exchange for the housewife. Female athletes, idolized in the 1920s, were out of place in the 1930s. Although thousands of women played baseball in the 1920s, virtually all professional and semi-professional female teams were gone a decade later. While a few women were able to persist on male

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<sup>20</sup>This particular decision only applied to Mitchell, although women were banned from organized baseball as a whole in 1952. Jean Hastings Ardell, *Breaking into Baseball: Women and the National Pastime* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 109.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Ladd, “Sexual Discrimination in Youth Sport: The Case of Margaret Gisolo,” in *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports* (New York: Leisure Press, 1982), 584.

teams, they were largely the exception and faced more criticism than they had the decade prior. In addition to the changing views on women, the devolution of female baseball was made possible due to the emergence of softball as an appropriate alternative.

### **Popularity of Softball**

Just as baseball has not always been exclusively for men, softball has not always been exclusively for women. Most accounts credit the creation of softball to a group of Chicagoan men in 1887. One Thanksgiving day, George Hancock and his friends were looking for something to do, so they tied a string around a rolled up boxing glove and threw the *soft ball* underhanded to their partner, who in turn smacked the rolled up glove with a broom handle.<sup>22</sup> Since its inception in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, various versions of the game abounded, often under different names with different rules and regulations. Most of these games were local and few had any widespread popularity. From its origins, softball was often associated with reform movements. Settlement houses were some of the first to support the sport, asserting that providing urban children a healthy place to play would improve their living condition. The National Playground Association supported the argument and pressured municipal governments to create parks that were suitable for softball diamonds.<sup>23</sup> In 1926, Denver YMCA director Walter C. Hackenson gave the sport its deceptive name (the ball is quite hard), which was eventually adopted

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<sup>22</sup> This is the story cited by Jennifer Ring in her book, *Why do Women Play Softball?* and corroborated by a number of articles I've found in various newspapers. See: "Baseball Goes Soft," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 2, 1938; "Baltimore's Softball Legions Straining at Home Plate," *The Sun*, April 30, 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Merrie A. Fidler, *The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006), 16-20.

by the Amateur Softball Association (ASA) in 1933. The ASA created a uniform set of rules and laid the groundwork for a softball revolution.

Shortly after softball organized, the game spread rapidly across the country. Initially, thousands of men and women played softball without any qualms that the new game was feminine in nature. In 1934, seven million people watched more than 950,000 players compete in organized leagues.<sup>24</sup> Just one year later, an article in *Time* claimed there were two million softball players and more than 60,000 teams.<sup>25</sup> By 1937, there were an estimated 96,000 teams and the following year there were well over one million.<sup>26</sup> Conservatively estimating each team at ten people, the bare minimum to field a squad, upwards of ten million Americans played softball in 1938. Pundits dubbed the sport as America's "second national pastime" and often wrote about the "softball craze" that was sweeping the nation. These staggering numbers reveal one of the most overlooked phenomenon of the 1930s, begging the question, why was softball so popular?

Softball's increase in popularity was a direct response to the economic crisis sweeping the nation. As unemployment surpassed one quarter of the population, the emphasis on sport, leisure, and consumption that dominated the 1920s declined. Major league baseball hit record low attendance levels and lost money in 1932, 1933, and 1934.<sup>27</sup> Local baseball teams fared even worse. With less expendable income, local

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<sup>24</sup> "The Daddy of Softball," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1935.

<sup>25</sup> "Softball," *Time*, September 16, 1935.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Root Zahler, "Baseball Goes Soft," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 2, 1938.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Barthel, *Baseball Barnstorming and Exhibition, 1901-1962: A History of Off-Season Major League Play* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2007) 120; Ron Briley, *Class at Bat, Gender on Deck and Race in the Hole: A Line-Up of*

teams lost their sponsors and industrial leagues were often disbanded. As the depression consumed America, local businesses opted to sponsor a cheaper sport that more people could play and more people could watch. They turned to softball.

Just as baseball dominated small town America in the twenties, softball surged in the 1930s. Softball was both cheaper and more practical than amateur baseball. Players needed little equipment or formal training to step onto the diamond. Distances between the bases were reduced from 90 feet to 60 feet, which allowed less athletic players to participate and made setting up fields more convenient. Whereas baseball fields needed considerable space, softball fields appeared in vacant lots and playgrounds. Furthermore, the Works Progress Administration contributed to the phenomenon by building thousands of stadiums across the country.<sup>28</sup> More playing fields created new opportunities for thousands of men and women at the amateur level, and helped to boost softball's popularity during troubling times. In addition, many softball teams took advantage of new technology that major leagues were reluctant to adopt, stadium lighting.

The adoption of stadium lights propelled softball's popularity. The majority of baseball games took place in the afternoon in the middle of the typical workday. By moving their games to the evening, softball teams allowed the working class to join in on the games and watch from the stands. By 1935, thousands of promoters invested money in softball fields and quickly reaped the benefits. Ordinary parks sat 4,000 people and cost roughly \$3,500 to build. George Sisler, a former major league baseball player, claimed that he invested in five softball fields, and at ten cents admission recouped his

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*Essays on Twentieth Century Culture and America's Game* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2007), 298.

<sup>28</sup> "750,255 Registered for Softball," *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 2, 1950, SCRC 169, TU; Ring, *Stolen Bases*, 8; Reiss, *City Games*, 141-145.

investment within one month.<sup>29</sup> While major leagues were reluctant to switch to night games, stadium lighting saved many minor league baseball teams from extinction and fostered the softball craze that swept through the nation.<sup>30</sup>

Softball's rise in popularity can also be attributed to the fact that the sport was specifically created and molded for all people. Softball is fundamentally similar to baseball, but modified in specific ways that make the game more accessible to a wider audience. The most notable difference between the two sports is the pitching style. Baseball players traditionally pitch overhand, while softball players pitch underhand. By the 1930s, softball leagues distinguished between fast pitch and slow pitch and between the sizes of the ball. A number of other technical differences between the rules of baseball and softball exist, all of which were intended to make a sport that was less physically demanding than baseball and more approachable to the masses. As previously mentioned, the softball field is smaller than a baseball diamond and the distances between the bases are shorter. The ball, however, is much larger. While the circumference of a baseball is approximately nine inches, the softball ranges from twelve to sixteen inches depending on the skill level. While baseball was increasingly marketed as a competitive, manly sport, softball was a game for everyone. Regardless of the talent, softball at all levels provided a couple of hours of entertainment for minimal cost.

The "playability" of softball helped make the game extraordinarily popular in the 1930s. An article in the *Daily Boston Globe* read, "There has been a boom in softball, which follows the principles of regular baseball but can be played by young and old of both sexes," the author continued, "at the present there are ten distinct schedules

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<sup>29</sup> "Softball," *Time*, September 16, 1935.

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, *The Minors*, 138-141.



operation, with junior and granddad often playing on the same club.”<sup>31</sup> An article in *The Sun* claimed that “ten thousand players will start the official league season this week and simultaneously thousands of others, including women and children, will take up bats and balls and move in on city parks, vacant lots, and the wider alleys.”<sup>32</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that “night leagues” across the state will feature “between 300 and 400 teams, representing industrial and business organizations, municipal athletic clubs, churches, lodges, fraternal orders and similar institutions.”<sup>33</sup> Many articles throughout the country shared a similar sentiment—softball was a game for everyone. Softball’s popularity in the 1930s was a direct reflection of its broad base of participants.

Sports promoters capitalized on the popularity of softball to earn money. Neighborhood games were typically free or ten cents, although the most elite competitors brought in 25 to 50 cents. One promoter claimed, “If you can tell me where you can get more entertainment for 15 cents the sarsaparilla is on me.”<sup>34</sup> The 1930s bustled with locally sponsored softball teams. Whereas the 1920s featured female baseball teams such as the General Electric Girls of Schenectady, the Fleisher Yarn Girls of Philadelphia, the Eastman Kodak Girls of Rochester and the Heath Silk Girls of Scranton, executives abandoned these industrial teams in favor of women’s softball clubs.<sup>35</sup> Softball was a relatively inexpensive sport to fund and served as a legitimate form of advertising.

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<sup>31</sup> “25,000 Baseball Players,” *Daily Boston Globe*, August 14, 1938.

<sup>32</sup> “Baltimore’s Softball Legions Straining at Home Plate,” *The Sun*, April 30, 1939.

<sup>33</sup> “Municipal Softball Leagues to Open Monday Night.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1937.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Finch, “Ziegfeld of Softball Enjoys Much Success,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1936.

<sup>35</sup> “Why Girls Leave Home for the Baseball Field,” *Staten Island Advance*, April 4, 1931.

Businesses had their names on the team jerseys and frequently appeared in the paper. As the popularity of softball continued to rise, sponsoring a softball team was not merely a charitable gesture but a sound and legitimate investment. Such was the case with the Renault Wine Company.

As opportunities to play on baseball dwindled, Houghton reluctantly made the switch to softball. Unsatisfied with the level of local competition, Houghton set out to create a highly competitive softball team in Philadelphia. Houghton, then in her twenties, drove down to the Renault Wine Company in Egg Harbor New Jersey looking for a sponsor to fund the team. Unsuccessful the first time, Houghton got the address of Renault's owner, John D'Agostino, who was living in Philadelphia. The determined athlete knocked on D'Agostino's door and presented him with a scrapbook containing hundreds of newspaper articles, photographs and other mementos from her baseball career. Like many other businessmen of the day, D'Agostino agreed to fund the softball team and named Houghton manager of the "Renault Champagne Girls."<sup>36</sup>

For the price of bats, balls, and some maroon uniforms, the Renault Company received tremendous publicity. The Renault Girls played twilight games every weekday and away games on the weekend. Much like her days on the Philadelphia Bobbies, Houghton played against the best men's softball teams in the Philadelphia area. On at least two occasions, the Renault Girls played against male all-star teams that featured the best players from male softball leagues. In other instances, the Renault girls traveled to play female teams between Philadelphia and New York City. All the while, thousands of people paid their dime or quarter to watch the Renault Girls play. Programs were sold

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<sup>36</sup> Edith Houghton, interview with Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

featuring the “Renault Girls” and newspapers often covered the teams’ whereabouts. Like thousands of others across the nation, John D’Agostino and the Renault Company took advantage of the growing popularity of softball by funding a local club.

Nevertheless, the growing popularity of softball made it even harder for women to compete in baseball. Unsurprisingly, former female baseball players made up the bulk of the Renault team and many of the girls resented the fact that they could not play baseball. “I don’t care too much for softball for one simple reason,” Houghton opined, “you can’t hold the ball like you can a baseball.”<sup>37</sup> One article reported, “The girls really prefer regular baseball and have been playing on the sandlots ever since they were youngsters. But softball being the next best thing the girls are glad they have the opportunity to compete in the great American pastime.”<sup>38</sup> The fact that the girls so openly preferred baseball to softball is telling. By the mid 1930s, the idea of women playing softball was so institutionalized that the papers disregarded the idea of female baseball entirely. Women on the Renault team did not want to be playing softball, they longed for the day that they could play competitive baseball. These women did not merely give up the game they loved, societal pressures *forced* them to do so. As softball’s popularity surged and pressure to leave baseball mounted, female baseball players reluctantly adapted to softball.

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<sup>37</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Exploratorium, March 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Dora Lurie, “Girls to Face Men’s Team in Baseball Game Tonight,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

## **Professionalization: Baseball for Men, Softball for Women**

In addition to the changing views towards women and growing popularity of softball, the professionalization of baseball further ostracized women from the sport they loved. In order to retain its status as America's pastime in the 1930s, the sport of baseball had to maintain American values. By the 1930s, these values increasingly found female athletes objectionable. Organized baseball banned women from participating and forced them into softball. In addition, as baseball professionalized, minor league teams lost their independence. Under the new farm system, major league teams owned the rights to the minor league players, giving managers little incentive to sign female athletes or play games against all-women teams. At the same time, organized baseball increasingly branded itself as a male sport. Baseball elitists distanced themselves from softball, which they characterized as a feminine byproduct of the national pastime. The gendering of both sports not only forced women into softball but also pushed men out of it. By the beginning of WWII, the professionalization of baseball created distinct sports: baseball for men, and softball for women.

As baseball professionalized, it increasingly became associated with masculinity. Jennifer Ring has argued that in order to maintain its status as the American pastime, baseball had to fully embody American patriarchal ideas.<sup>39</sup> Thus, when judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis declared Jackie Mitchell's contract null and void, it further protected the white male sanctity of the sport. Similar situations occurred at all levels of baseball all over the country. In 1937, the New York State Education Department prohibited Nina

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<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Ring, *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't play Baseball*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009) 29-31; see also Robert Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*, pg. xi-3.

Kiel, a fifteen year old pitcher, from playing on the Camden Junior High School Baseball team. Similarly, when Yolanda Klaskin tried out for the men's baseball team at Ithaca College, her coach said, "it would be a cinch for a boy, with equal ability, to win a place on the squad" but denied the female slugger the opportunity.<sup>40</sup> Amidst the growing uncertainty of the 1930s, baseball as an outlet for masculinity became even more sacred.

The idea of a farm system gained traction in the 1930s. Prior to the farm system, most minor leagues acted under the auspices of organized baseball (i.e. agreed on a set of rules, had the same commissioner, established player contract regulations) but acted in their own interest. These minor league teams made money by selling tickets or selling promising players to major league franchises. In order to make more money, independent minor league teams scheduled games against women's clubs or signed female ballplayers to contracts. As discussed in Chapter 1, these women were talented athletes that consistently drew large crowds. Yet as the 1920s came to an end, the era of independent minor leagues began to dwindle. Instead of purchasing individual players, major league teams began purchasing entire minor league ballclubs. By owning the entire team, the major leagues no longer had to pay outrageous amounts for promising prospects. The team also had exclusive rights to minor league players and could prohibit other teams from getting access to the potential stars.<sup>41</sup>

The advent of the farm system fundamentally changed minor league baseball. The Great Depression hit minor league baseball hard. Many leagues folded across the country and teams constantly moved from city to city looking for a more promising

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<sup>40</sup> "Girl Could Make College Nine," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 7, 1937, SCRC 169, TU.

<sup>41</sup> Sullivan, *The Minors*, 98-110

stream of revenue. Major league teams offered the struggling clubs more financial stability in exchange for less autonomy. Minor leagues were no longer seen an attraction that promoters could profit from, but grooming grounds for their major league counterparts. By 1940, the St. Louis Cardinals owned 32 teams with over 600 players.<sup>42</sup> Other major league teams understood the benefits of the farm system and followed suit. Owners moved young men from team to team as they developed, the most talented of whom were either brought up to the major league level or sold to another franchise. The professionalization of the minor leagues had dire consequences for women's baseball.

The success of women's baseball depended on the independent baseball teams. As was the case with Edith Houghton, most semi-professional female hardballers played for and against minor league teams. The advent of the farm system minimized these prospects. Minor league teams were expected to groom major league prospects and had no interest in signing female players. Similarly, minor league teams no longer needed to schedule "publicity stunts" against female baseball players to attract large crowds because they had the financial backing of the major league partners. By the mid 1930s, the professionalization of baseball and success of the farm system further ostracized women from the sport of baseball.

The increasing prevalence of the farm system was particularly hard on local baseball. Commissioner Landis was initially against the farm system because it "robbed small-town America of its precious heritage of independent minor league baseball." Landis went on to accuse Branch Rickey, the general manager of the St. Louis Cardinals

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 98-110.

and pioneer of the farm system, of “raping the minors.”<sup>43</sup> After the legality of the farm system was sustained in federal court, Landis changed his approach to make sure players in the system were treated fairly. As baseball lost its local flare, many men and women shifted their allegiance to softball. Local business that once sponsored baseball teams opted for the cheaper and more localized softball clubs. By the mid-1930s, even the most talented women had no place in baseball’s minor leagues.

As softball gained popularity among both sexes, many involved in organized baseball worried about the future of the game. Increasing pressure mounted to make softball a women’s game and make baseball more masculine. Baseball elitist referred to softball as a “sissy game” and harbored extreme antagonism towards the burgeoning sport. Young men who dreamed of major league careers were encouraged to play baseball instead of softball. One scout for the Detroit Tigers noted, “Softball may be good exercise but it’s having a detrimental effect on baseball...I’m blaming softball for the present lack of material in semi-pro ranks, once the heavy feeder of organized baseball.” Another scout for the St. Louis Cardinals had blunt advice for up and coming baseball players, “don’t play softball.”<sup>44</sup> Growing professionalization made competitive baseball at any level a stepping-stone for the major leagues. The advent of Little League further instilled this belief in American boys.

In 1939, Carl Stotz founded Little League baseball in Williamsport, Pennsylvania with the specific purpose of “developing qualities of citizenship, sportsmanship, and

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Neil J. Sullivan, *The Minors*, 98-110.

<sup>44</sup> “Softball Spoils Baseball Talent,” *Daily Boston Globe*, September 9, 1937; “Baseball Still Popular, Cardinal Scout Says,” *Daily Boston Globe*, October 30, 1936.

manhood.”<sup>45</sup> Although Margaret Gisolo had played in organized junior baseball in the 1928 and plenty of women like Edith Houghton played competitive baseball against men, Little League explicitly prevented girls from playing. It was young boys that needed to learn the values that baseball had to offer and learn the fundamentals that would hopefully propel their baseball careers. By the 1950s Little League had become an American institution and multiple generations of young girls had no opportunity to participate. More than anything else, the creation of Little League put the proverbial nail in the coffin for women’s competitive baseball, and further distinguished gendered boundaries between baseball for men and softball for women.

The creation of softball was reflective of women’s changing status in the 1930s. Throughout the depression years, women’s presence in the workforce increased. White women benefitted from increased clerical jobs and the numbers of married working women increased substantially. New Deal programs facilitated job growth for both sexes, and women increasingly participated in union activity and political activism. Yet despite all their progress, women faced extreme hostility towards jobs that challenged their traditional domestic roles. The New Deal broadened opportunities to women but only within the socially acceptable confines of the 1930s, thereby institutionalizing their inferiority to men.<sup>46</sup> A similar phenomenon was happening in the world of sports. The growing popularity of softball allowed more women to participate in athletics than ever before. As institutions promoted modified and non-competitive sports to women, they

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Gai Ingham Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994), 97.

<sup>46</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 498-506; Robyn Muncy, *Relentless Reformer: Josephine Roche and Progressivism in Twentieth-century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 164-165.



broadened the prospective base of female athletes, but eliminated competitive sports that challenged gendered spheres. Like New Deal policies, the creation of softball had positive effects on many women, but also worked to institutionalize their inferiority.

Functioning within the social confines of the 1930s, women's softball teams reached tremendous new heights. Professional softball teams travelled across the country, often drawing more fans and accolades than professional male baseball players of the time. Teams like the New York Roverettes, managed by Edith Houghton, played home games Madison Square Garden and travelled around the United States and Canada. Women's softball filled a niche for cheap entertainment that continued to capitalize on American's love of baseball, but only prospered within the appropriate gendered spheres. By the end of the decade, softball was able to grow and professionalize along side major league baseball, and develop as a unique spectator sport that fell within the appropriate gender boundaries. Such was the case with Edith Houghton and the New York Roverettes.

In the summer of 1938, women's softball made its debut at Madison Square Garden with tremendous success. New York was home to three major league baseball teams, the New York Yankees, the New York Giants, and Brooklyn Dodgers, all of who played their games during the day. This left a tremendous opportunity for entrepreneurs to capture the city's love for baseball when workingmen and women were off the clock.

Softball, the nation's fastest growing sport, was a logical fit. The compact size of a softball field made Madison Square Garden an ideal home for the female athletes. By the end of the decade, at least two highly competitive female softball teams, the Roverettes and the Americanettes, called Madison Square Garden home.

After hearing about the Roverettes, Houghton made the drive from Philadelphia to New York to speak with manager, Tom Lockhart. Houghton worked out with the team and was offered a starting position later that day. With Houghton at first base, the Roverettes played softball clubs from around the country. Teams came to Madison Square Garden from Phoenix, Boston, Montreal, New Orleans, Toronto and Philadelphia, and consistently played at a high level. On a number of occasions, Houghton and the Roverettes also made the return trip to Toronto where women's softball was equally popular.<sup>47</sup> Newspapers routinely covered the softball teams and advertised upcoming games. When the Phoenix Ramblers traveled to Madison Square Garden in 1938, both the *Arizona Republic* and the *New York Times* reported an attendance of 13,500 fans.<sup>48</sup> The fact that owners were willing to invest in travel fares and hotel accommodations for the female players is insightful in its own right. Entrepreneurs continued to see the financial value in female sport, but only when the women played in context that was not threatening to masculinity. Further evidence of this is the decline games against male opponents. While the Bloomer Girls baseball teams played nearly all their games against male opponents, by the late 1930s the female competitive softball teams predominately played other women. Teams like the Roverettes were highly skilled, and the possibility of defeating a male club would have endangered the ever-fragile gender hierarchy.

Throughout the thirties, women's softball remained a viable spectator sport. Shockingly, the women's softball teams that played in Madison Square Garden were so popular that they often outdrew major league baseball games in attendance. On August

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<sup>47</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Laura A. Purcell, "The Queens and the Ramblers: Women's Championship Softball in Phoenix, 1932-1965" (master's thesis, Arizona State University, 2004), 21.

25, 1938, a game between the New York Roverettes and Renault Girls of Philadelphia attracted a crowd of 8,500.<sup>49</sup> A game between the New York Giants and St. Louis Cardinals earlier that day drew 4,511 fans.<sup>50</sup> A few days later, a doubleheader softball game featuring the Americanettes versus the Newark Linden Girls, and the Roverettes versus a team from Akron, Ohio drew a crowd of 8,000 people.<sup>51</sup> A game at Yankee Stadium earlier that day between the Detroit Tigers and Bronx Bombers had a recorded attendance of 7,854.<sup>52</sup> Because of the size of the crowds and level of competition, Houghton later exclaimed, “playing in Madison Square Garden was like playing in the big leagues.”<sup>53</sup> By the end of the decade, not only were softball teams popular, but they had become a lucrative spectator sport.

The popularity of women’s softball is a testament to the 1930s as a whole. Amid the depression years, thousands of working class Americans sought new outlets for cheap entertainment. For less than the cost of a Yankees, Dodgers, or Giants game, New Yorkers could see a couple hours of competitive softball at Madison Square Garden. The fact that games were at night was significant as well. Even by the end of the 1930s, nearly every major league baseball game began at midday or in the afternoon, thus omitting the majority of the working population with traditional hours. Softball games featured doubleheaders that nearly always began around eight at night, thus providing a

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<sup>49</sup> “Roverettes Win at Garden,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1938.

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/SLN/SLN193808250.shtml>.

<sup>51</sup> “Roverettes Win at Garden,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1938.

<sup>52</sup> The attendance at major league games varied considerably. Well-attended games often seated upwards of 40,000 fans, while other teams consistently attracted closer to 5,000 per game. The stats in this paper are not meant to show that softball was *more* popular than major league baseball, merely that it was comparable in attendance to a daily game, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/NYA/NYA193808310.shtml>.

<sup>53</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991.

sports outlet for thousands of spectators that worked during the day. American's love for baseball at this time cannot be overstated. The baseball craze that prospered in the 1920s carried over into the depression years. Softball should therefore not be viewed as a replacement to the national pastime but as a supplementary, female version game. In fact, many writers believed that the popularity of softball introduced a completely new body of individuals to the sport of baseball, thus increasing the prevalence of both sports.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the Roverettes and Americanettes satisfied the craving for baseball in a way that major league squads were unable to do, and also in a way that was not threatening to the appropriate gender roles.

In addition to the love for baseball, the popularity of competitive softball can largely be attributed to the lure of the athletic woman. Although the traditional sportswoman of the 1920s had fallen out of fashion during the depression, softball players represented a new ideal of femininity. Self-proclaimed experts considered the modified sport easier on the female body and specifically designed as a game for everyone. Houghton and her teammates were not intruding on the sacred male domain of the baseball diamond, but prospering in their own game. Just as Americans celebrated female tennis and golf players in the 1930s, softball represented an appropriate physical outlet for the "weaker sex." Although many leading experts would have likely been appalled at the competitive nature of Houghton's softball teams, they were still substantially better than playing baseball against men. These assumptions about female inferiority were still evolving in the 1930s, and quantified by the demise of women's baseball in favor of softball.

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<sup>54</sup> Bill Dallas, "Many Industrial Organizations, Clubs, Turn to New Sport," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, SCRC 169, TU.

## **The Persistence of Softball as a Women's Sport**

There is no reason that women cannot physically play baseball. The baseball is smaller than a softball, which makes it more difficult to hit, but easier to throw and catch in a glove. The distance between the bases is longer in baseball, but girls can assuredly run an extra thirty feet. There are no baseball rules that inherently advantage men and there is no law that prohibits women from playing baseball. Furthermore, there is historical precedent that women can play baseball and compete against men. For proof, one need only look to the newspapers of the 1920s, which recounted the box score of Edith Houghton's baseball teams right next to those of local men and professional major leaguers. Nevertheless, during the Great Depression, baseball for women abruptly disappeared and softball became a sport for women.

The popularity of softball fueled the transition away from women's baseball. Funding a local softball team and stadium was cheaper and easier than supporting a baseball club. Likewise, softball admission was often cheaper than baseball, and night games offered entertainment for the working class. Most importantly, the relative ease of play allowed more people to play softball than would have traditionally played baseball. As softball popularity surged, many baseball teams at the local, amateur, and semi-professional level disbanded. The booming softball craze provided a logical and viable alternative to competitive women's baseball which society increasingly found more and more out of place.

At the same time, baseball underwent a period of professionalization that further entrenched softball as a women's game. As baseball professionalized, it became

increasingly associated with white males and distanced itself from anything that might be perceived as feminine. Baseball banned women from minor league teams and young men were encouraged to stay away from softball, a girl's game. The development of farm systems also left women with fewer opportunities to play, as their chances of making the major league teams were essentially non-existent.

The 1930s were vastly different from the 1920s. Along with financial decline came other noticeable trends. The sportswoman lost favor within academic circles and among the popular media. Instead of competitive baseball, pundits viewed softball as a more appropriate fit for the wholesome housewife that needed to exercise in moderation. Furthermore, as married women increasingly entered the workforce, males were increasingly vigilant about sexual hierarchy outside of the workplace.<sup>55</sup> The gendering of baseball and softball is one example of the imposed hierarchy. Men reclaimed baseball as a purely masculine game and further defined softball as a women's sport.

It is worth mentioning that the gendering of baseball, and particularly of softball, was never 100 percent complete. Young girls still played baseball with boys on the playground, and a few attempted to play on male teams, although they would have been anomalies. None of these girls, however, had an opportunity to compete on semi-professional, all-female, uniformed teams like Edith Houghton in the 1920s. Similarly, softball remained popular as a recreational sport for men on company teams and local organizations. Yet few boys played professional or semi-professional softball because any talented slugger was ushered into baseball. At the most elite level it was, and still is, nearly unanimous—men played baseball and women played softball.

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<sup>55</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 498-501.

The gendering of baseball and softball is reflective of the complex gender relations of the 1930s. The advent of softball created opportunities for more women to play in both competitive and non-competitive softball games. Thousands of women across the country that had never played sports found solace on the softball diamond. Additionally, professional softball teams like the New York Roverettes prospered because they did not intrude on the male domain. As softball became a women's sport, it flourished alongside major league baseball. By creating a distinct sphere for women's athletics that fell within the socially acceptable virtues of the 1930s, women's professional softball was immensely popular.

Even still, the creation of softball further institutionalized women's role as social inferiors. Talented athletes such as Edith Houghton were forced to give up the game they loved in exchange for a sport that society deemed more appropriate. With the creation of all boys Little League in 1939, younger generations of girls never even had the option to play baseball. Houghton's career proves that the gendered nature of baseball and softball was not always so blatant. There was a time that women played baseball with men and men played softball with women. Socially constructed factors created, and have maintained, these assumptions about male and female athletics. As Nancy F. Cott asserted, women's condition in society is shaped by humans, not predestined by God.

## CHAPTER 4 A Brief Resurgence: Rosie at Bat

“Once played baseball in Japan, would now like to pitch them a bomb”<sup>1</sup>  
-Edith Houghton, WAVES Biographical Questionnaire, 1942

The outbreak of World War II created new opportunities for women. The war years saw a 43 percent increase in female employees, including a significant increase in older, married women, and a significant increase in professional work. As millions of men went off to war, women excelled in traditionally sex-segregated occupations such as factory work, military service, and sport.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, historians have shown that these expanded opportunities did not reflect an ideological shift in gender roles, but a temporary development brought upon by war.<sup>3</sup> Societal standards still demanded that workingwomen express their feminine appearance and often-linked factory work to housework. Government propaganda promoted wartime occupations for women as a patriotic duty, not as an expression of gender liberation or individualistic endeavors. The expansion of women’s roles and persistence of gendered assumptions manifest in the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter. With her feminine appearance and masculine occupation, Rosie symbolizes the complex notions of womanhood that plagued many workingwomen in the 1940s. As was the case with earlier generations, the complex

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<sup>1</sup> “Miss Average WAVE is Young, Attractive and of Trim Form,” *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, National Baseball Hall of Fame (NBHF).

<sup>2</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 276; Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 511.

<sup>3</sup> Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 273-295; Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 1-10; Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 146-152.



gender relations are also evident in the career of Edith Houghton and the sport of baseball.

The 1940s witnessed the brief revitalization of women's baseball. As millions of men went off to war, women began playing baseball in the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBBL). Originally started as a softball league in 1943, the AAGBBL evolved into a league of professional female baseball players by the end of the decade. Although players were respected athletes, league administrators demanded that players wear skirts, attend charm school, and act "ladylike" on and off the field.<sup>4</sup> A brief analysis of the league shows how it embodied the complex gender relations of the 1940s—the war years gave women more opportunities, but they could only compete within the ever-present gendered confines of society.

While women on the home front once again had the opportunity to play professional baseball, Edith Houghton and thousands of other women joined the military. The nuanced combination of expanded opportunities within the confines of traditional gender assumptions is evident in Edith Houghton's time in the Navy. When Houghton enlisted in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) in 1942, officials depicted the naval organization for women as a temporary wartime necessity. The Navy promoted the ability of female units as a way to free up men for battle, and

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<sup>4</sup> "Girls' Baseball: A Feminine Midwest League Opens its Third Professional Season," *Life*, June 4, 1945; Merrie A. Fidler, *The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006); Susan E. Johnson, *When Women Played Hardball* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1994); W.C. Madden, *The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997).

forced recruits to constantly emphasize their femininity.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the WAVES provided unique opportunities for women. When the all-male Bureau of Supplies and Accounts baseball team needed an extra player, they recruited the baseball-turned-softball superstar, Edith Houghton.

For the first time since the early 1930s, Houghton played competitive hardball. Houghton's baseball career in the WAVES, however, is reflective of larger sociological trends. Despite her acknowledged skill, men in the Navy still viewed her as a temporary substitute during a particularly unusual set of circumstances. Like women in the factories, Houghton did not threaten masculinity because her presence on the baseball diamond was only one of necessity. Once more women joined the WAVES, Navy officials asked Houghton to manage a woman's softball team. While Houghton unsurprisingly excelled against her female competition, traditional gendered assumptions limited her opportunity to play hardball. Houghton's short, yet successful, stint on the men's baseball team once again proves that women can compete amongst men at high levels of play when given the opportunity.

By the end of the decade, women's baseball struck out for the final time. The post-war years reemphasized traditional gender roles. Industries with conventionally male occupations laid off women most frequently and the image of the American housewife replaced Rosie the Riveter. By the time Houghton left the Navy, female hardball players once again posed a threat to broader gender hierarchies. Edith Houghton

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<sup>5</sup> Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Fine Press, 2004); Robyn Muncy, "Women in the Workforce After WWII" (lecture, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, April 16, 2013).

quit playing competitive athletics and the AAGBBL declined in attendance and folded after the 1954 season. With it ended the last opportunity for women in professional baseball to-date.

### **The All-American Girls Baseball League**

Players in the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBBL) embodied the contradictory attitudes of the 1940s. For the first time since the Bloomer Girl era, women had the opportunity to play hardball. Players and league administrators, however, went to great lengths emphasize the league's femininity and distinguish themselves from male baseball. An examination of the AAGBBL shows that the war years provided new opportunities for women but did not change the underlying assumptions about gender roles.

Philip K. Wrigley, chewing-gum mogul and owner of the Chicago Cubs, founded the All-American Girls Softball League (AAGSL) in 1943. By the 1940s, Wrigley was well aware of the popularity and financial benefits of softball. During the depression years, softball attracted more fans than baseball near Wrigley's stadiums in Chicago and Los Angeles. A survey conducted by one of Wrigley's Los Angeles employees found 9,000 softball teams within a 100-mile radius of Wrigley Field in 1938. When Wrigley aptly decided to host the softball championships at his stadium, the attraction drew 30,000 fans to the tune of \$7,000.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when war threatened to take a significant portion of major league talent, Wrigley turned to women's softball to fill the void.

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<sup>6</sup> Fidler, *All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 32-33.

Wrigley created the AAGSL with the specific purpose of providing entertainment for Midwestern cities involved in the war-production. Wrigley established teams in Racine, Wisconsin; Kenosha, Wisconsin; South Bend, Indiana; Rockford, Illinois; Peoria, Illinois; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Kalamazoo, Michigan. As the league evolved through the 1940s, it gradually shifted from softball to baseball. The ball got progressively smaller, the distance between bases got longer, and by the end of the 1947 season players switched to overhand pitching. An article in *Life* magazine described it as “something less than regulation baseball, something more than softball.”<sup>7</sup> Like Edith Houghton, many of the girls preferred the switch to hardball. The game was faster, had a more respectable score, and produced less errors in the field.<sup>8</sup> The league officially changed its name to the All-American Girls Professional Ball League (AAGPBL) at the end of the 1943 season and then again to the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBBL) in 1946.<sup>9</sup>

The AAGBBL briefly revitalized women’s competitive baseball, but did so without challenging the baseball patriarchy. Campaigns fueled by Arthur Myerhoff, advertising agent and majority stakeholder in the league, advertised in nationally popular periodicals as well local papers and sports magazines. Myerhoff characterized the league as suitable entertainment for war-workers and family outings with particular emphasis in the Midwest.<sup>10</sup> Advertisements that preached the entertainment value of the league also

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<sup>7</sup> “Girls’ Baseball: A Feminine Midwest League Opens its Third Professional Season,” *Life*, June 4, 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Karlene Ferrante, “Baseball and the Social Construction of Gender,” in *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon, (Thousands Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994) 245.

<sup>9</sup> Fidler, *All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 338.

<sup>10</sup> Fidler, *All-American Girls Professional Baseball*, 51.

stressed the femininity of the players. Newspapers wrote biographical sketches of the players describing their background, personal interests, and domestic skills, supplementing this personal information with photographs that emphasized the player's beauty. "Charlene Barnett, of the Rockford Peaches," printed one paper, "is a lithe little blue-eyed, honey blonde of 21, and probably the only second baseman in the history of baseball who ever had a chance to make a career in professional modeling."<sup>11</sup> A similar article in the *Kenosha Evening News* read, "Mary Barker has a truly regal bearing and knows how to wear clothes and set off her tall beauty."<sup>12</sup> Local papers reprinted similar excerpts that emphasized both the entertainment value of the game and femininity of the ballplayers.

By constantly promoting the femininity of the players, the league blunted the impact of the female presence in the traditionally male domain. Managers expected players to don skirted uniforms, attend charm school, and live under the guidance of chaperones.<sup>13</sup> A number of former players shared the exact same sentiments, "they wanted us to look like ladies and act like ladies, but play like men."<sup>14</sup> As Susan Cahn astutely noted, the AAGBBL viewed athletic ability as masculine skill rather than incorporating athleticism within the range of feminine qualities. In doing so, women's

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<sup>11</sup> "Sluggers in Skirts: Girls of the All-American Circuit Hit, Run, and Field like Major Leaguers and They're Much Prettier," *The Sun*, July 31, 1949.

<sup>12</sup> *Kenosha Evening News*, 18 June 1943.

<sup>13</sup> "Girls' Baseball: A Feminine Midwest League Opens its Third Professional Season," *Life*, June 4, 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Alpert, "Thelma 'Tiby' Eisen: An Oral History," *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 121; Annabelle Lee Harmon, quoted in Fidler, *All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 51.

baseball did not challenge the traditional gender roles that furtively persisted throughout the 1940s.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to physical appearance, owners in the AAGBBL continued to instill gendered assumptions in other facets of life. The AAGBBL, for example, allowed women to play and chaperone, but under no circumstances were they to be managers or coaches. Most managers were former major league players, recruited to bolster the professional image of the team. Eddie Ainsmith, the infamous leader of the Bobbies Japan tour, was one such manager of the Rockford Peaches. Even though women such as Mary O’Gara and Margaret Nabel served as managers of successful women’s baseball teams in the 1920s, patronizing ideals of the WWII era barred this opportunity and treated the female players more like children than professional athletes. Owners also tried to establish teams in cities without male minor league teams and explicitly forbid exhibition games against any male team. While Bloomer Girls clubs played nearly all of their games against male opponents, managers of the AAGBBL did not want to jeopardize their ladylike reputation by directly challenging, and perhaps beating, male teams. Despite the renewed opportunity for hardball, strict sex-segregation was always prevalent.<sup>16</sup>

The era of professional women’s baseball was short-lived. The change from underhand pitching to overhand pitching was the beginning of the end. As Merrie Fidler points out, the change excluded the broad base of talented women that grew up playing softball. So few women had played baseball that the change to overhand pitching, the

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 140-163.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 153-154.

single biggest difference between the two sports, ironically led to the demise of the league. This cycle has further perpetuated into modern era—because women do not have baseball experience, they are not good at baseball. Oddly enough, the only adjustment that Edith Houghton could *not* make was going from overhand pitching of baseball to the underhand softball style.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a cyclical pattern began in which administrators had less money to expend on publicity, which subsequently resulted in fewer fans and even less income. The advent of television in the 1950s made Major League Baseball more accessible than ever and made the AAGBBL along with minor league teams even more obsolete.<sup>18</sup> All of these changes put the AAGBBL in direct contention with male baseball. Attendance peaked in 1948 with nearly a million fans before its subsequent decline in the 1950s. Although teams remained popular in a few of the small towns that they inhabited, the AAGBBL was ultimately unsustainable and disbanded in 1954.

For the first time since the early 1930s, young girls had the opportunity to make money and play highly skilled opponents on the baseball diamond. Yet women's professional baseball teams were successful because they did not threaten gender relations. These expanded opportunities in traditionally sex-segregated spheres were reflective of the 1940s. Like Rosie the Riveter, the lady bat swingers were able to take on traditional male occupations, but had to continually reassure the public of their femininity.

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<sup>17</sup> Houghton reiterated this claim in multiple interviews, Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991; Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000; Edith Houghton, interview by Exploratorium, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Fidler, *All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 124.

## **A WAVE Plays Ball**

Although Edith Houghton knew about the All-American Girls Baseball League and admittedly could have made the team, the sensational athlete felt obligated to join the military.<sup>19</sup> Much like the AAGBBL, Edith Houghton's time in the military reflects the expanded opportunities for women within the gender confines of society. Houghton was one of more than 200,000 women that joined the armed forces during WWII. Each branch of the military created female units which manifested in the Women's Army Corps (WAC), Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS), Marine Corps Women's Reserve (MCWR), Coast Guard Women's Reserves (SPARS), and Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services (WAVES). The indoctrination of women into the military is reflective of larger sociological trends. While female units created new opportunities for women, enlistees consistently faced skepticism and backlash from critics who believed that women in the military would undermine traditional gender relations.<sup>20</sup>

In response to critics, the military accepted female soldiers in a way that was not threatening to traditional sexual hierarchies. Government publications emphasized that women would only take on essential non-combat roles in order to free up more men for battle. When Lieutenant Elizabeth Reynard created a name for the women's Navy unit, she specifically incorporated the word "Emergency" to show older admirals "we're only

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<sup>19</sup> Kevin Baxter, "Baseball's First Female Scout Was Ahead of the Game," *Miami Herald Tribune*, June 3, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Fine Press, 2004).



a temporary crisis and won't be around for keeps."<sup>21</sup> Public concerns of sexual deviance encouraged the WAC to discharge "mannish women" and refuse female recruits access to venereal disease medication that they provided to male soldiers.<sup>22</sup> While some recruits got jobs as mechanics, scientists, and test pilots, the vast majority filled more conventionally feminine jobs such as clerks, telephone operators, and nurses.<sup>23</sup> World War II did in fact expand opportunities to women in the military, but did not change the underlying assumptions about gender roles. Houghton's career in the Navy further illustrates the contradictory opportunities and limitations of women in WWII.

Just days after President Roosevelt signed the Navy Women's Reserve Act into law on July 30, 1942, Edith Houghton became one of the first women to enlist in the WAVES. By October, Houghton and thirty other young women left the B&O Railroad Station in Philadelphia, destined for the Navy storekeeper school at the University of Indiana.<sup>24</sup> The program included courses in general storekeeping, disbursement, provisions, clothing, aviation, typewriting, spelling, and English and correspondence.<sup>25</sup> Following school, Houghton was assigned to the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts in Washington D.C., where she worked in the WAVES Clothing Division. Houghton started as Storekeeper Third Class and was promoted to Chief Storekeeper one year

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<sup>21</sup> Yellin, *Our Mothers' War*, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 5-8.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 508.

<sup>24</sup> "3 Units of Waves Leaving Here," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, October 7, 1942, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries (TU); "More Waves Leave Here For Schooling," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>25</sup> Syllabus, Ship Store, 1942-1944, Box 4, United States Naval Training School records, 1940-1970, C101, Indiana University Archives.

later.<sup>26</sup> Houghton was responsible for keeping records and statistics regarding clothing manufacturers and oversaw the handling of uniforms.<sup>27</sup> But not even Uncle Sam could keep Houghton off the baseball diamond.

When Houghton first enlisted there were still not many women in the military. The shortage of female athletes made it difficult to field a women's softball team. Baseball, however, was one of the predominant recreational activities for enlisted men. A considerable amount of major leaguers, including future Hall of Famers Ted Williams, Yogi Berra, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial, and others, left the prime of their careers to serve in the armed forces. Thousands of other major, minor, and amateur league players accompanied the star athletes. Needless to say, the level of play in the armed forces was incredibly high. Nevertheless, when the men's team, the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts (BuSandA) Baseballers, needed an extra player on their baseball team, they found a more than capable substitute in Edith Houghton.

The men's navy team was the most skilled club that Houghton had ever played on. Virtually all of the players grew up playing baseball, some of whom even went on to sign major league contracts.<sup>28</sup> Thirty-years-old and far removed from her days of the Philadelphia Bobbies, Houghton was still able to compete alongside the men. "A big treat is in store for those who go to tomorrow night's game—there's a WAVE who is now a regular on the men's team!" The author went on, "She plays first base on the Bureau

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<sup>26</sup> Ed Pollock, "Playing the Game," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 15, 1946, SCRC 169, TU.

<sup>27</sup> "Meet the WAVES," *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>28</sup> It is unclear if any of the players on Houghton's team played in the MLB but Houghton thought they may have or at the very least were of a similar caliber. Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000.

team. C'mon out and watch her shine!"<sup>29</sup> Although women had played baseball just a decade earlier, Naval news bulletins seemed shocked that a woman could have experience outside of softball, "She's Edith Houghton, SK3/c, of Clothing, who's been playing baseball (and we don't mean softball) since she was eight years old."<sup>30</sup> Houghton played a number of games with the men's team and even travelled to Philadelphia to play games at opposing naval yards.

Nevertheless, Houghton faced much of the same skepticism that plagued female athletes in the pre-war years. Although she was a regular on the male team, promoted in naval bulletins, and praised for her talent, Houghton often found herself sitting on the bench. It is not clear exactly how often Houghton got onto the field, although sources seem oddly contradictory at best, and blatantly discriminatory at worst. One of Houghton's teammates wrote, "Tom Kelly's argument with a shrimp almost forced us to use our only substitute, Enlisted WAVE Houghton. You can believe this scribbler, that girl can make any ball team in the country."<sup>31</sup> Everyone that saw Houghton play praised her talent and ability to keep up with the men, yet the prevailing assumption that women were not as athletic as men still rendered Houghton a substitute. This contradiction is further evidence that WWII did not change the underlying gender assumptions, but simply provided women with new opportunities.

Houghton's reversion to softball further emphasizes the fact that pre-war gender biases persisted through the war. Once more WAVES enlisted, there would eventually

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<sup>29</sup> "Butterfinger Night," June 7, 1943, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>30</sup> "Butterfinger Night," June 7, 1943, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>31</sup> "Patter," July 19, 1943, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

be 86,000, Houghton began playing with the women's teams. While men continued to play competitive baseball, the armed forces exclusively promoted softball for women. Houghton begrudgingly accepted the transition, "When the girls came in, they wanted me to organize softball. I don't like softball."<sup>32</sup> Yet the perennial ballplayer was resigned to the limitations, "I understand. They didn't have the space or money for diamonds, and not everybody can play baseball."<sup>33</sup>

As secretary of the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts Recreation Association, Houghton helped establish an all-WAVES softball team.<sup>34</sup> With Houghton acting as coach, captain, and first baseman, the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts (S&As) softball team played other female teams in the D.C. Government Girls Softball League.<sup>35</sup> Although she enjoyed playing with the team, Houghton's level of skill on the field was much higher than the average WAVE. In a game against the PandAs, Houghton's team won, 28 to 3. Another game against the Yards and Docks, Houghton's Supplies and Accounts won, 20 to 8, and when the team played Bureau of Aeronautics, the game was called after Houghton's club scored 19 runs in five innings.<sup>36</sup> In 1944, the S&A's finished with a record of five wins and one loss, Houghton accounted for most of the teams runs.<sup>37</sup> During her stint in the Navy, Houghton's batting average reached an

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin Baxter, "Baseball's First Female Scout Was Ahead of the Game," *Miami Herald Tribune*, June 3, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991.

<sup>34</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Tim Wiles, June 20, 2000; Also Scrapbook, "Vote Today," Also Interview with Kevin Baxter, "Baseball's First Female Scout was Ahead of the Game," *Miami Herald*, June 3, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Daily Bulletin, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>36</sup> "BusAndA's WAVES Hit the Ball," May 12, 1944, *Unknown Source*, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF; Navy News Bulletins, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

<sup>37</sup> WAVES Yearbook, Edith Houghton player file, NBHF.

astonishing .800. “They just didn’t have good pitching, and I just had natural ability.”<sup>38</sup> Unsurprisingly, the D.C. Recreation League selected Houghton to serve as a member of the All-Star Team.

It is not surprising that Edith Houghton dominated the Navy softball leagues. Her experience on the Renault Champagne Girls and the New York Roverettes gave her a distinct advantage over the average WAVE. Equally unsurprising was the choice to promote women’s softball over baseball. For many of the young women, their time in the Navy was their first experience away from home, and softball served as a way to bring girls together and keep them out of trouble. Furthermore, the popularity of softball was so dominant throughout the 1930s that Houghton was in the minority of women that had any experience playing hardball. Like the pre-war years, this decision created many more opportunities for women without previous athletic experience or baseball skill, but it came at the expense of athletes like Edith Houghton who adored the sport of baseball.

The fact that Houghton and thousands of other women could join the armed forces reflects the new opportunities offered to women during WWII. Yet these opportunities did not change underlying biases towards women. The Navy characterized female recruits as temporary substitutes for male soldiers, and the BusAndA Baseballers characterized Edith Houghton as a temporary substitute for a male player. Women in the WAVES were increasingly pressured to look feminine, while Edith Houghton was increasingly pressured to play the more feminine sport of softball. Although the war years brought about new opportunities for women, they did not reflect a change in gender relations from the pre-war era, nor did they have a lasting impact in the post-war world.

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<sup>38</sup> Edith Houghton, interview by Barbara Gregorich, September 4, 1991.

## The Last Strike

The revival of women's baseball during the war years was not coincidental—it came just as opportunities for women were expanding in traditionally male domains. The replacement of male athletes with females was not extraordinary during WWII. Like the increase in female factory workers, women emerged in traditionally sex-segregated athletic positions such as jockeys, umpires, bowling-pin setters, and caddies.<sup>39</sup> A number of explanations could explain the renewed acceptance of female athletes. For one, it is possible that war reduced the threat to masculinity that plagued the depression years. Given the opportunity to flaunt their manliness on the battlefield, men were willing to resign some of the sex-segregated domains that they dominated in the 1930s. As men went off to war, women were able to take jobs in the factories and sporting arenas because they no longer threatened the male hierarchy. This theory, however, is hampered by the ever-persistent fear that women in traditionally male domains would sacrifice their femininity. If societal views toward women actually changed due to the war, female factory workers and baseball players would not need to flaunt their feminine appearance or emphasize the temporary nature of their work.

It is more likely that the expanded opportunities were a reflection of wartime necessity: women worked in the defense industries because men were out fighting, the All-American Girls Base Ball League formed because male ball players enlisted in the service, and Edith Houghton played on men's team because they needed an extra player. Both Houghton and the All-American Girls Base Ball League played baseball in a way

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<sup>39</sup> Fidler, *All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 33.

that was not threatening to the patriarchal order. Despite her skill, Houghton did not play as much as male players, and once more women enlisted in the Navy she went back to playing softball with the girls. Similarly, women in the AAGBBL played in skirts and avoided playing male teams. Once men returned home from war, the AAGBBL posed a threat to male baseball and shut down shortly thereafter. The expanded opportunities during the war did not indicate a change in gendered assumptions, but a temporary lull in strict gender boundaries. This was the case on the factory floor and on the baseball diamond.

The traditional gender roles that covertly persisted throughout the war re-emerged as dominant narratives in the post-war years. A 1946 survey by *Fortune* magazine found that less than 22 percent of men and 29 percent of women thought that women should have an equal chance with men for any job.<sup>40</sup> Both male and female traditionalists argued that a woman's rightful place was in the home and chastised women that insisted on taking jobs in business, industry, and technology. Although the number of women in manufacturing jobs remained higher than pre-war levels, societal pressure in the post-war years worked against the opportunities that manifested during World War II. Women continued to work in the post-war era, but sex-segregation remained.<sup>41</sup> This post-war environment left no room for women's baseball. Houghton's career playing baseball was over, as was the opportunity for future girls to follow her path. With the collapse of the AAGBBL in 1954, the last era of women's professional baseball came to a close.

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<sup>40</sup> "The Fortune Survey: Women in America, Part I," *Fortune* 34 (August 1946), 8.

<sup>41</sup> Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 287-299; DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 517; Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 2; Robyn Muncy, "Women in the Workforce After WWII" (lecture, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, April 16, 2013).

More than anything else, the brief revival of female baseball illustrates the socially constructed nature of the sport. When given the opportunity, Edith Houghton and the women of the AAGBBL played baseball and did so successfully. It is not lack of physical strength or lack of interest that keeps women out of baseball, it is sociological factors that deny them the opportunity.



## **CONCLUSION**

### **The Lasting Legacy of Women's Baseball**

When Edith Houghton first played ball on the vacant lot across from her Philadelphia home, the eight-year old girl did not set out to challenge gender roles, promote feminism, or reinvent the sport of baseball. Like the boys in the neighborhood, Houghton simply wanted to play ball, and the social context of the 1920s allowed her to do so. Before major league baseball was ubiquitous, local baseball teams were a vital source of entertainment around the country. The increased popularity of baseball along with greater acceptance of physically strong, independent women allowed Houghton and Bloomer Girl teams to travel the country playing male teams.

Yet even during the most egalitarian era of women's baseball, women still faced discrimination. While papers praised women's skill on the field, they also depicted female baseball players as a novelty. Managers asked players to look and act feminine on the diamond in order to fit within the socially acceptable standards of proper womanhood. When Houghton and the Philadelphia Bobbies travelled to Japan, presumed inequalities incorrectly characterized the women as physically inferior to male players. The presence of male pitchers and catchers, along with female chaperones implied that women were not capable of competing with men or travelling alone. Nevertheless, the social environment of the 1920s expanded opportunities for Edith Houghton and female baseball players in ways that they would never achieve again.

As the twenties gave way to the thirties, public acceptance of the audacious woman dissipated. Although women continued to work in greater numbers during the depression years, men imposed gendered hierarchies in different ways. As the popularity

of softball exploded, physical educators and baseball administrators increasingly marketed the game as a feminine sport and reclaimed the baseball diamond as a male domain. The transition created more opportunities for women in the sport softball, but excluded Edith Houghton and other women from hardball. The professionalization of baseball further banned women from its ranks, entrenching baseball as a masculine game and rendering softball feminine. Like other industries, women increased their presence in the sporting world, but faced an increasingly male-centric worldview.

The gendered assumptions that began during the depression persisted throughout the war years. Edith Houghton had the opportunity to play baseball with men in the Navy and competed admirably. Similarly, women in the All-American Girls Professional League drew large crowds and played good ball. Yet these revived opportunities were met with skepticism and backlash. The All-American girls flaunted their femininity to appease an uneasy public, and officials relegated Houghton to the softball field once more women joined the service. The post-war era reinforced traditional gendered roles as sex-segregation in the workforce and on the baseball diamond was largely restored. While Houghton's career is certainly unique, the rise and fall of women's baseball is indicative of the broad, convoluted patterns of gender relations that affected millions of women.

If at all possible, the life of Edith Houghton was even more remarkable after she stopped playing competitive sports. After WWII, the ever-persistent slugger yearned for a career in baseball. With her best playing days behind her, she contacted Bob Carpenter, president of the then last-place Philadelphia Phillies and arranged for an appointment. Armed with her baseball scrapbook as evidence of a seemingly long-gone era, Houghton

pleaded to Carpenter, “You don’t have any women scouts in your organization, but I’ve been in baseball for years and years, and I think I know a little about the game. Why don’t you hire me?” Two weeks later, she received word that she would be scouting prospects in the Philadelphia suburbs on many of the fields she played on not long before.<sup>1</sup>

Houghton scouted for the Phillies from 1946 to 1952. During that time she signed sixteen players, although none of them reached the major leagues. As the Korean War escalated, Houghton was called back into active duty. She would serve in the Navy as both a regular and a reserve for 28 years, reaching the rank of Chief Petty Officer. Following the war, she continued to play softball casually but spent most of her time working traditional jobs. In 1964, Houghton left her Philadelphia home to retire to Sarasota, Florida where she actively bowled and unsurprisingly, watched baseball games. Edith Houghton died on February 2, 2013, just ten days shy of her 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. She never married or had any children.<sup>2</sup>

Since the demise of the AAGBBL in 1954, women have only made piecemeal progress in their return to the baseball diamond. The Education Amendments of 1972 notably invoked Title IX, which prohibited all educational programs and activities receiving federal funding from excluding participants because of their sex. Title IX has dramatically improved the opportunities for female athletes, but noticeably neglected female baseball players. Under the law, baseball and softball are considered equivalent sports, which nearly any baseball or softball player will tell you is not the case. While

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Rich Westcott, *The Fightin’ Phils: Oddities, Insights, and Untold Stories* (Camino Books, INC: Philadelphia, 2008), 18-19.

<sup>2</sup>“Edith Houghton, Rare Woman Among Baseball Scouts, Dies at 100” *New York Times*, February 15, 2013.

Title IX has improved the opportunities for young girls to play collegiate level softball, it has further prolonged the gendering of the sports. Similarly, in 1974, twenty-two class-action suits charged that Little League discriminated against girls, and in March of that year, the Appellate Division of the New Jersey Superior Court ruled that girls could play Little League baseball. Not coincidentally, Little League Softball was created later that year.<sup>3</sup> Young girls and women are technically allowed to compete on collegiate baseball teams and in Little League, although societal norms still force them into their softball counterparts.

Despite the obstacles, a number of women have followed Edith Houghton and fought for their place on the baseball diamond. In 1989, Julie Croteau played first base on the men's Division III team at St. Mary's College, and in 1994 Ila Borders pitched on a male team at Southern California College. More recently, Mo'ne Davis stunned crowds when she pitched a shutout at the 2014 Little League World Series. A number of other women have entered the realm of male baseball, yet these players are exceptionally rare. At the collegiate, Olympic, and professional levels, the gendering of sport is still strict: women play softball and men play baseball.

It was not until December 2015 that Major League Baseball would hire another female scout.<sup>4</sup> Baseball's seemingly archaic view towards women is largely the same as it was in the 1930s. The persistence of softball as the "appropriate" sport for young girls has instilled generation after generation with the assumption that they cannot play hardball. Houghton's largely unknown career should give solace to any young girl that

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Hastings Ardell, *Breaking Into Baseball: Women and the National Pastime*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2005), 83-39; see also, [www.littleleague.org](http://www.littleleague.org).

<sup>4</sup> Rob Neyer, "In the Major Leagues, Female Scouts are Few. Their Skills Aren't." *New York Times*, March 28, 2016.

dreams of playing baseball or conquering other fields designated as male domain. Like the outfield walls of a baseball diamond, the gendered confines of sports were constructed by people, and those that swing for the fences may find they are not insurmountable.

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