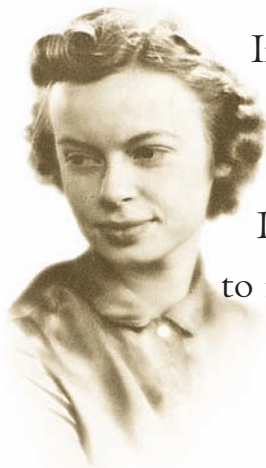




Rosemary's Baby



In 1934, Hitler became führer, *It Happened One Night* swept the Academy Awards, and a 15-year-old girl hatched a plan to round up baseball autographs.

By *Bill Glavin*

Darry Halper opens Peggy Christ's autograph album and slowly begins leafing through the pages. The album contains 14 pages of signatures—all major leaguers who played, coached, or managed in 1934. The majority signed their names on Rolodex-like cards. There are two or more to a card in some cases, like the ones with signatures from Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig and Mel Ott and Carl Hubbell. Two immortals who were by then coaches, Cy Young and Honus Wagner, wrote short notes. And three entire teams, including the 1934 Yankees, signed a single sheet of stationery. Each page is preserved in plastic.

A senior editor/writer in Rutgers' Department of University Relations, Christ inherited the book from her mother, Rosemary Wood. "When my mother was 15 years old, she sent letters to players, coaches, managers, and even clubhouse attendants, asking for signatures," says Christ.

AMONG THE AUTOGRAPHS IN CHRIST'S ALBUM IS ONE FROM PRINCETON GRAD MOE BERG, WHO SPIED FOR THE OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES (PRECURSOR TO THE CIA) WHEN HE PLAYED BALL IN JAPAN.

"The album speaks to the response she got."

With almost every major leaguer of the day in Wood's collection, she never—to her daughter's knowledge—attempted to obtain another baseball autograph. Wood, who grew up in Taunton,

Massachusetts, went on to earn her history degree from the University of Rochester, marry, and become a stay-at-home mom who made all her own clothes. "My mother was a wonderful seamstress," says Christ. "Sadly, she died in 1974 from Alzheimer's when she was only 55 years old."

Christ, who became a Yankees fan after moving to Poughkeepsie, New York, at age 10, had her ear pinned to the radio in 1962 as Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle both chased Ruth's single-season home run record. "Once I went off to college, I became much more of a casual fan," says Christ. "I'll watch the Yankees if they are in the World Series, but that is pretty much the extent of my involvement in baseball."

Halper, the Babe Ruth of baseball memorabilia, invited Christ to bring the album to his Harding Township home after being asked to assess its value on the phone. Halper, who donated most of his own collection to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown and auctioned off the rest at Sotheby's for \$21.8 million, examines the signatures with the intensity of a sports agent looking for a loophole in his player's contract. "These are definitely authentic; Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth did everything left-handed except sign their names," he says, before turning a page. Christ asks why. "That's because they both attended Catholic schools, where writing left-handed was forbidden," Halper explains. "And if you look closely, you see that Babe never connected his B and A and Walter Johnson never completed his J's."

"I love the way this book smells, nice and musty," Halper tells Christ, inhaling the book like a wine connoisseur might savor the aroma of a finely aged burgundy. "This is absolutely amazing. I give your mother fabulous credit. She must have loved baseball."

He points out the Hall of

Famers in the collection: a total of 54. Among them: Tris Speaker, Lefty Grove, Connie Mack, Ty Cobb, Rogers Hornsby, Grover Alexander, Casey Stengel. "Stengel was the first manager of the Mets, but did you know that Hornsby was one of his Mets coaches?" he asks. Halper spots the name, Ben Chapman, and tells a bone-chilling story: "When Joe DiMaggio first joined the Yankees, Chapman was a very good center fielder, an all-star in fact," he says. "He told a sportswriter, 'In the off-season, I'm a sheriff in Alabama who kills as many niggers as I can. And I like to kill Jews, too.' His racist comments embarrassed the Yankees; shortly after he was traded and Joe got his shot in center field."

Christ smiles at her pun when she asks Halper for a "ballpark estimate" of the collection's worth. "It's a difficult question. If you pull it apart, I'd say only about \$10,000," he begins. "Ruth and Gehrig together could bring \$1,000 and so could a note from Honus Wagner or Cy Young. But taken together as a snapshot of this one year, someone might be willing to pay a considerable sum for this. You never really know."

Until Christ showed it recently to some Rutgers colleagues, her album hadn't been out of her closet in a long time. "If it was worth \$100,000, I might have been tempted to sell it," she says. "For now, I'll hold on to it as a keepsake, although I have moved it from the closet to a safety deposit box." □

Box Scores

SOCCER

Fullback Guy Abrahamson and midfield-forward Sherif El Bialy, both seniors on the Scarlet Knights men's soccer team, were named to the All-Big East Second Team.

BASKETBALL

The Scarlet Knights men's and women's hoops teams each received one national letter of intent for next season. Paterson Catholic High School's Marquis Webb, a 6'4" guard and consensus national Top 100 recruit, is the first New Jerseyan to be signed by head coach Gary Waters. Natisha Johnson of Gibsland, Louisiana, who averaged 33.5 points and nine assists per game as a high-

school junior, will give head coach Vivian Stringer help at the guard position.

FIELD HOCKEY

The Rutgers club field hockey team, which competes in a league composed of some 25 teams from New Jersey to Virginia, won the club title, defeating defending champion Maryland.

CROSS-COUNTRY

Julie Culley, who finished the NCAA Championship race in 32nd place out of 254 competing runners, was named an all-American. She qualified after placing third at the District II Championships, the highest a Rutgers runner has finished since 1984.