

Rockford Chamber VOICE Article – May 2018 Summer brings celebration of Peaches' first season

By John Groh

At the beginning of the 1992 movie, "A League of Their Own," an aging Dottie Hinson is reluctantly packing to go to the opening of an exhibit at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown showcasing the athletes who played in the first women's professional baseball league. The fictional Dottie had been a Rockford Peach, one of four real-life teams playing in the inaugural season of 1943.

"When are you going to realize how special it was, how much it all meant?" her daughter asks.

With four championships, the Peaches were the winningest team in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, which existed between 1943 and 1954. The league was created to help American baseball moguls maintain interest in the sport while so many of "our boys," including a lot of big-name ball players, were overseas fighting in WWII.

While millions of American women punched in at factories to support the war effort in the absence of men, 60 women from across the country and Canada were recruited to play for pay on baseball diamonds in the Midwest. They were talented athletes, and people in the teams' home cities of Rockford, South Bend, Kenosha and Racine turned out to support them.

It was special, and it meant something – then and now. The legacy lives on, especially in Rockford, the Cradle of Baseball in the West. A women's team called the Rockford Starfires, named after a variety of peach, has called Beyer Stadium home since 2012. "The team plays the same women's hardball rules used in the original women's league. On May 30, 1943, the Rockford Peaches played the South Bend Blue Sox in the all-girl league's opening day game at Beyer Stadium.

Numerous events this spring and summer will celebrate the 75th anniversary of that first season. Rockford hosts two all-girls baseball tournaments this summer, one for the United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) and another for Baseball for All, a national organization with the mission of empowering girls to play the game.

In addition, several upcoming events support a capital campaign effort for the International Women's Baseball Center, which was announced two years ago and will be housed in a building across the street from Beyer Stadium.

Celebrities who acted in the movie will be on hand for a family-friendly fundraiser titled, "Diamonds, Denim and Stars" at the Coronado Theatre on Wednesday, May 30. The celebration continues through the weekend. The Peaches will be recognized at City Market on Friday, June 1, and "A League of Their Own" will be featured at Friday Night Flix at Davis Park. The fun continues at Beyer Stadium on Saturday, June 2, with Family Day, which includes educational activities for kids and an exhibition game between the Starfires and celebrity guests. Sunday, June 3, features a Home Run Derby, a friendly competition between local police and firefighters, and closing ceremonies.

Find a full listing of the IWBC's 75th anniversary events at www.internationalwomensbaseballcenter.org. Looking toward the future, Rockford could greatly benefit from the efforts of the IWBC to make the city a mecca for baseball enthusiasts. IWBC

President Kat Williams is especially interested in how baseball can be used to teach children about science, technology, engineering and math. To the popular STEM formula, she has added an A, for the arts, calling it STEAM education. That is truly a meaningful effort for our city's children.

Meanwhile, the RACVB is working with the Illinois Film Office to try to attract the attention of Hollywood executives who are considering producing a new TV series based on the story of the Rockford Peaches. It would be an amazing economic and publication relations boon to the city to have a series filmed here.

At the RACVB, we're doing all we can to keep Rockford at the center of the story, where it belongs.

John Groh is president/CEO of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. The mission of the RACVB is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development. www.gorockford.com

The views expressed are Groh's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.

