

Big Fish in a Little Pond

Before **WHITEY FORD** became a household name, the southpaw took the hill at Cameron Field

By Alfred Santasiere III

In more ways than one, Whitey Ford followed in the footsteps of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig.

Not only did Ford become a Yankees legend and a member of the National Baseball Hall of Fame a few decades after Ruth and Gehrig, but he also took center stage at Cameron Field in South Orange, New Jersey.

After posting a 9-1 regular-season record during his rookie season with the Yankees, Ford tossed a gem in Game 4 of the 1950 World Series, pitching 8 $\frac{2}{3}$ scoreless innings.

Soon after, Ford's time in pinstripes was interrupted.

"We won four straight from the Phillies in the 1950

World Series, and that was one of my greatest thrills," Ford said. "A few days after the World Series, I went to the military draft board to find out how many months I had before I had to report to the Army, and they told me I only had a few weeks. On Nov. 20, I was officially in the Army."

The 22-year-old Ford was stationed in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, which is located about 50 miles from New York City. Although Ford wouldn't be facing major league hitters during his service time, which lasted two years, he didn't stray too far from the game.

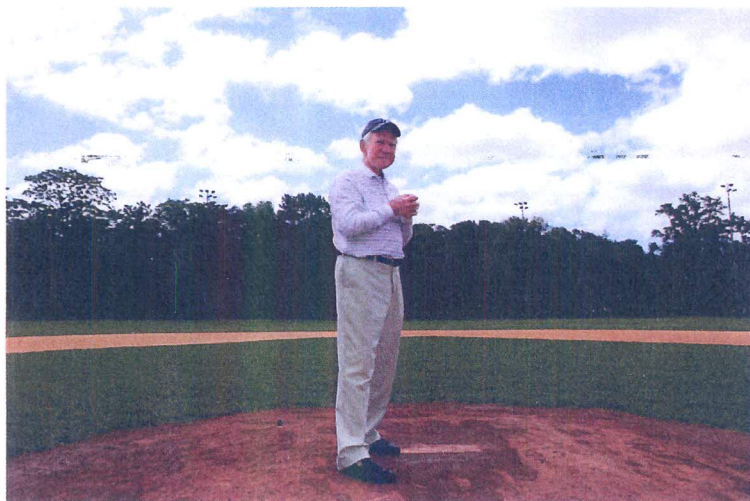
"After I finished basic training in Fort Monmouth, the general put me in charge of the baseball field," Ford said. "I managed the grounds crew and made sure the field always looked nice. I would show up at about 8 in the morning and make sure the grass was cut and the dugouts were clean."

Of course, Army officials also saved a roster spot on the Fort Monmouth Signaleers baseball team for the up-and-coming pitcher.

The Fort Monmouth squad competed against local colleges, semipro teams and American Legion teams in the greater New York area.

On June 24, 1951, Fort Monmouth invaded Cameron Field for a tilt against the South Orange American Legion Giants. Ford, who was suffering from elbow inflammation, surrendered two runs in three innings of work and took the loss.

"The general asked our manager, Mule Haas, why we would have 3,000 fans at some games and only have 500 at others," Ford said. "Haas explained that I had played for the Yankees and a lot of people came to see me pitch. The general responded by saying, 'Make Ford pitch every game.' So for about a month, I pitched at least one inning in every game."



about 60 degrees that day, much in the tank to begin with."

Ford got the chance to redeem himself the following season when the soldiers carried a 38-8 record into Cameron Field to take on the Giants, who boasted a 10-2 record.

On Sept. 7, 1952, the Signaleers faced the Giants after splitting two previous meetings that season. Ford, who this time was working on 11 days' rest, took a 6-2 record to the hill.

In the rubber match, the Chairman of the Board gave up two hits and one run in the first inning before blanking the Giants over the final eight frames.

later, Ford scored the second run of the game on an error.

Clinging to a 3-1 lead, Ford allowed two Giants to reach base with one out in the ninth inning, but the Signaleers' ace came back to strike out the final two batters of the game.

Earlier this summer, Ford returned to Cameron Field for the first time since 1952. As he was walking off the mound, I reminded him of his brief ninth-inning struggles.

"I planned it that way," Ford responded through a laugh. "I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory." ❄



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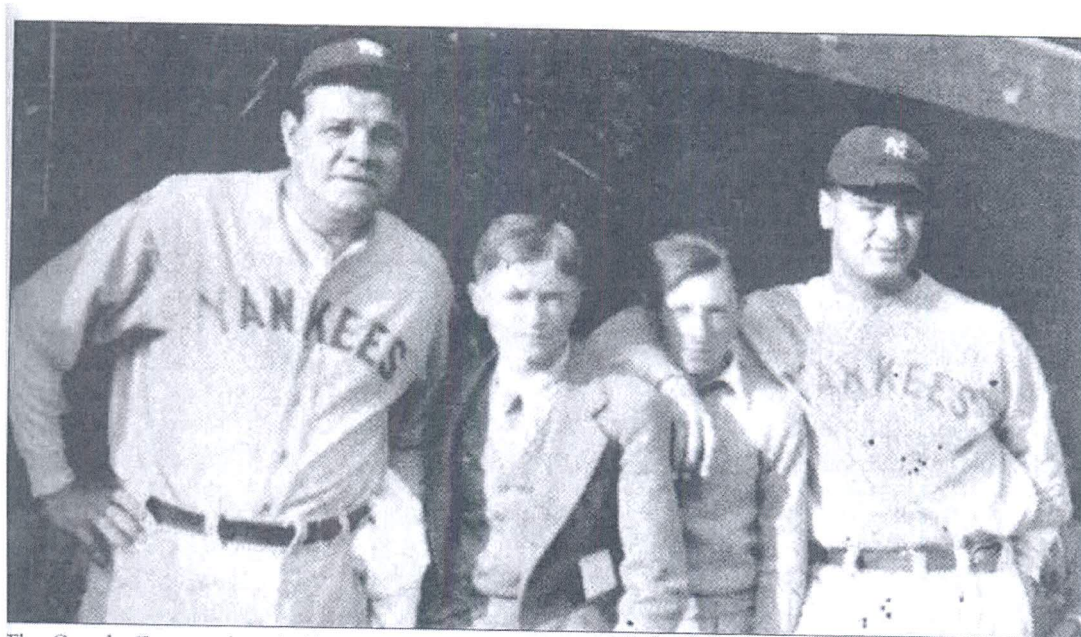
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When Babe Ruth Played for South Orange

The Yankee legend and his teammate, Lou Gehrig, played at Cameron Field in 1929.

By Marcia Worth (Open Post) (/users/marciaworth)

🕒 Updated April 5, 2012 at 2:37 pm 💬 4 **P** (<http://contribute.patch.com/moderation/3148>)



THE YANKEES

until the major league play

Ruth and Lou Gehrig took the local field -- yes, Cameron Field.

It's hard to believe that a sport so rooted in tradition was something of a long shot less than a century ago. While the first stars, Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner, Cy Young and Walter Johnson were becoming household names in the 1910s and early 1920s, thanks to radio broadcasts of the games, the sport still suffered from rumors of gambling and graft. When the Chicago White Sox lost the 1919 World Series to the underdog Cincinnati Reds, the game's reputation was seriously tarnished.

Still, the sport's appeal and talented players attracted fans. The New York Yankees – to which many South Orangers still claim allegiance – emerged as the team to beat in the '20s. Babe Ruth made a name for himself as a hitter; in 1920 alone, he hit 54 home runs. He anchored a lineup so strong that it was called "Murderers' Row." Joining Ruth on "the row" were centerfielder Earle Combs (batting average .356), shortstop Mark Koenig (.285), first baseman Lou Gehrig (.373), left fielder Bob Meusel (.337) and second baseman Tony Lazzeri (.309).

And on Oct. 27, 1929, Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig played baseball at South Orange's own Cameron Field.

Until the mid-'20s, Cameron Field, one of South Orange's busiest baseball fields today, was a private club owned by the South Orange Field Club. The Club first housed itself in Edwin Mead's barn, which burned down in 1895. By the time the

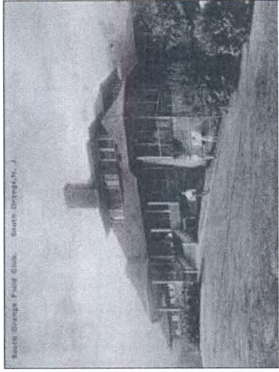
new clubhouse -- what we now call The Baird -- was built, club members looked across Mead Street to watch golfers playing on the nine-hole course. The ninth hole was located where the baseball diamond is now, and golfers teed off near home plate.

Times changed, however, and golf gave way to baseball, as both watching and playing the sport became the rage in South Orange. The town fielded a number of semi-professional teams. One such team hosted New Brunswick in a game on Oct. 27, 1929. The South Orange team, with help from Ruth and Gehrig, played for a crowd of some 12,000, including about two dozen Major Leaguers. Spectators paid one dollar each to sit in the grandstand and watch South Orange best New Brunswick, 7-6. Legend holds that Ruth homered into the right-field stands, while Gehrig hit two home runs. Memorably, one shot by the "Iron Horse" cleared the wall and the railroad tracks to hit a house on Vose Avenue. Local rumor has it that the ball -- one of nearly 200 used in that game -- broke a window.

The following week brought the historic Black Monday and Black Tuesday, which ushered the nation into the Great Depression. Those years saw a rise in baseball's popularity as the nation sought cheap diversion from daily problems. Night baseball and the Hall of Fame were founded in the 1930s, and 1931 saw baseball attendance records shattered. South Orange, closely linked to Manhattan's fortunes, felt the economic pinch. Like the nation, the residents turned to baseball for exercise and entertainment. Cameron Field never looked back to its golf course past; it remains a busy baseball field today. Teams field, pitchers practice that curve, and batters—I suspect—aim for that window on Vose.

1. BAIRD COMMUNITY CENTER

In 1889 residents established the South Orange Field Club. This was a members-only organization that met in Edwin Mead's Barn. Seven years later, in January 1896, the barn burned to the ground and the club immediately began building a new clubhouse. It featured 14 clubrooms, a veteran's recreation room, pool tables, four bowling alleys, a craft shop and three kitchens. By 1929, more sports activities were available and the private club evolved into a community center. In 1930, 14 rooms were added and the South Orange Field Club was renamed the Baird Center. In addition to serving the welfare needs of the community, the Baird has since become the hub of both cultural affairs and recreation for the Village.



Baird Community Center
South Orange, N.J.

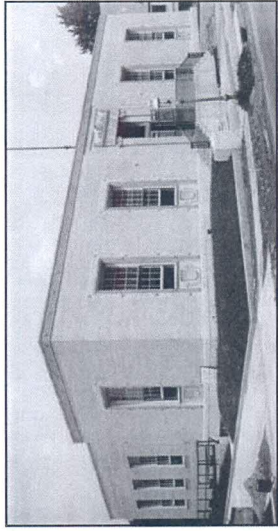
2. CAMERON FIELD

From about 1900 until the mid 1920s, Cameron Field was private property owned by the South Orange Field Club. A nine hole golf course named the Lone Oak Links was part of Cameron Field. The 9th hole was positioned where the baseball diamond is currently located. From about 1900 until 1935, baseball was one of the main attractions across the country. In the 1920s, baseball clubs often marketed the game by having professional players play baseball with local ball clubs in exhibition games. Typically, crowds gathered at the South Orange Field Club (as we now know, this was later known as the Baird Center) to watch the home team play semi-professional teams and numerous touring African-American Teams, including the Black Yankees, Pittsburgh Crawfords, Cuban Stars and the Washington Pilots. One game took place on October 29, 1929. Twelve thousand spectators, including 35 major-league ballplayers brought baseball fever to Cameron field to watch legendary players Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig play in an exhibition game for South Orange. Spectators each paid the \$1 admission to squeeze into the grandstands and crowd around the diamond that fall afternoon. Ruth hit a home run into the right field stands and Gehrig hit two homers. One of Gehrig's shots traveled 600 feet as it cleared the centerfield wall and the Lackawanna Railroad tracks to hit a house on Vose Avenue. Fourteen dozen baseballs were used that day when South Orange defeated New Brunswick 7 - 6. Today, the local Cal Ripkin League's motto is "South Orange Baseball: "Where Legends Played."



3. POST OFFICE

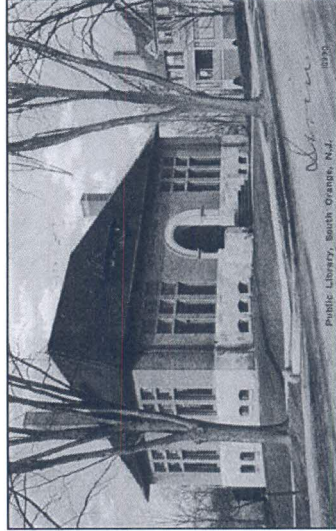
In 1937 the South Orange Post Office closed its doors to the public. It was during the term of General Farley.



In 1939, the U.S. Department of the Treasury held a commission painted murals for decoration inside post office buildings. The first prize winning artist got to paint a scene in the Bronx. The second prize winner was assigned to the South Orange Post Office. Bernard Perlin (who was then 21 years old) won the \$2,000 prize to paint the mural of this choice. He spent nine months on it, which shows recreational pursuits popular in South Orange.

4. THE CONNETT LIBRARY

When the original library, located on the 2nd floor at what is now Orange Avenue (now Dunkin' Donuts) became too small, Connett donated land at the corner of Scotland Road and 1st Avenue for a library. He made this donation on the condition that the library raise \$7,500 to build the library. Five hundred families donated to the library. The Village's school board opened the library on May 8, 1939. It was a large building that was needed to expand the library. The building opened in 1939 and is located on the corner of Scotland Road and 1st Avenue.



Public Library, South Orange, N.J.
1939