

**DAILY
NEWS
SPORTS**



Keystone/file photo

PLAY IT AGAIN, BAM!

DIVERS SEEKING PIANO BEHIND
'CURSE OF THE BAMBINO' **PAGE 76**



By **MARK KRAM**
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SUDBURY, Mass. — Chris Hugo bubbles up from the tranquil surface of Willis Pond, not far from where the legendary Babe Ruth once rented a winter cottage. In full scuba gear and carrying an 11-foot probe, Hugo had spent the better part of an hour in search of an equally legendary piano that belonged to Ruth and is supposed to be somewhere at the bottom of the pond. How it ended up there is the source of some speculation, but the belief in Red Sox-crazy New England is that by reclaiming it from the watery depths — if indeed it is there — the team will be able to finally wriggle free of the so-called “Curse of the Bambino.” The Red Sox have not won a World Series since 1918, the same year the piano apparently became submerged and the year before Ruth was sold to the Yankees.

You’re probably thinking at this point: Hey, where’s Geraldo Rivera when you need him? Television viewers of a certain age never will forget him standing breathlessly to one side as jackhammer store into what was supposed to be Al Capone’s secret vault and unearthed nothing but some old wine bottles and a handful of cobwebs. But you want to believe this charming piece of lore, if only because it conjures up the spirit of one of the truly irresistible figures in America culture: The Babe, the wayward son of a Baltimore saloon keeper with that apple-barrel torso and a heart as big as his bottomless appetite for hot



BETHANY VERSOY/For the Daily News

Diver Ken Hayes is among those attempting to locate piano that belonged to Babe Ruth.

BOSTON TEASE PARTY

Goin’ deep in search to end Babe’s curse

dogs. For years, the story of the piano has been told again and again, changing in shape and picking up color as it has passed through the generations. No one knows what to believe at this point, but no one is eager to let go

of the possibility that the archeological discovery of this young century exists if only they can zero in on it.

The fact that Hugo is something of a skeptic has not stopped him from playing along and see-

ing where this leads. On this late spring Sunday at Willis Pond, he and three other divers have shown up on the dock with their equipment and a carefully plotted chart, assembled close to 2 years ago by the aptly named

John Fish, of American Underwater Search and Survey Limited. Fish has participated in some grisly undersea expeditions, including the search for pieces of TWA Flight 800 off the coast of Long Island in 1996, and initially identified “seven or eight magnetic anomalies” at the bottom of Willis Pond. While any of them could have been the piano, Hugo said prior to slipping into the pond that Sunday, they could just as easily have been an old wood stove, a bathtub or perhaps some spent shells from an abandoned nearby Army base. By the end of the day, he would have some good news and some bad news to report when he waded back to the dock.

The good news?

He flips up his mask and says with a smile, “Well, I didn’t get bit by a snapping turtle.”

Truth or fiction?

Sudbury was exceptionally cold and snowy during the winter of 1917-18. When young Ralph Sheridan and his pals learned that Babe Ruth had a cottage 20 miles west of Boston on Willis Pond, they journeyed over from adjoining Maynard with some frequency to see him. In a letter to the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum in Baltimore in 1989, Sheridan remembered that as he walked up to the property Ruth was outside gathering pieces of wood for the stove. Ruth greeted the boys warmly and invited them to ski down the 15-foot slope in front of the cottage.

Continued on Next Page

TIMELINE

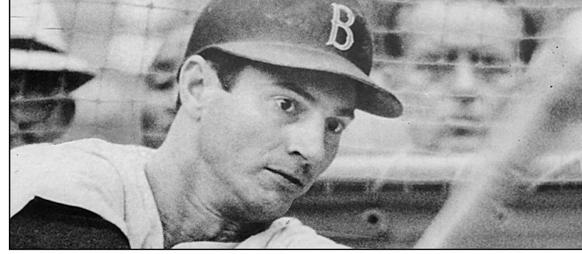
1918 ▶ Babe and Helen Ruth rent cottage near Willis Pond in Sudbury, Mass.; his piano allegedly disappears underwater.



1919 Red Sox owner Harry Frazee, a Broadway producer, sells Ruth to the Yankees for \$125,000 in cash and a \$300,000 loan.

1923 Ruth leads league in runs, homers and RBI and helps Yankees win their first World Series.

1935 Ruth returns to Boston to play for Braves. At 40, he bats .181 and hits six home runs.



1946 Red Sox, in first Series appearance since 1918, lose in seven games to Cardinals.

1967 ▲ Carl Yastrzemski and Red Sox lose World Series, again in seven games, again to Cardinals.

1975 Sox lose 3-0 lead in Game 7 and drop World Series to Reds.



1999 Yankees close out century by winning their 25th title.

2001 ▲ Expert uses infrared camera during December search and identifies “rectangular shape with wiry weeds” at bottom of Willis Pond.

1920s

1930s

1940s

1960s

1970s

1990s

2001

PLAY IT AGAIN, BAM!

Continued from Preceding Page

Joyfully, they spent the better part of the afternoon skiing down the hill, when finally the Babe himself piped up: "If you kids can do it, I can." So down the Babe would go, slipping and falling head over heels, only to get back up again, shake off the snow and try it again. Helen Ruth then invited the boys into the cottage and served them hot cocoa and cookies.

"Mrs. Ruth would play the piano and we would all sing along, including the Babe," wrote Sheridan. "He loved kids and always liked to have them around. And, always when we would leave, he would say, 'Come over again and bring the gang.' We were thrilled to be with him."

So exactly how did that piano supposedly end up in Willis Pond? Eighty-six years later, two theories have remained in play: One is that the Babe, in an inebriated show of physical strength, threw the piano off the porch, at which it rolled down the hill and into the pond. Theory No. 2: Ruth held a party on the frozen pond and slid the piano out there for a singalong. The story goes that he simply left it there until it fell through the ice during the inevitable spring thaw. Says local historian Curt Garfield, author of "Sudbury 1890-1989: One Hundred Years in the Life of a Town:" "We were a country town then, and people used to leave old junk on the ice in the winter, Model T-Fords, old stoves, pianos, just to see it sink. In fact, they used to place bets on which day the stuff would fall through the ice."

So, does Garfield believe there is



BETHANY VERSOY/For the Daily News

Jim Walker points to a spot in Willis Pond where divers Ken Hayes (left) and Chris Hugo will search for piano.

a piano at the bottom of the pond? "I think there is a piano down there," Garfield says. He then adds with a laugh. "Of course, there could be four or five of them there — including one that belonged to the Babe. I remember years ago a neighbor told me they yanked one out of there, but who knows if the Babe ever played it."

Others are less certain the piano exists. "I think the whole story is bleep," says Robert W. Creamer, the author of the superb biography: "Babe: The Legend Comes to Life." "The old pitcher, Waite Hoyt, once told me: 'All the lies about Babe Ruth are true,' which is to say, they might not be strictly true but if you look long enough you can find a comparable one that is. But I never came across the piano story in any of the research I unearthed, and with Ruth, I was always coming up with nuggets of odd information. "Oh, he liked to sing in the show-

er and play the banjo now and then," he says. "And I know he used to hang out with [jazz pioneer] Bix Beiderbecke. But when it came to playing the piano, his ability began and ended with 'Chopsticks.' "

Creamer pauses, then adds with a chuckle: "Nahh, the whole story is hooey, but what is amazing is this: Ruth is still fun."

Some just simply hope the story is true, including Greg Schwalenberg, curator of the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum. "Coming up with something new with a Ruth connection would be exciting," Schwalenberg says. "But if you are asking me if I think it is down there, I can only say there is a possibility."

Whatever you chose to believe, the story was apparently the fodder for local chat for years. Garfield remembers that it was "one of those stories that gets told around the pot-bellied stove"

on cold winter evenings. He remembers that back in the summer of 1957 — or so the story goes — some boys were wading in the pond and came upon what Garfield remembers as a "gold-colored harp," quite possibly the plate of the piano in question. When asked why it was not investigated then, Garfield replies, "No one considered it that big of a deal back then." It was not until Garfield included a chapter on the piano legend that it occurred to someone to go into Willis Pond and see if it was there.

Sudbury upholsterer Kevin Kennedy concocted the idea as he was playing baseball with his 9-year-old son. Kennedy is a long-suffering Red Sox fan (as if there is any other kind) who immediately saw a two-pronged opportunity in the piano: By bringing it up, they could not only dispel the "Curse of the Bambino" but draw attention to an organization he

works for called the Restoration Project, which helps the mentally ill lead productive lives by employing them to restore old furniture. The organization obtained a state permit to search the pond, and has been aided by an array of volunteers. Eloise Newell, director of Restoration Project, says, "Symbolically, the piano represents people who have come up from the depths of mental illness to become functioning members of society." Newell says the plan is not only to locate the piano but to "get it in playable condition again" and auction it off.

Given that the piano has been submerged for close to a century, it would appear that Newell and her organization would have a better chance of getting Ruth himself in playable condition. Not necessarily so, according to David Robinson, of the Public Archeology Laboratory, Inc., in Pawtucket, R.I. Robinson speculates the piano could well be in "great shape" given the conditions in which it has been preserved. Says Robinson, who has found American Revolutionary War artifacts and even a Viking ship from 1125 more or less intact: "If the piano fell in and immediately sank in the silt, chances are a lot of it would still be there. If it were simply sitting on the bottom, it would then be exposed to higher levels of oxygen, which could lead to increased deterioration. Luckily, this is not a saltwater environment, where there are wood-eating worms that could devour it in a season. Chances are in this cold freshwa-

See **RUTH** Page 74

2002

Five divers spend 4 hours of a February afternoon failing to find piano in pond.

2002

Divers return to pond during two 2-day period in April, but high-tech equipment fails to locate piano.

2002 ▶

Underwater specialist John Fish uses advanced detection device and gets seven hits that might be piano.



2002

2003

Red Sox blow 4-0 lead and lose Game 7 of American League Championship Series to Yankees.

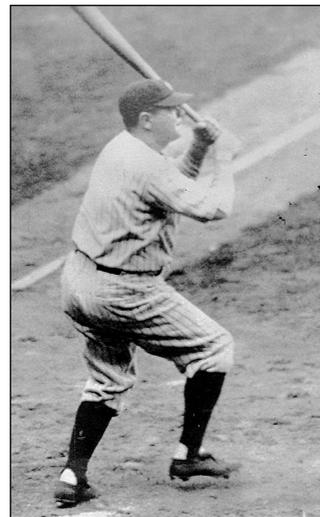
2004 ▼

A group, which includes volunteers such as Jim Walker, does a fourth dive on a Sunday in June that once again fails to net the piano.



2003

2004



World Series championships

Boston had won five titles when it sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1919. It's still waiting for its sixth.

Red Sox

1903, 1912, 1915, 1916, 1918

Yankees

1923, 1927, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1941, 1943, 1947, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1956, 1958, 1961, 1962, 1977, 1978, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000

— Paul Vigna

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RUTH

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ter setting it has existed in a state of suspended animation."

So, could it be restored to playable condition?

Robinson chuckles. "Good question," he says. "It would be a challenge, entailing 3 to 5 years of work at a cost of between \$150,000 to \$200,000. Of course, getting donations to do it could not be a problem. Red Sox fans will do whatever it takes."

Contributions so far have been, well ... sluggish.

"So far we have received \$10," says Newell. "And that was from an anonymous donor in memory of his deceased father, who had been a Red Sox fan."

But the very conditions that would help preserve the piano are the same ones that prevent it from detection: Visibility in the pond is poor and becomes even worse when the silt at the bottom is stirred up. In the early stages of the exploration in December 2001, Hugo captured a picture of an unidentifiable pile of debris with an infrared camera, only to explore it the following February and discover a custard dish from 1903 and an old Black Label beer can. That April, divers explored it again but found only an outer opening of rocks. Fish joined the search in November and surveyed the bottom of the pond with a side-scan sonar, a subbottom profiler and magnetometer.

Of the seven "hits" he identified, two were immediately eliminated; they were pipes. But three of the remaining five appeared intriguing to Hugo, who stood on the dock 9 days ago with some volunteer divers and said: "Something is definitely down there, but what?"

With the aid of the information supplied by Fish and aerial photography, Jim Walker plotted the coordinates of the dive that day, locating the exact spot with a sextant and lengths of rope. Says diver Ken Hayes, "What it comes down to is placing an 'X' on the water." Buoys were then placed in the approximate area of two of the hits, at which point Hugo, Hayes and Rebecca Green slipped into their gear and into the water. Hugo and Hayes carried 11-foot probes to poke the silt in search of something solid. Green carried underwater camera equipment, of which she would later say with a laugh: "All I got was divers coming out of the

black." While the divers work with the probes, Joe Mullin, also a veteran diver, explains: "Remember that board game, ' Battleship?' This is what that is like. You poke until you get a hit."

But the bottom was deeper than any of them could have imagined. Going in, Hugo guessed that they would encounter 4 feet of water, then perhaps 6 feet of silt. It was far deeper than that. Working in what Hugo said was "about 10 feet of water," he pressed the 11-foot probe in the silt as deeply as it would go, up to his shoulder — and found nothing. Neither did Hayes. Clinging to the edge of the dock with his mask flipped up, Hugo says: "Twenty feet of mud. Had to be. Maybe even more."

Hugo then adds with a shrug, "Back to the drawing board."

Need a drought

So what happens now? As Hugo and the other divers strip out of their scuba gear and dry off, Newell asks them that question, only to be answered with sighs, uncertainty. Mullin explains that in any underwater expedition you have to weigh the risks and rewards. He says, "When you are working in deep silt like that, you can cut your hand on something sharp and not even know it."

Newell smiles and asks, "What if John Fish came back? Would that help?"

Mullin pauses, then says: "More than likely, no. Although I guess he could give you a better reading."

Walker nods. "With some of his more sophisticated sonar," he says, "he could give you the depth and approximate shape of whatever it is under the mud."

Hugo says that Fish is on his way to Egypt to search for ancient monuments.

Newell remains convinced there is a piano at the bottom of Willis Pond, if only because it has been such a part of the oral tradition of Sudbury.

"Usually, oral traditions have some foundation in fact," she says. "So yes, I am optimistic we will find this at some point."

Local historian Garfield also believes that it will be found, but not by divers. "They may have to drain it before they find it," he says. "Either that or somebody will be out there fishing, get his hook snagged on it and fall in the water on top of it."

He chuckles and adds, "Now that would be a whopper." ★