

Babe Ruth's Canadian Connections

In the early 1990s I was at a reunion dinner for the Lizzies, an organization of boys' baseball and basketball teams in Toronto over the first half of the 20th century. My dad was a member of the Lizzies when he was a kid. I was doing research for my novel *Gift of the Bambino*, a story about a boy and his grandfather, and how they were bound by baseball and Babe Ruth. The Lizzies were in the novel.

I remember the night well. There was a room of 200 old-timers, and I sat down at a table. The guest speaker was boxer George Chuvalo. The man next to me wondered what a young guy like me – it was 25 years ago – was doing there, so I said “Research for a book I’m writing.”

“What’s your book about?” he asked me. I told him “It’s about baseball ... and Babe Ruth.”

“Hmm,” he said with a shrug. “I knew Babe Ruth.”

“Excuse me? You knew Babe Ruth?”

“Yes. I was with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1938, and he had the locker next to me in the team dressing room.”

As luck would have it I had sat down next to Goody Rosen. I didn’t even know who he was. But Goody Rosen was the first Canadian named to a major-league all-star team. In 1945 when he was with the Pirates he hit .325 – the third-best average in the National League. In 1984 he was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame. He passed away ten years later.



I once met Robert Creamer, who wrote *Babe: The Legend Comes to Life*, which is widely regarded as the best Ruth biography ever written. I told him

about my encounter with Rosen, and Creamer immediately said “Goody Rosen was a good ballplayer.”

So at that Lizzies reunion dinner Rosen started talking about Babe Ruth. “I was just a rookie,” he said, “and he had me look after his humidior. You know? For his cigars.”

Well, he went on about Babe Ruth this and Babe Ruth that, and for that one evening at least I think I really believed in God! I wrote down everything he told me, and then mentioned that Ruth was known to be something of a rabble-rouser. “Oh yes, he was,” Rosen said. “He was a good person, though.”

That sentiment has been a consistent theme with everyone I talked to about Babe Ruth over the next 25 years. My novel was released in 2004, and I became a Ruth aficionado. I also got to know the Babe’s grandson, Tom Stevens, and once spent a memorable afternoon with him and his mother Julia – Babe Ruth’s daughter who’s now 101 – at the family home in New Hampshire.

Next spring [2018] I have a new non-fiction book coming out – ***Babe Ruth: A Superstar’s Legacy***. It’s the first book ever done on the legacy of Babe Ruth. Tom Stevens is writing the foreword, and the Ruth family is releasing photos that haven’t been in the public domain. More on that later.

I’m going to talk today about the Babe and his Canadian connections ... but before I do that I want to pass this around. I do a blog about my books and writing, and in the next few months there will be a lot of stuff about Babe Ruth. If you’d like to get it, just drop your business card in the box, or write on a slip of paper your name and Email address.

So, for those Canadian connections ... let’s begin with the home run at Hanlan’s Point, which, by the way, served as the beginning of ***Gift of the Bambino***. On September 5, 1914, a pitcher named George Herman Ruth of the AAA Providence Grays tossed a pretty good game against the Toronto Maple Leafs baseball team. He was 19. He stood six-two and, with apologies to William Bendix and John Goodman, weighed a strapping 190 pounds. He pitched a one-hit shutout, and the final score was 9-0 for

THE LEAFS WON AND LOST TO THE GRAYS

"Babe" Ruth Held Them Help-
less in the First Spasm—
Prieste's Timely Hit.

The Leafs are not entitled to very much credit from Saturday's first game with Providence, but as they nosed the Grays out 3-2 the second, they got by.

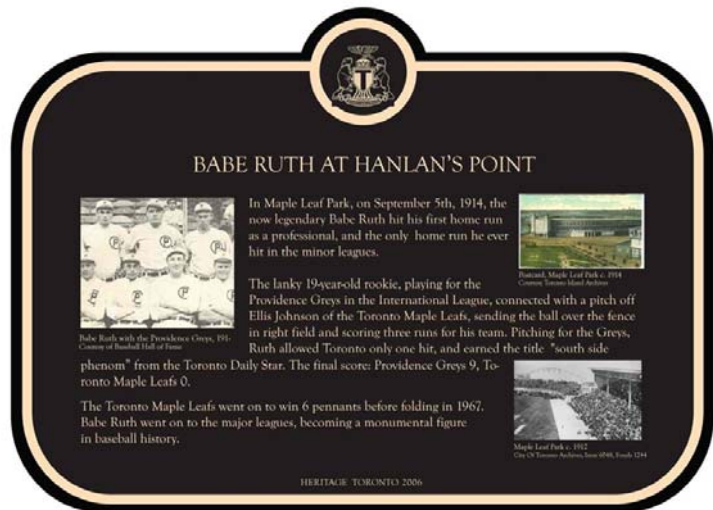
The first game was a 9-0 defeat. "Babe" Ruth, the Grays' youthful southside phenom, held the Leafs to a single clout in the first, and had them all smothered on the nigh side of second base, hence the 3-0 stuff. He gave three bases on balls and struck out seven. Boston American are said to have paid Ballmine \$25,000 for him. He looked to be worth every nickel of it Saturday. Johnson twirled for the Leafs, and the Grays just murdered his fast ball. They got 15 hits, including a home run by Ruth. Here is enough of the score:
R. H. E.
Toronto ... 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0-0 1 1
Providence .. 1 0 0 0 3 0 2 3-9 15 1
Batteries: Johnson and Kelly;
Ruth and J. Onslow.

Providence. Three of those runs were courtesy of a home run he hit. The ball went over the fence in right field and where it wound up, well, that's another story. But it was his first pro home run in an official league game.

In 2006 I was involved in a ceremony when the Yankees were in town to play the Blue Jays. We dedicated

two plaques at the site where that home run was hit – it's now the Billy Bishop Airport. One plaque commemorates the professional baseball history of Toronto, and the other Babe's first homer.

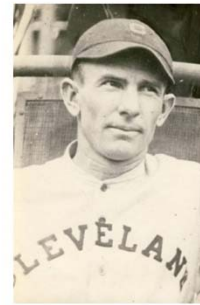
In my novel that ball sails into Lake Ontario, but some people say no, it was caught by a guy in the bleachers. There used to be a bar in downtown Toronto – Alice Fazooli's – where they had a bronzed baseball up on the mantel. According to rumour it was the 1914 ball. In the flesh, so to speak. One day I asked the proprietor about that, and he said it was just a facsimile.



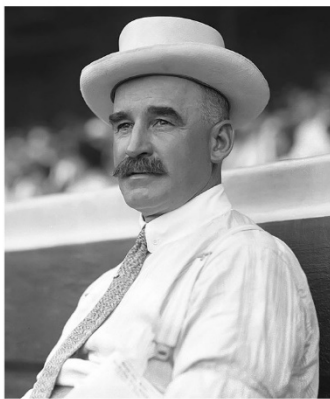
You may have heard the story about Babe Ruth going to St. Mary's Industrial School in Baltimore when he was a boy. There he learned how to play baseball from this man Brother Matthias. Matthias stood six-foot-six and weighed 250 pounds. Babe Ruth said he was "the greatest man I've ever known." In fact, his real name was Martin Boutlier,

and he came from Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. A Canadian. So now we know Babe Ruth learned his baseball from a Canadian, and hit his first pro home run in Canada. That's pretty good. But wait; there's more.

Ruth the pitcher had already appeared for the major-league Boston Red Sox before the Hanlan's Point home run. He went up and down between the majors and minors a couple of times that season. He made his major league debut on July 14, 1914. The first batter he faced in the show was Jack Graney from St. Thomas, Ontario. Graney got a single, but Ruth won the game. Graney played for the Cleveland Indians, and after he retired he became the radio play-by-play broadcaster for the team. He did that for over 20 years. He passed away in 1978 at the age of 91. In 1984 he was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame, and today the Hall has an award named for him to honor a member of the media who has made a major contribution to baseball in this country.



Now, the man who signed Babe Ruth to his first big-league contract was Joseph J. Lannin. Wouldn't you know it? Another Canadian. He was from the town of Lac-

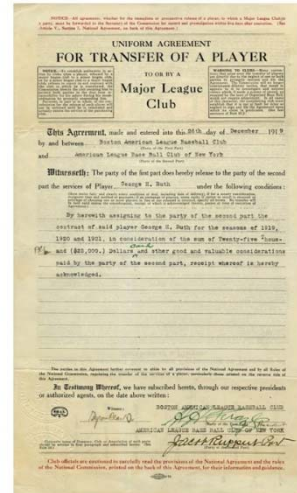


Beauport, Quebec. An orphan at the age of 14, he went to Boston and worked as a bellboy at the Adams Hotel, where he listened to high rollers talk about real estate and commodities. He wound up owning a string of hotels, apartment buildings and golf courses. Sort of an early version of Donald Trump ... but without the attitude.

In 1914 Lannin became owner of the Boston Red Sox, and later that year he purchased the rights to bring Babe Ruth to town. It turned out pretty well because the Red Sox won the World Series in 1915 and 1916 with Ruth a starring pitcher. In 1917 Lannin sold the Red Sox to Harry Frazee. And while the Red Sox would win another World Series in 1918 – again, Ruth starred – Frazee later sold Ruth to the New York Yankees. Over the next 86 years the Red Sox would win no championships and the

Yankees would win 26. It became known as ‘The curse of the Bambino.’ Which goes to show that a Canadian was smart enough to sign Babe Ruth ... but only an American was dumb enough to get rid of him.

Here’s an interesting tidbit about the 1920 transaction that took Ruth to the Yankees. The Royal Bank of Canada was part of the deal which included a \$125,000 cheque and a \$300,000 bond. It was a lot of money back then. The bond was financed through the Royal Bank of Canada’s agency in New York City; that document would one day sell at auction for \$151,000. When I first called the Royal Bank of Canada headquarters in Montreal about this the girl on the line actually laughed at me. She didn’t believe it. She thought it was a joke. When she called back later ... she wasn’t laughing.



I’ve heard that Ruth’s first wife Helen Woodford was from Nova Scotia, but also that she’s from Boston. She was a waitress in a diner when Ruth joined the Red Sox in 1914. She was 16; he was 19. Apparently, young George told people she was from Halifax. She wasn’t. However, it’s possible her family had roots in Nova Scotia, and if that’s true then in a roundabout way we may conclude – with Brother Matthias and Helen – that Ruth was sort of Canadian by adoption.



With local children on a trip to Nova Scotia, 1934
Courtesy of the Babe Ruth Museum
Baltimore, Maryland

One of his favourite pastimes was hunting, and sometimes he did that in the wilds of Nova Scotia. There are lots of great photos of Babe Ruth with kids. One of my favourites is this one from 1934 in Nova Scotia.

Now remember that 1914 home run at Hanlan’s Point, which I

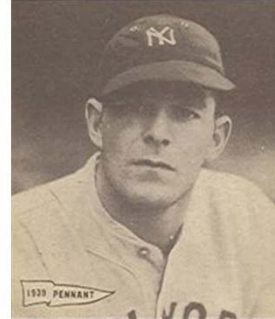
think went into the lake? Another time when Ruth was with the Yankees he played an exhibition game against the minor-league Toronto Maple Leafs at the old Maple Leaf Stadium. He hit a home run and that ball did go into Lake Ontario; no doubt about it.

I once did a story for the Toronto Star about Ruth's home run at Hanlan's Point. I interviewed Tom Valcke, who at the time was President and CEO of the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. I asked him what he thought about the 1914 ball, and whether or not it went into the lake. His comment was priceless: "I've heard two stories about the Hanlan's Point home run. The first is that it was hit into the lake. The second is that somebody stole the ball, and as security chased him away he threw it into the water. But maybe it was the baseball from the 1930s that was stolen and tossed in. It would almost make draining the lake worthwhile if two of the Babe's biggest taters are sitting on the bottom."

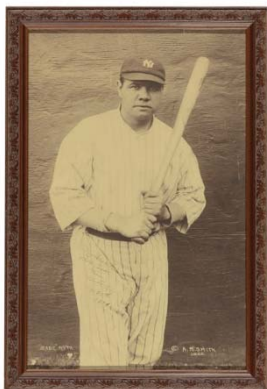
Another Canadian connection occurred in 1925 when Ruth was sick and got hospitalized. There was a lot of speculation about what was wrong with him. It was reported that he died and the story went ... viral ... if you can call it viral back then. In England the *London Evening News* ran his obituary. It said: "The great pitcher has struck out Babe Ruth. The death of the beloved and incomparable Bambino is a national calamity, for it wipes out the highest paid athlete in the world." Well, I believe a Canadian newspaper first reported the story, and then it got picked up in England and went global. But guess what? It was fake news! Babe's ailment came to be known as 'the bellyache heard round the world.'

In June I was at Cooperstown to interview the curator who put together the revised Babe Ruth exhibit at the National Baseball Hall of Fame. I spent an afternoon going through the Babe Ruth scrapbooks and it was fascinating! Included in the scrapbooks is a clipping from the *New York Evening Journal* – January 26, 1926 (the bellyache persisted right into 1926) – which gives you an idea how the media of the day covered Ruth. Running across the page are photos depicting the alleged damage to Ruth's stomach after he downed 12 hot dogs, which put him in hospital. The second photo shows a shirtless Ruth; super-imposed over his mid-section is a shot of real hot dogs and they're even numbered 1 to 12! The caption reads: "Here are the 12 hot dogs that upset the stomach of the man who upset the batting records. Notice how snugly they nestle in the vast cavern of Mr. Ruth's interior." The media had a lot of fun with Ruth, and he had a lot of fun with them.

I began my talk with Goody Rosen. When Rosen played for the Brooklyn Dodgers there weren't many Canadians in major league baseball. But one who made his debut three seasons before Rosen was George 'Twinkletoes' Selkirk from Huntsville, Ontario. What's the Babe Ruth connection? How would you like to be the guy who succeeds Babe Ruth in the Yankees outfield in 1935 after Ruth signs with the Boston Braves of the National League? That was George Selkirk. If that wasn't bad enough, the Yankees also gave him the Babe's no. 3 ... which is like a rookie going to the NHL's Edmonton Oilers and they hand him no. 99 and say "Play well". The Yankees' no. 3 wasn't retired until Ruth died in 1948. George Selkirk was a good ball player. Five times he hit over .300, and he made the American League all-star team in 1936 and 1939. He was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 1983.



Now I want to switch gears and talk a bit about the new book – ***Babe Ruth – A Superstar's Legacy*** – which comes out in the spring [2018]. It has a lot about Ruth that you may not know, but it's not a biography. It has lots of photos and visuals, but it's not



a picture book. It's about the legacy of Babe Ruth ... and what a legacy it is. This is the photo we're using on the cover. It was taken in the Yankees' dugout in 1920, Ruth's first season in New York. The next year the photo was signed by the Babe. This is Ruth at his absolute physical peak. He looks like a guy who hit 714 home runs.

In 2004 a collector named Scott Ireland flew to New York City to attend an auction because this framed photograph – and there's only one – was up for grabs. He bought it for \$149,500. It was the first single-signed photograph to ever sell for more than \$100,000.

When you research Babe Ruth you find that, with him, it's a whole new ball game. Everything is a whole new ball game. Let me give you a few examples. Five years ago a Yankees jersey that he wore in the early 1920s sold at auction for \$4.4 million! It was a new Guinness world record for an item of sports memorabilia. And that's for any sport in the world ... anywhere in the world. It was almost twice what it cost to build Yankee Stadium back in 1923! What's more, Babe Ruth hit the very first home run at the new stadium. The Louisville Slugger bat he used to do that sold for just under \$1.3 million at another auction that was put on by Sotheby's. Today sports memorabilia is a billion-dollar industry, and there are two categories – Babe Ruth and everyone else.

Earlier this year I found a list of the fifteen most valuable items of sports memorabilia in the world. The 1920s Yankee jersey was number 1. Number 2 was the original hand-written rules of basketball by James Naismith, who by the way was Canadian. Other things on the list were the hockey sweater worn by Paul Henderson in the Canada-Russia summit series of 1972, the gloves worn by Muhammad Ali in his 1965 heavyweight title fight against Floyd Patterson, and from soccer the Sheffield football club rules, regulations and laws from 1857. But seven of those top fifteen items involved Babe Ruth!

David Kohler is President of SCP Auctions, the company that sold the 1920s Yankee jersey. He's a big player in the industry, and he told me: "Babe Ruth is king of the whole business of sports memorabilia. He is in so much demand that I could make a living just out of Babe Ruth items." When that jersey was sold in 2012 it was delivered by a former secret service agent. "You be careful with that," Kohler told the ex-agent when the man took possession of the jersey. "I protected presidents," the guy said. "Presidents can be replaced," said Kohler. "This jersey can't."

Babe Ruth – A Superstar's Legacy explores the legacy of a man who some say is the most famous American ever. Who says that? In June a one-year exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian in Washington wound up its Babe Ruth showing. They've only done about ten of these, for people like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. But they did one on Ruth. James Barber is the curator of the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian. An expert on presidents, war heroes and American history, Barber said to me: "Babe Ruth's name is the one American name that is universally known around the world."

One of the things from that exhibit is the cover of a Vanity Fair magazine from 1933 showing a gargantuan Ruth caricature looming over the landscape. Another is a Time magazine cover from 1976 ... which was 28 years after Ruth died. It marked the opening of the newly refurbished Yankee Stadium; who else were they going to put on the cover?

The Legacy book explores things like the Babe Ruth League, which got going in 1952 and today has more than one million players – kids, youths, teens – not to mention two million volunteers ... making it one of the biggest sports organizations in the world. There's a chapter about the commercial licensing of



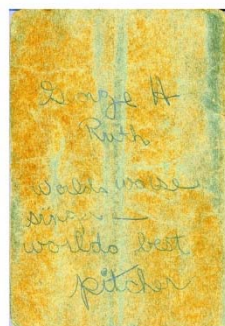
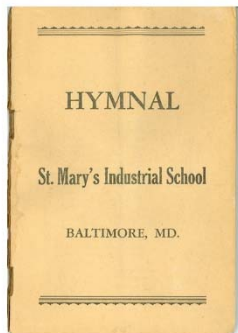
the Babe Ruth name, which is a major industry.

Norwegian Airlines has a marketing program where they put the faces of heroes on the tail fins of their jets. For its U.S. routes they just launched their American heroes program, and guess who the first hero is?

There's also a chapter on the Hall of Fame called "The Face of Cooperstown" because he is.



The book has a section on Michael Gibbons, who ran the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum in Baltimore for 37 years, and is still involved with it. They have a lot of good stuff there. It's been



said that Babe Ruth invented the autograph; well, here's his first autograph.

It's believed to be from 1907, when he was about 12. He had signed it in a book of hymns at St. Mary's, and it was found under the floorboards with this inscription, spelling mistake and all.

The book also has a chapter about Babe Ruth's impact in other countries, most notably Japan, but also Canada, Mexico, Cuba, other countries in the Caribbean, and the Far East.



These are two statues of Babe Ruth ... at Sendai City in Japan ...

and a sixteen-footer at Camden Yards in Baltimore. There are others.



But maybe the most significant thing about the legacy of Babe Ruth is what didn't happen. After his playing days were over he wanted to manage a ball team, but never got the chance. The old line goes that he wasn't able to manage himself, which has long been attributed to Col. Jacob Ruppert, owner of the Yankees. In fact, Ruppert never said that. He did say, however, that Ruth would make a fine manager.

There's a clipping from 1920 that says the Yankees offered to make Ruth their manager that season. But at the time he turned them down. There are other clippings from 1933 and 1934 about several teams interested in having him as their manager: the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Cincinnati Reds, the Detroit Tigers and the Boston Braves, to name a few. But Ruth never became a manager after he retired. Why? You'll have to read the book. But I will tell you this: Ruth was a man ahead of his time. He was the first athlete to have an agent. He was the first athlete to have his own personal trainer. And after he married his second wife, Claire Hodgson, he really cleaned up his act. From 1926 through 1932 he put together seven seasons for the ages.



This is a painting that was done a few years ago. It depicts Babe Ruth in his Yankees uniform and Josh Gibson in his Homestead Grays uniform. Gibson was called 'the black Babe Ruth' and was considered the best player in the old negro leagues. In his career he hit over 800 home runs. But he never played in the majors because of segregation. The painting was commissioned by

Gibson's great grandson, Sean Gibson, and Babe Ruth's great grandson, Brent Stevens. The two are friends. They believe, as do others, that Babe Ruth never became a manager because he would have hired black ball players.

Julia Ruth Stevens – that day in her home – was the first one who told me about this. I later connected with baseball historian Bill Jenkinson, who has done a lot of research on this – more than anyone else – and in his mind there is no doubt. The last chapter of the Legacy book gets into it.

Well, I guess my time is up. I want to thank you for this opportunity.

Jerry Amernic

November 2017