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*Mrs. Morhard and The Boys: One mother's vision. The first boys' baseball league. A nation inspired by Ruth Hanford Morhard (review)*

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attention. On the other hand, Smith is quite complimentary of baseball's role in the Civil Rights Movement with Jackie Robinson's shattering of the sport's color barrier in 1947, yet he neglects to acknowledge the slow pace of baseball's racial integration.

To restore baseball's position in the nation's sporting hierarchy, Smith rightly suggests that the pace of play be enhanced through pitch clocks and umpires keeping batters in the box. He also maintains that the presence of baseball on network television must be increased in order to attract younger fans to the game. This argument has validity for the late twentieth-century marketplace, but network television is not the venue through which most viewers today access sporting events and programming. Baseball must appeal to changing demographics in the United States, but Smith fails to address how the sport may better market itself to women, Latinos, Asians, and blacks, who have deserted the game in recent years. There is a tremendous amount of young talent in the game, but players such as Mike Trout must be better marketed and youthful enthusiasm encouraged.

American culture has changed, and baseball may never regain its stature as the national pastime, but the sport continues to attract followers. Baseball is not going away, and Smith offers an entertaining account of the sport's history. In the final analysis, however, one's opinion of Smith's book is likely to be influenced by one's political and cultural perspectives. American democracy faces many challenges, but the nation today displays a far greater respect for diversity and social justice than the one into which this reviewer was born in the late 1940s.



**Ruth Hanford Morhard. *Mrs. Morhard and The Boys: One mother's vision. The first boys' baseball league. A nation inspired.* New York: Citadel Press Books. 2019. 277 pp. Cloth, \$27.00.**

*Tim Wiles*

*Mrs. Morhard and the Boys* tells the previously almost completely unknown story of a remarkable woman who founded a youth baseball league in 1937 Cleveland, two years before Little League was founded in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

The book begins with a dramatic 1941 championship game in Cleveland's League Park, though neither the Indians nor any of Cleveland's several Negro

Leagues teams was involved. Instead, the Little World Series pitted the Little Indians, champions of the Junior American League against the Cardinals, who won the Junior National League pennant. Wisely, author Ruth Hanford Morhard ends the prologue before revealing which team would come out on top. The score stood 4-2, with but one inning left to play. Readers will have to wait for a conclusion, though, as the story goes back almost nine decades to its true beginning.

Joseph Mathey set sail for America from Le Havre, France, at age seventeen in 1869, after both his mother and his grandparents passed away. In America, he pursued the same occupation his family had known in France: farming. He and his wife Elizabeth spawned seventeen children, the eleventh of whom, Josephine Mathey Morhard, is the heroine of this book.

Josephine was a remarkable woman, and it's a good thing, because the author spends approximately the first one hundred pages detailing her fascinating life in impressive detail. Readers of this journal should note there is almost no mention of baseball in the first one hundred pages. However, this is not just a baseball story, but also the story of a remarkable, persistent, irresistibly plucky young woman who left home at a very young age, weathered two bad marriages, and supported a daughter and a son through the Great Depression running her own butcher shop.

The author, Ruth Hanford Morhard, who married that son, Albert Joseph Morhard, or "Junior," tells her story in extremely well-researched detail and vivid writing. This baseball fan, with little to no interest in Ohio farm life of the late nineteenth century, nor in the economics of Cleveland butcher shops during the Depression, nevertheless found the story fascinating and compelling. In short, the life of Josephine Morhard is portrayed as both representative of American life during these years, and at the same time extraordinary in her ability to ignore conventional expectations of a woman in American society, and blaze her own trail against difficult odds.

Running a successful business as a single mother left little time to parent her children, and Josephine had growing concerns about Junior, resulting in her eventual founding of the baseball program. Perhaps because her initial motivation in starting the league was to give her own son structure and guidance, these became the overarching goals of her effort on behalf of all the boys who ended up playing on the eight teams in two leagues which she founded.

The leagues emphasized discipline, motivation, encouragement, and fair play. Beyond that, she wanted to teach the boys proper baseball technique, so she networked and recruited Laddie Placek, a scout for the Cleveland Indians and a local sporting goods salesman, to teach the boys proper hitting, throwing, and fielding techniques.

Along the way, she also recruited several experienced umpires, including future Spink-Award winning sportswriter Hal Leibovitz, and developed high quality fields, with the help of local mayors, business owners, and other community leaders. Much of the money to run the league came from her own coffers, along with fundraising events like holiday doubleheaders and ox roasts.

Mrs. Morhard managed her own team, the Little Indians, and found parents to manage the other teams. At one point, the fifth team to develop was also managed by another mother, and the author notes that “it was unheard of to have mothers in dresses and high heels running baseball teams.” In fact, there was at least one predictable attempt at a man taking over the leagues, but he was firmly rebuffed. Elmer Kaufman thought there should be more emphasis on winning and less emphasis on having fun and learning off-the-field values. Kaufman was destined to lose this battle, though, perhaps because he underestimated his opponent. As the book tells us, Josephine Morhard had “fought her way through life since she was a child. She’d dealt with men who attempted to rape her, cheat her, and frame her. She’d married two wayward men who put her through hell.” She’d resurrected a failing business and “dealt with much worse than Elmer Kaufman.” He takes his child off the team and founds a short-lived competitor league.

The whole story of how a determined woman founded two youth baseball leagues which played for eight seasons and played their first championship game in a major league ballpark is wonderfully implausible. Even just looking at one chapter reveals a fantastic baseball story. Junior Morhard, age twelve, watches a fancy car pull into his driveway, and out hops his older sister with her new boyfriend, Jeff Heath, rookie left fielder of the Cleveland Indians. Not only does Heath stop by often, but he always plays ball with Junior in the backyard, leaves tickets for Indians games, and brings friends like Bob Feller and Roy Weatherly over. There are baseball books that have been written in the past whose stories are not even as intriguing as this chapter.

The book is extremely well-researched, and the attention to detail is administered with love—the love of great stories and the love of the game. Short side trips cover Cleveland baseball luminaries including Alta Weiss, Joe Jackson, Louis Sockalexis, and others. Most of the details are correct, though there are occasional lapses which might distract, but ultimately do not take away from the overall compelling nature of this unique story. For example, extra innings are referred to as “overtime” at one point, and Jimmie Foxx is rendered as “Jimmy.” Errors are a part of baseball, and of baseball writing, and the few that can be found within these pages are inconsequential. It is still a great story, very well told.

The creation story of Little League baseball, dreamed up by Carl Stotz in

Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in 1939, is well known. Much of the intrigue surrounding the premise of this book is that the junior leagues in Cleveland were founded two years earlier, by an extremely plucky and determined woman. The author addresses differences in the leagues, noting that a key part of the Little League vision, sponsorship of teams by local businesses, may have made the difference in the survival of Little League, contrasting with the demise of Cleveland's junior leagues in 1944. Though the Cleveland leagues made it most of the way through World War Two, interest declined during wartime, and the original generation of players aged out.

Though this chapter of youth baseball history was largely unknown until this book, the leagues received wide media attention during their heyday. Syndicated newswires reported on the championship games at League Park, and the Cleveland Indians even assisted the league by making a publicity film for them at no cost—in addition to providing all the baseballs the boys used. That film can still be seen today on YouTube, under the title “Mrs. Morhard’s Little Indians Present “Bringing Up Baseball.” Introducing the Junior Big Leagues.”

The source material for the book includes not just this film, but extensive interviews with Josephine’s son “Junior,” Albert J. Morhard, and at least twenty handwritten pages of manuscript memories by Josephine herself. Extensive research notes are provided by the author. There also were interviews with several boys who played in these leagues, and some of their lives are well-sketched in the book.

So, let’s return to that championship game in League Park, on a beautiful, sunny, eighty-four-degree day on September 28, 1941. The Little Indians are in the championship game against the undefeated Little Cardinals of the Junior National League, whose pitcher throws a no-hitter through six innings and drives in an insurance run in the top of the seventh and final inning, extending the lead to 5–2. There’s a brief skirmish between the heroine of the book, Little Indians manager Josephine Morley, and her male counterpart in the other big-league dugout. Naturally, what’s at stake is not just the outcome, but whether the game will be played according to the rules, requiring substitute players to each get an inning of play.

What happens next, you’ll need to read the book to find out. There hasn’t been a great baseball movie made for quite a few years. Hollywood need look no further than this book for some excellent source material.

