



Erlene "Beans" Risinger

Birth: March 20, 1927

Death: July 29, 2008

Earlene "Beans" Risinger was born at home in Hess, OK. She was the oldest child with four younger brothers; one of which was adopted. Only her adopted brother and she completed their early education through high school. As soon as they were able, her other brothers worked in the cotton fields, which was the best employment option in the area.

From the time she was 12 years old, Beans also picked cotton. Of that experience, she said, ". . . if you've never chopped cotton down half mile rows at 112 degrees with hot wind blowing while going out behind the tumble weed to go to the bathroom, you haven't lived."

Yet, her family found time to play its favorite pastime—baseball. From the time she was six years old, Beans was playing catch with her dad. At that young age, she learned to throw overhand, which proved to be very important later in her baseball career. The coach for the girls' high school softball team would take her out of her sixth grade class to take her to the games. Then after the game, he would treat her with an ice cream cone. Because the coach's generosity happened during the Great Depression, it made a lasting impression on her. "What a big treat it was because not everyone had nickels or dimes to do that," said Beans.

During her pre-high year years, Beans played baseball with the boys. They would "always choose [her] first to be on their team." During high school, Beans "played all kinds of sports . . . and coached first base for the boys' . . . team." On the girls' softball team, she played shortstop.

In 1947, Beans learned about the women's professional baseball league by going down to the grocery store to read the day-old newspaper. She then ". . . took a penny postcard, wrote the editor of the sports people, and they forwarded [her] card onto Chicago. They sent for [her] and told [her] to come up there for a tryout."

Beans borrowed the money from the bank to take the train to Rockford, IL, for the tryout. However, she only made it to Chicago, where she was supposed to change trains to Rockford. "By the time I had ridden that milk train all the way to Chicago, never having been out of the county line before . . . I was so homesick. I went to Union Station and went back home. I didn't

make it in 1947 because I just turned around and went back home,” she said. Back at home, Beans had to work in the cotton fields to pay back her bank loan.

In 1948, a scout from New Mexico, on her way to spring training, “scouted [Beans] and said they would send [her] to Springfield, IL. She took out another bank loan and bought a bus ticket. That time the trip was only one day, “so I made it then,” Beans said. By that time the required pitching style had changed from side or underhand to overhand. Because the teams needed overhand pitchers and Beans could throw overhand, she became a pitcher.

That same year, the league expanded to 10 teams. But, according to Beans, it “didn’t have enough good players to go around and didn’t have enough cities to support it.” Springfield, IL, was one of those cities, so it lost its team. As a result, Beans was “allocated” to the Grand Rapids, MI, Chicks. However, in 1949, Beans was asked to join a team that toured Central and South America. “And that was the second time I was ever away from home,” she said.

When she returned to Grand Rapids, Beans remembered that she made \$65 a week, which was “great pay,” and on the road “they’d give you meal money.” At home two girls would stay in a room of individual homes; sometimes they would have kitchen privileges.

Until 1950 Beans had gone home to Hess, OK, for the off season. But then she decided to stay in Grand Rapids. The owner of Jordan Buick, a league board member, had offered her a job.

In 1953, a year before the league disbanded, the Chicks won the league championship. Beans played an important role in that achievement. The victory came in the last game of the season, which was played in Kalamazoo, MI. According to Beans, it was cold, only 40 degrees, (the girls played in short skirts); the bases were loaded; the clean-up hitter was up; the captain of the team, Ziggy, had a brief conference on the mound with Beans; Ziggy told Beans, “Just do it.” And she did. She struck out the batter and won the game. “That was a highlight of my career,” she said. The trophy that the team won that year is displayed in the Baseball Hall of Fame, in Cooperstown, NY. Beans continued: “I never won 20 games or anything like that, but I never missed a turn pitching and my Earned Run Average for the whole years was 2.51, which is considered really good. So I’d be worth a million dollars today if I were a pitcher.”

In 1954, with the end of the league, Beans moved on by attending an x-ray technician program at Butterworth Hospital. As a result of an x-ray of her elbow in 1953, she had become interested in that technology. While in that program, she earned \$25 a week, a significant wage decrease from her baseball days. As an x-ray technician, she went to work for an orthopedic surgeon and stayed with him until 1969. In 1970, she became an “orthopedic assistant” and worked for a group of orthopedic doctors until she retired in 1995. At the time of this interview, Beans only “worked” by helping her friend and fellow Chick, Marilyn Jenkins, with her estate sales business. She also volunteered for the Shriners International.

Starting in 1982, Beans attended league reunions every 2 years. She said they were attended by about 200 ballplayers. At the time of this interview, they also had their own players’ association, which had been funded, in part, by \$100,000 from the 1992 movie, *A League of their Own*.

Beans was among 60 former league players who were asked to come to Skokie, IL, all expenses paid, to coach the actors of that film.

Beans has been inducted into three halls of fame. In 1988, the entire league was honored by the Baseball Hall of Fame. In September 2001, the Chicks team was installed in the Grand Rapids Hall of Fame. Last, although the date escaped her, Beans said she was also in her hometown's Baseball Hall of Fame.

When asked why she thought the league dissolved, Beans had many reasons: WWII was over; people could get out again; television was becoming popular; there were more options. Finally, the league was a nonprofit organization that "didn't keep any rainy day money and that was a problem [after the war]."

In conclusion, Beans said, "After hearing about the league, it just changed my life It changed a lot of people's lives, but it really changed mine because of where I was born and brought up."

At the time of this interview, Beans also commented on women's sports: "[They] are doing wonderful. We think we got it started. Then Title XI came in and it helped. It's still not fair, but it's a lot better than it was.

Other Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earlene_Risinger

<http://www.aagpbl.org/index.cfm/articles/risinger-earlene-beans/11>

<https://aagpbl.org/index.cfm/articles/risinger-earlene-beans--3-20-1927--7-29-2008/68>

<http://cdm16015.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15068coll11/id/16>

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