Bloomer Girl

A Short Story suggested by Eric

By Maryanne Peters

The following story, the first seven paragraphs of which are shown here, comes from the Sporting News (then a baseball-only newspaper) of December 4, 1924:

WHEN PETTIGREW LOST HIS GIRLISH FIGURE

A Little Story of a Veteran Minor Leaguer

PONCA CITY, Okla., Nov. 30 --- "Gents, meet Miss Maude Nelson." It was thus back in the early 1900's, that Ned Pettigrew was introduced to the members of the baseball teams throughout the West and Southwest, when their respective towns were visited by Jack DeRoss' "Bloomer Girl" team. It was, to be exact, in 1901, that these "Bloomers" visited old Oklahoma Territory, playing at Guthrie, Oklahoma City and various other towns in what is now Oklahoma.

Ned Pettigrew was the star pitcher for the girls' team. Almost all the other members were girls, who had been organized into such a team and were piloted about the country by DeRoss. There was no girl that could throw a ball equal to the occasion, however, and Pettigrew -- who has since lost his girlish figure -- was secured to do mound duty. And he was exceptionally good. On the day the Bloomers played at Guthrie, they shut out the home team, 6 to 0, with Pettigrew in the box.

Pettigrew was in Ponca City the other day, helping in the organization of the new Mid-Continent League for 1925, to be composed of Cushing, Ponca City, Enid and Blackwell in Oklahoma, and Arkansas City, Wingfield and perhaps Eureka and Wellington in Kansas. He was here with the Cushing fellows and it is generally understood that he will again manage the Cushing team next year and play centerfield as usual.

"We had a lot of fun while the Bloomer Girls were on the road," said Pettigrew. "I had to keep my mouth shut, of course, from when we got into a new town until the game was over, for I had too deep a voice for a girl, but I had the figure all right, and in almost every instance we got through a game without the fans knowing that I was not really a girl.

"My playing name was Maude Nelson, and as such I was introduced, although I was supposed to be DeRoss' wife. Jack always carried my glove to the baseball field and played at catch with the rest of the team until I arrived. He would always refer to me as his wife. Invariably, he would give some local boy the glove and say -- 'Sonny, take this glove out there to my wife.' And then when the boy would reach me with the glove, some of the girls on the team would always say, 'boy, tell Jack that Maude wants some peanuts and to send her a dime, Of course, such conversation would easily get around among the fans and as long as I kept still, I was all right."

Pettigrew played the outfield for Wichita, Kan., over a long term of years, both in the Western Association and the Western League, and it was while he was with that club that he had the climax of his girlhood days in baseball. He tells the story:

"I heard an awful yell from one of the boxes and it turned out to be Jack DeRoss. It was the first time I had seen him since I quit playing with the Bloomers at least eight years earlier, and while renewing the old acquaintance Jack suddenly motioned to a woman to come down to the stand and meet me; it was Jack's actual honest-to-goodness wife. Acknowledging the introduction, I said to Mrs. DeRoss -- 'I do not want to cause Jack any embarrassment, but you perhaps do not know, Mrs. DeRoss, that I was Jack's first wife.' " ...

I don’t really know how these things happened, but somebody picked up the story and I headed down to Ponca City Oklahoma to meet Ned Pettigrew and get his story for the December edition of “the Sporting News”. I would have taken the journey to talk to a fencepost, back then. I was young and keen at knew little of the world. But I loved baseball, and I loved to travel around this great country of ours, and this sounded like an interesting story.

I knew very little about the Bloomer Girl Baseball teams except that they travelled around parts of the country playing exhibition games with local teams, usually sending up those serious amateurs by playing better ball. The girls were professionals after all, but not all of them were girls.

I learned that later on, the fact that some of the team were men dress as girls came into the open, and was seen as all part of the joke. These games were meant to be entertainment, and from a baseball perspective there was still plenty of high quality skills on display. As long as the crowd was happy and the turnstiles could pay the Bloomers fee, everybody was happy.

But back when Ned became Maude, things were a little more serious. Bloomer girls had to be girls.

The team run by Jack DeRoss arrived in Ponca City in the fall of 1901 when Ned was only 19. Ned had been required to retire from playing but was still more than capable on the mound. He was not a big guy and was of slight build, but he had a good arm and an even better technique. He had a range of ball deliveries that could keep any batter guessing. He was just what Jack DeRoss was looking for, in a girl.

All I knew was that Ned had turned out for the Bloomer Girl team and that he had been able to pass himself off as female for at least five years. From what I had been told, from around 1906 it became more widely known that not all the girls on the field were really girls, and even with that knowledge the exhibition games continued until to U.S. entry into the First World War. It was said that Ned had continued to play for a Bloomer Girl team up until as late as that – up to 20 years playing professionally. It struck me that Ned would have a story to tell.

I had an address. It was in a comfortable suburb on the outskirts of the city. It was a large house with a wide porch, and a grass lawn in front right down to the street, and big trees around it. I had the cab drop me off and I headed on up and knocked on the door.

A woman answered. She was around forty, shapely of figure, attractive, with brown hair styled in what I now know are called marcel waves. She wore a green dress and shoes with heels.

“Eric Pither from the Sporting News,” I said, introducing myself. “I am doing a story of Bloomer girl teams, and I am looking for Ned Pettigrew.”

She looked suddenly very uncomfortable. She stepped out of the house and onto the porch and motioned that we walk towards the outdoor sofa seat where we could sit.

“You won’t find Ned Pettigrew here. But I may be able to help you,” she said. “I played for a Bloomer girl team way back when. I played as Maude Nelson, but that is Maude with an E, so not the same Maud Nelson who played out in Boston.”

“It’s just that I understand that Ned played for 20 years for a girl’s team. There must be some stories he could tell.” Still she saw me pull out my notebook and she seemed willing to talk.

“Ned did not play as long as I did,” she said. “And there are stories to tell. And I am happy to tell them to you. But can I ask that you keep some confidences when you publish. Some of us have gone on to lead happy and rewarding lives after baseball. I can tell you the whole story, including all about Ned, if you agree that you will only publish what I say that you can.”

“Well maybe I could just talk to Ned, if you can tell me where I can find him.”

“You will not be able to talk to Ned … not ever,” she said with a determination that made me believe that, for whatever reason, that was true.

“Fair enough, Miss Nelson,” I said.

“It’s actually Mrs. DeRoss,” she said. “But you can call me Maude. And no, I never played in Boston. I just took the name Nelson to play off a little confusion.”

Now Mrs. DeRoss. I knew who Jack DeRoss was. He ran the team. I had heard that he had died only a few years before. His widow would be able to give me the story I was looking for. So I sat down with my notebook and she sat beside me, arranging her dress over her knees, and she began her story:

“Small towns in this part of the world are hungry for entertainment, and sport is the best thing going. Every town has a local team and might play neighboring towns. None of them are good enough to play a team of professionals, but most of them think they can beat a team of women, even if they are professional. Townsfolk will pay to see them in such a contest. That was the idea behind Bloomer girls.

“My husband Jack recruited only girls until he came here, to this city and found himself without his pitcher. It was injury so they say, but for whatever reason the girl he had was no longer able to play. Ned was available. It was a disciplinary thing. A morality issue. I will spare you the details. It was a big disappointment for Ned. He had always nursed an ambition to play semi-pro-ball. It was just that if he wanted that dream, he would need to do it in skirts. As it happened, he looked damn good in a dress. He had to keep his mouth shut, of course, from when we got into a new town until the game was over, for he had too deep a voice for a girl. He got better over time. But he had the figure of a woman, with a little help, and a good mop of hair that grew like a weed. He wore it quite long back then.

Some of the girls on the team were in on it, but not all of them. It is a credit to Ned that he was able to pass even with people he was close too, so long as they were not in the same changing room. So that is why Jack took Ned into his room in every hotel that the team stayed in. And well, you know this part of the country. Hotels around these parts don’t take to men sharing their hotel bedrooms with unwed women. So, it was not long before Jack realized that the only way this was going to work was that if Ned were to become Mrs. DeRoss.”

“So I assume that there was no other Mrs. DeRoss?” I said.

“You would be wrong. Jack had a wife and two kids but gave up family life to go on the road with his ball team. I met her once. She came to a game. It would be about eight years after I started. He called me over to meet her. I told her straight. I said to her: “I do not want to cause you any embarrassment, but you perhaps do not know, Mrs. DeRoss, that I am Jack's wife now’. She died during the epidemic in 1918 which explains why I am looking after our grandchildren out back – which is why we are out here on the porch.”

“Have you got any stories?” I asked. “Something I can use in the article?”

“Patience, young man,” she said. “I told you that you would have a story and you will.”

“Jack played the wife thing to the hilt. He always carried my glove to the baseball field and played at catch with the rest of the team until Ned arrived. He would always refer to him as his wife. Invariably, he would give some local boy the glove and say -- 'Sonny, take this glove out there to my wife.' And then when the boy would arrive with the glove, some of the girls on the team would always say, 'boy, tell Jack that Maude wants some peanuts and to send her a dime, Of course, such conversation would easily get around among the fans and as long as I kept still, I was all right …”.

“Excuse me,” I said. “You said ‘Maude’. Was that Ned pretending to be Jack’s wife, or you.”

She bit her lip. She looked up, and then she looked down. She said: “For a kid reporter you have a lot to learn. They are one and the same. I am Maude. I was Ned.”

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| Well, I knew that I was green, but I did not know just how green until that moment. Now we live in times of Christine Jorgensen and the like, but this was way back in 1924. That kind of thing did not happen. And how could this woman have been a man? I had to ask.  “But, but, how can you have the body of a woman?” It seemed almost indecent to use the word ‘body’ in those days. “I mean your figure. It is … you are … womanly.”  “Time, young man,” she said. “You start with just skin and bone and a little muscle, but you spend time as a woman, and in particular a woman in the arms of a good man, that gives you the body of a woman. Even Ned Pettigrew had to lose his girlish figure. Perhaps you should make that the sub-title of your story?”  The End | Popular Hairstyles of the 1920s |

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