

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS

'Sultan of Swat' visited Medina in 1920

By Matt Ballard

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The 125th birthday of George Herman "Babe" Ruth was Feb. 6. After a stint with Jack Dunn's Baltimore Orioles, Ruth's contract was sold to the Boston Red Sox on July 4, 1914, and once again to the New York Yankees in 1919 for \$100,000. Those hardened baseball fans know the rest of the story, the superstitious "Curse of the Bambino" and subsequent Red Sox World Series drought.

Ruth made a visit to Medina on Oct. 18, 1920, playing as a ringer for "Bing" Cleary's Medina baseball club against Jimmy Mack's Harrisons of Lockport. Playing at what is now Veterans Park along with Carl Mays, Fred Hoffman, and James "Truck" Hannah, the Medina club shelled out \$2,000 to bring the quartet to Orleans County. Cleary announced in the local papers that advanced-sale grandstand tickets were unavailable and that all sales would take place the afternoon of Oct. 18.

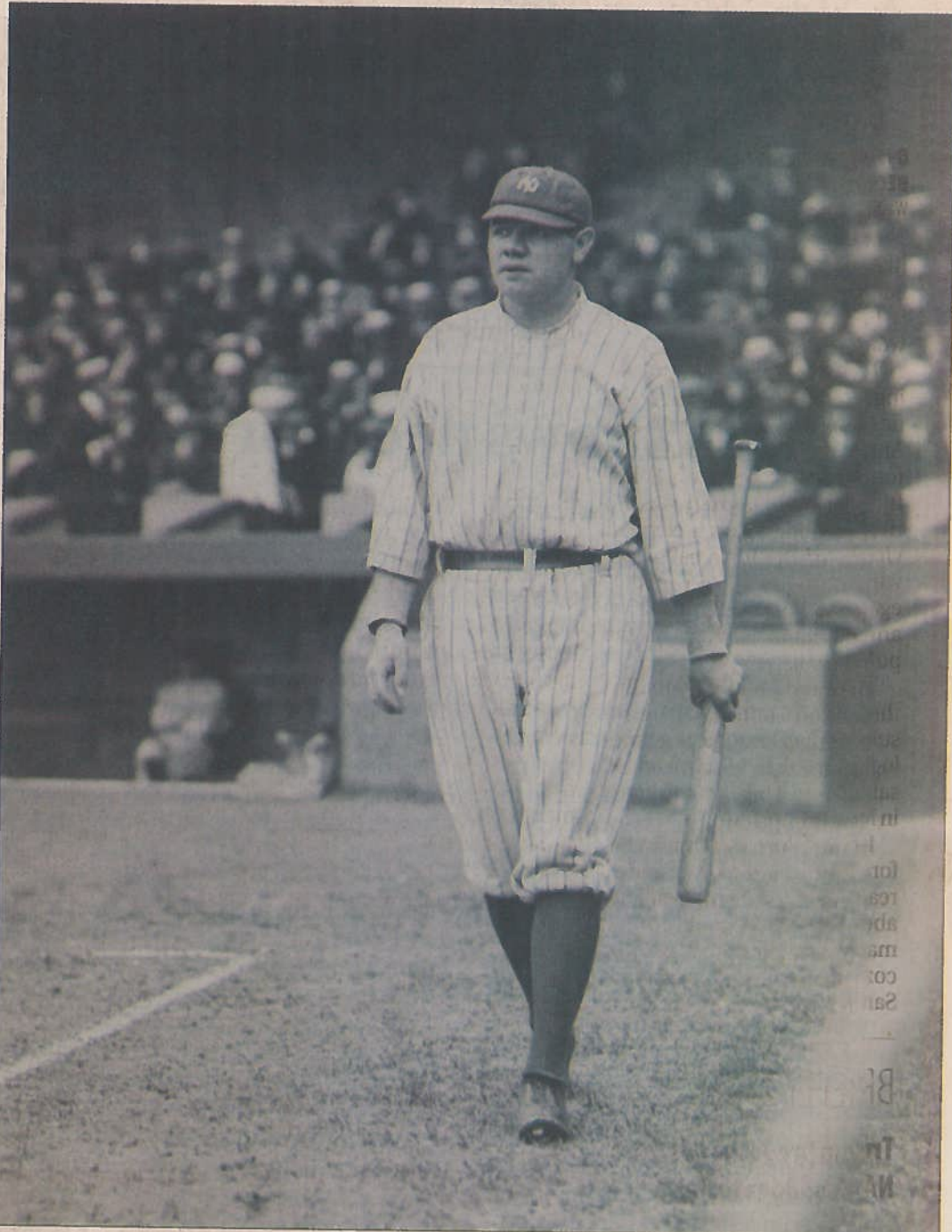
After the close of the game, the ticket sales came up about \$400 short of the needed \$2,000. Local accounts indicate that the "Sultan of Swat" put on a home run exhibition before the game, launching 15 balls over the fence. Cleary was forced to step in and stopped the demonstration as Ruth threatened to knock all of the team's balls out of the park before the game even started.

It was anticipated that Ruth would pitch for the game, but during a game at Binghamton the week prior he sprained his wrist. The Bambino played first base for the duration of the game, while Carl Mays took the mound and Hoffman played behind home plate. Although Ruth was just beginning to establish himself as major hitter, he fanned on his first at bat for the game against Lockport's Bert Lewis. It was "Fin" Whalen of Lockport who hit the first ball out of the park. Whalen later recalled, as he rounded first base, that Ruth remarked, "Beat me to it, eh, Red?" Ruth later hit a home run and triple in Medina's 6-2 victory over Lockport.

Ruth's visit to Medina is legendary, although those who would recall first hand have since passed.

Over the years, variations of the story have appeared in local papers, including notations that the game occurred in 1921 rather than 1920, occurred on Oct. 19 instead of Oct. 18, and that Jeff Tesreau of the New York Giants played.

Of course, Ruth's connection to Orleans County was not limited to his visit in 1920. Carl Fischer, "The Medina Mauler," struck out Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Sam Byrd consecutively during his time as a pitcher with the Detroit Tigers in 1932.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL THOMPSON. COURTESY OF ORLEANS COUNTY HISTORY DEPARTMENT.

Photograph of Babe Ruth during his first year with the New York Yankees, 1920