

Ladies Vintage Base Ball

For over a decade women have been part of the vintage base ball phenomenon. The Ohio Village Diamonds were the first such club, but they have now been joined by clubs such as the Lady Clodbusters, the Lady Locks, the Hens, and others. Research on 19th and 20th century womens' baseball is still growing, but it has been documented that like their modern counterparts, a few ladies from earlier times were not content to sit and watch the boys play. In the novel *Northanger Abbey*, published in 1818, Jane Austen's character Catherine is described as follows "...It was not very wonderful that Catherine, who had by nature nothing heroic about her, should prefer cricket, baseball, riding on horseback, and running about the country at the age of fourteen, to books..." Enlightened ladies of the 1860s did understand the need for exercise, and baseball found a place in a few locales. However, most Americans considered it too rough and tumble for young ladies, and by the mid-1870s, inappropriate. Etiquette books of the 1870s and 1880s suggested croquet parties and fishing excursions as suitable activities for women.

The first documented mention of women playing baseball anywhere in the United States was in a letter from Vassar student Annie Glidden to her brother on April 20, 1866. "They are getting up various clubs now for outdoor exercise. They have a floral society, boat clubs, and baseball. I belong to one of the latter, and enjoy it hugely, I can assure you." A history of the Resolutes and period base ball at Vassar was published in the July-August 1994 issue of *American Heritage*. Titled "The Girls of Summer" by Gene Smith, the 1876 Resolutes pictured at right were, in fact, one of the last two clubs at Vassar. In Annie Glidden's day, the game was considered good for the mind. Baseball's popularity peaked in 1875 at Vassar and Smith writes, "...increasingly the baseball clubs were also seen as vulgar." Public pressure against girls playing base ball killed off the game at Vassar shortly after the June 1876 photo was taken. However, times changed. In the 1890s, the novelty of barnstorming ladies "Bloomer Girls" teams attracted attention. These clubs usually had a few (typically 1-3) male players and would play against men's clubs. Perhaps the most successful female player and ultimately team owner was Maud Nelson. Born in Italy in 1881 to the name, Clementina Brida, Nelson became the premier female pitcher of latter 19th and early 20th century. She played on the Boston Bloomers and the Star Bloomers before joining forces with her husband, John Olson, owner of the Cherokee Indian Base Ball Club in 1908. In 1911, Nelson created the Western Bloomer Girls club which was a huge success. After two years, she sold the club to her partner and went on to create another ladies club—a pattern she would repeat several times. Ladies base ball would thrive until the Great Depression when many clubs (both male and female) folded in hard times. In addition, the game of softball was starting to take hold in the 1930s and women stopped playing base ball for the most part. The last gasp of air for ladies base ball was the The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943-1954 which was, of course, the inspiration for the movie, *A League of Their Own*. For more information, visit the web feature "The Girls of Summer" in the Exploratorium's website "Science of Baseball" section. The Rutgers website has a fine article and photo on Bloomer Girls. Also check the New York Women's Baseball Association website for excellent information on the New York Bloomer Girls, 1910-1933. Some of the information in this page was taken from the fine book, by Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball* (1993)

