

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
BASEBALL IN PENNSYLVANIA

1. Student's Name Karen Callender
2. Subject's Name Sally O'Leary
3. Subject's Background Thirty years with Pittsburgh Pirate public relations
- a. date and place of birth Pittsburgh, PA
- b. Present address Same  
May contact at Pirate Clubhouse, Three Rivers  
Stadium.
- c. Present Occupation PR manager, Pgh. Pirates
4. Date of Interview 11/21/94
5. General Comments:

Mrs. O'Leary was very pleasant to interview, and generous with her time. She provided me with a 1994 record and information guide that has a section on the history of the Pirates, as well as biographies, season reviews and other information. Mrs. O'Leary was familiar with Slippery Rock University through interns that have served in the Pirate organization. She seemed pleased to contribute to our university archives.

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Subject: Ms. Sally O'Leary  
Public Relations Manager  
Pittsburgh Pirates

Karen Callender  
11/22/94

KC: When did you join the Pirate organization?

SOL: In May of 1964. I joined when we were still at Forbes Field. At Forbes Field we had a very small staff of probably twenty-five people altogether. I went into the public relations department, but we also did group sales, community nights, promotions, speakers, and anything that came along we did it in PR. There were just two of us! The boss and myself.

KC: How big is the department now?

SOL: When we moved to Three Rivers [stadium] the staff enlarged. We probably went up to maybe seventy-five at that point, and since then its enlarged even more. I think we're probably up to one hundred and fifty. That was cut back again because of the strike situation and club being up for sale. Its just grown and grown in all areas, every department. Now there is a group sales department, there's a community relations department, there's a promotions department.

KC: So its become more specialized?

SOL: Yes, everything has its own area.

KC: Before you joined the organization did you have an interest in baseball?

SOL: Very much. I'd always been a fan. I had applied for the job a couple of times and I always got the form letter back saying there were no openings but they would keep my name on file. Fortunately, I worked for an ad agency in Pittsburgh, and one of our clients was Mellon Bank. I was scheduling commercials for Mellon, and they happened to be a sponsor of Pirate baseball on radio and TV. My name was on the commercials as a contact, if there was ever a problem. That's how I got to know Bob Prince, who was the "Voice of the Pirates" for many, many years. We became very good friends, and he knew of my interest in the game. He said that someday there would be and opening with the Pirates and he would see that I got a chance at the job. So, it happened. The girl that had the job had been there for about eleven years, and everyone thought that she would die there because she was such a fan. But she was from Philadelphia and she wanted to go back to Temple [University] and further her education, so there was an opening. I had my interview at a ballgame one saturday afternoon, and I got the job!

KC: That's great! And you've been here ever since?

SOL: Oh yes, thirty years later! I've been here ever since.

KC: I'd like to ask you specifically about your duties, what you did then and what you do now.

SOL: It was basically secretarial. Although one big part of the job was statistics. I had to keep score of every game, so I had to go to every game. I had to update the statistics every day, and prepare press notes for the next home game. In those days I didn't have an adding machine or a calculator. I didn't have an electric typewriter, or a xerox machine. There was no such thing as a fax machine. Everything was very manual.

- KC: You had to be very well organized . . .
- SOL: Oh dear! And you really had to know the game. You had to know how to keep score. You had to follow records and keep on top of things for the media. And I hated math when I was in school! I just despised math, and here I am in a job where I have to use it every day!
- KC: I have a statistics class now, so I can sympathize with you, it can be very frustrating!
- SOL: Yes, but it did keep my interest, and I always knew what was going on. I could answer questions, we had so many phone calls. But I could answer the questions from media and from fans.
- KC: So you really had an overall perspective of things.
- SOL: Oh yes.
- KC: Over the years, aside from the growth of the behind-the-scenes organization; what other changes have you noticed? Such as the focus of PR; who were the fans? Were they the same thirty years ago as they are now?
- SOL: No, its changed considerably. The game, I think we all know has become a big business. There's so much money involved. When I first joined the club, the players were very . . . you were very close to the players. You could deal with them directly. You could get them to make appearances for minimal fees. They were always available, they were always there. Now, its almost impossible to get a player to make an appearance, unless it's on a charity basis, for a charity organization. But to just make an appearance as a speaker or to sign autographs for a couple of hours; there's a fee that has to be paid. That has taken some of the real close fan interest away, I think. There's not that closeness anymore. We've had an ownership change over the years too, which has effected a lot. When I joined the club, the Galbreaths owned the club. They owned it for over forty years when they sold it in 1985. Then we were purchased by a conglomerate of twelve or fourteen business people. That changed it considerably. All of a sudden we had fourteen bosses to report to! Its been quite a change that I've seen over the years.
- KC: There are many people who say the players have benefited over the last thirty years, as far a salary and the treatment they receive. We've all seen films of the old days with the players crammed into a bus, being stitched up after a game.
- SOL: Yes, exactly.
- KC: But there had to be a turning point when everyone was satisfied with their situation, as far as what was expected and what they received. Something changed since that point. Whether it was free agency coming into the picture or something else. What do you think it was?
- SOL: Well, I think it was when they organized, when they got their union. That's when it really started to change. And all the players have an agent or an attorney who deals for that player. When Joe Brown was our general manager,

he could see this coming. When he finally retired, he did so before this really took off. Because, he was of the opinion, if he couldn't deal face to face with a player and negotiate a contract, then he didn't want any part of it. If he had to deal with an agent as a middle-person, that just took away a lot of the warmth and personal feeling towards it all. So I think that's when it started to change. When this union was formed. Grant it, the players certainly have benefited.

KC: Financially?

SOL: Yes, very much so. But it has taken away that closeness, I think.

KC: What about public opinion toward the players?

SOL: Well, I think it is hot and cold. If you're winning, I don't think they really care what they're [players] making or what they're doing. But if you're not winning all the time, then they [fans] start seeing all these other little things that effect it and they start blaming this or that. But we've been fortunate that we've had many good years here, as far as winning, or getting close to winning. This last year or two when we lost to Atlanta for the third time then it was a real downer. It never seemed to pick up again.

KC: Do you really see waves of attendance according to wins and losses?

SOL: Oh yes, yes. Definitely. Now we had a good advance sale through this past season because we were going to have the All-Star game. And in order to get a ticket to the All-Star, you had to be a season customer, really. So, there were many different types of season ticket packages available to the fans, and there were a lot of advance tickets sold on that premise. But, I think it is going to be difficult to get many of those people back. I think when this is finally settled, it's going to be a real selling job. And I think that we anticipate that for a few years. We have to build it back up again, in many ways.

KC: The fan loyalty?

SOL: Yes, definitely. Because they feel betrayed. The season just shut-off August twelfth, and no post season, no world series since 1904. They're bitter, they really are, and a lot of us are too.

KC: I can see that, and who do you blame for that?

SOL: That's right. Both sides are involved. They both have their plate on the table and somebody's going to have to give. Something on both sides is going to have to give.

KC: Is it a matter of too many people asking for too much?

SOL: No, I don't think it's that. I think the players don't want to give up anything that they have, and the owners have given and given, and given all these years. Now they realize; hey, wait a minute, something has to change here. Because we're continuing to give all the time and that's not viable. The moneys just not going to be there. Especially in small markets

like ours. So somebody has to say; okay, this is enough. The owners have consistently said they need a salary cap. Whether that is going to happen or not I don't know. It has to happen in some form. Whether this new offer they've made in recent days is going to have it or not I don't know. We don't really get that close to knowing what is in the package. We just have to know what we read in the paper and wait and see.

KC: Throughout this whole season, what have you done for public relations? I'm sure you're trying to keep the love of the game alive, for when it does come back.

SOL: Right, right.

KC: How do you do that?

SOL: It's pretty difficult, it really is. We can't use the players in any way, because they're on strike, so we have no contact with them. They wouldn't be able to do anything anyway under the circumstances. So this is one area in which we have used the former players a lot. We have about twenty-five who live in this area. If we get requests for speakers or assemblies, we try to put someone there. But mostly it's front office people who go out and try to convince the public that we will have a baseball season in ninety-five [1995], and somebody will be playing ball. You just have to try your best. It's difficult. First you don't know who is going to be on your team. We have a lot of preparation to get ready for spring training. We have to write a media guide, do a yearbook, and you don't know who to write about! You have a forty-man roster, but you don't know if those players who are going to be tendered contracts are going to come to camp. You don't know if they'll cross the line and come. So you're really at a standstill in a lot of areas. But I have noticed, this off-season, that I have not gotten the requests from the public for players to appear. I get all the requests for the former players through my office and they just haven't been there this year. I've had very few. This shows me that the fans, even for the old-time players, are losing their interest in the game. So there is going to be a big selling job.

KC: I don't envy your position, and I think you're right, it is going to take a lot to turn people around.

SOL: It is.

KC: And depending upon their [the players] attitude when they come back, it could be tough.

SOL: That's right.

KC: And this is complicated with the Pirate organization because of the sale?

SOL: Exactly, because of the sale, right.

KC: And the new stadium, they're talking about that?

SOL: Right, right. Personally, I don't think we need a new stadium, but they don't ask me. But it makes me laugh that twenty-five years ago when we

were moving here [Three Rivers Stadium], this was the greatest thing ever built. It had everything that anyone could ever want or need. Now, all of a sudden, it's out of date. I feel there are things that they can do to the stadium to make it more compatible to what the fan is looking for. There are things they could change rather than build a whole new arena someplace. I just can't see it.

KC: What is the problem people have with the stadium?

SOL: Ever since we've opened, people complain about the traffic, and parking and one thing or another. And there again it makes me laugh because the football fans come, and you don't hear any complaints about waiting in traffic after a game. I don't know if it's a different breed of fan, or what it is. The Civic Arena is the same thing. You hear no publicity about bad traffic jams after an event at the Arena. Yet anytime they're held up here after a baseball game . . . I guess it may be because we play so many home games. We have an eighty-one home game schedule. Maybe that's it, I don't know.

KC: It may be that public opinion has grown sour. You hate to see it effect the game itself.

SOL: Yes.

KC: But you would say the game itself hasn't changed?

SOL: The game hasn't changed, no. Its become more scientific in a lot of ways. The players are certainly better prepared physically. They have all kinds of equipment and training available for them, that the old-timers didn't have. They're travel plans are first class all the way. I don't know, it's strange.

KC: Is there a difference now between the richer clubs, clubs that are buying the large salaries and a smaller club like ours? It hasn't really helped a club like the Mets, at least in the last few years, but does it make a difference to the game?

SOL: Well, you can't really "buy" a team. You really can't. If you have good talent, and good managers to bring them along . . . it its there, it will come through. I'm firmly convinced you can't buy a team like the Yankees have tried to do, or Oakland, or some of the other clubs. If you have the right group of fellas, that are dedicated, and if you have a good farm system, good minor league organization, if you build that up you're going to be fine. And we're doing that here. I think our minor leagues and farms have been working hard in the last few years and have built up a pretty good pool of players. They want to play. They're ready, they're anxious. The young guys are ready to go.

KC: Could it come to that?

SOL: Sure it could. And there again I think the fans would come out to see that. I think they're [the fans] ready for this. I think they know you won't win right away but they would appreciate somebody hustling and playing a good game. And eventually they're going to be great.

KC: Do you think the fans, especially here in Pittsburgh, like the underdog team?

SOL: Yes, they do.

KC: For a couple of years. . .

SOL: Yes, but not too long!

KC: I remember in the seventies [1970's] we would come to games at least once a week. That was the time of Dave Parker and Willie Stargell, and it was a very warm, loving feeling we had for the team.

SOL: Oh yes, the seventies were fun!

KC: Even the seasons leading up to those winning years were wonderful.

SOL: Oh, it takes awhile.

KC: Yet when I went to a game a year or so ago, I just didn't sense that feeling. But all this was in the air, with salaries and everything.

SOL: That's right.

KC: Fans were booing Barry Bonds when he came out on the field. . .

SOL: And it's been his attitude. The way he'll not talk to people and to media. He's an outstanding athlete. He has all the tools in the world, but he's got to learn to control his mouth. To be decent to people. He's the idol of a lot of little kids, they think he's just the greatest.

KC: And he could be.

SOL: That's right, but he's got to show some compassion. The players have to do that. They have to use their PR a little bit!

KC: It is a business.

SOL: Yes it is.

KC: One thing we have been fortunate in is in the management of our team. Murtaugh, Leyland. . .

SOL: We've had some great managers, Chuch Tanner, Leyland. Leyland has been outstanding. Here was a minor league coach brought in as a manager. Nobody had ever really heard of him, but he has a way about him, the players really respect him, they'll play for him.

KC: I noticed that also. I remember that when Bonds showed disrespect for Leyland and the fans turned on him. It seems if a player is having a bad season, the fans will stay behind him, but, as with Bonds, if they do something toward Leyland, or make bad remarks about Pittsburgh, he'll lose the town.

SOL: That's right.

KC: I hope it stays the same in this town, that we don't lost that feeling.

SOL: I think it will. We've had baseball for 108, 109 years. I can't imagine it leaving. I just can't imagine that happening. That's why I felt that we would eventually get a new buyer, and we would stay here, I never felt threatened that we would leave.

KC: There isn't much fear of that now, is there? Isn't it part of the deal that the club stays here?

SOL: Right, right.

KC: What about the stadium? Is that part of the deal?

SOL: I don't think its going to be in written form, but it will be a good faith offering that there will probably be a new stadium.

KC: So there's a lot happening, much different from the days of Forbes Field?

SOL: Oh it sure is, it sure is.

KC: Another question regarding unions; I heard Myron Cope talking about working at Forbes when he was a teenager. He would sell hot dogs or soda, or whatever he could and the working conditions were awful. They would put him in what was called "the dungeon" if he wasn't working so he couldn't see the game. That was before the unions came in and things got better for most people.

SOL: Yes, that's right.

KC: Do you think it's gone past the point of helping?

SOL: Yes, I think it's gone a little bit beyond. Sure, things can still be improved in some areas, but I think you have to have a limit on everything. But maybe I'm from the old school, I don't know.

KC: So actually it's the money that has prompted the change. . .

SOL: Oh yes, the money, I think it is. Definitely the money. Of course the big salaries create problems. You have to raise your ticket prices, food prices, parking prices. Everything goes up in accordance. And it has to stop someplace.

KC: How badly has that effected attendance?

SOL: Some people feel its been quite a bit, but I don't know. I think if people really want to come to a ballgame they're going to pay the ticket price. They may not come as often, the family of four or whatever. They can still come and sit in general admission and have a good evening at a reasonable price. But if they want a box seat they're probably not going to come more than two or three times as a group.

KC: Has this inspired things like "family night"?

SOL: Sure, sure. We never used to have promotions like that, but once we got

over here we had to do something to fill these seats. The Galbreaths really didn't promote that much, because in those days you didn't have to. But once we got over here they realized you have to change your thinking and market it a little differently. That's when we started the different promotions. usually on weekends or Friday nights, Sundays. Recent years we started family nights, or buck night in the middle of the week. They're very popular, they really are.

KC: I agree. You've made it possible to come and enjoy a game without having to stay home for the next two weeks! I'd like to ask you about the image of the game. All the problems you've talked about, the union and free agency, this pull between the owners and the players, not just in Pittsburgh. From the fans point of view, from the feedback your getting, do people still love baseball? Is it still America's sport?

SOL: Well, it's going to have a pretty rough race right now. I think so many people are turned off. Because for years and years baseball was the number one game. I don't know if we're going to come out number one right away. If they don't settle this and we don't have a major league season next year, it is really going to be a battle. If the players do come back I think the fans will come back. I feel sure they will, all over the country, although you hear a lot of them say they'll never go to another ballgame, and they could care less. I think once the players go to camp and you start spring training and all this starts up again, I think your good fans will come back. Your basic fans. It is going to take awhile. I don't care what way it ends up, it's going to take awhile.

KC: Do you think a replacement with minor league players will help?

SOL: I think it will help, yes. I don't know whether it's going to be overwhelming right away. They're [the fans] going to wait and see just how interesting it really is. But, it's going to take awhile, in my opinion.

KC: Well, we've got time.

SOL: That's right!

KC: I think baseball will be around for a long, long time.

SOL: Well I do too. I can't imagine it dying. When you looked at "Baseball" by Ken Burns you saw that they had problems in their day too.

KC: Has there been anything in baseball history to compare with this last year? Especially in this area between the sale, the stadium controversy, the strike?

SOL: I don't know but when I watched it I was surprised at the things they were having problems with in those days. To us now some of them may seem very minor. But in that time it was probably a pretty major thing. I was surprised at some of the things the players were complaining about. They wanted to be organized in some way or another, but it never happened.

KC: Burns focused a lot on racism.

SOL: Yes, he did.

KC: Is that still a factor today?

SOL: I don't think it is. I don't feel that here in Pittsburgh anyway. We've had some very good black athletes. Some outstanding ones like Clemente and Stargell. They certainly were behind them all the way. So I don't think that's a problem with us at all.

KC: So there have been some good changes?

SOL: Oh yes, yes definitely.