

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
HELEN FILARSKI
Women in Baseball

Born: 1924 Detroit, MI
Resides:

Interviewed by: Frank Boring, GVSU Veterans History Project, August 5, 2010, Detroit, Michigan at the All American Girls Professional Baseball League reunion.
Transcribed by: Joan Raymer, November 26, 2010

Interviewer: “Helen, if we could begin with your full name and where and when were you born?”

My whole name is Helen Margaret Filarski and I was born in 1924.

Interviewer: “Where?”

In Detroit, Michigan

Interviewer: “What was your early childhood like? Where did you live?”

I lived in Detroit, Michigan and most of the time it was—the war was on and there was no—it was before the war was on I should say and I was going to school in Detroit, the Catholic school. **14:17**

Interviewer: “Did you wear a uniform?”

No, not at first, it's when you're out of the eighth grade that you start with the uniform.

Interviewer: “I had the white sox with the black shoes and the girls had the skirts with the white sox, yup, yup. Where did you live? I know it was Detroit, but did you live in an apartment or a house?”

No, we lived in the east side of Detroit and my mother and father and there were seven children. The war was on and most of them at that time were in war plants because the war was on and everything, so we just stayed there and I went to Holy Name School for

eight years and graduated from there and went to St. Joseph's because my mother had gone there, so we all followed up in the Polish atmosphere. **15:46**

Interviewer: "So you had neighborhood friends and did you play games?"

Played games—I was one of seven children, so the girls, I didn't consider myself a girl because I went with my brother and we played ball all the time. The boys got away with it you know, so I stuck with him and we played ball and most of my time with them we played and like everybody else, we had one bat and one ball and I got the job to sew the ball up every time after we played because we knocked the stuffing out of it, but then we had to sew it up before we could play a game. **16:41** I would keep that up and I went through grade school and I played all that way and then I went to high school.

Interviewer: "Now, were there any organized sports at the school?"

No, not at grade school they didn't have any.

Interviewer: "But you're playing baseball basically with other neighbor kids?"

We would get out of school and out we would go. We lived right next to a playground and that was one thing you know, we would go out the door and over the street and we played until it got dark and that was it every day you know. **17:34** Because I was a girl, my mother would call me every once in a while, "get in here and do the dishes", and I didn't enjoy that, but what do you do? We did that all my life through eighth grade then when I graduated out of grade school—oh, in the summer time my mother, since we were so poor and they didn't have a job, my father got a job cleaning the streets at that time because there wasn't any war plants. My mother would make a big lunch and everything and my dad would drive out to a plot that the city gave you and make a garden and we would sit out there all day working on the planting. **18:40** Then my dad would come

back after he got through with his job and pick us up. There were about four of us at that time that went there and they took us home and we got ready for dinner and everything and that was every day, you know, that we had time to get over there.

Interviewer: “By the time you got into high school, did you have any idea what you wanted to do through life? Were you going to be a nurse or be a mother, what were you thinking?”

Well, through those years I played ball at the city park and I played with the girls that were in the league and mostly I was too young and that and I would pick-up the bats and chase the ball and stuff like that. **19:43**

Interviewer: “So is this the actual professional girls’ baseball league?”

Yes

Interviewer: “How did you hear about them?”

Oh, I learned a lot from them you know.

Interviewer: “But how did you hear about them? How did you know they were there?”

Here’s the playground, here’s the street, here’s my house, I mean we lived right upon it and anybody that would get on that field we could see and if there was an open space, a position open, I ran over there and played in it, the boys or whoever is playing.

Interviewer: “How did you hear about the All American Girls Professional Baseball League though?”

Alright, when we played, a bunch of girls were in the league and I got good enough to play with them and on their team, so I played and everybody said, “why don’t you go join us for this year, you’re good enough to go over there”. **20:52**

Interviewer: “So they were off season, they were from Detroit and they went to play wherever they played and when they came back, that’s when you were playing with them?”

Yes

Interviewer: “Ok, now I get it, so did you go and talk to your mom and dad about it?”

Oh, I kept talking to her all the time, but it was no use and she would say, “girls don’t play ball, just come in the house and do some work around the house”, all housework all the time.

Interviewer: “You had told me a story about how you heard about tryouts in Chicago, let’s hear that story.”

Through the girls, we kept going to the park and that and I heard the story about it and the girls kept asking me, “come on, come on with us, don’t stay here”, so I went and asked my mother and she said, “you’re too young, you can’t leave home alone, you’re too young to go”, and she said, “Al Capone is in here and he’s trying to get a league together of women and it’s not for playing ball and you’re not going anywhere near that playground again”, so it just kept a going and I kept playing there. **22:27** I kept playing until I got out of high school.

Interviewer: “So you had to have her permission to be able to join the league and she wouldn’t let you.”

No

Interviewer: “So when you turned was it eighteen? What did you do?”

Eighteen, yes and I said, “I’ll run away”, and she didn’t like the idea of me running away, so she said, “let me talk to some of the girls, Connie Wisniewski, and a lot of the girls that were on the team and they were my friends and I had them over and everything and she talked to them and they said, “she’ll be all right, we’ll take care of her”, and I was about the youngest one there then and when I got to spring training they got me in real good you know. “You Pollock, you go and stay in the room and when we call you bring down the fire escape and bring us in”, so that’s what I was doing for a while. **23:40** I was the best friend.

Interviewer: “So your mom finally says it’s ok to go. What does your dad think about all this?”

My dad didn’t care. Hhe didn’t care.

Interviewer: “So, how did you actually go to the spring training? Did you go by train, did you go by bus?”

We did, we went by train.

Interviewer: “And you were with the other girls that you knew, so you felt kind of taken care of?”

Yes, placing you where you were going to play, I got on a team, Rockford, with no friends of mine and I didn’t know anybody.

Interviewer: “Did you have to try out? Did you have to try out for the team?”

Yes

Interviewer: “What was that experience? What was that like, the tryouts?”

You’re scared, you’re scared and there were girls from the league out there and they would hit the ball to me. Connie Wisniewski was the best pitcher there was at the time,

so she would do the pitching—running and everything, teaching you, but they made a fool of me. **25:04** They'll do that, they will kid around with ya, but I tried to do it my own same way.

Interviewer: “But you got in.”

Oh yeah, I got in

Interviewer: “That must have been a happy day?”

Oh, it was fine, but it took me and got me into a house. When you get on a team they check you into a house, so this was mom and dad Gorenson and they had no children and they had a beautiful home and everything, but they said to them, “keep an eye on her because she's underage and we don't want any problems”, so it was “where you going?” They kept their eye on me. **25:57**

Interviewer: “Did you have a room mate?”

Yes, she was a movie star, Kay Rohrer, and she would go out and she would say, “don't forget, I will call you when I want to come back in”, so she would call and if we were on the road, she would call and I'd let down the fire escape otherwise I would wait and put the light on so she would see the light and that the road was clear and she would come in and we did that for two seasons.

Interviewer: “What was your first season like as a rookie?” 26:36

Scared, you're really scared when you play with these gals who know their position and what's going on instead of waiting for someone to say, “now you go there and you go there”. They put you in your position and they taught you—you learned and you would stay on that field until you fell down. You learned to not be afraid of the ball and it was good, it was really great. **27:12**

Interviewer: “What position did you play the first season?”

Third base

Interviewer: “As a rookie, did you start or did you sit on the bench a lot?”

No, I started I started.

Interviewer: “Even though you were scared, you must have been pretty good?”

I didn't mind it and I was tough you know, I would run and go after that ball because I was going to stop it if it killed me. When you were a rookie, you were going to fight your heart out and that's what I did and it was a strong team.

Interviewer: “Any particular game that you remember from the first season? Was there anything that you did that was good or maybe made a mistake?” 28:03

I don't know, I'm telling you; I ended up in the hospital.

Interviewer: “What happened?”

Well, I got spiked a couple of times down my legs sliding into third base you know and I think that's what the worst one was, but that was it.

Interviewer: “How did you like the uniform?”

Oh, it was free you know and they gave you a lot of free time there.

Interviewer: “Did you have to alter it at all for your height or anything?”

The first year no, but the second year we did because it was a little bit long.

Interviewer: “One of the girls said the difficulty was that she played in the outfield and as you reached down for the ball, you got dress and you didn't get the ball you got the skirt.”

Right, it's just like in the infield, you're down here and you go down for the ball and here—the ball is right there. **29:14**

Interviewer: “Now, once you finished your first season, you came back home to Detroit?”

Oh yeah

Interviewer: “Then what did you do when you got home? Were you still in school? You were out of school, right?”

No, no I wasn't in school, but in-between there I went to the war factory. I was two years in the war factory and then I was able to—my age could get me out you know, so that's where I went.

Interviewer: “You were in Detroit though?”

Yes

Interviewer: “So that was one of the factories that was supporting the war.”

Yes

Interviewer: “So then how did you—your second season, did they send you a letter? Did they call up your house and say we want a new contract?”

Yeah, they send a letter and tell you it's—we met in spring training.

Interviewer: “Ok, and once again you took the train?” 30:12

Yes

Interviewer: “Did you still travel with the same girls that you did before?”

Oh yeah, there were about seven or eight of us from Detroit that—and every year they probably picked up on or two girls, so it got big and it was very nice.

Interviewer: “So the second year you weren't a rookie any more?”

No, no and boy, you better know your steps. It was great and you just knew what you were doing.

Interviewer: “How were the fans?”

Oh, the fans just loved ya I’m telling ya. They would be in there and we had a lot of attendance. They were there all the time. It was great.

Interviewer: “Now you played some games at home and then you also had road trips?”

Yes, four games at home one time and three on the road and then three home and four on the road.

Interviewer: “What were the road trips like?”

Bumpy, we just had a beat-up bus and oh my god I’m telling you it was really something. It was worse than these that go down the street. **31:34**

Interviewer: “These were fairly long trips by bus?”

A lot of them, like you would go to Chicago, that was a long one from Peoria or something like that. That was about the longest one I think, from Peoria over into Chicago there.

Interviewer: “Now, when you stopped along the way were you just able to walk out with in your blue jeans?”

No, if you stopped there and you intended to get off the bus you gotta put your skirt on.

You couldn’t be seen in public in shorts or anything like that. **32:16**

Interviewer: “Right, did you have to go through the charm school, the school?”

Ya, it was the first year the charm school was there.

Interviewer: “I’m sorry, I should have gotten back—how was that?”

Oh, everybody laughed about it at first. They made us scared you know, because we couldn't get out there and play ball because we were doing this and everything you know, and what did we want to do that for.

Interviewer: "Did you have to have a book on your head?"

No, but some did

Interviewer: "Well, did they ask you to sit down in a certain way? Did you also learn how to use the knife and fork and things like that?"

Well, your woman who taught us--

Interviewer: "Helena Rubenstein?" 33:27

Yeah, she was one, and they taught us how to get up and how to sit down and some of them would just mock them and come in and plop down.

Interviewer: "But this was new to you, you were a city girl, right and playing with the boys and now you got to sit this way?"

Yes, and I was scared and you would get scared at doing these things, but I loved it just as much.

Interviewer: "Did any of those things carry on for the rest of your life? Do you still sit that way?"

No, no and if I want to sit down, I sit down. 34:17

Interviewer: "So, your second season, you're not a rookie anymore and you're still playing third base?"

Yes

Interviewer: "Any games that you can think of that were a little bit unusual and did you have a good year?"

Oh, we had a good year, we won the championship the first year that I played and that was good.

Interviewer: “Because of you?”

No, I helped a little bit and I had a good year there and if I couldn't do it with my glove, I would do it with my body.

Interviewer: “You said earlier that your family was not wealthy and you were making pretty good money weren't you?”

Yeah, it was more than I did in the factory. I mean we were still at the war a couple more years I think into it and we were still at war.

Interviewer: “Did you send money home?” 35:20

Yeah, oh yeah I sent it and I didn't have anyplace to spend it because you can't do anything anyway.

Interviewer: “At that time Helen, you're a professional baseball player and whether your mother believed it or not, you really were a professional baseball player. Were you thinking that was something you were going to keep doing every year?”

Well, I didn't hear about it at first, but I wanted to get into it and once I got into it I loved it you know.

Interviewer: “But did you think you were going to be able to play this for a number of years?”

No, I would just do it day by day and figure it out just as good as you can and you do what you can.

Interviewer: “Did you have any idea what you wanted to do professionally with your life? Did you want to become a nurse or did you want to become anything?”

No, I just wanted to play ball all day long. 36:31

Interviewer: “So, at the end of the second season you came back to Detroit and you worked in the same factory?”

No, you couldn't go back there.

Interviewer: “So, did you get a job?”

No, I don't think I did.

Interviewer: “You were living at home with mom and dad?”

Yeah, and working around there.

Interviewer: “Now the third season comes along and you're not playing for the same team anymore, right?”

Let me see, I went to Peoria and Kenosha for one year after that and then went to South Bend for three years.

Interviewer: “But the Kenosha experience—how come they transferred you to Kenosha? Do you remember why?” 37:29

Well, they probably had an opening. Either somebody got hurt or you never know if they didn't have a good player there.

Interviewer: “So, you're playing with one team and the next thing you know you're playing with another team.”

That's right, you can go overnight, a lot of times you play ball that night and then as soon as you start packing in the dressing room and out you go to another city. That's how they went when they were short on players.

Interviewer: “Was the experience at Kenosha a good one?”

Oh yeah, it was a good one, getting use to the girl next to you, you know, it takes a little time, so they make you play a little longer and you get different plays and it works out good, so I stayed there for that year. **38:37**

Interviewer: “Good, then back again to Detroit?”

Yes

Interviewer: “And then you play another year?”

Yeah

Interviewer: “This time you’re with the new team, South Bend and they had a pretty good team didn’t they?”

Oh yes, they did and three years I played with them and they were very good. They had a lot of old time ball players. I mean they didn’t get any new ones like the other teams got and it’s hard to get use to playing next to somebody like that, going after the ball or playing to the right team. **39:38**

Interviewer: “Now, you’re playing for a number of years as a professional baseball player and even at that point you’re still not thinking that this is going to be your career?”

Yes

Interviewer: “Did you think that you were just going to keep playing?”

I never thought that it would last that long you know. We played night after night wondering how long we were going to be together because sometimes they were talking you know, about breaking up and things like that, but we never did, so we just kept on playing.

Interviewer: “What was your last year? You lasted until?”

1950

Interviewer: “The league went on until 1954, how come you left in 1950?” 40:31

I got married, yes in 1950 I got married

Interviewer: “And you just decided that you weren’t going you play baseball anymore?”

Yeah, and things were getting different and my boyfriend Donald Steffes said, “it’s either me or baseball”, so I quit and got married.

Interviewer: “So, after that, after you finished, did you miss playing baseball?”

Oh, yeah you do

Interviewer: “Did you ever play another sport after that?”

No, I was married and lived the married life.

Interviewer: “Did you talk about your baseball experience after you were done?”

41:34

Oh, we always talked about it, anyone we met we talked about it and I use to come to the reunions too and continue to come.

Interviewer: “Well, how did you hear about—did you come to the first reunion?”

Yeah, I think I’ve been to all of them, oh yeah.

Interviewer: “All of them, now let me ask you a real dumb question, why do you come to the reunions?”

To see, to meet and talk baseball, that’s all we do you know, we get there and we tell about all these crazy plays we make or something and they will say, “oh, you were so

dumb, you were supposed to be the other base”, and they all laugh about it you know. It was great and the best part of my life.

Interviewer: “What are some of the stories that you tell at the reunion?” 42:32

Oh, I don’t know

Interviewer: “Well third base gets a lot of action.”

Oh yeah, yeah it does

Interviewer: “Especially when you have bases loaded.”

Right, right

Interviewer: “Well, let me ask you this, you did talk about your experiences with baseball and a lot of the girls never talked about it, didn’t tell their kids, didn’t tell anybody.”

Oh yeah, you ought to see my room and what I got, pictures and everything and I’ve gotta—and after seeing those pictures downstairs I start saying mine aren’t so good because they’re great.

Interviewer: “Were people interested in talking about baseball?”

Anybody that met me would talk about it and, “are you still playing?”

The first question anybody will ask you, “are you still going back?” **43:31**

Interviewer: “Did you get a chance to see the movie “A League of Their Own”?”

Yeah, we were in it, we were in it and we were showing them how not to throw it so hard and we laughed and had more fun with that.

Interviewer: “What did you think of the movie?”

We thought it was great and I thought it was great. A lot of them that saw it came out came out of their shell and said, “never knew there was any ball league”, and those

pictures they had over here, they ought to put them in a book. You talk to somebody and they say, "I didn't know that". **44:30**

Interviewer: "What do you make of all the—the movie came out and in some ways you're treated like movie stars. What do you think about that?"

Well, we were for a while there you know. We did some crazy things with them I'm telling you. Every time you would hit the ball or something they would say, "don't throw it so hard", or something and we just sat down and laughed because they wanted to make the picture, but they didn't want to do the business, but it was great, the whole thing you know.

Interviewer: "You went to Cooperstown?"

Yes

Interviewer: "How was that experience of getting inducted into the hall of fame?"

That was great, that was the first time I saw the whole thing you know and it is just beautiful there. **45:30**

Interviewer: "the movie, I thought, did a pretty good job out of showing the reactions of the players in there and were you in that scene in the movie?"

Yes

Interviewer: "I'll look for you the next time I look at it, Ok?"

Yes

Interviewer: "It's interesting because I teach at the university level and the kids are usually anywhere from eighteen to twenty and when I told them I'm doing this documentary about the All American Girls Professional Baseball League, and A league of their Own, they get all excited over it."

Everybody loves it and they say, “are you—did you see that picture?” I say, “ yeah, I was in it”, and they say, “you were?” It was really great and we loved it all the time we were working on it.

Interviewer: “That was just a few years of your life, a small part of your life, but how do you look back on that period now? How do you look at it? Is it some thing that’s very special to you or is it something that just happened? Have you had a chance to think about it?” 46:41

It’s very special to me because I lived for it and a month before I had to leave town, I was packing, so it meant everything to us and kids would say, “where is everybody?” They are different people you know and there was something, the love for the game and we still loved the people around there and talked to them. We didn’t think we were stars or anything.

Interviewer: “But you played professional baseball.” 47:41

Yeah, that’s right

Interviewer: “One other question for you, did your mom ever get a chance to see you play baseball?”

Yes, I think she saw one game and she would say, “I’m not going to watch you get hurt, I can’t watch you get hurt”, and that’s the first thing she always thought of. She would say, “you’re going to get hurt”, and I said, “well when the ball is hit to me real hard, I’ll get out of the way ma”, and she would say, “Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it”

Interviewer: “You said earlier that your dad didn’t care one way or the other, did he get a chance to see you play?” 48:28

He probably did, but he wasn't interested in it. Girls should be in the house, you know, and wash the dishes. I'm so sick of washing dishes.

Interviewer: "When did your parents find out that you played for the league? Did they know early on?"

Not really, not really it didn't mean anything to them that I went out of town. They thought anybody can do that, we all play ball.

Interviewer: "But that all changed."

Oh yeah and as the years go by it means more to them.

Interviewer: "You have a special family her, this—you have your own family, but you have another family that's all these other girls and all their daughters and their sons and whatnot."

We have a big family when we all get together and they all feel the same way and the mothers talk just like they do, you know. 49:47

Interviewer: "What do you think about this All American Girls Professional Baseball League? It's part of American history now."

Yes, yes it is

Interviewer: "Did you ever think it was going to be that big of a deal?"

No, it was getting slowly and they would get it out there once in a while, but they get it out there now and everybody says, "A League of Their Own is on", and everybody is going and I say, "A League of Their Own".

Interviewer: "If it's on TV I can't change the channel, I just—I don't care where it starts or where it ends, I just watch it. My favorite scene is the Tom Hanks and Geena Davis when she's about to go with her husband and leave and she said it got

too hard and he said, “It’s supposed to be hard, if it wasn’t hard everybody could do it”. 50:46

Yeah

Interviewer: “That’s an amazing scene and I use that in class, you gotta work at it.”

It makes sense

Interviewer: “did you get a chance to travel to other countries? Some of the girls went to Cuba.”

Yes, I did

Interviewer: “How was that experience?”

I don’t know really.

Interviewer: “Just another ball game?”

It’s another ball game, it’s another country and they start talking and I say, “ya, ya, sure”, you don’t know what they’re talking about and they touch you. We were walking in a parade coming to the stadium one time and they touch you and get on the floor and holler, they just go out of their minds. They toss somebody and the guys that are keeping the line straight and they go up to them and are beating them with a Billy club and they didn’t care how they hit them. 52:05

Interviewer: “The public was just going crazy about it, so the police came?”

Outside yeah, the police would get them if they would stick in their hand to touch you.

Interviewer: “Where else did you travel to besides Cuba? Did you go any other places?”

Yeah, I went on the train, I’m trying to think where I went in the wintertime. I played somewhere, I forgot already.

Interviewer: “Was it South America? No”

I was in Puerto Rico

Interviewer: “Once again, just another ball game?”

Yeah

Interviewer: “No Billy clubs this time I hope.”

No, sometimes they will just run in and do something and run out. Somebody had been talking and they said it’s like holy people when they run out and throw their arms up and holler. It’s something sacred and that’s why they come and run out. You got to stop it because the parade is going on. **53:33**

Interviewer: “They thought you were somehow holy people, huh?”

Yeah, little do they know, huh?

Interviewer: “Well Helen it’s been a pleasure talking to you. Is there any story that you just want to be able to tell because I know you talk to your friends about things. Are there any stories that you can think of off the top of your head?”

Right now I can’t remember.

Interviewer: “All right.”