

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
BASEBALL IN PENNSYLVANIA

1. Student's Name James Shimmons
2. Subject's Name Cloyd Shimmons
3. Subject's Background Sandlot baseball player, 1946-1953
- a. date and place of birth April 22, 1933, Huey, PA
- b. Present address [REDACTED]
- c. Present Occupation Maintenance, Clarion County Airport
4. Date of Interview November 20, 1994

5. General Comments:

Cloyd Shimmons played baseball in a sandlot league located in northwestern Pennsylvania during the late forties and early fifties. He sadly recalls the disappearance of sandlot baseball during the fifties. Especially interesting are his comments on the role of carnivals as meeting places for members of various teams. He also recalls some of the playing conditions which were unique to the sandlot era. Cloyd's deep appreciation of the game is constantly evident throughout the interview.

DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE

Q: When did you play baseball?

A: I started in 1946; I was thirteen years old. I played until I was twenty.

Q: Where did you play? What position?

A: I played the outfield all the time and usually always center field.

Q: In what geographical area did you play baseball in?

A: Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Q: How big of a circle did your team travel in? How far did your team travel from your home field?

A: Never any more than a sixty mile radius.

Q: Who did you play for?

A: I played for a team in a little community that I grew up in. It was a coal mining town called Huey, Pennsylvania.

Q: Was it a formal league?

A: Yes we had a league at that time.

Q: Who else played? Who were some of the other teams?

A: Sligo, Pennsylvania had a team and in the other direction was Rimersburg, Pennsylvania, which is north of East Brady. Brady had a team. We played teams in New Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Saint Petersburg. Well, it has been a long time; it's hard for me to remember a lot of them.

Q: What about some of the further away teams?

A: Cadogan, in Armstrong County, down by the Ford City, Kittanning area.

Q: How did you travel to away games?

A: We always traveled by automobile, and we had a pick-up truck to haul our

equipment in.

Q: Now I'm going to move to some more general questions, designed for more elaborate responses. Why did you play?

A: If you wanna go all the way back to my childhood, when I first started to see people play baseball, it kind of scared me a little because I knew the ball was very hard and I was afraid of getting hit with that thing. So, I was kind of pushed into this, but after I wasn't afraid of the ball anymore I played because I really loved to play. I wanted to win, I guess like you always want to win in sports, competition, and just for loving sports.

Q: Speaking of sports, where would you rank baseball in comparison with all other sports in terms of how good of a game it is?

A: I think I have about equal interest in both football and baseball. I would rank both of those above basketball, although I am interested in basketball.

Q: How has baseball changed from the forties until today; how has the game changed?

A: As far as sandlot baseball is concerned, it has changed entirely. Because in those days there were leagues everywhere. You could play sandlot baseball and it was very competitive. If you weren't in a league, you could still play on a team which scheduled games with other non-league teams and you could still get games where you could play. Sandlot baseball was everywhere. In the early fifties it just began to disintegrate. All of a sudden it was just all softball. It was something that was hard for me to grasp. It just petered out when softball came along and got popular. I don't know where the interest went: I don't know what happened. But the big difference between when I played and today is about all you have in non-professional baseball is high school

baseball and of course there's some college. You have some high school baseball and you don't have any individual sandlot teams anymore. They're gone. The only baseball that's left, outside of professional baseball is high school baseball and college baseball. Of course some people have the American Legion teams; you have the Little League. You'll always have that I guess. But sandlot baseball is a thing of the past. That's how much it has changed since I played. That's the thing that's gone today. It's gone.

Q: To be a member of the team, did you have to be within a certain age bracket?

A: No. As a matter of fact, the team that I played on, most of the kids were teenagers anywhere from sixteen to twenty years old. But in addition to that, we also had some people who were in their forties that were playing with us. We had a pretty wide range of age on that team.

Q: Did the older guys respect the younger kids?

A: Yes they did. I'm very glad about that. That's some of the fond memories I have; we got along very well. They respected the young kids' abilities and the younger kids really looked up to the older guys. They knew that those older guys really had ability. Even though they were slower, the younger players knew the old guys had talent. They respected them and it was a good mix.

Q: Let's talk about the social aspects of sandlot baseball. Did a lot of peoples' families come to the games?

A: Yes, it was very popular. Families did come and sometimes they got so into the game that fights broke out. They were very supportive.

Q: What about doubleheaders, did you usually play doubleheaders?

A: We played doubleheaders on Sundays and sometimes holidays like the Fourth of

July. Normally we wouldn't have doubleheaders on a weekday, but I played in a lot of doubleheaders.

Q: How many innings did you usually play?

A: Nine innings. We did, on occasions when we scheduled doubleheaders, after the first game was completed and we saw that we might possibly run out of light for the second game we would agree on a seven inning game for the second game. Sometimes we would play a seven inning game for that reason.

Q: What about Black baseball players? Did you ever play against any Black sandlot baseball players?

A: Yes I did, but there weren't too many in the counties I played in. A little further south there were more of them. I really didn't get involved with them too much; but yea, they were there. I played with some good ones in the Ford City area.

Q: What about racial tension in the forties?

A: I remember that particular time that we were playing in Ford City. There was no racial tension there that I know of. Everybody got along fine there.

Q: You lived in an Italian community. Were there any ethnic rivalries?

A: Yea, that did enter into baseball in sandlot times. Some communities were more heavily Italian and some were more heavily Irish. You would get racial slurs and things like that from fans. There was some of that but it wasn't a major thing.

Q: Do you think racial tension is worse today?

A: Yea I do, I think it probably is worse today. They always say it was worse back then, but I don't think so.

Q: Let's talk about team pride. Tell me about wearing uniforms to carnivals.

A: Carnivals of course, were very prominent in those days. We lived in small communities and one of the few outlets we had was a carnival. When the carnival came to town it was a big deal. All of the towns got them; they moved from one town to another. Every time you went to a carnival, you didn't take your baseball uniform off. You would see other baseball teams there with their uniforms on and immediately you would get a conversation going with them and that's really how we scheduled a lot of our games. This really led to playing a lot of teams that we wouldn't ordinarily have played because we wouldn't have known anything about them.

Q: Who bought the uniforms?

A: Each game the hat was passed. People were as liberal as they could be. There wasn't much money in those days. Also, small businesses would sponsor a team and they would have their emblem on the back of the jerseys. Usually, it was a combination of offerings and business sponsorships.

Q: What about media coverage? Did you ever get any press?

A: Oh yea, it was a big thing in little town newspapers. Of course there was no television in those days.

Q: How was the equipment in those days?

A: It wasn't the best. The bats were pretty good. Sometimes you ran short on baseballs. When a fellow hit a home run in a sandlot game it was easy to lose the ball.

Q: Was there anything unique about any of the sandlot fields?

A: Oh my yes! I played in outfields that had telephone wires running diagonally from left field to right field. I had to watch that pole in center field. I caught balls like that. I played in outfields that had gullies and you had to run down in the gully or you had to

run up in the gully. I played right field in a ballpark that had huge trees with branches right over my head. One fellow hit a very high fly ball to right field and I'll never forget it because I was just beside myself trying to figure out where that ball was. I knew it was above those limbs, but all the sudden I saw a rather large opening that had a circumference of about three feet and that ball came right down through it and I caught it. That's something that I'll always remember from my outfield days. There were some real funny things in the outfield. There were some real funny things in the infields too. We played on infields that sloped, some had backstops, some didn't. Yea the fields were a real circus.

Q: Baseball has been called the national pastime; in what way was baseball your pastime in the forties and early fifties?

A: One thing I want to say about sandlot baseball, we never lost track of what was going on in the professional game. We loved to play baseball, but we just loved the game itself. The Pirates were not doing well in those days; they were probably in last place more than they were anywhere else. But everything that they did, if they moved up a couple games in the standings, if they had a few game winning streak, we just got all excited about it. We were avid, rabid fans. We talked constantly about the batting averages of the Pittsburgh Pirates, the wins and losses of the pitchers and how many home runs Ralph Kiner hit. We also learned how to compute our own batting averages and we kept that thing going. We just loved the game and talked a lot about it.