

“AND, FINALLY, IT WAS WILLIAMSPORT”

By Frank W. Santucci

In the 1940's up and down the Allegheny River with Pittsburgh as its hub, were little river towns that featured small sandlot baseball fields. On any given summer day these little diamonds would have young boys participating in a baseball game. Most were pick-up games, very few organized leagues back then, so occasionally I would communicate with boys of neighboring towns to set up some competitive games.

Around that same time, we were hearing and reading about organized playoffs in Williamsport, PA for young boys, ages 9 to 12 for only our state. We yearned for some organization of local teams, so we could compete in these ball games.

There were all kinds of time to play ball, no cell phones, no television, no video games, and girls were a few years away. The radio would be blaring Pirates games while we were playing ball. Sealtest Milk was the radio sponsor and play-by-play announcers were Rosey Roswell and Jack Craddock. Rosey did not attend all of the away games, but was able to announce the game, play by play received by teletype. He would be in a studio in Pittsburgh reading the information embellishing the outcome over the air waves with the noise of the teletype in the background. When a homerun was hit, with a loud voice he would exclaim, “Open the window Aunt Minnie” over plugged in broken glass sounds, finishing with, “She never made it”! We all loved those broadcasts.

Still our thoughts were to play in some Pennsylvania league, although none ever came to our area. As we grew older we expanded our playing territory. Rosedale boys had a team that played on an open field above Elliott Street. Somehow they had managed to get uniforms, rumor had it that some insurance company had paid for their grey and red uniforms. On one occasion, our Verona team walked down Second Street, up Verona Road to Elliott Street where the Rosedale sand lot field was located. I made arrangements for us to play in the a.m. on their field. They appeared very dapper in their uniforms while our uniforms were disheveled dungarees, corduroy pants, oversized tee shirts, and worn, soiled varied ball caps. No one ever discarded their favorite lucky ball cap. It didn't seem important that we lost the game, what mattered most to us was that we had played a team with uniforms and new balls. With our three bats slung over our shoulders and gloves hanging on our belts, we headed back to Verona ending at Cribbs Field to play a game of rounders among ourselves - only five or six players are needed for rounders.

At the onset of any ball playing day, everyone would gather at my Second Street home. On Saturdays I was not permitted to leave the house until I finished polishing the dining room furniture with red oil polish. You could hear the team throwing old black tape covered baseballs back and forth, white surgical tape was too expensive, as they patiently waited for me. My mother inspected my job before granting permission to leave and also made sure I was not bullied for performing “woman's work.” Rainy days were spent sitting on porches,

talking baseball or listening to the away Pirates games on the radio. These fun-filled summers never ended.

My family had relatives on Valley Street and Maple Way in Oakmont, the Bonaroti's and Calfe's had large families. I made arrangements for our team to play the Valley Street Tigers, from that area of Oakmont. At the bottom of Sixth Street, the Tigers would walk across a little foot bridge spanning Plum Creek, past the railroad yard to First Street in Verona then up North Avenue to Second Street. In those years there was a field on the corner of Center Avenue and Third Street on St. Joseph's property.

The day was dark with a promise of rain, but we were undaunted and eager to play. Something was unusual as the Tigers approached the field, one of their teammates was a girl. Since there wasn't enough boys to make the trip to Verona, they brought Dolores Calfe to complete their team. Of course immediately we all said no way would we play against a team with a girl player, our solution was for them to play with only eight. She did not say a word, only gave a look that did all her talking. The Tigers said there would be no game with only eight. After much debate, we agreed this skinny girl with a raspy voice could play. To add to our insult, she was their pitcher, and pitch she did. We barely won, and this was one game we rarely spoke of after it was over.

Summers came and went, leagues were formed and uniforms made us a legitimate team, but still no call to Williamsport. I even had a one-day, four-hour tryout session for the Pittsburgh Pirates Baseball Team.

As we grew older, softball became our game. Although not quite the little league dream, one year we went to Williamsport and won the 1963 Pennsylvania State Softball Championship.

Because Mollie was so cooperative and understanding, we were in Williamsport, PA for the Little League World Series in 2012, 2014 and 2015. It took seventy years for me to get to the Little League World Series games. What a remarkable experience for both of us. Everything is free of charge, ushers and umpires volunteer their time, shuttles free, back and forth to the games and throughout the complex. I was like a kid reliving my youth.

Finally, I made it to Williamsport - not the dream, but reality.

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