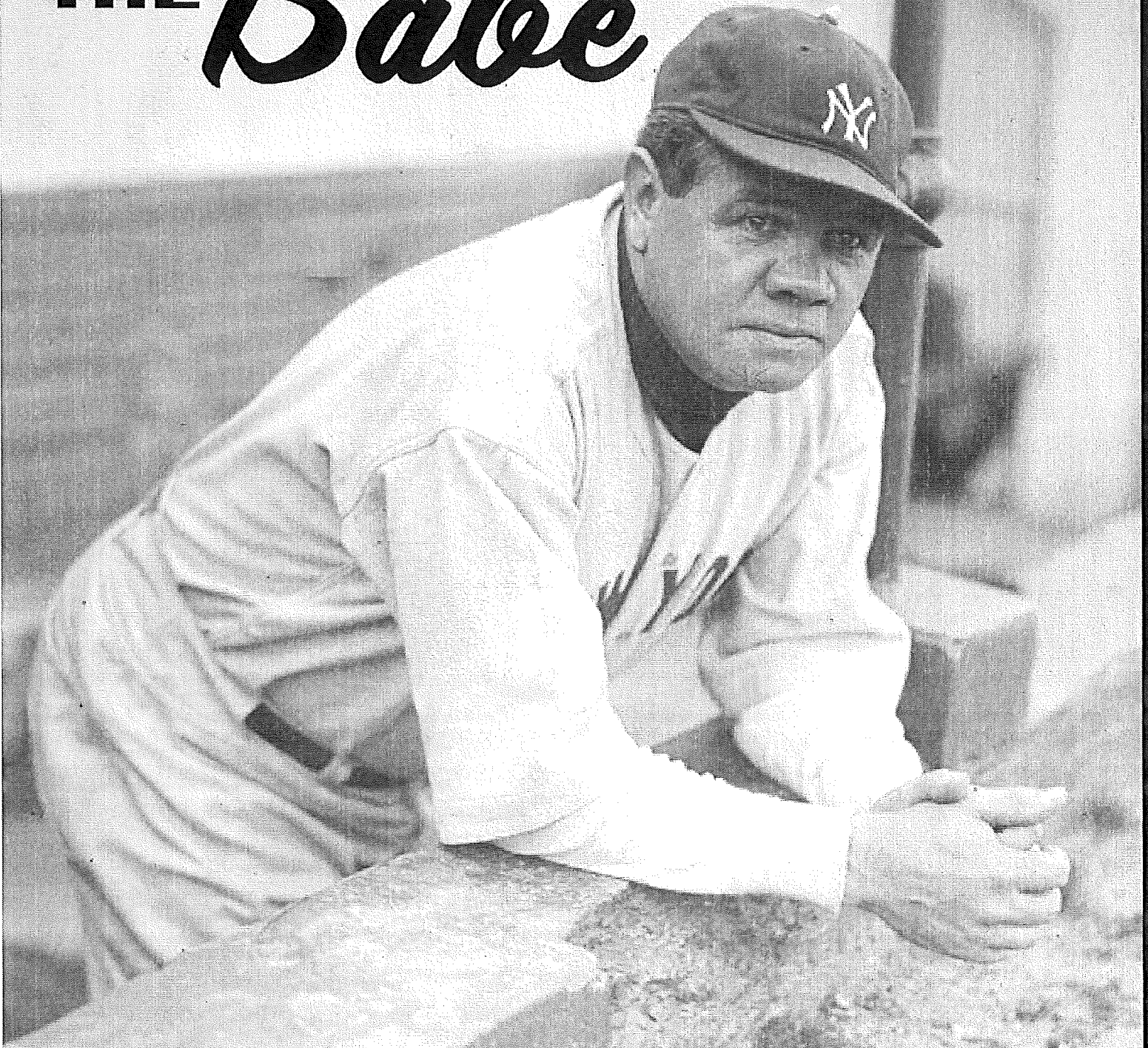


THE *Babe*



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Babe Ruth in Minnesota

By Stew Thornley

Babe Ruth was drawn to Minnesota by baseball, but – as was the case with Ted Williams, who later challenged Ruth for the title of greatest hitter ever – the outdoors and nonbaseball opportunities in the state also attracted him.

After the World Series in 1921, Ruth and a pair of New York Yankees teammates, including Bob Meusel, went on a barnstorming tour. The excursion violated a prohibition on barnstorming by World Series participants and resulted in the players being suspended to start the 1922 season.

Restrictions on postseason touring were loosened, and, as the Yankees battled for the American League pennant again, Ruth planned another barnstorming trip that would bring him to Minnesota. One report had Ruth and Meusel, along with pitcher Joe Bush, coming to the central part of the state, from which Bush hailed. The trio discussed visiting the Brainerd Lakes area. (Bush was known in those parts as the Brainerd Meteor.) “If they can’t make the duck hunting, they will be here to get a deer or moose,” wrote the *Brainerd Dispatch*.¹

That trip didn’t happen, but reports soon emerged that Ruth and Meusel would play in Minneapolis on Sunday, October 15, and then head the next day to Sleepy Eye, a city in the south-central part of the state. Plans changed on this itinerary, as well, but it was Minneapolis that was left out, not the smaller city. The 1922 World Series ended on Sunday, October 8 (the New York Giants knocked off the Yankees in five games), and Ruth

and Meusel began a Western tour with a game in central Iowa the following Friday.² Over the weekend, they played games in Lincoln³ and Omaha, Nebraska. Then they took off to keep their date in Sleepy Eye, even though the journey demanded that they detour from their next day’s destination, which was Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

How they settled on Sleepy Eye is still a mystery,⁴ but Ruth and Meusel arrived by train in nearby Mankato the morning of Monday, October 16. An auto took them to Sleepy Eye, and they stopped at the Berg Hotel, where a crowd had gathered. The Sleepy Eye band gave a concert at a downtown intersection at 1:00 P.M. and then marched to the ballpark, where additional bleachers had been built. They weren’t needed as the cold weather kept the attendance to under 1,000. Those who showed up got their money’s worth as Ruth hit two long home runs in the game,⁵ one a grand slam, as his squad beat Meusel’s team 9-7 in a game called after 5½ innings. Ruth finished the game on the mound, retiring all three batters he faced, two on strikeouts, in the top of the sixth.

The Knights of Columbus held a reception that evening at St. Mary’s School. Ruth said he hoped to include Sleepy Eye in his travels the next year⁶ before he and Meusel boarded a train to South Dakota and eventually to Denver, where their tour ended on October 29.⁷

Ruth never returned to Sleepy Eye, but he and Meusel went back in Minnesota two years later. At the same time, while the New York Yankees were wrapping up their 1924 season – with a second-place finish to Washington – the Minneapolis Millers of the American Association were closing out a disappointing season. The Millers' rival, the St. Paul Saints, had won the pennant and were heading to the Little World Series, but a pair of Minneapolis boxing promoters were able to secure an appearance by Ruth at Nicollet Park, the Millers' home.⁸ The date was set for October 14, and Meusel would be with Ruth again on a tour that would take them to the Pacific Coast.

Ruth played for the Odd Fellows, the city's amateur champions, and knocked a pair of home runs that cleared Nicollet Avenue beyond the right-field fence. He added a pair of singles, outdoing Meusel, who was held hitless while playing for a local all-star team assembled as the Odd Fellows' opponents.

The crowd was only around 3,000, but there were enough over-enthusiastic young fans to stop the game in the eighth inning by coming onto the field and swarming Ruth. "Try as Babe did, he couldn't get the kids off the field," wrote Charles Johnson in the *Minneapolis Star*. "They became so thick that Ruth couldn't get away. The kids didn't want anything (in) particular. They just wanted to be close to him. He's their idol. Babe grabbed the lone bat that the souvenir hunters left him and made a bee line for the gate with the kids after him."⁹

Ruth's appearances in Minnesota were to this point confined to postseason barnstorming, but the entire Yankees team came to St. Paul for a midseason exhibition game against the Saints at Lexington Park on June 16, 1926. Two years before, as part of his 1924 excursion, Ruth had planned to toss baseballs to fans from the *Minneapolis Tribune* building but canceled because of safety concerns.¹⁰ In St. Paul, however, Ruth went through with the event, signing and then hurling autographed baseballs out a window of the *Pioneer Press and Dispatch* building in downtown St. Paul to a huge crowd gathered on the street. He then went to Lexington Park and put on a show in batting practice. That is all the fans got, though, as the game itself was rained out. "Every one of us is not only sorry but sore because we didn't get to play today," said Ruth, who promised to return and make up the game at the end of the regular season.¹¹

It wasn't until the following season that the Yankees and Saints made up their rained-out game, but Ruth, by himself, came to Minnesota for a variety of nonbaseball activities in late October of 1926. Vaudeville was the main reason for his visit as large newspaper ads touted his appearances at the Pantages Theatre in downtown Minneapolis with such enticements as "See the Battering Bambino Unfold His Bag of Batting Tricks."¹²



Bob Meusel and Babe Ruth at Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, October 16, 1922.
 Photograph taken at the Sleepy Eye ballpark by Stew Thornley.

Ruth also purchased a nonresident hunting license on Saturday, October 31, with an invitation by the Minneapolis police chief to go duck hunting the next day and a plan to delay this excursion long enough to meet Queen Marie of Rumania at the Minneapolis Institute of Art as she made a nine-hour stopover in the Twin Cities.¹³ During his week in town, Ruth also worked in visits to the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children, the Catholic Boys' Home, and a sanitarium for youngsters with tuberculosis at Glen Lake, just outside the Twin Cities. In addition, Ruth found time to work out with the Minnesota Gophers football team¹⁴ and also visit St. Mary's Hospital to see Joe Boland, a player from Notre Dame who had broken his leg in a game against the Gophers three weeks earlier.¹⁵

The following summer the entire Yankees Murderers' Row returned to St. Paul for an exhibition game. The Yankees beat the Saints, 9-8, on Wednesday, July 20, 1927. Although neither Ruth, who went on to set a single-season record with 60 home runs that season, nor Lou Gehrig, cleared the fence at Lexington Park, the pair "spilled nearly a quart of ink autographing baseballs

and score cards for small boys” before the game, according to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.¹⁶

Nearly 15,000 fans enjoyed the show, although the crowd dropped by at least one when 42-year-old John Kulasivig dropped dead of a heart attack after reportedly yelling, “Hit it over the fence, Babe.”¹⁷

Ruth appreciated the hospitality he received during his visits to the state, and that played a role in his agreeing to interrupt his “first vacation in 21 years” in 1935. Ruth had retired as a player that spring. That summer, he agreed to play in the annual game of the Minneapolis and St. Paul police departments. During his 1926 postseason vaudeville tour in Minneapolis, Police Chief Frank Brunskill had made Ruth an honorary member of the department.¹⁸

On Sunday, September 1, 1935, Ruth played half a game at Nicollet Park with the police teams. He only hit a double, but *Minneapolis Tribune* reporter Bob Beebe wrote, “[H]e gave the fans an idea of how he can sock a baseball by walloping a dozen or so out of the park in a batting exhibition that preceded the actual contest. One of them was a terrific clout that cleared the fence in deep left center with plenty to spare.”¹⁹

One of Ruth’s unfulfilled desires was managing. Unable to land a job as skipper in the major leagues, he decided to prove himself in the minors and told people he might like to manage the St. Paul Saints in 1941. He remained frustrated when the Saints instead hired Ralph “Red” Kress, who had been a popular figure in the area when he played for the Millers in 1937.²⁰

Ruth always seemed to enjoy his travels to Minnesota, starting with that first trip in 1922.²¹ After playing in front of 700 fans on a cold day in Sleepy Eye, Ruth called those who turned out “the most loyal fans he had ever seen,” according to the local newspaper. “He said that in New York not ten people would attend a game in the face of such a cold, snowy day.”²²

Randy Krzmarzick, a columnist and baseball historian in Sleepy Eye, has researched Ruth’s 1922 appearance there. “I think it’s likely the town did make an impression,” he said. “We’d like to think so.”²³

Footnote

Ruth’s final trip to Minnesota was Tuesday night, June 22, 1948, one of his last public appearances. He had flown in from South Dakota on a national tour to promote junior baseball. Before a battery of microphones at the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis, Ruth was interviewed by 11-year-old Johnny Ross, who had lost his eyesight a few years before. “How are you, Babe?” asked

Johnny. “I don’t feel so good,” replied Ruth. “I have a very bad throat and my head aches.”²⁴

Five years later, Ross played football and wrestled for Marshall High School in Minneapolis. In 1953 he was the state wrestling champion at 120 pounds.²⁵

Ruth returned to New York on Wednesday and by the next day was in the hospital, where he spent most of the remaining six-and-a-half weeks of his life. According to Robert W. Creamer in *Babe: The Legend Comes to Life*, Ruth flew to Baltimore for a charity game, which was rained out. On July 26, he attended the premiere of *The Babe Ruth Story*. Ruth left early and returned to the hospital. He never left the hospital again.²⁶

Notes

- 1 “Bush, Ruth and Meusel May Come Here: Trio of Baseball Stars Enthused with Our Region: Plan Hunting in Brainerd Lake Region after the World’s Series,” *Brainerd Dispatch*, September 25, 1922: 1.
- 2 “Ruth and Meusel to Play at Perry on Friday, Oct. 13,” *Des Moines Sunday Register*, October 1, 1922: 2S. The first stop on a Western tour by Ruth and Meusel was in Perry, Iowa, northwest of Des Moines. See Taylor reported in the October 14, 1922, *Des Moines Register* that Ruth’s Perry team beat Pella (with Meusel) 12-3 with Meusel hitting a home run and Ruth two triples. Taylor wrote that the “cool weather, high wind and dust that blew across the field in clouds” kept the crowd to only 800 and that promoters lost money on the game.
- 3 The *Lincoln Star* of October 13, 1922 (page 9) has an ad for appearances by Meusel and Ruth at charitable institutions in Lincoln to distribute candy on National Candy Day and for a game at Landis Field in the afternoon.
- 4 The selection of Sleepy Eye as a stop has been a topic of research by local historians, including Randy Krzmarzick. An article in the October 10, 1922, *Minneapolis Star* (page 8) states that the ball game was staged by the local unit of the American Legion. Krzmarzick believes the Knights of Columbus (of which Ruth was a member) may also have been involved and that Ruth may have been attracted by the St. Mary’s School (the same name as the industrial school he attended in Baltimore). See foxsports.com/north/video/299603523964.
- 5 One of the home-run balls still exists, according to a Minneapolis television station report: kare11.com/article/news/local/land-of-10000-stories/babe-ruth-home-run-ball-turns-up-with-104-year-old-minnesotan/35072475. Eleven-year-old Len Youngman corralled one of Ruth’s home runs and years later gave it to his grandson. Youngman turned 107 on March 27, 2018.
- 6 “‘Babe’ Hits Two Homers in Game Here Monday,” *Sleepy Eye Herald-Dispatch*, October 19, 1922: 1.
- 7 *Lincoln State Journal*, Monday, October 30, 1922: 9.
- 8 “Babe Ruth to Play at Nicollet Park on October 14 or 15,” *Minneapolis Star*, October 1, 1924: 10.
- 9 Charles Johnson, “Kids Break Up Ruth’s Ball Game; Souvenir Hunters Have Big Day,” *Minneapolis Star*, October 15, 1924: 11. Other reports suggest that the game had already been called by darkness by the time the fans swarmed onto the field.
- 10 “Ruth Appears at Tribune Today; Ball Tossing Is Eliminated,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 14, 1924: 15.
- 11 “‘Babe’ Ruth Regretfully Leaves St. Paul, Promising to Return September 28 if Yankees Grab Pennant,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 17, 1926: 1. Ruth and the Yankees said they would come back if they won the pennant since their regular season would

- conclude September 26 while the National League season wasn't scheduled to conclude for another three days.
- 12 "Babe Ruth 'The Swat King' Now Appearing at Pantages," *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 31, 1926: Art Section, 7.
 - 13 "Ruth, King of Swat, Delays Hunting to Greet Queen Marie," October 30, 1926: 1.
 - 14 "Babe Ruth Visits Boland, Injured Notre Dame Star," *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 2, 1926: 21.
 - 15 "Babe Ruth Works Out with Gophers; Tackles Joesting," *Minneapolis Journal*, November 2, 1926: 26.
 - 16 "Ruth, Gehrig Find Pen Mightier Than Bat to Thrill Boys Here," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 21, 1927: 1.
 - 17 "Winona Man Drops Dead," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 21, 1927: 1.
 - 18 "Babe Ruth to Take Part in Police Tilt at Nicollet," *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 1, 1935: 16.
 - 19 Bob Beebe, "13,000 Fans Watch Ruth in Police Game at Nicollet," *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 2, 1935: 14.
 - 20 "Ruth to Manage Saints???" *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 22, 1940: Second Section, 1.
 - 21 How many times Ruth came to Minnesota is unclear. The Nanibijou Lodge in Grand Marais, Minnesota, on the north shore of Lake Superior about halfway between Duluth and the Canadian border, claims Ruth and celebrities Jack Dempsey and Ring Lardner as charter members of the lodge when it opened in 1929: naniboujou.com. There is no mention of any of these celebrities in the *Cook Herald* (the newspaper for Cook County, where Grand Marais is) in the late 1920s.
 - 22 "'Babe' Hits Two Homers in Game Here Monday," *Sleepy Eye Herald-Dispatch*, October 19, 1922: 1.
 - 23 "Remembering Babe Ruth's Visit Sleepy Eye, Minn.," narrated by Tom Hanneman, Fox Sports North, July 8, 2014, foxsports.com/north/video/299603523964.
 - 24 Joe Hendrickson, "Interview We Won't Forget," *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 23, 1948: 20.
 - 25 Dan Stoneking, "Marshall-U," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), May 28, 1982: 1D.
 - 26 Robert W. Creamer, *Babe: The Legend Comes to Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 423-424.