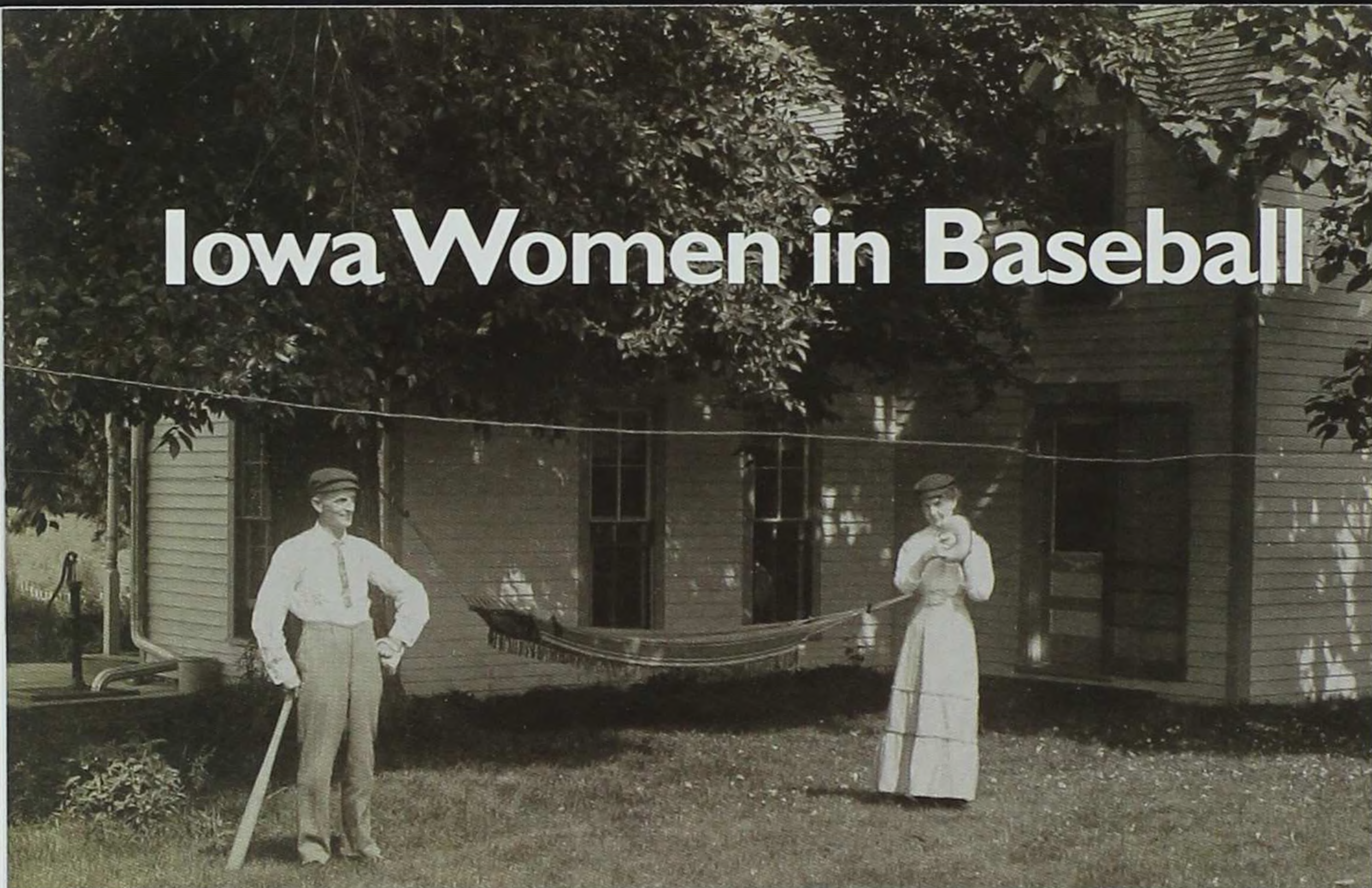


Iowa Women in Baseball



by Ginalie Swaim

Left: A long skirt didn't hamper this Victorian woman from catching hits at the turn of the century. A hammock in the background awaits the tired ball players. Below: an unidentified team in softball trousers, in 1937.

SHSI (DES MOINES)

A sportswriter from the *Iowa State Register* was one of 1,500 fans watching an 1892 baseball game in Des Moines. A New York women's team was taking on a local team of male department store clerks sponsored by Younkers Brothers, and the reporter wisecracked: "While it was not a very scientific and skillful game on the part of the young ladies it was a very amusing one. The pitcher and catcher were very good, but whenever a ball was knocked into their outfield, the crowd would nearly go into convulsions. . . . The players arranged themselves in a line and by the first tossing the ball to the second and second to the third and so on, they would finally get the ball inside

the diamond. Such a scene reminded one of the old-fashioned fire bucket brigades. . . . The young ladies, however, play a very good game, when the fact is taken in mind that it is an absolute and natural impossibility for a woman to play base ball. . . . A ball team composed of wooden Indians and clothing store dummies could come as near."

It took a while for female ball players to gain respect and a foothold in Iowa. In 1912, women students at the State University of Iowa in Iowa City were playing softball, organized by the Women's Athletic Association (WAA), according to historians Leah Rogers and Clare Kernek. But the 1923 university yearbook ac-



SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Nursing trainees in 1942 in Des Moines determine who will bat first. Right: The Albia-Hiteman kittenball team (circa 1930s).

knowledged that WAA's "vaudeville entertainments" and monthly social events "more than anything else [helped] to put the organization in its present place on the campus."

Participation in the sport grew. By 1939 and 1940, 75 women's teams across Iowa played in the state's AAA softball division.

Two women with Iowa connections played in the 1940s and 1950s All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). With a nod to wartime patriotism, the league was started in 1943 by Chicago businessman P. K. Wrigley. Wrigley was concerned that the war would drain male players from the major leagues and thus empty major league ball parks. He developed the AAGPBL as a fallback: if the major leagues folded, women's teams would play on these diamonds and maintain public interest in baseball. AAGPBL teams were placed in midwestern war-production cities, where factory workers could attend local games despite gas rationing. In 1945 a writer noted, "Not long ago, girl's baseball rated along with checkers for spectator interest. Now there are nights when you have to stand up in back to see what's going on at the plate."

Iowan Betty Francis played on AAGPBL teams in Muskegon, Kalamazoo, and South Bend from 1949 to 1954, when the league ended. Francis was born in Maquoketa, Iowa, and had played ball on the school team in nearby Monmouth. Inez Voyce was on the South Bend Blue Sox and the Grand Rapids Chicks from 1946 to 1953. She had played ball at Seymour High School in Wayne County, Iowa. She graduated in 1941 and then served as a second-class yeoman in the navy before joining the league. A left-hander, Voyce played first base. "I was playing softball with boys since I was old enough to walk," she said.

In the 1970s, several Iowa City feminists began organizing softball teams. According to Susan Birrell and Diana M. Richter, sports studies experts who researched these teams in the 1980s, "Any feminist can tell you that

if you are a stranger in town on a hot summer evening and you want to find the feminist community, you should head for the nearest softball diamond." Early teams comprised feminists in various Iowa City arenas: the Blue Stockings (the academic community at the University of Iowa), Grace and Rubie's Rats (a women-owned coffee shop); Plainswomen (a feminist bookstore); WRAC (the Women's Resource and Action Center); and Emma Goldman (a women's health collective). The teams "provided evidence of the strength of women's culture in Iowa City," Birrell and Richter note. They formed to "shape sport into a practice which has relevance within their lives." The women valued friendship, sensitivity, and good times rather than competition and victories. As one coach emphasized, "There's a lot of support for people trying, and people don't really get upset with mistakes and the criticism is relatively supportive."

For high school girls, softball was added to sports programs in 1955 (joining basketball), but "what really made the state [softball] tournament blossom was the [Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union's] decision in 1970 to anchor it in Fort Dodge at the Rogers Sports Complex," according to writer Chuck Offenburger in *E. Wayne Cooley and the Iowa Girl*. The sport grew in participation and popularity. In 2002, the union's executive director Troy Dannen told Offenburger that the girls' tournament draws thousands. The fans "sit between fields and see each pitch of both games. Between games, they return to the outdoor grills for brats or burgers or chicken, but they have to hurry," Dannen explained. "The park staff has diamonds ready within 10 minutes after a game ends, and it's time to play ball again. And the greatest treat for softball fans is that the same thing happens the next night." ❖

The author is the editor of Iowa Heritage Illustrated.

A passion for the game . . .



Early baseball: A carved baseball, bat, and straw hat on an 1880 grave marker make a poignant statement about the importance of baseball to a young child or perhaps a parent. The marker is in the Lowaville cemetery, in northwestern Van Buren County. The boy and his two siblings all died within a few days,