

HOFF'S MEMORY CRYSTAL CLEAR

Eyewitness Claims Babe Never Called Famous Home Run

BY DOUG RUTTER

The legend of baseball great Babe Ruth isn't based entirely on fact. The story behind his "called home run" in the 1932 World Series, for instance, has been embellished over the years.

That's the story according to Bill Hoff, who may well be Brunswick County's only eyewitness to the homer 50 years ago at Chicago's Wrigley Field. He remembers it differently.

Hoff was seated along the third base line, some 90 feet from the Babe, when Ruth allegedly pointed to an area in the outfield bleachers and delivered the most famous of his 714 career dingers.

Hoff, a lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, says the whole story is a sham. The "Bambino" never pointed to the seats, but rather to the home plate umpire.

"I saw that game and they'll never convince me any different," Hoff said recently at his Shallotte Point home.

The Babe was actually telling the umpire how many strikes he had left. With two strikes against him, Hoff said Ruth held up one finger toward the umpire to let him know he had one swing to go.

Hoff remembers the game like it was yesterday, which is pretty amazing considering he's 93 years old.

Born Jan. 25, 1899, in rural South Dakota, Hoff remembers a lot of things most folks his age have long since forgotten. He has the memory of a college coed cramming for a psychology final.

"I can remember things way back when as far as that goes," Hoff says, rather unimpressed with his sharp mind. "Occasionally I'll forget a name or something. But I get along pretty good."

His son, Bob, says he has a photographic memory. Until eye surgery a few years ago, Bob said his father had read five or six books a week for more than 40 years and re-

membered everything about them.

The senior Hoff loves talking about baseball. He went to a lot of games at Wrigley Field and old Comiskey Park when he lived in Illinois, just 90 minutes outside Chicago.

He recalls one of his more humorous mo-

ments at the ball yard—the time he happened to run into the first commissioner of professional baseball, Kenesaw Mountain Landis.

Hoff and some buddies had choice seats at a White Sox game, down front near the

commissioner and his diamond-clad lady friend.

"When we got up to leave one of the guys said something and I turned around and bumped into Landis and knocked his hat off," he said, breaking into a laugh.



BILL HOFF picks crabs at his Shallotte Point home. The 93-year-old does his share of household chores to stay active.

STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

Hoff, who describes himself as a country boy, has lived with his son and daughter-in-law at Shallotte Point for about six years.

"I like it," he says of the quiet, waterfront community. "We don't have six-foot snow banks here like we do in Illinois."

Hoff lived in the Hoosier State for more than 40 years. As a younger man, he was a farmer and plumber and worked in a ship yard several years before retiring from DuPont in 1964.

"I still work for DuPont," Hoff says with a grin. "I get a check from them every month to remind me."

Born and raised in Roscoe, S.D., Hoff received an eighth-grade education in a one-room schoolhouse. All eight grades met in the same room, with a total enrollment of about 15 students.

Hoff, whose parents came to the United States from Germany, was a plumber during the Great Depression. Like everything else, he still has vivid memories of those lean years.

"Unless you went through it you can't realize what it was," he said. "I knew people worth a million who for a short time didn't have enough money to buy a hamburger."

Hoff said the small midwestern towns suffered a lot, and he remembers making pipes where some of the wealthy farmers could stash their money. "I know one thing, I wouldn't want to go through it again."

Hoff's memory isn't the only thing that has held up over the years. He's a spry 93 with two granddaughters, five great-grandchildren and a face with hardly a wrinkle on it.

He doesn't have any secrets to staying young. "I help out with the chores when I can," Hoff says. "I just do little things to stay active."

He also fishes occasionally, and enjoys competing in the annual Shallotte Point VFD Flounder Tournament.

"I've never got skunked," he says proudly. "I've always caught at least one fish."

At 89, Ballard's Can-Do Man For Church

BY ERIC CARLSON

Thomas Lafayette (T.L.) Ballard is a man with a mission. On any day of the week you can spot this spry old gentleman stopped by roadsides throughout Brunswick County picking up aluminum cans and loading them onto a specially made trailer he tows behind his car.

Or you might see him tidying up around county ball fields, tossing more finds into his jangling satchel.

When friends and relatives come to visit, they often bring bags or boxes full of cans to add to his collection.

He doesn't do it out of any particular fondness for cans or a hatred of litter, although he is disturbed about how much people seem to throw away.

At nearly 90 years old, the man everyone knows simply as "Mister Ballard" spends much of his time collecting discarded aluminum to help purchase a new van for his church.

Ballard is a member of Jennies Branch Baptist Church, where he also teaches Sunday school. He joined shortly after moving to nearby Brick Landing in 1946. He is a native of Chalybeate Springs, which he describes as "just a place in the road now" near Fuquay-Varina. He brought his family here on the advice of a doctor who felt that living near the water would be good for his son's asthma.

Roaming the highways comes natural to Ballard. Before retiring, he spent 32 years as a traveling salesman for Brown, Rogers and Dixon Hardware Co. He remembers loading his samples onto the same little trailer he uses today and visiting hardware stores throughout eastern North Carolina.

Nowadays his travels rarely take him beyond Whiteville, where he sells his cans to a recycling center. He takes the time to smash each can flat with a sledge hammer so he can collect an additional penny per pound. And no one ever asks if he qualifies for the extra penny added for senior citizen recyclers.

Ballard estimates that he's picked up about 7,000 cans this year, enough to add \$100 to the church van fund.

"He's really been an inspiration to all of us," said Herman Absher, pastor of Jennies Branch Baptist Church. "I wish we had several more who were as enthusiastic as he is."

The church is about \$4,000 short of its goal of \$16,000 for the van fund, Absher said. He hopes to be able to purchase a late-model 15-passenger van by the end of this summer.

The van will be used to transport the church choir, Sunday school students, senior citizens and other church groups to special events and activities.



T.L. BALLARD, 89, of Brick Landing prepares for another day of gathering aluminum cans to raise money for his church.

STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

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