

Kewanee Ballhawks

From 1946 to 1974

by Larry Lock

The Kewanee Ballhawks, the subject of next year's 19th Walldog mural in Kewanee, are for many of us a distant memory but for many others they are like ancient history.



STATE CHAMPIONS--AGAIN--This 1961 Star Courier photo shows the Kewanee Ballhawks celebrating their fourth straight Illinois Amateur Softball Association state tournament championship at Windmont Park. In front are from left Cookie Matson, Dot Larson and Gerry Hammerstrand. Directly behind are Nancy Stevens, Mary Ann Vyneman, Helen Hewitt and Sherry Ortman. In back are Manager Wilbur Osborne, Ruth McCulloch, Shirley Boatz, Connie Thomas, Fran Seketa, Jim Werderman and Mary Jane Werderman. (Photo provided by Mary Jane Werderman whose younger brother Jim in 1967 would become one of the 11 Kewanee men killed in Vietnam War.)

For all of us then, here is a reminder or an introduction to the women's softball team that, like Kewanee Boiler Company and some men's sports teams of the first half of 20th century, put Kewanee on the map far outside of its city limits.

The Ballhawks were one of the best in Illinois during the 1950s and into the 1960s. They won state championships in the Illinois Amateur Softball Association in 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960 and 1961. And they were runners-up in 1952, 53, 54, 55 and 1957.

The Ballhawks had their beginning in 1946, but by another name; and they continued after their heyday to compete at a high level until disbanding after the 1974 season.

The origin of the Ballhawks was the work of Grace Larson, who had a sports-loving daughter named Dorothy, better known as Dot. In 1946 Grace helped form an All-Star traveling team from a YMCA girls' softball league.

According to Dot in a 1974 interview with Star Courier sports editor Bob Westlund, her mother got \$15 each from 15 sponsoring merchants and the team was called the Merchanettes. They played under that name until the 1951 season when the team name of Ballhawks was adopted. Dot's baseball glove was a Wilson Ballhawk--sounded like a good name for a good team.

Dot and her mother Grace would become synonymous with the Ballhawks. They were there in the beginning and they would remain Ballhawks until the team was disbanded at the end of the 1974 season.

Grace, the sponsor and business manager and person doing whatever had to be done to keep the team in existence, was inducted into the Illinois Softball Hall of Fame in 1973.

Dot received the same honor in 1976 after playing some 20 years and managing the team from 1963 to 1974. Dot was voted all-state catcher seven times during the years from

1954 to 1961 and played several other positions, including pitcher.

To be a great softball team you have to have at least one great pitcher and from 1950 to 1962 that role was fulfilled by Gerry Hammerstrand, a six-foot tall hard thrower from Galva. For 13 seasons Gerry would combine with Dot as catcher to form a most formidable combination that would result in Gerry, like Dot, being voted into the Illinois Softball Hall of Fame.

There were many highlights for Gerry, Dot and their fellow Ballhawks. Three of them would come in 1959, 1961 and 1962.

In 1959 after winning another state championship, the Ballhawks would place second in the four-state West Central Regional played at Watseka, Illinois. Their long-time nemesis, the Pekin Lettes, would deny them the championship and a trip to the National. In the double elimination tournament, the Lettes prevailed twice against the Ballhawks by scores of 3-1 and 9-1 for their 10th straight regional championship.

In 1961 at the Regional in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, the Ballhawks would run afoul of the Lettes once again, this time losing in a semi-final contest 3 to 2. The loss allowed the Ballhawks to claim third place as the Pekin team went on to win the championship by defeating Logansport, Indiana.

In 1962 the Ballhawks would not do as well, but they had the distinction of hosting the West Central Regional at Windmont Park, which once again would be won by the Pekin Lettes. The Ballhawks won two games but lost two; the second loss that eliminated them was to a Madison, Wisconsin team in 14 innings by a 2-1 score.

The Ballhawks reign as one of the elite teams in Illinois would end with the 1962 season as Gerry Hammerstrand would leave the team and join the Pekin Lettes. Other "old veterans" retired from the team as well, according to Dot.

In 1963 Dot took over as manager of the team. With no players over the age of 19 they posted a 25-6 record and placed third at the state tournament in Decatur.

But as Dot told Westlund in 1974 "we haven't had that much success since." However, the Ballhawks did remain competitive and entertaining on warm summer nights from 1963 until 1974 when Dot retired, and the team disbanded.

In the Westlund interview, Dot pointed out that the only current (1974) player who was with the team when she started managing in 1963 was Mary Jane "Snookie" Werderman. Snookie actually joined in 1958 and played on several of the state champions.

Dot was hesitant to try to name her old teammates in the Westlund interview but did choose to name the young ladies who pioneered the Ballhawks in 1946: "pitcher Mary Lou Ketrige, first baseman Bev Brockman, second baseman Wilma Fulton Thurman, shortstop Dot Larson, third baseman Charlene Marvin, left fielder Marilyn Anderson, centerfielder Joan Hainline, right fielder Ruth Skeeters and catcher Betty Mae Keach and also Francis Olson."

As time goes on before next summer the Walldog Mural Committee, with help from the Kewanee Historical Society and any others who would like to contribute, hopes to bring to light much more about the Kewanee Ballhawks of 1946 to 1974.