

BABE RUTH'S LAST APPEARANCE AT YANKEE STADIUM

My Uncle Sam was the president of a shirt manufacturing company in New York named Salant and Salant. He was apparently a significant business leader because I recall my family looking at his obituary in the paper with his photo when he passed away. His position meant that I had a large supply of heavy shirts and outdoor wear. There was another advantage. He had box seats at Yankee Stadium which he made available to my Dad on June 13, 1948, which was Babe Ruth Day at the Stadium. It was an overcast day and the Yankees were playing a double header against the Cleveland Indians. We had never had seats so close to the field.

I recall sitting on the third base side and seeing the Babe come to home plate as part of a ceremony before the regular game started. He was wearing his old Yankee uniform. He even took a few swings and I remember him grunting with exertion and laughing at himself for not having a smooth swing anymore. Babe Ruth, as I now know, was dying of cancer at the time and would be dead about six months later.

Amazingly, 60 years later, on September 15, 2008, I sat in just about that same place to watch the Yankees play the Chicago White Sox. I was with my son Shandon and I was able to relate the story to him about how I saw the Babe make his last appearance in the Stadium that was known as "the House that Ruth built." It was particularly poignant, because this was the last week of the season, following which the old Yankee Stadium would be torn down. Shandon called it a real "father-son bonding experience."

I saw many other Yankee games between 1946 and 1951, and can recall every team I saw play. Included were the Philadelphia A's [with manager and owner Connie Mack, the only manager who wore a suit in the dugout and not a uniform]; the lowly St. Louis Browns; and the Boston Red Sox on several occasions with such stars as Ted Williams and Johnny Pesky. On the Yankee side, I saw Joe DiMaggio, Yogi Berra and Phil Rizzuto all play, and watched Mickey Mantle break in as a rookie. I vividly recall him dropping a fly ball into the stands in right field, giving the A's a home run, which resulted in his being sent back to the minors.

I listened religiously to Yankee games being broadcast on WINS radio with Mel Allen calling the action, sponsored by Ballantine Beer and White Owl Cigars. I would amaze my uncles and other kids by knowing the Yankee line up by heart, including most of their current batting averages. I dreamed only of one day being a major league baseball player, and recall the exquisite pleasure when after games were over and fans were allowed to walk across the outfield grass to exit the stadium through the bull pen, my Dad leading me by the hand for this enthralling experience.

Then we would ride the Jerome Avenue El from 161st Street back up to 200th Street, where we would get off and walk home to Decatur Avenue. There I would add the 10 cents score card my father had bought for me to my collection of my most treasured mementoes. They went in my drawer with my comic books.

Q: OK, were you much of a reader?