

RAY ORLAND WAYCHOFF

Ray Orland Waychoff was born on October 31, 1926, in Fairfax, Iowa, to Orrie and Emma (Yanecek) Waychoff. When Ray was in high school, the family lived in Watkins and the nearest high school was in Norway, so he played baseball for the Norway High School team from 1941 to 1943 and town team baseball for Watkins in the Iowa Valley League - beginning at age 15 - after receiving permission to play from the Norway School superintendent. A school newspaper, the "Waggon Tongue", published during his junior year of 1942, shows that he was both a sports reporter as well as a subject of the sports section. He was the top pitcher on the baseball team and in his senior year his average of nine strikeouts per game was complemented on offense by his .286 batting average.

On February 17, 1943, Ray signed his first professional baseball contract. The day after the sixteen-year old graduated from Norway High School with the class of 1943, he joined the York (PA) White Roses, a Pittsburgh Pirates' affiliate in the Class B *Interstate* League. When the league play began in May, the inaugural season for the White Roses, he earned a salary of \$125.00 per month. For a freshly minted high school graduate, the sum was spectacular.

York played a slate of teams from towns such as Hagerstown, Trenton, Lancaster, Wilmington, and Allentown. Although the towns were small, the caliber of play was much better than that he'd experienced in high school. On May 26, Waychoff was reassigned to Hornell, a Class D Team in the *Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York* (Pony) League. Two weeks later on June 5, Ray returned to York and on June 6th, he was released. The discharge included a friendly note of encouragement from the York General Manager, John Lisle, assuring the teenager that, "I am sure that you have a great future in baseball".

Seven months later in February 1944, Waychoff received a letter from the Trenton minor league club offering him a league try-out on April 15. As was customary for the time, the offer specified that the try-out was at Ray's own expense and that he would be reimbursed only if he made the club. After some discussion among teams in Elmira, Toledo and Newark (of the St. Louis Browns organization), he eventually signed with the latter and began play on April 29 in the Class D *Ohio State* League. On June 17th, after managing only a .211 batting average in 71 at bats, the infielder was released by Newark and returned to Iowa.

World War II put Waychoff's baseball career on hold when, on February 20, 1945, enlisted in the US Army at Fort Snelling in Minnesota. Less than one month later, on March 15, he received a letter inviting him to spring training with the Wilmington Blue Rocks of the Carolina league. Due to his military service, however, Waychoff was placed on the National Defense List, thus making him ineligible to compete in league play or be signed by another team.

After two years of military service at both Fort Hood and Fort Sill, where he played on the post baseball team, he was discharged. He applied for reinstatement in baseball in October 1946 and in 1947 was signed to play at Salina, Kansas, for the Philadelphia Phillie's organization.

Waychoff, now 21 years old and more mature after two years of military service, played well. He was the starting second baseman in both 1947 and 1948, and his .266 batting average helped his team with the Class C *Western Association* championship in 1947. The next year, 1948, Ray received a pay raise to \$200 per month. He played 133 games at second base that year and batted .251 but on February 21, 1949, he was released. Fortunately for the still-young player, 1949 marked the return of post-war professional baseball to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with the opening of Memorial Stadium. In March, Ray signed with the Rockets coached by Packy Rogers and he reported to the club's spring training site in Missouri.

On the drive home to Iowa following spring training, Ray developed knee pain in the car, pain that did not respond to normal treatment. Once home, despite favorable reviews in the Cedar Rapids Gazette, he played a mere ten games before being diagnosed with rheumatic fever on May 8. He was relegated to the sidelines, although he rejoined his team on June 16th after seven weeks of sick leave. On June 17, however, he injured his knee, and was out for the season. As it turned out it, was the end of his professional baseball career.

The now healthy Waychoff married Peggy Joanne Caviness on February 11, 1950. The two later expanded their family to include two sons, Blaine and Kent (also known as KC). And both later played baseball with the Fairfax town team and Prairie High School Baseball Team.

The Cleveland Indians offered Ray another shot with Cedar Rapids in March, but the fever had weakened the former star. On April 27, 1950, Cedar Rapids granted Waychoff his outright release. That, however, did not mark the end of Ray's involvement with baseball.

With a young family and professional ball a luxury of the past, Ray went to work for the Iowa Manufacturing Company and played with the company team in the local M&J (*Manufacturer's and Jobbers*) League until the organization disbanded. Once Iowa Manufacturing ended its team sponsorship, Waychoff joined the Midwest Janitors team for a few seasons. Now residing in Fairfax, Ray began playing with that town team in 1958 and, in 1960, he also assumed managerial duties. Waychoff stopped playing in his mid 40's due to vision loss caused by hemorrhaging blood vessels but continued to coach the team well into the 1970's. Although his eyes slowly failed, his love for baseball never dimmed.

Ray retired from Iowa Manufacturing in 1980 as the toll taken by his illness three decades earlier now cast a growing shadow over his health. In November 1981, he was forced to undergo what was then a radical open heart surgery procedure for insertion of an artificial, mechanical mitral heart valve to replace the valve damaged by the fever. The next two years passed without event and in 1983 he was honored for his contributions to amateur baseball when he accepted the award of appreciation from the Iowa Valley League. The award was given none too soon. On September 11, Ray Waychoff passed away due to complications that caused the failure of the artificial heart valve. Only 57 years old, Ray Waychoff was finally claimed by his rheumatic fever.

Along with the memories of all those he touched both in and out of baseball, Ray continued to be remembered by his community as a memorial was established in his name and the funds were used to erect a lighted flag pole at the Fairfax Baseball Park. Ray was survived by his wife, Joanne; son, Blaine and his wife, Barb; son KC and his wife, Kathy; and four grandchildren, Brianne, Abby, Ben and Elise Waychoff.