

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
ELMA WEISS
Women in Baseball

Born: Columbus, Ohio
Resides: Phoenix, Arizona

Interviewed by: James Smither PhD, GVSU Veterans History Project, August 7, 2010,
Detroit, MI at the All American Girls Professional Baseball League reunion.
Transcribed by: Joan Raymer, January 4, 2011

Interviewer: “Now Elma, can you begin by giving us a little bit of background on yourself?”

Yes, I was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1923 and we’ll skip the early years.

Interviewer: “I would like to ask a little bit about the early years. What did your family do for a living in those days?”

Well, originally farmers, everybody was a farmer in that era and he was an electrician. He had a lot of work with professional buildings. He wired hospitals and businesses and part of the Ohio State University stadium because we lived in Columbus just a short distance from the campus. **55:12**

Interviewer: “Did you grow up in Columbus and go to school there?”

Yes, I grew up and went to school there and started at Ohio State University, and I completed three years and then the war changed people’s lives dramatically, as you know, and we had a shortage of teachers, but the rule at that time was, if you had completed three years of college and you could get a principal to hire you, you could teach school, so that’s what I did. After my third year I went to Port Clinton, Ohio, and taught high school for a year and then I was supposed to go back and finish, but I went back, but the urge, the desire to be patriotic again—instead of finishing my senior year I joined the navy.

Interviewer: “Why did you choose the navy as opposed to another branch of the service?” 56:00

This is going to sound funny, but it was strictly because I didn't like the khaki uniforms. I liked the navy blue.

Interviewer: “You are not the first WAVE to tell us that. That they had better uniforms.

Is that right?

Interviewer: “So you did that and once you signed up what—where did they send you for training?”

For the navy, do you mean?

Interviewer: “Yes”

All of us went to New York at the time and we spent—I think it was four months or six weeks, it was six weeks, in basic training and my major was in physical education, so I had another three months in New York City and then eventually I ended up in Oakland, California.

Interviewer: “While you were going through basic training and then more specialized training, tell us a little bit about what that was like. In basic training, what do they have the women do?” 56:56

Well, they were trying to get us familiar with navy terms and so forth, and we had to learn that the floor was the deck and the stairs were ladders and so forth, so we spoke in navy terms and we were taught to recognize and identify airplanes and ships and so forth. Just so we could—we didn't expect to get aboard a ship, and of course we didn't, but we knew all the navy lingo and that's the way they wanted it.

Interviewer: “Did they teach you discipline and all that kind of thing?”

Oh yes, we were under the same rules. I went home for Christmas at one time and we were snowed in on the train coming back and in the navy they don't care about a snowstorm. What happens if you miss your ship? The war might hinge on you making your ship, so we had to serve what they call “a captain's mast” and you had to work cleaning the decks or something of that nature. **57:54** They treated us like the young men.

Interviewer: “Did they give you a lot of physical training and exercise?”

No, I already had that actually, at the university, but we did go through—they called it PT and we did some exercises and swimming.

Interviewer: “What year was this when you joined the navy?”

It was in 1943, in 1943 I was still in school at that time, so we covered the summer and I went in the fall of 1943 and served in 1944 and was discharged at the end of 1945.

Interviewer: ‘What did your physical education background—how did that affect your assignment? You mentioned you had been majoring in that, so they had you go to a particular kind of training and you stayed in New York for three or four months and what were you doing at that time?’

Well, they called it Specialist I Training and I guess it's what a drill sergeant would do more or less and when I was a student I was a student company commander and I was in charge of six sections of forty girls each. **59:05** I recall one day we mustered out in front to go to breakfast and one—she was a specialist I guess, and she called out the window that she overslept and I was standing down there and we were all standing at parade rest, two hundred girls there, and she said, “can you get them to the mess hall?” I called the

company and turned them around and marched them down the street and bleeped them to the right and to the mess hall, and I was so proud of myself and I was so proud of myself as a youngster doing that, really.

Interviewer: “Now, were most of the women training about the same age?”

I suppose they were, you had to be twenty-one to go in—well I was, let’s see—you had to be twenty-one to go in the navy, which is one reason I didn’t go in earlier. I wasn’t that old yet. **59:54**

Interviewer: “Well, the men were going into the navy at seventeen and eighteen.”

But not the women

Interviewer: “Not the women, alright, so basically you’re training to train other people.”

That’s pretty much the size of it, yeah. The S really stood for shore patrol for the men, but we ended up being in charge of barracks.

Interviewer: “So, you go out to Oakland, California, now what was there?”

Well, the WAVE barracks were in the heart of town and what we had to do, we were called “ship’s company” because we didn’t go, but every morning buses would come in, and several hundred girls would get on the buses and they would be taken out to one of the navy stations, but “ship’s company”, there were about twenty of us, stayed there and I arranged recreation for them by buying books for the rec room I guess, and records and I painted a badminton court and I managed a softball team and things of that nature for the girls. **0:56**

Interviewer: “All right, what do you think was the most interesting aspect of that job?”

Well, I enjoyed—I took leather craft the year before—see, when I’d gone out there I couldn’t get in because I was a day late at the university, so I was out there and all I had was about seventy five dollars and I came from Ohio of course, and didn’t have enough money to go back home and didn’t know—I said, “don’t panic”, and I had training in recreation, so I went down to the city recreation department to see if they would hire me and they said, “well, you’re in luck because we’re just doing Civil Service training now and you can take the test”, so I took the test the next day, as a matter of fact, and the rule in Civil Service was that whoever got the top scores had to get the top jobs, so they had to hire me. There was a woman who had taught at the Golden Gate Recreation Center down there and she was much better and knew her job and they wanted to keep her too, so they had to create a job for me. **1:58** I ended up working at playgrounds quite a bit for a year until I was eligible to go to the university.

Interviewer: “That was after the naval service then?”

No, this was—let’s see, I’m getting mixed up on dates. It was after the naval service, but before the baseball.

Interviewer: “All right, we were talking about the naval service itself and I asked what was the most interesting part of that job.”

Well, I use to play a trumpet years ago and I recall one time we were raising the flag on our post and several officers came out and I practiced raising the reveille in the morning and took some pictures of that and that was kind of thrilling and exciting too because I wasn’t a top trumpet player. I was kind of exciting with all the people standing around saluting and watching the flag go up and here I was struggling with that bugle. **2:59** that was interesting and then we had a softball team and the navy girls played the coast guard

and marine women's group and we sang in a chorus and we went out to San Quentin one time just to sing for the prisoners, so there were recreation type of things you know.

Interviewer: “Did you feel like you were doing something useful for the war effort or making a contribution?”

Well, I suppose so, I didn't really think about the war in essence, I just did the job that I was supposed to do and we were supposed to take care of the women. They trained me in leather craft during my work in the recreation department there in the city of Oakland, and I ended up teaching the craft to women in the Golden Gate Community Center. That was fun because that was strictly afterwards, but I had learned that in the navy and that was good because that was something they could really gain from. We made wallets and belts and purses and things like that. **4:02**

Interviewer: “So, you had kind of a direct connection between the naval career and that work in the Civil Service that you did afterward. It all kind of fit together and they all grew out of the training that you already had in college.”

You're exactly right, the physical education and the actions there and the recreation things that I did.

Interviewer: “All right, now we're going to go back up a little bit, going back again to being a kid, how did you start playing sports?”

Well, we lived near a playground and it was just about a block away, a city municipal playground, and every summer when school was out we were at the playground. They had fifteen softball diamonds there and every summer they had the industrial leagues and church leagues and other leagues there and I used to go down there all the time and sell pop for five cents to—carry a bucket with twelve bottles of coke and holler, “ice cold pop

five cents”, and they would stop the ball game, and so I worked in the summer selling pop to the ball players. **5:00** In the daytime when the diamonds weren’t used , we used them and we played different, other playgrounds..

Interviewer: “Who is “we”, who were you playing with?”

Well, mostly local boys and girls that I knew and who were my age level. It was from about the—well, I started doing that when I was in the first or second grade when I started playing softball, but more in the ninth grade and on into high school.

Interviewer: “There were other girls beside you who were playing?”

Yes and we played other local playgrounds and eventually we played night ball for a shoe company, J.K. Shoe Company, and we were hired to work at the shoe company because we played softball, so every summer we did that and we had a pretty fair team.

Interviewer: “By this time you’re getting specifically women’s teams?”

Women’s softball teams **5:52**

Interviewer: “So, you’re actually involved in that at that time. Then did you continue to play when you went on to college?”

Yes, but not so much. You know in those days women were supposed to behave differently and we were told not to play on a team that was coached by a man. That’s what they told us at Ohio State, so we—but I loved softball so much that I thought what I do in the summer is my own business as long as I make my grade in the winter, so I played for local teams that were coached by men and then we went to state tournaments and so forth, so we had pretty fair teams.

Interviewer: “Did you go out of state when you were playing softball or did you stay in the state?”

It was all state wide, but we went to state tournaments up around Elyria and Toledo and Cleveland, up that way. **6:41**

Interviewer: “How did you wind up signing with the All American Girls Professional Baseball league?”

Well, I was out in California at the University of California Berkley working on my master’s degree in 1948 and I was playing at the time with some softball players in Alameda, California and they were quite famous because they were the world champions. I knew two girls out there that had been picked to be members of the All American League and they told me about it and they told me that Bill Allington was a scout and coach and he was trying people out, so I got a hold of him and he tried me out and I was an outfielder, so he hit a lot of fly balls to see if I could catch and checked my arm out to see if I could throw and whether I could run and the next thing I knew I was in Peoria, Illinois. I was sent there to play with the Red Wings.

Interviewer: “What year was that?”

That would be 1948 and that was a little bit difficult for me because, well, I was older then, I was twenty five and many of the girls played ball when they were fifteen years old, but it was a little different for me and I sort of suspected that maybe they were going to make a chaperone out of me because I had the college credits and all of that, but I played there and enjoyed it very, very much. **8:03**

Interviewer: “Did they have you play all outfield positions?”

I was outfield and I could play any of them. The trouble is, the college wasn’t out until June and they started their spring training in April and by the time I got there they had finished their spring training and were well into the season, so I’d of had to be a pretty

fair player in order to break into the line-up, so I did a lot of things, I pitched batting practice, and participated and they taught me different things. The game was different from softball, so it took me a while to learn, so one time at the end of that first season the coach said, “you’re going to start tonight. You’re going to play right field and you’re going to play the whole game”. Oh boy, I thought this was just great, so I played the game and played well. I made a couple double plays, which I figured in catching the ball and throwing the runner in off base. I thought, “Now I can show them what I can do”. This proves, in those days professional ball was the same for the women as it was for the men and it is a business. **9:08** I didn’t know it, but the next day I was shipped out to Rockford, and he let me play the game because he knew I was going to be leaving the next day, so it’s a business, you go wherever they want you.

Interviewer: “All right, when you got to Rockford did you get a chance to play any more?”

Well, there were two weeks left in the season, so then I went home and worked there and the next year instead of going back to Rockford they had me on the tour. They were trying to popularize the league in the south and we played in Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas and Louisiana, all the way down there for the season. Getting close to the end of the season my back was hurting me quite a bit, so when I went home I just never went back to the league. **9:51**

Interviewer: “Because of the way you joined the league, coming in in mid-season and kind of moving around a lot, and maybe also the fact that you were a little bit older, did they tell you much in the way of what kind of rules you had to follow and that kind of thing?”

Well, they didn't because they were well into their training, but I learned from the other girls everything that I had to know and they had their rules, which we had to follow, as you well know.

Interviewer: “So, you had to wear the skirts and so forth and all that kind of thing.”

The nice thing about the league—the fact was they just accept all the girls. If you play one day, one week, one month, one year or ten years, you're part of the family more or less. That is the thing that has been so good because over all these years we've all maintained a relationship with each other and I think that's a wonderful thing. I think we did a lot really. **10:50** I was teaching school when Title IX came in and women just didn't do things in those days and I was in on a lot of this changing and I think it was fascinating business. We didn't know we were pioneers until the movie was made and the cards were made and we didn't know this.

Interviewer: “When they got to the point where they were making the movie were you connected with that or did you participate?”

I was teaching school again and I couldn't go. You know that's—that was a good thing, but it also kept me from doing other things.

Interviewer: “How long did you teach?”

As a whole now, I've taught over thirty years. I have a degree from Ohio State and from the university in Berkeley, California and a doctorate from Arizona State University.

Interviewer: “And did you take the doctorate also in physical education?”

Yes

Interviewer: “And have you taught at the university level as well?”

Yes, it was almost all—I finished my last twenty-five years at Phoenix College, which is a two-year community college. **11:51**

Interviewer: “Did you do coaching while you were there too?”

Yes, we had to coach and that was another thing, we had intramurals and we had sports day, but women coaches were not paid, we just had to do these things, but we never got paid, we just had straight teaching jobs. We got paid for teaching and we went through all of that, we went through all the different sports and then Title IX came along and the men gave us a lot of static because they thought they were going to lose some money.

That the women were going to get the scholarships and some of the money, so we had all kinds of wars with the men’s departments. It was just true over all the universities at that time and I think Title IX was—and thing like our league here being pioneers and all that, I think they were some of the best things that ever happened for women in sports and to live in that era was a very interesting thing for me. **12:47**

Interviewer: “And you were really in a position to watch those changes.”

Yes, I saw all those, I was department chairman when the money came in and we hired volleyball players, basketball players and I coached a softball team in college then.

Interviewer: “Let’s go back to the playing days. Tell us a little bit about life with the traveling teams. How did that work?”

Well, when I was with Peoria, with the Red Wings, we had so many games away from home and we were assigned by the chaperone, we had roommates in the hotels and we were given per diem money. When we were at our home base we had a family that we lived with and I guess maybe we were home about a week at a time and then we would go off on the different trips, so that was interesting. The second year when I was

traveling in the south and it was kind of rugged. **13:43** They had the two teams, we traveled on one bus and I remember we had one more player than we had seats, so we alternated and walked up and down the aisle. When it was time to stop somewhere they had two rooms in a hotel and we all showered in those two rooms and we were off to a game every night, but when you're young you can do a lot of things.

Interviewer: "Because you were a little bit older, did you kind of fall into a little bit of a chaperone role too?"

No, but after the end of my two years, they had never said this to me, but I kind of suspected that might have been why they kept me on because I was not playing regularly. As a matter of fact, I only played about seventeen games in those—if you take both of the summers, the summers were only two months long because of teaching, and to play seventeen games in four months was, I guess, all I could hope for, and that's the reason I suspected maybe they had another plan for me. **14:42**

Interviewer: "Aside from that game toward the end of that first season when you kind of got in there and played the whole game and made a couple double plays, were there other games when you were out there playing, that stand out in your memory?"

Well, I was out there practicing certainly as hard as the rest of them and learning all the tricks and everything they were doing. I might have been called in for a pinch hitter or something of that sort, but no, whether you were home or you were on the road, you had to get there hours before the game started and of course I did the same routines all the other girls did as though I was going into the game, but most of the games I spent on the bench.

Interviewer: “All right, who did you have managing you when you were going around on the tour?”

Schrall, Leo Schrall that was his name, yeah, and we had a good team and there are some very famous girls that played. **15:42** Now, Twila Shively, and we had—let’s see, who were some of the others, these manes are—Terry Donahue, who was well known and Kate Vonderau, who was a catcher. That one game I played before I was sent out, and the reason I thought I was going to stay—I was playing out in the field and there was a long low fly that I had to run and reach down to catch and I just saw the runner starting in from third, so I just heaved it toward the catcher. We’re taught to bounce it in if you’re coming from center field and one bounce if you’re coming from right field, but I just heaved it and it got to the catcher on the fly and she tagged the runner coming in, so it was a double out. I thought, “boy, I got it now”, and the next day I end up in Rockford, so it’s a business. **16:30**

Interviewer: “As you were traveling around, what kind of reception did you get when you went to these little towns in the south?”

Oh, everybody just loved it and we had big crowds. The biggest crowd I every played before in the baseball was ten thousand they were giving away—the girls all got a suitcase and they were giving away an automobile, so when they had specialties and things like that, the crowds were bigger. Everybody would stand outside the locker room and wait for the girls to shower and then they would sign autographs, so it was exciting and you begin to think you have some importance in this world.

Interviewer: “Were there any particular places that you went that kind of stand out in your memory or do they all just run together?”

No, they probably did at the time, but as I look back sixty years ago, I can't remember anything special except that it was just great. Of all the things I've done, the college degrees and the teaching and getting married and having children and all of that, I recall that the baseball was the thing that I remember the most and enjoyed the most of all the things I've done in my life. **17:44** In eighty-seven years you do a lot of living.

Interviewer: “What is it about is it about the baseball, do you think, that makes it particularly distinctive and makes it stand out?”

Made it stand out?

Interviewer: “Yes”

Probably—we played softball on the playground and I just knew since I was a kid—I remember I use to play in the second grade, at recess we would play and at a high school reunion one time a man said to me, “when you were in the second grade everyone wanted you on their team”, because not too many girls played, just the boys, and they knew that I could play some, so they enjoyed that and I enjoyed that also. I just always played softball and we had some quite good teams in softball, we really did.

Interviewer: “What did you think of the “A League of Their Own” movie? What was your impression of it?” 18:41

Well, I thought it was very good. Of course, it was an entertainment feature of course, the parts with Tom Hanks and some of the other things. I don't remember any girl that I knew that had a husband who was killed in the war or anything of that sort because they were still pretty young and there were not very many girls that had mates or anything at that time, but you just get involved, you don't have time to do anything else. It was fun to go on the road because you would get up and have breakfast and you would go to a

movie every afternoon or you would go shopping and then there would be practice and then there would be the ball game. When you were home you had more things that you could do and it just became like a sorority. We're all sisters in the same thing, but we all admired it. The pitchers did well, they usually made about a hundred and five dollars and I made fifty-four dollars a week and that was my best salary, but that's pretty good for sitting on a bench. **19:47**

Interviewer: "Do you think you changed much or grew much because of that experience? Did that add something to your life or was it just a really good experience?"

Well, I think so, it enlarged my field of acquaintances and you become quite close because you're definitely into it in depth. You don't just play around like amateur ball. Your money depended on it and you were competitive in other words and you wanted to play. In softball, as amateurs, we use to play men's teams and we got a kick out of trying to beat the men's teams, but in baseball you just wanted to make the team and play. They had more players and of course they couldn't put them all in and they had several pitchers just like they have in ball today, so I enjoyed that. As a matter of fact, when I married my husband was a professional ball player and he AAA ball for the Chicago Cubs, so I continued liking baseball. **20:51**

Interviewer: "As you were going through your career teaching and so forth after you were out of the league, did you tell people that you played professional ball?"

No I didn't, I just got busy teaching school and doing the things I had to do teaching school because it was an era of my life that was over with just as the navy was, just as the college was, and so forth. Actually it was the making of the movie that brought us all

back to life again really. Before that we—it was it and it was over and it was done and when I read through a lot of the biographies of the girls, they got different jobs, went on doing their other jobs and the movie came out and all of a sudden we became pioneers.

Interviewer: “But you didn’t see yourselves as pioneers when you were doing it?”

Oh, no not at all, and in fact for the twenty-five years I was teaching after that until I found out they had reunions every year and I started coming back. I didn’t know any more about it, so I think that was a good thing, it makes you feel like you are part of a sorority, part of a group and it was the relationships between the players, team work.

22:00

Interviewer: “That’s something that comes up very consistently when we talk to people. It’s a hard thing to get people to talk about individuals sometimes because everybody is the group.”

We pretty much liked everybody and everybody liked each other and we cooperated in the things that we did and had a good time. Faye Dancer was on our team and she was well known as liking life, but we didn’t do some of the things—well, you know a lot of times they would do what—Faye liked to put Limburger cheese on the doorknobs so you couldn’t turn the door and go in and playing pranks, but kids do that. Between fifteen and twenty-five you’re still a kid and you’re not under your parents’ authority, so you do what you have fun with. **22:49**

Interviewer: “So, what have I left out? You have done a very good job and I anticipated multiple questions in the process, so you were very helpful.

Thank you, thank you, I didn’t want to say too much and like I say, I wasn’t one of the top players, but I was lucky to have lasted as long as I did and I had other conflicts with

school and all of that, but over the years I think I accomplished more things than many women did. That wasn't our thing, women were supposed to stay home and cook and I don't like to cook. **23:00**