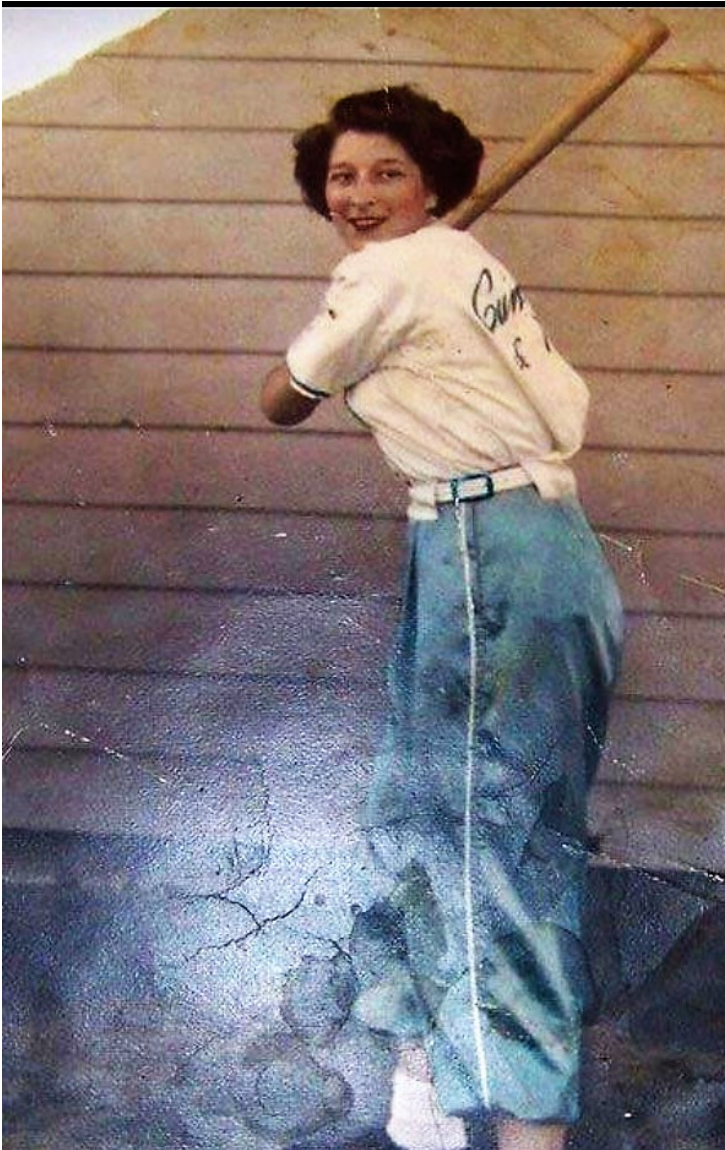


Marion Bowers: an Indigenous baseball trailblazer



By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

For National Indigenous History Month, Bancroft This Week is highlighting an Indigenous woman from South Algonquin Township who blazed a trail playing professional baseball from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Her name was Marion Bowers. Miriam (Marion) Susan Bowers-Laginski was born in Whitney, in South Algonquin Township in 1933, to Norman Bowers and Susan Sharbot Bowers, who was Indigenous. According to her daughter Roxane Manitowabi, her mother probably played baseball as a youngster as most other kids, including herself did up in Whitney in those days. During the Second World War, Manitowabi also says that her mother, being one of the youngest siblings, looked after the farm and kept things going, as her four older brothers and one sister were off fighting the war.

Bowers lived in Toronto from 1949 to 1961. Manitowabi says she was only 16-years-old making that move to the big city, although her experiences being a farm girl gave her resilience and strength.

"When I think about being an Indigenous woman and going to Toronto when you're so young and making that transition between being a farm girl and living in the big city. It must have been a tough go," she says.

During those years down in "the big smoke," she played Ladies Major League Fastball, taking on the positions of second base and outfielder. Well respected by her teammates, who called her "Dutch," she was also a consummate sportswoman, who hit many winning home runs for her team The National Torches, formerly called Cunningham and Hill, during her tenure with them. She was also mentioned in many newspaper sports articles of that period.

The National Torches won the Bulova Watch Trophy at the 1961 CNE tournament. They also competed for Canada in the ASA Women's Major League Fast Pitch National World Tournament in Stamford, Connecticut.

The National Torches also competed against the Men's All-Stars in community fundraisers in addition to the roster of regular games they played.

According to one local newspaper sports editor at the time, the Sunnyside Ladies' League, of which The National Torches were a part, played a "fast, thrilling kind of ball" and regularly attracted bigger crowds than the men's league.

After Bowers came back to Whitney in 1961, she became the mother to two daughters, Roxane and Bernadean. Sadly, she was widowed in 1971, and from then on, raised her two daughters as a single mother. Manitowabi says she continued to play baseball casually, but nothing competitive.

"She tried to encourage me to play baseball, but I just didn't have the desire or the skills. I was not an athlete," she says. During her post-baseball career, Bowers worked at Killarney Lodge and drove a school bus for many years for the Renfrew District Catholic School Board. Manitowabi recalls that her mother really cared about her community.

"She was always involved and giving back to the community. She worked with the Catholic Women's League. They had a seniors' club there so she was really active in those areas. She also did a lot of work with the Metis Nation when they first started, trying to help people get their status," she says.

Bowers passed away in 1998 in Whitney. Manitowabi calls her mother's experiences playing professional baseball ground-breaking, and sees her as a role model for Indigenous women and for young people from Whitney in general.

"Think about it. You're an Indigenous woman, you're playing professional baseball in a male dominated sport. I think it's really important to recognize and acknowledge the history. It's not just about baseball. I do think there's more to it," she says. "[She and her teammates] were trailblazers."

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