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Copper Country Memories: Oscar Wigman, the Ball Player Who Came to Stay

Posted: Tuesday, Jul 21st, 2015

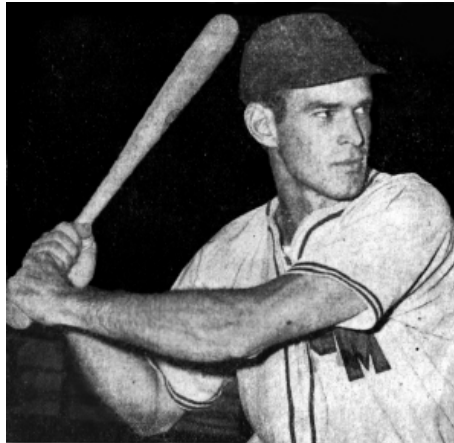
BY: Ed Kuehneman

Ozzie Wigman grew up poor in Detroit in the Great Depression. He was an athlete in high school. In WWII, he served in the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor, Guam and the Marshall Islands, running a mail room.

Afterwards, he played professional baseball in Wisconsin, then came to Arizona to play two seasons for the Globe-Miami Browns, a farm team for the St. Louis Browns. Local sports fans liked to watch Ozzie blast home runs at O'Brien Park in Claypool. Ozzie was an outstanding pitcher, but was moved to first base or the outfield, probably to keep his powerful bat in the lineup. When it seemed time to move up to the "Big Leagues," Ozzie dropped out and stayed in Globe instead. His arm had been injured from overpitching, and Ozzie had made local friends.

Ozzie's father had died right after the war, and Ozzie, who had always sent money home to help his family, continued to send money to his mother. Now he asked her to send some back so he could buy an engagement ring. She told him to get out of the hot sun!

He got the money somewhere, and proposed to Jean Alden, the only child of



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Charles Alden, owner of the Alden Theater in the Alden Building on South Broad Street. Charles wanted to send both of them to college, and thought Jean should learn fashion design in New York. When he died, however, the couple had a quiet wedding and stayed in Globe.

Ozzie managed both the Alden Theater and the Globe Theater for Frank Hollis, who became a good friend. Easy-going and good-natured, Ozzie got along with a lot of folks. Once, Ozzie saw Kirk Douglas looking at a poster outside the Alden and chatted with him.

Passing time saw changes. O'Brien Park and the Alden Theater disappeared. Frank Hollis died but Bobby took over.

A local pastime was "cruising Broad Street," and some folks just bought a soda at the theater, while others came for the movie, but they all saw Ozzie's familiar face at the Globe Theater. He had many friends. He worked six nights a week, but enjoyed mornings with golfing and fishing buddies. He liked to watch sports and hunt, and was a frequent winner of the "first buck of the season" award at Bill Hardt's Unique Sporting Goods.

Ozzie didn't allow horseplay in the theater, and some local kids thought he was stern. He could be, but usually he was cheerful, often whistling or laughing.

On Wednesday, his only day off, he'd pick up his three children, Debbie, Rodney and Gordie, after school. They'd go for a picnic or a swim, or if Ozzie and Jean were going to a formal dinner later, he'd take the kids to the Busy Boy for burgers and fries. If he and Jean argued, the kids never saw it. "He was a great dad," they agree. He always had time to listen, and he'd care for them if they were sick.

Debbie, the oldest, liked to walk with her dad. He explained why a "gentleman" walked on the outside. She was too much of a tomboy to care much what a "lady" did.

Ozzie's kids weren't really excited about popcorn, but it was nice to see the movies for free. They couldn't go to just any movie, however. Ozzie was selective, especially when movie morals went downhill.

Ozzie took his family to the Lutheran Church faithfully. If needed, he would serve in an office or hurry down to make a repair. He read his Bible daily. The family would eat promptly at 5 p.m. and have a "family devotion" (Bible lesson). He'd tell his children not to be critical of others, because everyone would stand before the Lord one day, each on his own.

Then Ozzie would be off to work.

He retired at a healthy 62, and enjoyed Social Security and senior discounts, saying, "I've worked a long time for this." He loved Globe and stayed put.

Later, he had a triple bypass, and it had to be repeated, but he was active after that. Then a brain tumor gave him a bad six months. His boys took alternating weeks off, spoiling him all they could. His faith remained strong.

In April, 1996, at 69, Ozzie passed away. He'd taught his children to laugh, but they grow teary-eyed every April, remembering. Ozzie's friend Bill Hughes gave all his fishing gear away, because fishing without Ozzie would be too sad. A lowly "street person" told the family, "I'm sorry for your loss." (Ozzie had been no easy mark, but he had been respectful and kind to the unfortunate.)

"Daddy's girl" Debbie found herself crying and crying. Then she had a dream. She was sitting on bleachers at a sporting event, and she felt, actually felt, a hand on her shoulder. Turning, she saw her father. "Are you all right?" he asked. He had the biggest smile.

"Yes," she said. Then she knew she was crying for herself. Ozzie was just fine. She'd see him again.

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