

The “Babe” Was Here!



Cumberland 1931 and 1932

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Two of the most memorable events in Western Maryland sports history happened more than eight decades ago when George Herman Ruth and his New York Yankees team mates played exhibition games at Community Ballpark in Downtown Cumberland. The games generated excitement among fans while providing a financial boost to the Cumberland Colts, a Class C team of the Yankees farm system and member of the Mid Atlantic League. Fans were not disappointed because the Yankees put on a show that has lived in Cumberland sports lore for eight decades. While the passing of time has erased eyewitness accounts of the games, a Cumberland resident treasures an artifact that keeps one of the Bambino’s exciting appearances very much alive.

The Yankees first arrived in town on September 3, 1931. While the Colts were winning games that season, the Great Depression was taking a toll on attendance. The Colts organization hoped the Yankees game would raise money while renewing interest in the local team. According to reports, financial arrangements for the September visit included a payment of \$1,583 to the Yankees.

Many fans would be afforded a stadium seat on the historic day, but others had to search for high ground outside the facility that would provide a view of the game. According to the *Cumberland Evening Times*, “From the time the gates were thrown open at one o’clock, a continual tread of customers streamed into the park. Long before game time the stadium was filled. Outside ... small boys crowded a shed in back of the left field rampart... (and

the lads were chased from their vantage point. But they could not be restrained. Babe Ruth was in town and that means something in the lives of those boys ...” In addition to the nearly 3,900 fans inside the stadium, hundreds of others lined roofs and windows along Wineow Street and nearby buildings.

The visiting team started the game facing a “safe” pitcher, a requirement by the Yankees organization who did not want to risk injuries caused by wild pitches. Vito Tamulis, the Colts pitcher, faced Earl Combs and Myril Hoag before the “Sultan of Swat” stepped to the plate amid a cheering crowd. Tamulis’ first pitch to Ruth ended with a crack of the bat that sent the ball sailing over the right field fence much to the delight of fans who knew they had just witnessed a magical moment in local sports history.

The Yankees proved to be generous guests as they played their stars for nine innings and accommodated autograph requests following the game. The team did not, however, respond favorably to invitations to tour the Kelly-Springfield Tire Company and Celanese plants. Instead the players retired to the Algonquin Hotel until it was time to meet the 8:40 pm train at the Queen City Station.

The Bronx Bombers agreed to a second exhibition game that was set for 3:00 pm on May 25, 1932, a travel day for the Yankees who were headed to Washington DC. Once again the Yankees appearance in Cumberland generated excitement among baseball fans and the community at large who hoped to catch a glimpse of the legendary



1931 Cumberland Colts

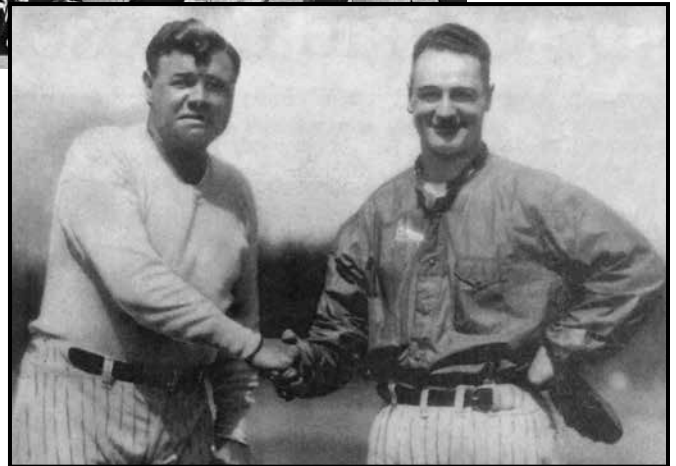
This photograph was taken at the Community Ballpark in Cumberland, Maryland.

Standing: Angue Davin, Chick Helmick, Bob Walsh, Bernie Connell, Leo Mackey – Manager, Col. Nelson Russler – President, Warren Duke, Max Posnak, and Bob Lynnatt.

Kneeling: Jim Dinsmore, Vito Tamulis, Dan Paremud, Jake McCay, Doug Hall, Bill Salamore, Pat Shea, Howard Braham.

Front: Jamie Eschelmann, mascot.

Vito Tamulis, the left-handed Colts pitcher who gave up a homerun to Babe Ruth in the 1931 game, joined the New York Yankees in September 1934. Tamulis later played for the Dodgers, Phillies, and Browns in a successful Major League Baseball career.



team. Although it was an inconvenient starting time, more than 1,000 fans passed through the gates along Wineow Street. One young man chose not pay the admission fee and decided instead to seat himself on a nearby railroad track, a decision that would have important consequences.

Cumberland resident Shirley Shaffer is well acquainted with Babe Ruth's second appearance in Cumberland because her father, John "Boots" Sapp, was the fan who seated himself on the Western Maryland Railway spur that spanned an area beyond the center field fence. Boots Sapp was not alone in creating an improvised seating arrangement because fans assigned themselves to convenient spaces all along the railroad and nearby vantage points.



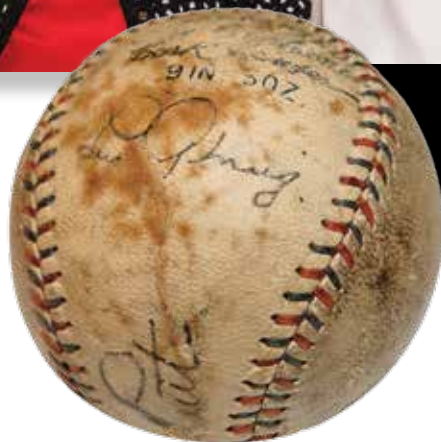
Top photo: Babe Ruth and teammate Lou Gehrig.

Bottom photo: John "Boots" Sapp showing his grandson, Greg Shaffer, the ball Babe Ruth hit out of the Cumberland Community Ballpark in 1932.



Shirley Shaffer relates the story of how her father, Boots Sapp, acquired the famous Babe Ruth ball to Cumberland baseball players, J.T. (left) and Allan Stevenson.

Baseballs at right are two views of the same ball displaying the Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig signatures.



Scale model of Community Ballpark in Cumberland.

These photographs by: **Lance C. Bell**

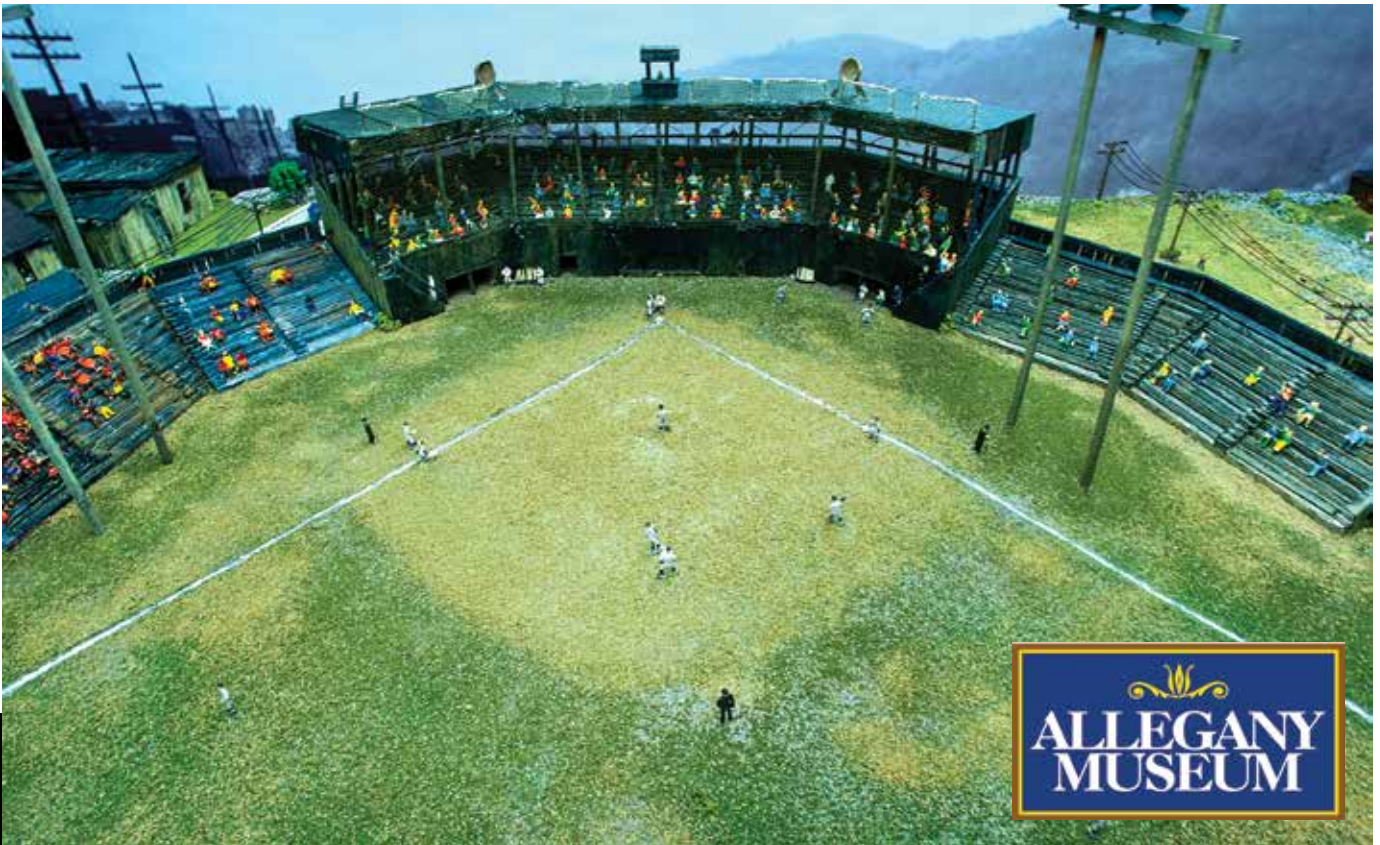
According to newspaper reports, the Yanks put on a show during the game but it turned out to be the pregame extravaganza that caused the most excitement. During batting practice the Bambino lined a pitch over the center field fence and onto an embankment near the railroad track, the only time a baseball ever cleared the center field fence at Community Ballpark.

According to Mrs. Shaffer, her father witnessed the record breaking long drive and brought home an artifact to prove it. “According to my father, Babe Ruth hit the ball over the center field fence, the longest ball ever hit at the stadium. All the nearby fans ran for the ball, but my father ended up on the bottom of the pile and was able to grab it. He later went around to the front office, and the officials allowed him inside to get it autographed. Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and two other Yankees signed the ball.

The Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig signatures remain legible but the other two have faded.”

The historical record notes the Yankees defeated the Cumberland Colts by a score of 5-1 in the first game and 19-6 in the second one—no surprises in those box scores. What the contemporary accounts could not capture, however, is the lore that Ruth, Gehrig, and the Bronx Bombers left behind to a grateful town. While eyewitnesses to the historic game have passed, the Shaffer family treasures a valuable artifact that will keep the Boots Sapp-Babe Ruth story alive for future generations to enjoy.

The Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig autographed ball is secured in a safe deposit box and makes appearances as deemed appropriate by the Shaffer family.



This scale model of the Community Ballpark in Cumberland (1923-1946) was built by Andrew Sparber, and assisted by Rick Webb. It is located at the ALLEGANY MUSEUM, 6 Pershing Street, Cumberland, MD (www.alleganymuseum.org).

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