

The Merchantes

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It's baseball season once again, or at least should be. Regardless, here's another look at the Kewanee Ballhawks, the women's softball team of 1948 to 1974 that brought recognition to Kewanee and is the subject of this summer's Walldog mural that will be painted July 6-10.

Earlier the Star Courier published an article summarizing the glory years of the Ballhawks from the early 1950s to 1962. The article appeared in the Oct. 19, 2019 issue and can also be found on the Kewanee Historical Society website (kewanee-history.com).

This look back focuses on the girls who got the ball rolling in 1948.

According to the June 9, 1948 "Fandomettes" column by Star Courier sports editor Ray McHugh, "a group of Kewanee lassies are busy organizing a softball team which will be known as the Merchantes."

McHugh adds that the team is sponsored by Kewanee merchants and will play its games at the Old Playground (present day location of the Kewanee National Guard Armory).

McHugh listed the names of the girls who had signed up as follows: Betty Mae Keach, Marilyn Anderson, Beverly Brockman, Wilma Fulton, Dorothy Larson, Charlene Marvin, Joan Hainline, Ruth Skeeters, Frances Olson, Mary Lou Reed and Jerry Hetherington.

Those same girls appear in the picture attached to this article. They would become the original Ballhawks team, but by a different name—the Merchantes. They were primarily high school age girls who in 1947 had participated in a four-team YMCA league.

As the Merchantes in 1948 they were not affiliated with the YMCA, but rather were sponsored by Kewanee merchants. Mrs. Grace Larson, mother of Dot Larson who would be a Ballhawk from beginning in 1948 to the end in 1974, recruited 15 merchants to donate \$15 each to get the team started.

The Merchantes competed in a six-team league that included teams from Peoria and Galesburg. During the three years (1948-1950) that the team was known as the Merchantes, they did not win the league championship but did generally win as many games as they lost.

A highlight for the Merchantes was the last game of the 1949 season when they were invited for the first time to play under the lights at Northeast Park. They beat the Burlington Iowa Merchantes 7-6 by overcoming a 6-0 deficit with a 7-run rally in the 6th inning. The victory gave them a 17-15 record for the season.

After the 1950 season the girls decided they would like a different name. Apparently Dot Larson's ball glove was a Wilson "Ballhawk." Sounded good and the Merchantes became the Ballhawks.

When the 1951 season began only four of the original 1948 Merchantes/Ballhawks remained on the team. They were Dot Larson, Fran Olson, Joann Hainline and Beverly Brockman.

Today six of the young ladies who started the Ballhawk story in 1948 survive. They include Fran Olson, Wilma Fulton Thurman, Joanne Hainline Coleman, Ruth Skeeters, Beverly Brockman Decker and Mary Lou Reed Ketrige Griffith, all of whom will be honored in person or virtually when the Ballhawk Mural is dedicated on July 10.



BALLHAWKS BY ANOTHER NAME--The photo shows the 1948 Kewanee Merchantes, the original Kewanee Ballhawks. They were high school girls who formed a traveling team under the leadership of Grace Larson that in 1951 became known as the Kewanee Ballhawks. Team members with maiden names were, front row from left, Dorothy (Dot) Larson, Frances Olson, Wilma Fulton, Charlie Hainline (bat boy brother of Joanne), Charlene Marvin, Jerrie Hetherington; back row from left, Stan Douglas (manager), Ruth Skeeters, Beverly Brockman, Mary Lou Reed, Joanne Hainline, Marilyn Anderson and Jean LaRue. (Photo provided to Kewanee Historical Society by Wilma (Fulton) Thurman.)