

The Babe Stood Tallest With His Youngest Fans



Babe Ruth, left, chatting with youngsters in 1924; the ailing slugger, right, at Yankee Stadium shortly before he died, and Frank Haggerty, below, posing for photographers at Ruth's casket on Aug. 18, 1948.



Associated Press (top and right); the Babe Ruth Birthplace Museum (above)

BALTIMORE
EVEN as he faced death, Babe Ruth apparently had time for a kid. This is part of the legend that seems beyond dispute, above and beyond the timeless and insoluble debate of whether he called his shot.

"Babe Ruth was the eternal kid, and that's why he could never resist them," said a man who has spent the last 16 years unearthing proof.

It's the stories people come to tell, the mementos they want to show, or sell, that make Michael Gibbons's job the equivalent of sticking a hand into a historical grab bag of Ruthian delights.

In 1982, Gibbons knocked on the door of the then-struggling Babe Ruth Birthplace Museum to produce a documentary on the most famous American baseball player. He never left 216 Emory Street, the small row house and birthplace of the Babe, in the shadow of what is now Orioles Park at Camden Yards. Here, he marks a fine line between man and myth.

Coincidental fact: exactly 216 major league pitchers surrendered home runs to the Babe.

Contrived fiction: Little Frankie Haggerty cried over the Babe's body at the funeral in New York.

The newspaper photos sent around the country days after Ruth's death at age 52 — 50 years ago today — did present a 10-year-old boy standing over Ruth's casket, holding a ball signed by Ruth in one hand while the other appeared to be wiping away a tear from his left eye.

By this time, the country was familiar with Frank Haggerty of Danvers, Mass., who months earlier had taken it upon himself to write to a cancer-stricken Ruth, in October 1947, offering himself as a stand-in at the funeral of Brother Gilbert, Ruth's boyhood mentor at St. Mary's Industrial School.

"I am sorry your friend Brother Gilbert died," Haggerty wrote to Ruth. "If you wish, and I can get permission from the other brothers, I will go for you, as I live in Danvers. I will behave. Love, Frank Haggerty."

Ruth, who seldom behaved, wrote back from New York in a Western Union telegram dated Oct. 21,

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1947: "Dear Frank: Thank you for your letter and I will be most grateful to you if you will represent me at Brother Gilbert's funeral. I am unable to go but I will feel I am there in spirit through your gracious gesture."

Haggerty attended the priest's funeral, and a weakened Ruth continued to answer the boy's letters, inviting him in one correspondence to send a ball he would sign, and telling him in another that he was proud of the "fine pictures in the paper" of Haggerty at Brother Gilbert's funeral. "I think you're a grand kid," Ruth signed off on Oct. 31, from his address at 110 Riverside Drive.

Naturally, Haggerty saved every photo, every scrap of paper. He grew up to become a merchant seaman, and moved to Baltimore in 1968. Not long ago, after Haggerty's wife had died and his savings had shriveled, he went to Gibbons at 216 Emory Street. Peter Angelos, the Orioles' owner, was solicited by Gibbons. Angelos agreed to pay Haggerty \$5,000, allowing the museum to secure the material, all authentic. Except, it turned out, for the photo of the kid crying for the Babe.

"The photographers knew who I was, and one of them asked me to brush away a tear, so I did," Haggerty told Gibbons. He also confessed to a reporter for The Baltimore Sun.

The truth of the matter was that the country was crying for Ruth, and it wasn't as if he had any role in the dramatization of the photo op. Haggerty's story was, if anything, more proof of what a grand guy Babe Ruth was, at least when it came to dealing with kids.

That's why Kevin Williams, a former investment banker who quit his job to take an anniversary Ruth show on the road for Gibbons this summer, believes it is generational justice when children pull their fathers in the direction of a life-size stand-up that is measured exactly to Ruth's 6 feet 2 inches.

"We've been in 23 cities, major and minor league ball parks with the show," Williams said. "I'm amazed when the kids see the stand-up and they yell out, 'It's Babe Ruth.' And the man has been dead for 50 years."

Players who don't approach Ruthian levels of fame today whine how

Mementos mark the truths behind one of sport's greatest heroes.

they can't go out to a restaurant or a movie without attracting a crowd, as if they aren't let through side doors, into private rooms. None of this was a problem for Ruth, evidently, in his prime, or in his decline.

He signed, according to Gibbons, more than 600,000 baseballs between 1914 and his death, including one on July 13, 1948. As this story goes, Ruth was making what would be his last trip to Baltimore, to a sandlot baseball game, where he was scheduled to present an award to a boy from his former school, St. Mary's.

As it turned out, when Ruth arrived at the rain-drenched airport, he was informed the game had been postponed. But by the steps leading down from the plane, a father waited with his son.

"Could you sign this for the boy?" the father asked.

The dying Ruth smiled, took the ball in his hand, signed it and returned to New York.

Years later, the boy — his name was Sig Seidenman — brought a ball to Gibbons, claiming it was the last one Ruth signed in his hometown. You could still see the smudges made by the raindrops.

When this story made the local paper, it wasn't long before more proof of the episode was presented to Michael Gibbons by one Paul Geppi.

He said he was the kid from St. Mary's who had missed out on meeting the Babe. And he gave Gibbons the plaque that proved it.

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