

AN ORAL HISTORY OR BASEBALL

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This interview was conducted with Mr. Sid Snyder
of Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. The interviewer
was George L. Lange Jr., a student in the Department
of History at the Slippery Rock University.
The interview was conducted on October 17, 1994.

Interviewer-Mr. Snyder, are you a native of Slippery Rock?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, I am. I was born in Slippery Rock on July 1, 1932.

Do you want to know where?

Interviewer-Yes, sir.

Mr. Snyder-I was born on Franklin Street, don't recall address exactly, but it was on Franklin Street. When I was one year old I moved to Center Street and I lived at Center Street till 1946 which would make me fifteen years old and then moved across street, on Center Street, and lived there until 1950 until I left for the service.

Interviewer-Is your family from this area also?

Mr. Snyder-My grandad moved here with my Dad at what is commonly known as Walton's farm on 173 approximately two miles out of town, in the twenties. They came from Clarion County.

Interviewer-Mr. Snyder, can you recall your first experiences with baseball?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, I do, the first experience, which I mentioned before, would be in 1940. The spring or mid-summer of 1940 and it was American Legion baseball. It was run by Coach Thompson and Coach Hennick. Coach Hennick was the baseball coach at the college and Coach Thompson was the football coach. I referred to Mr. Boyer, he was quite a bit older, he graduated in 1940.

Interviewer-From high school?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, from the high school in 1940. Coach Thompson said something to me because I had an interest in baseball and a glove. So I went up, but basically I played very little in '40

and '41, being eight or nine years old, but it was American Legion ball and they put me in if they felt the pitcher could not get the ball over the plate. I wasn't allowed to swing at it. I could field a little, but was playing with guys who were older, who were graduating in those years.

Interviewer-Was there anything in the way of Little League programs?

Mr. Snyder-Nothing in the way of Little League, absolutely nothing.

Interviewer-What effect did World War Two have on baseball in the area?

Mr. Snyder-Well, in Slippery Rock here, baseball just stopped. Almost all the guys went to the service, if they didn't get drafted, which most of them did, they enlisted. So baseball basically stopped, as far as here was concerned. There was no baseball in the area.

Interviewer-What was your involvement with baseball at Slippery Rock High School?

Mr. Snyder-We got involved in baseball at Slippery Rock High School basically, what happened, was all the guys came back from the service. And I don't know that I had an interest, with the war and all, but when they came back they got baseball going again, so we got in the Petroleum Valley League played out at Branston. And it was Mr. Boyer that I remember, although a lot of the war guys, Mr. Knox and Mr. Schaeffer and all these gentlemen came back and I had the opportunity, still being a young man, those guys, being four or five years older than me

got to go out and play a little bit for them. Although I was just a fill-in player also. After that Mr. Boyer started up American Legion again, approximately...the Petroleum Valley League lasted about three years, from '45-'47, they played two years in Branston and one in Harrisville...and Mr. Boyer in '47 got the American Legion going. And at that time we talked to Coach Smiley, Robert Smiley, who was our basketball coach in about 1946 about starting a baseball team.

Interviewer-This was at the high school?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, this was at the high school. So, we started playing baseball at Slippery Rock High School around 1947 or '48 I am not sure of those two years. Along with it we had American Legion baseball run by Mr. Boyer for two or three years. He was also playing and running Slippery Rock in the American Legion.

Interviewer-Can you recall how many boys played on the high school team at that time?

Mr. Snyder-Basically wasn't too many of the high school boys played on the American Legion team. They were allowed to play until they were nineteen or twenty, the rules, I think, were changed afterwards. I think it was to let some of the guys graduated to play and such.

Interviewer-How many on the high school team?

Mr. Snyder-We had enough to play. I can remember we'd have a pitcher playing in the outfield or something like that. We had enough to play and I think the whole time we didn't take

a bus, we took two cars. Mr. Smiley drove one of them and one of the parents to drive the other one and run the high school program. Money was very limited in those days. Things really hadn't started up again after the war.

Interviewer-Where did you play your games at?

Mr. Snyder-We played out home games at the Slippery Rock College baseball field. Same place that the college did, up on their field.

Interviewer-Could you describe or tell me a little about the relationship between the high school teams and the state college at that time?

Mr. Snyder-Ya, well Slippery Rock was a state teachers college even. And our relationship at that time...we went to the same schools, same buildings, we were just part of the college. Our teachers were their teachers, when you look back and see that Bob Smiley ended up coaching at the college and Doc Elden, who was a shop teacher, taught at the college also. And Joe Frazier and Holt and Peters and all out teachers basically were paid by Slippery Rock State Teachers College and Slippery Rock Area School District.

Interviewer-Did you play with or practice with the college teams?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, we did, more so maybe in basketball than baseball because baseball was very limited. They were only here for a little bit. And we played in the spring not so much in the fall like, well they played spring and fall. It was very limited, the college would

leave, get out in the middle of may and we were going to go on so we'd practice a little bit with them but our big association with them was in basketball. They were here all winter and so were we.

Interviewer-While you were still in high school, were you involved in any summer leagues?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, we had the high school team going with Mr. Smiley, then we got the Junior County League started and we talked to N.Kerr Thompson, I can remember going up and knocking on his door, he was a giant of a man, we knew him from shop class and the different student teaching. I can remember a story, it was a fifty pound anvil, he put his little finger in and held it out. He was a tremendous man, loved sports tremendously. We went up and knocked on his door, and said we were trying to get a Junior League team going and would he coach us? He said yes, and for the next couple of years, Coach Thompson, who was getting quite elderly at that time, I'm not sure what his age was. He was elderly, I imagine sixty-five or seventy, he had retired from college, but he ran our team for about two years then in the Junior County League.

Interviewer-What were those years?

Mr. Snyder-Those would be '48 and '49 my sophomore and junior years.

Interviewer-When did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Snyder-I graduated in 1950.

Interviewer-Your last year of summer ball was?

Mr. Snyder-My last year of summer baseball was 1950. I player

summer ball, but my Dad said I should do something else, so I did have a job. But I still played summer ball. At that time Mr. Thompson didn't run it, the high school coach Bob Smiley went to the college in '52, so high school baseball only lasted until about '51. So when Bob went to the college, our baseball still went on, even though the high school didn't through the Junior League. It went on until 1952.

Interviewer-So, after you graduated, the high school team disbanded?

Mr. Snyder-The whole team dissolved, high school baseball was stopped for the time being. It wasn't recognized as far as the high school was concerned.

Interviewer-Were you more of a club team?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, we were like a club team, you'd have to say. Bob Smiley was the basketball coach and wasn't paid to coach baseball. But we'd take off, they'd let us out of school a half hour early to go to the different schools we played. Local schools, some were Sandy Lake and Eau Claire, Harrisville and Grove City.

Interviewer-These were high schools in the region?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, they were high schools in the region. We played a basically recognized league, but there was not championship.

Interviewer-In light of the fact that you didn't have the high school's support, how did you boys fund the team?

Mr. Snyder-We used our baseballs and bats from the Junior County league. Our uniforms didn't have Slippery Rock High School

on, we just used our own equipment. It was a way to get baseball games in while school was still going on, before school was out was what it was all about.

Interviewer-During this period of time Mr. Snyder, did you follow professional baseball?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, I did, I was interested in all sports and I think more so in baseball because I got a start there. I can remember about that time, I went to school, laying in front of the radios, we didn't have televisions. TV didn't come in until 1947 or '48, so we'd lay in front of radios and listen to the games. I can remember we had a local pool hall here in Slippery Rock above the A&P on the main drag in Slippery Rock alongside the theatre on South Main Street. We'd go in there, we weren't big enough so we'd hardly hit the balls around. The gentleman that ownedd it, I was a good friend of his son, Steve Klinger. So he'd let us up there and we'd listen to the games while we were fooling around on the pool tables.

Interviewer-Did you listen to the Cleveland Indians and the Pittsburgh Pirates?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, the Indians or the Pirates, whatever was on. If it was the game of the day back then it could be the Detroit Tigers, Chicago White Sox, Boston Red Sox, at that time some of us picked out...I think I was a Boston Red Sox...I was a Ted Williams man and my good friend, just to be different, he was a St. Louis Cardinal fan, he was a Stan Musial man.

We picked out heroes, until Kiner came along to the Pirates and Cleveland got Bobby Feller and Bob Lemon and some of the pitchers they got over there. We'd just pick out a team and follow it, the loyalty wasn't there as I guess it is today. We really didn't go to many games, no one could afford it.

Interviewer-Did you ever get to Cleveland Stadium or Forbes Field?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, I got chances, several chances in my high school days because my Dad owned the bus company in town and they would get busloads up and I would get the opportunity, it was relatively easy for me to go. Just cost a ticket and there was always an extra seat on the bus. I was to Cleveland, Lakefront, Forbes Field hundreds of times.

Interviewer-Did you have any favorite players? Anyone whom you followed particularly?

Mr. Snyder-I think we started going more, when in my high school days I got playing, basically we stuck with the local guys. It's hard to name them, I think Frankie Gustine, third base and Elby Fletcher played first base for them and some of the pitchers. Ya, we'd follow them and basically get their games, with their names on them and such. And everybody followed Babe Ruth cause he played some in my time. Seems if I don't know for sure, or just seen it so many times. But the last game he played was in Pittsburgh. Many don't know his last game was in Pittsburgh.

Interviewer-For the Boston Braves, right?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, for the Boston Braves, right here. I think it was

there he hit his last home run.

Interviewer-His last home run?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, his last home run in Pittsburgh, and I can't tell you what year it was.

Interviewer-Could you say, or in your opinion, was the best professional baseball player you ever saw in person?

Mr. Snyder-In person, I'd have to say the one I feel...I did see Stan Musial and my hero, Ted Williams play, but I'd have to say Hank Aaron or Willie Mays would have to be. I guess I seen them a lot more than I seen Ted Williams or Stan Musial play, cause they were wrapping up in the '40's. Ted did come back a little after the war, but he left for the Korean, too, and Stan was wrapping it up. But the guys I got to watch from the beginning would be Hank Aaron and Willie Mays.

Interviewer-Was baseball, at that time, the most popular professional sport?

Mr. Snyder-Definetly. I mean we'd watch professional football, but at that time ten games was all they played. Maybe two spring games and ten games and then we'd follow the Steelers. But baseball, that was your long season in the summers when you had a lot of time to follow it, yes.

Interviewer-Following your return from service in the Korean War, when did you become involved in baseball again?

Mr. Snyder-A lot of us came back in 1954, I spent three years, eleven months and one day in the U.S. Navy. We came back in

'54 and I got back in August and being the end of the season there was no baseball in Slippery Rock whatsoever. But some of the guys that had played baseball, at the time I had played and were two or three years behind me now, didn't go to Korea and they were playing down in Harlansburg and I'm not sure what league was down there, but I know Dave Duncan and Bill Beatty and Bill Renick were playing for Harlansburg because there just wasn't enough guys here. All the guys who graduated in '51 and graduated in '52 ended up in the service and those of '53 were sophmores. They didn't go and on top of that they went to Slippery Rock University which helped them from going to the service at the time. So they were playing and Harlansburg when we got back so two of us went down there. DeWitt Maxwell, who got out two days before me. I was supposed to get out earlier but didn't. He and I were interested in baseball so we went down there. I think he got to pinch hit one time and I had taken up pitching a little bit and warmed up a couple of times, but never got in a ball games down there, of course with August the season was over a couple of weeks after we got back. So we talked that winter with DeWitt Maxwell, who went to work at Cooper's and Bill Renick, who was working for his Dad, and I was working for my Dad, and got this idea to get the Junior League going again. We were on the edge, they lowered it from twenty-one or something like that. Twenty-one and you could play there so it was the County League that was coming around. So we decided and got

in the County League the next year, which would be 1955.

Interviewer-Was it the Slippery Rock County Team?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, it was the Slippery Rock County Team, yes it was.

Interviewer-Where did you play your games?

Mr. Snyder-We played our games at Slippery Rock College. At that time it would be Slippery Rock State Teachers College. I believe they changed their name around '49 or '50. So it was Slippery Rock State College and we played up on their field. They were good to us, we had a working relationship with them. Basically, our coaches Bob Smiley was at the college and Pop Stuart who was also at the college, and Bill McKay was also at the college, were the guys we had. So, we didn't have too much of a problem. I believe Wally Rose came soon after that and he became college coach and he wanted us to play up there too. All the guys were interested in baseball and all these young men then had come back so we got it going in 1955.

Interviewer-So the County League started in 1955. How long did you play with the County League team?

Mr. Snyder-Well, we were talking about that the other day, and it seemed like forever, but it wasn't. We think we played until 1973.

Interviewer-Continuously?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, continuously from 1955 to 1973, about eighteen years.

Interviewer-What roles, what capacities did you fill with the team?
On and off the field.

Mr. Snyder-Basically, I pretty much got so, even though we had several managers at this time, one time we had my brother-in-law Chuck Garing, and at another time we had one of the coaches at the high school, when the high school started back up again. I can't think of his name right now, doesn't even ring a bell. But him, and some years we didn't have anybody so I'd just pretty much take over and our later years about 1968 to 1973 we had a coach that came up from Saxonburg. Name of Charlie Lang.

Interviewer-I like the last name.

Mr. Snyder-Yes, Charlie Lang and he, ya, came up from Saxonburg the last five years of baseball, although the last three years we played in Harrisville.

Interviewer-So the Slippery Rock entry, specifically Slippery Rock when did they stop playing?

Mr. Snyder-I think about 1970 would be the last year we played in Slippery Rock and that was partly because the college got bigger and we couldn't get the field. They put soccer up there now is soccer. They turned it into soccer and so, we had to get permission from the college. They put a fence around the field, but we could get in. I think our relationship with the college wasn't...in more than one aspect though. I mean, some of the games, people got a little rowdy, some of the guys would bring beer in, which the college didn't want on the field, some college people, word got around. I think we got a little older and didn't take care of the field like it

should have been taken care of, at all, so I mean, it was a two way street. It wasn't strictly, you think about it now, but our working relationship with the college wasn't like it was and it was their field.

Interviewer-What was the age of most of the players and were you a continuous group?

Mr. Snyder-Pretty much continuous group, we had about ten or twelve guys who would be almost continuous. Guys would come and go and so on and so forth. But I can pretty much name the guys who were with it right along. Frankie Augustino played third base, and Bill Renick played shortstop, and Calderon played second base and Eddy Maxwell was at first base, DeWitt Maxwell played left field, center fielder was Tommy Bavard and right fielder was Ted Hollihan and Bill Merkle, myself and Red Davis did much of the pitching for the biggest part of the years.

Interviewer-Did your association extend beyond the baseball field? You were all young men with families...

Mr. Snyder-Yes, our association, we. Of course Bill Renick was my brother-in-law at the time although he ended up divorcing my sister. But our relationship was more so that that and we'd always get together and have parties and so on and so forth, so it was more than just on the baseball field. At the same time I should add that we played basketball up till 1971 in the YMCA League in Butler, so we had a winter and summer

sport.

Interviewer-Was the county team followed by the community?

Mr. Snyder-The community was really involved in it, here in Slippery Rock, for about ten years. Basically we started it up, we'd go around to the businesses and try to pick up money. But we had enough support up at the baseball field, the Slippery Rock College field that we'd pass the hat and pick up enough money to pay for the baseballs and bats and even buy new uniforms. We got a couple of new sets of uniforms. We had better support than most of the county teams. Slippery Rock seemed to have a real good interest in it. We had volunteer umps, and we always thought our umpires were better than their home umpires. Anyways, I think the League said, about 1965, the Butler County League said we'd have to use paid umpires so they started sending them out. I think we were paying each umpire ten or twelve dollars a game, but the support was good enough that passing the hat we'd take up enough money to pay the umpires and buy our equipment.

Interviewer-Did the players bring their families to the games?

Mr. Snyder-We did, at home games especially. My wife and my two daughters and all the other guys were married. My two children one born in '57, one born in '59, ya, they'd go up there. They'd come to the ball game and run around up there. Most of the guys took their families, not too much to away games, usually at home games.

Interviewer-Was there anyone who you played with or in the league who went on to play professionally or a baseball career beyond the County League?

Mr. Snyder-The guys that played with us...Bill Renick, he went up for a month, that was in 1957, he went to the minor leagues. He went to the Dodger training camp and he had went there because a friend we had who was with the Dodgers. Name was John Jantzee. John...Bill was a tremendous athlete, basketball baseball and football.

Interviewer-Mr. Jantzee was a player with the Dodgers?

Mr. Snyder-He was a player with the Dodger organization. He played just happened to have the misfortune to be with the Dodgers. He was a pitcher and he won twenty games, we think great now, for Los Angeles, Montreal, and Houston.

Interviewer-The Triple-A teams?

Mr. Snyder-Yes they were the Triple-A teams at the time. He won twenty for Houston one year and Los Angeles one year, but the Dodgers had Don Newcome, Preacher Roe and Jantzee never got a chance to come up. He lost favor with them trying to help organize a union. And that was part of it. Guys like Bill Renick went and spent a couple of weeks there and was assigned to Class D ball and made twenty-five dollars a month or something like that. It was impossible to even consider living on.

Interviewer-So he was the only player to have an opportunity to play professionally?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, he was the only one I believe who played with us that would have an opportunity, although several guys in our league, who played in the league had played in the minor leagues and came back and played in the county leagues.

Interviewer-Did any of them play major league ball, that you were aware of?

Mr. Snyder-A couple who played with us in our league. Ronnie Kline from around Calgary, played with one of the teams in Butler, I think Herman's, and played for Calgary High School and another team later one, for Jackson Center. He and another, Gary Peters, went with the Chicago White Sox. He played eight or nine years.

Interviewer-Mr. Snyder, when did the involvement with the County League begin to wane and what is its current status? Is there any longer a team in Slippery Rock?

Mr. Snyder-No, there is no team in Slippery Rock any longer. I think they did come back for a few years in the '80s. When they got started back up again...it started to wane, the guys were getting older and in 1973 our last year, '73 or '74, I'm not sure. After about twenty years, we had moved to Harrisville and a lot of our guys had left, Charlie Lang and others. It was not as popular there, so some guys came to us from around...we had Chuck Cyphar from Marwood and Wane Geesher from Marwood and Mickey Deal from St. Quinlans and Ron Lumley from Herman and Barney Banes came back from the Tri-County League to catch for us. About all

that was left was myself and Bill Merkle and Bill Renick and Frank Augustino and maybe DeWitt Maxwell out of our original group. Some of the guys had left the area to work elsewhere so teams were falling apart everywhere. The young guys I guess I should say although Little League baseball is great and Midget baseball is great and the young guys don't seem to be as interested in what was required to maintain a team. In Harrisville we noticed that's why some of the other guys came. All the young guys, I don't want to name names, thought all you did was hit the baseball and play games. They didn't realize you had to raise money and buy bats and balls and go out in the field and chase the balls some of the time for the other guys and throw it in there. All they wanted to do was go up there and take their swings and go lay down or go somewhere else. I don't know whether you could say Little League baseball ruined it or whatever, but as we know the league is no longer in existence, so something is happening to it. I don't want to say what ruined it all, but to me that's what happened to ruin it. They had everything done for them. Little League, Midgets, or whatever it would be and did everything for them. They no longer realized there was more to it than standing up there with a bat, hitting a baseball and playing games.

Interviewer-Is there currently a team at the high school?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, there is.

Interviewer-An American Legion team?

Mr. Snyder-No, there is not, we ran a Legion team, some guys came to us, sons of guys we had played with. Bill's son Michael Renick came , so Bill and John Jantzee got the American Legion going. Again, here in Slippery Rock, we had a good Legion, willing to pay the bill and keep it going. I started helping our. Then Bill got busy and those guys were juniors in high school when we got it going and in about two years it sort of waned, too. It fell apart and for about two years we had Legion going again and then there didn't seem to be any interest at all.

Interviewer-Finally, Mr. Snyder, what has the game of baseball meant to you, your family and your community? What, if anything, has the game lost and what do you see in baseball's future?

Mr. Snyder-The game to me...I don't know. The competitiveness, the friendships. Joe Kantz, Bill Renick and I play golf Thursdays and Saturdays, and would be playing today...John Jantzee had to go away for a few days.

Interviewer-I should mention, it is a beautiful fall day and Mr. Snyder was kind enough to forgo a round of golf and it is appreciated.

Mr. Snyder-Anyway, to my family...I had two daughters and I'm sure they're both lovely girls, but my wife wouldn't state this this way...but, I thought it was good for me, the responsibility of raising a family and being lucky enough to live in a area like this to help support it. My wife

thinks maybe I donated too much time to baseball and was too interested in the game, but at the same time I feel we benefited from it. In my business and in my mental sense playing sports as long as I did and now lucky that I'm pretty healthy at sixty-two. I play golf, I play in two leagues out here, the Slippery Rock Men's League plays on Mondays and Wednesdays night and tonight I'm going bowling I do that. So I think that sports, well, you keep on going. The baseball stopped in '73 but we didn't stop. We started up a church softball league, I don't know for how many years after '73, so we kept with softball. We had church softball going four, five, or six years and at the same time we started our Slippery Rock Men's League, with our course out at Shamrock.

Interviewer-Most of these associations, which developed into others, came about through baseball?

Mr. Snyder- Yes, they developed from baseball. We still play golf, Bill Renick and Jantzee, guys that played, Nick Calderone.

Interviewer-Men that you also grew up with?

Mr. Snyder-Yes, grew up with. Associated in high school, the baseball and we're still around here. And since 1961, golf. So we have twenty there, or twenty-four out at the golf course.

Interviewer-Where does baseball go from here?

Mr. Snyder-I don't think baseball, beyond high school, we'll see again. My opinion, I was out this summer, I have a nephew

that's involved in Little League and I see T-Ball and Little League, got several in between that, and like we said still have the high school. But, I don't think anyone will organize there's no place. I see there is some small Tri-County League down there, about four teams, down around Butler. A little legion is going on, but instead of North-South Divisions, they only have on division. I'd like to see baseball get started up again, I'd like to see the kids. But in my opinion I don't think they'd ever get baseball organized beyond high school.

Interviewer-Do you have an opinion as to what is the reason behind this decline of interest in the sport?

Mr. Snyder-I think that they kids have too much to do. I got a granddaughter now, she's got everything and she's only three years old. I think the kids today have too many other things that baseball would be more like work, not like play. We were lucky to get a car, or get three cars, to get to away games. They all have cars now, almost automatic, a kid sixteen years old gets a car. I don't know if it's girls or what, we weren't that much interested in girls. Heck, we thought baseball was better than girls. In my opinion, I don't think the kids are going to put forth the necessary effort to keep organized ball going. Like I said before, too much may be done for them, in T-Ball, Little League, high school, legion, too much is done for them. There's no desire, maybe they play so long they are washed out.

Interviewer-What do you mean by "washed out", Mr. Snyder.

Mr. Snyder-Some of my friends that I associate with in the golf leagues and bowling leagues and so forth...I noticed them doing everything for the kids, from T-Ball at six or seven, through the Little Leagues, they're twelve of thirteen and go into high school with everything done for them. There's no energy, no desire. I think they've had all there is to do, they've decided they'd had enough of it. We were lucky, we didn't get started until later and did it all ourselves and I think that's where it's falling apart. Everything is being done for the kids and there's no desire, just mentally out of it.

Interviewer-Thank you very much Mr. Snyder for your time and patience. I truly appreciate it. Thank you for listening.