"He blasted a home run, sailing across what today would be the Lifelong Education Center, Library, Susquehanna Room and Building Trades Center, and hit ***The Chair.****"*

Babe Ruth

The "King of Baseball" Played *Here!*



At the southeast rim of campus sits the Alvin C. Bush Campus Center. On its northeast corner is an angular stone marker that reads "Crooks Doors, 1886." The marker represents the former site of the Crooks Door Factory, and the last remnant of the wood-framed industrial park that once occupied the area. Directly west of the Crooks facility, in the vicinity of the new Victorian House, once stood the original Culler Furniture Factory. Atop the old Culler building, perched on its roof, sat an oversized chair big enough for a king.

As young boys in 1950s Williamsport, my friends and I would sit in an old baseball grandstand, the former West Third Street baseball field. The grandstand sat, angled southeasterly, directly behind the College Gymnasium, the site that today is the northwest sector of the Lifelong Education Center.

by Paul A. "Babe" Mayer Jr.
associate professor, fitness and lifetime sports

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In the 1950s, the old baseball grandstand was part of the Williamsport Area High School football stadium. It was here, on autumn Saturday afternoons, my friends and I gathered to watch the Williamsport Millionaire football team play before packed crowds of hysterical WAHS football fans. Coach Tom Vargo, who later became a professor at the College, produced some of the best football played in 1950s Pennsylvania. On football afternoons the place to be was West Third Street stadium, and everyone in the stadium viewed the giant chair that towered over the visiting stands.

Often, from that old grandstand, my friends and I would look in a southeasterly direction, beyond the players, the crowd and the field, and over the visiting stands, at that oversized chair atop the Culler factory. "The Chair," as it was known to us, was a symbol for what was manufactured daily within the confines of the large wooden building. It was a local landmark, and like most landmarks, "The Chair" was not without its local folklore.

One particular legend, often related in our youthful enthusiasm, gives an account of the day the king of baseball, Babe Ruth, played a game at that former baseball field. And, of course, in his "Ruthish" fashion, he blasted a home run, sailing across what today would be the Lifelong Education Center, Library, Susquehanna Room and Building Trades Center, and hit "The Chair." "Wow, what a shot that must have been!," we would gasp as we sat gazing in the stands.

Last year, while speaking at a fitness conference at Hofstra University in Hemstead, Long Island, I was invited to attend a special academic conference commemorating the 100th birthday of Babe Ruth. The conference involved historians, biographers, sportswriters, authors, friends and others who, for three days, lectured on the myth of Babe Ruth, an American icon.

It's been almost 50 years since the Babe's death, and over 60 years since his last home run. Yet, people still feel the magic at the mention of his name and his mystical "feel good" powers. Children and adults still point to the fence, acknowledging his famous 1927 "called shot" World Series home run. Those who study baseball believe he saved the game, following the aftermath of the dreaded 1919 Black Sox scandal. Players still look at him as the home run king, even after most of his records have been broken. His persona is as bold today as it was when he helped a troubled America bridge two World Wars and the Great Depression. He wore the New York Yankee pin stripes. He represented the American dream. He achieved greatness. He was then, and still is, the king!

During the conference I drifted back to my youth, sitting in that old grandstand with my friends, and recalled the story about Babe Ruth and the Culler factory chair. Reflecting back brought a comforting feeling to me — a feeling that accompanies thoughts of the "good old days," and the persona of legends like the Babe. It was then that I realized the bond between Babe Ruth and the Penn College campus.

"His persona is as bold today as it was when he helped a troubled America bridge two World Wars and the Great Depression."



HISTORICAL PHOTO COURTESY WAHS YEARBOOK

An historical aerial view shows the West Third Street baseball field behind the College's gymnasium and the old "trolley car barn," seen in the foreground. The gymnasium still stands, as does the Academic Center, situated across the street.

On October 31, 1923 the "barnstorming" Babe Ruth All-Stars visited the West Third Street field to play the Williamsport Grays, a local minor league baseball team that had won the NYPEN (*New York-Pennsylvania*) League championship earlier that season. "Barnstorming" was a common practice for pre-1950s professional athletes. Sports heroes traveled to small cities to play post-season exhibition games against local talent. And Babe Ruth was the best there was at it. He regularly earned $1,000 a game, and fans flocked to see the great Babe Ruth hit a homer.

Ruth did not disappoint the local fans that October afternoon. The Babe smashed three home runs. During pre-game practice, he directed two home runs over *(not on)* the Culler factory chair! The third occurred during the game, which the Babe Ruth All-Stars won 8-5 over the Williamsport Grays. Babe was a showman; the "chair" was a natural prop, and together they created a memorable show.

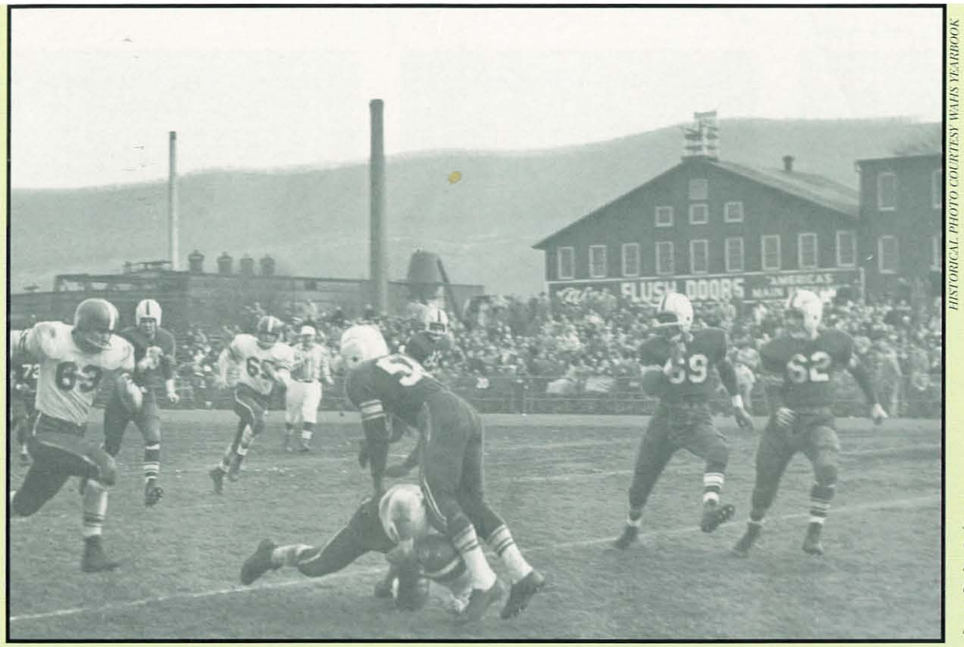
Compared to his many achievements, those three home runs are insignificant, unless you were there on October 31, 1923, or frequent the site of the present College campus. Then, his performance here magnifies; it allows you to be a part of his myth.

The Babe and his visit to my hometown and my campus is important to me. I guess that's because, like so many others, I believe that heroes are an important part of life. Unfortunately today, it's harder to find heroes. In our society of advanced technology, icons like the Babe seem to have vanished. Heroes appear and disappear almost as quickly as their television commercials. Their image is marred by inflated salaries, contemptuous attitudes, labor strikes and skyrocketing ticket prices that make it difficult for fans to see them in real life.

We need heroes to look to for inspiration, to set examples for us to follow, goals for us to seek, and to guide us through difficult times. That's the legacy they leave us. In our complex world today, it is comforting to know that heroes are there when we need them. That's why I enjoy recalling the time Babe Ruth came to that old stadium here at what is now Penn College. Babe Ruth arguably may be the last American sports demigod. That alone makes having the Babe as part of our campus lore important.

The next time you pass along the north side of the Campus Center, stop and look for the stone marker that reads "Crooks Doors, 1886." Look west at the Victorian House, and imagine it as a wood frame factory with an oversized chair on its roof. Gaze in a northwesterly direction through the Susquehanna Room and imagine a rotund left-handed batter, swinging, hitting a towering ball over the campus and beyond the giant chair. Look real hard and maybe you can see my childhood buddies and me sitting in the old wooden grandstand, amazed. ■

Author "Babe" Mayer received his nickname from his childhood buddies who thought he, in his baggy Little League uniform, looked like and ran like Babe Ruth.



HISTORICAL PHOTO COURTESY WAHS YEARBOOK

The infamous "chair" sits atop the former Culler Furniture Factory in this photo, taken on the field during a Williamsport High School football game.