



*The Remarkable Story of*  
**TONI STONE**  
The First Woman to Play  
Professional Baseball in the Negro League

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## *A Question of Sin*

From where she stood the air she craved  
Smote with the smell of pine;  
It was too much to bear; she braved  
Her gods and crossed the line.

—COUNTEE CULLEN<sup>1</sup>

Tomboy Stone had a confession to make. The young girl knelt in the St. Peter Claver confession box and began to unburden her mind. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” she began, and admitted that she wanted to run away from home. Tomboy was having trouble with her parents, and their disapproval was more than the twelve-year-old could bear. She looked down at her hands, worn and dirty from all the hours she spent outdoors, and thought about how she had come to make such a difficult decision. For some time Tomboy had felt pulled between the love she felt for her family and her love for something else: baseball. “It was like a drug,” she said. “Whenever summer would come around [and] the bats would start popping, I’d go crazy.”<sup>2</sup> Boykin and Willa Stone did not understand their daughter’s obsession. They thought it was wrong, that it was unnatural for a girl to be so consumed by a boy’s game. Tomboy was well acquainted with their opinion. “My parents thought the idea of a little girl playing baseball

was sinful,” she said.<sup>3</sup> Her mother even sent a letter to teachers at school, informing them that her daughter’s health might suffer if she played sports. She “told them I had a heart murmur, anything to discourage me.”<sup>4</sup> Tomboy also knew her parents had appealed to Father Keefe, the family’s parish priest, to dissuade her from playing baseball with neighborhood boys. But she could not give up the sport, and, after trying unsuccessfully to win her parents’ approval to keep playing, Tomboy decided to run away. Her decision made her heartsick, but, torn between baseball and her family, her choice was clear.<sup>5</sup>

Father Charles Keefe listened as the young black girl recited the litany of her transgressions. Even out of sight in the confessional, children like Tomboy could not hide from Father Keefe. He recognized the children’s voices, and sometimes he didn’t bother to pretend that their disclosures were anonymous. He was like their mother or an alert teacher or the radio’s fictional crime fighter the Green Hornet in his omniscient acuity. Once, after one of the neighborhood children confessed his sins, the boy was startled when Father’s disembodied voice rang out from the opposite side. “By the way, Mel,” he said, “could you get me a carton of cigarettes from the store?”<sup>6</sup>

Kids and adult parishioners alike trusted Father Keefe. As a white priest in a historically black congregation, he had gained the community’s respect for his commitment to race relations.\* Tomboy thought highly of him, too, and was drawn to his honesty. To her, he was clear and direct—straight across the plate. She also loved his pas-

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\*St. Peter Claver Catholic Church was named for the seventeenth-century Spanish Jesuit “slave of the slaves” who ministered for nearly half a century to men and women in the Caribbean. He was elevated to sainthood in 1888. Saint Paul Archbishop John Ireland worked with a black “congregation of converts” to establish St. Peter Claver in Minneapolis/Saint Paul. In 1910 Father Stephen Theobald, a native of British Guiana, began his ministry at the church. Theobald was legendary for his speeches on race relations and, along with other members of the Church, helped found the Minnesota NAACP. St. Peter Claver church members also played leading roles in working with W. E. B. DuBois in establishing the Niagara Movement—a campaign that called for a “mighty current” to end racial discrimination and disenfranchisement across the country. Theobald died of peritonitis in 1932 and was succeeded by Father Charles J. Keefe in 1933 (*St. Peter Claver Diamond Jubilee, 1892–1967*, 5–9).

sion for life. She called him a “big old Irishman” who had a “Joy to the World” enthusiasm about him.<sup>7</sup> He was a kind and creative man: the type to find a solution to a problem rather than issue a decree, she thought. A few years before, when the Stone family first started attending St. Peter Claver, Father Keefe had taken an interest in young Tomboy. He knew Mr. and Mrs. Stone were concerned about their daughter. The youngster was an outcast: she did not do well in school and was made fun of by some of her peers because she didn’t look, act, or talk like other girls. Keefe even knew that Boykin and Willa Stone disliked their daughter’s nickname, “Tomboy.” They called their daughter by her given name, Marcenia Lyle Stone. But to children and everyone else around St. Peter Claver, she was Tomboy Stone—the best athlete in the Rondo neighborhood of Saint Paul, Minnesota, and the girl who got into fights for being different.

Tomboy completed her confession and agreed to recite several Hail Marys and Our Fathers. It was a light penance—what St. Peter Claver kids called “a slap on the wrist.”<sup>8</sup> But Father Keefe knew he had to do more than require Tomboy to pray. He had to come up with a long-term plan for handling the girl’s unconventional dreams while respecting her parents’ concerns. Willa and Boykin Stone were strict parents, but Keefe believed their worry for Tomboy stemmed more from anxiety about her future than from a conviction that playing baseball was morally wrong. The Stones thought baseball was unladylike, that there was no future in it, and they were anxious that their daughter might get hurt, physically or emotionally. Boykin and Willa wanted all four of their children to amount to something. Willa especially was concerned about their three daughters’ economic independence. She knew that for a young woman to truly have choices in life, she had to have money. Playing baseball would never give Marcenia that freedom, Willa thought. Boykin had additional concerns. He frequently lectured his children that even now—in 1933—black people in the United States faced unfair obstacles. Tomboy said her father explained “how rotten the whites were to us . . . and how he wanted us to get our education.”<sup>9</sup> What could baseball possibly offer a twelve-year-old girl from

a black neighborhood in Saint Paul, Minnesota, Willa and Boykin Stone asked their daughter? Everything, Tomboy thought.

After he finished hearing confessions from the line of youngsters standing in a neat row along the church wall, Father Keefe went to his office and considered how he could help Tomboy Stone. He did not believe Tomboy could be talked out of playing baseball: he had seen her play and knew she was a gifted athlete. He also wondered if sports might actually help the combative Tomboy more than hurt her. If she was proud of what she did on the diamond and gained some respect in the community, perhaps Tomboy wouldn't fight as much. Maybe she would forget about running away. Keefe thought about suggesting that the youngster become more involved with the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center—a lifesaver for kids with time on their hands and an inclination to temptation.\* But Boykin and Willa Stone might feel more assured, Keefe wagered, if their daughter participated in something directly connected to the church. The diocese had a baseball league for boys, and he knew that Tomboy was acquainted with many of the players. “After Mass, I'd put my dungarees on and I'm out to find the fellas,” she said. Keefe might be able to convince parish boys to let Tomboy play in the Catholic boys' baseball league if they realized how fast she could run and how far she could hit a ball. If he could channel her athletic ability into a Catholic activity, perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Stone would stop criticizing their daughter's interests. Father Keefe mentioned his idea to Tomboy. He “told me that since I wasn't going to stop playing,” she said, “I might as well play for the church.”<sup>10</sup>

Keefe's idea worked. After he spoke to the Stones and suggested their daughter try the Catholic boys' league, they relented. He calmed

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\*Hallie Q. Brown and its Minneapolis counterpart, the Phyllis Wheatley Center, were linchpins in the Twin Cities. “Hallie Q.,” as it was affectionately called, opened after the black YWCA closed in 1928. It offered child care, athletics, senior activities, health care, and cultural, political, and social events. The center was named for Hallie Quinn Brown, an Ohio educator who spearheaded the black women's club movement in the nineteenth century. In Saint Paul, “Hallie Q” was led by the formidable I. Myrtle Carden from 1929 to 1949. Carden improved the lives of countless African American residents in and around Rondo. Children in the Rondo neighborhood, including Tomboy, also played at the Welcome Hall Center and took part in its activities sponsored by the Zion Presbyterian Church.

Willa and assured her he would look out for Marcenia. Tomboy was thrilled. The Stones' neighbor, Melvin—Father Keefe's cigarette runner—thought there was a more subversive reason the thoughtful priest wanted Tomboy involved with the parish baseball team. “She had the most talent,” Melvin said.<sup>11</sup> Folks in the neighborhood didn't seem to mind that Tomboy Stone was an oddball girl playing baseball on a boys' team as long as she helped St. Peter Claver win the game. It was settled. “I got a chance,” Tomboy said, and played outfield and infield.<sup>12</sup>

Tomboy was fortunate to have Father Keefe intercede with her parents. She also was fortunate to live where she did. The Rondo neighborhood in Saint Paul, named for the busy two-mile-long street that was its main artery, was heaven for a kid who loved baseball. Just blocks from Tomboy's home was Dunning Field, next to Central High School, where she could always find kids playing catch. Next to Dunning was Saint Paul's grand Lexington Park—the field Charlie Comiskey built before he took his name and his team to Chicago. The park was home to the Saint Paul Saints. Gabby Street, “the Old Sarge,” managed the team after being fired from the World Champion St. Louis Cardinals a few years earlier. If he could manage the Cardinals' Gas House Gang with Dizzy Dean and Pepper Martin, “the wild horse of the Osage,” surely he could handle a team of twenty-year-old kids who hoped to make it to the big leagues. Tomboy loved Lexington Park, not only for the stray baseballs that she found there but especially for the days when Babe Ruth came to town. The Babe came to town on customary trips, when the Saints were an informal farm team for the Yankees.\* He'd sign baseballs, pose for pictures, and chat up the locals. But the Saints weren't the only game in town. A few miles to the west was Nicollet Park, home of the New York Giants' farm club the Minneapolis Millers. Kids like

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\*The Saint Paul Saints team was used as “development ground” by the New York Yankees from 1919 to the early 1930s. Bob Connery, a scout for the Yankees, bought the Saints in 1925. Among the players who moved from the Saints to the Yankees were Leo Durocher and Vernon “Lefty” Gomez (e-mail to author from Stew Thornley, November 13, 2008).