

The Babe Ruth Museum and Birthplace

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THE BABE RUTH MUSEUM AND BIRTHPLACE, 216 Emory Street, Baltimore, MD 21230. (800) 435-BABE. Winter Hours 10 a.m.–4 p.m. seven days a week, after April 1 open to 5 p.m. (until 7 p.m. on Oriole home game dates). For information about the Babe Ruth Archive, contact Greg Schwallenberg at (410) 727-1539, ext. 3011, or e-mail John@BabeRuthMuseum.com. Website <http://www.BabeRuthMuseum.com>

Babe Ruth is as Baltimore as the city's rowhouses and their scrubbed white marble front steps. George Herman Ruth, Jr., was born, raised, and learned baseball in Baltimore. He started his baseball career as a fearsome schoolboy pitcher for St. Mary's (a kind of reform school). The Babe Ruth Museum and Birthplace is a piece of Baltimore history that would interest any baseball fan.

Emory Street is located in what was traditionally the German section of the city. The museum fills the interconnected spaces of three Baltimore-style row houses, one on each side of the birthplace. The birthplace itself consists of a parlor and living room, which are sparsely furnished in keeping with the family's financial circumstances (the house had been rented by Pius Schamburger, Ruth's maternal grandfather, an immigrant from southern Germany). A framed Gothic needlepoint reading *Gott hilf uns noch* (Ever a help is God) and a German-language Bible attest to Ruth's ethnic heritage. Ruth could be heard speaking German during his career, and he enjoyed plebeian German fare like the pickled eels he often ate, a quart or two at a time, before a game. However, Ruth's German heritage is a mere elision in the museum text. His persona did not involve a specifically German content in the pre-electronic media, unlike many ballplayers of Italian-American heritage of that era.

Though ethnicity was not part of Babe Ruth's myth, class was. Among the artifacts displayed upstairs are pieces of the poor-boy cum sports legend story: a shard of a whiskey bottle and some dishes excavated from the family saloon

(a site now beneath center field at Camden Yards). There is a delightful juxtaposition of two mementos from Ruth's years at St. Mary's: a catcher's mitt and a hymnal. The mitt, incredibly small compared to modern equipment, is soft, supple, and well-worn; it is just barely larger than his boyhood hymnal, which appears not nearly so well-worn.

In the museum section, images of the sports idol are displayed in a multi-tiered panorama of larger-than-life photographs. There are pictures of Ruth signing autographs for youngsters, pictures of him in action on the ballfield. Ruth's home run swing was like a roughly-used corkscrew when he failed to make contact. Here also is Ruth stepping out in top hat and evening clothes. He is somber, perhaps self-conscious, holding patent leather gloves. A small film theater in the museum shows a 28-minute TV biography narrated by a young Mike Wallace about how Ruth became a baseball legend, the dominating and defining mythic baseball icon.

Despite his roots in Baltimore, and although he signed his first professional contract here as a pitcher, Babe Ruth is usually seen as the "Sultan of Swat" of the New York Yankees. Although Ruth was once briefly an Oriole in the International League, Orioles owner Jack Dunn, Sr., sold this local prospect, dubbed by Oriole teammates "Jack Dunn's Baby" or "Dunnies Babe," in mid-season 1914 to the Red Sox. Ruth pitched masterfully for Boston and helped the Red Sox reach the World Series in 1915, 1916, and 1918. After being sold to the Yankees in 1919, he became the iconic power hitter of the 1920s. The historical irony is that, in a sense, he was actually returning to the home team—the New York Yankees were the former American League Orioles, who had been purchased and moved to New York in 1903.

The museum also contains a wing that features the ongoing career of Orioles player Cal Ripken, Jr. This section is, like other displays here featuring the Orioles, underwritten by the Orioles corporate ownership. It is dedicated to Ripken's breaking of Lou Gehrig's record of consecutive games played. Stalwart Cal is one ballplayer son of a local baseball family who is ineluctably linked in the popular mind to the success of the present-day Orioles. The seemingly unassailable consecutive games record set by Gehrig, Ruth's New York Yankee teammate, had been standing since 1939.

This museum is an example in a capitalist-entrepreneurial context of what sports history scholar Tara Magdalinski calls *Traditionspflege*—a German term she uses to mean the conscious searching for, recognition of, and articulation of "invented" traditions, à la Eric Hobsbawm, toward some larger goal. The baseball "powers that be" recognize the need for linkages to larger and more dominant sporting traditions. Baltimore is a true baseball town and has had an Orioles team since 1872. Baseball is the stuff of vital tradition: a studied pace, a summer-long season, players that still look human in their uniforms, an endless variety of situations. The historicity of baseball in an increasingly ahistorical America needs the buttressing that places like Baltimore's Camden Yards ballpark and the Babe Ruth museum can provide. Baseball is a particularly fertile field for creating traditions rooted in historical fact. The stately pace of baseball makes it, perhaps

more than any other American sport, a game geared toward reflection on what has been within the context of the here and now. The preservation of tradition helps to elicit a real, if hard-to-define, sense of community in a postmodern age seemingly geared only to effective marketing. Steven W. Pope, in his recently published book *Patriotic Games*, calls this in a broader context "the problematical nature of public memory (which) represents a body of beliefs and ideas about the past (that) includes fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society."

The Babe Ruth Museum is scheduled for expansion. The individual and corporate owners of the Orioles would be well-advised to increase the number of Babe Ruth displays at the new venue. In particular, a separate exhibit on the "old" Orioles just before the turn of the century coupled with greater emphasis on Ruth's time with the International League would help in creating and explaining a Babe Ruth tradition in Baltimore baseball.

In 1998, some exhibits will be moved closer to the stadium-marketing complex. Future exhibits there will include "Women in Sports," the history of the Baltimore Negro League teams, and a history of the Camden Station railroad building itself. The part of the museum dealing specifically with Babe Ruth will expand into the vacated space at the current location. The Emory Street location will continue to house the Babe Ruth Archive, containing donated documents, scrapbooks, and the scorebooks of many of Ruth's memorable baseball games.