BRISK chilling breeze whipped along the steel girders supporting Forbes Field, creating a haunting mournful sound which projected images of long lost, cheering, ghostly crowds. Here and there, puddles gathered along stairways and the sparkling green outfield grass reflected drops of moisture. As the heavy dark morning clouds rapidly receded, the temperature climbed into the low 50s. A spring day began to show promise.

It was noon, Saturday, May 25, 1935, when the stadium gates swung open. Forbes Field seated over 30,000, but on this day only 10,000 would attend. The early morning showers, plus the promise of a game meaningless to the standings, discouraged attendance. The Pirates fielded a good first division club under player manager Pie Traynor, but it lacked the ingredients to be a serious contender. The visiting club, the Boston Braves, were going nowhere.

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Boston was the consistent last place team of the National League. Under manager Bill McKechnie, it was staffed with aging veterans and untried youngsters. The team's only true attraction, slugging center-fielder Wally Berger, would eventually lead the league in home runs with 34. However, this season another attraction had been added which caused most of the fans to pay the admission. Babe Ruth was playing. The immortal home run king, the greatest baseball player and gate attraction of all time, was ignobly closing his magnificent career in sad fashion, playing with an inept team which would lose 115 games by season's end. It was a pathetic climax which the curious came to witness.

Besides Ruth, eight other future hall of famers would be on the field that day. For the Pirates, there were: Pie Traynor; Honus Wagner, first-base coach and Pittsburgh's own; outfielder brothers Paul and Lloyd Waner (Big Poison and Little Poison); pitcher Waite Hoyt; and shortstop Arky Vaughan, who would win the batting title with a .385 average. For the Braves, there were manager Bill McKechnie and veteran shortstop Walter "Rabbit" Maranville.

George Herman Ruth began his career as a consistent 20-game winning pitcher for the Boston Red Sox in 1914. But no pitcher or player had ever hit a ball like Ruth, and upon his trade to the New York Yankees in 1920, the Babe became a full-time right-fielder. He immediately astounded the sports world with his prolific total of home runs and the amazing distances they traveled. Throughout the decade of the 1920s and early '30s, Babe was the undisputed champion of sports; no athlete was so universally popular or loved. He led the Yankees to seven pennants and four world championships as the most feared hitter of "Murderers Row." Known also as the "Bambino," the "Sultan of Swat," the "Maharajah of Mayhem," the "Bamer," the "Prince of Pounders" and "Judge" by his teammates, he set a new home run record in 1919 with 29, breaking the old record of 17 established in 1884. In the 1920s, he hit over 50 home runs in four seasons, with 60 in 1927.

But that was the past, and baseball is a business with little room for sentiment. When the 41-year-old slugger's power diminished and his production fell off in 1934, Yankee management coldly decided to get rid of him.... [Boston offered] a contract as a player, stock-holder, and assistant manager. With child-like belief, Ruth signed the deal and happily returned to Boston and the National League.

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him capable, it had become such an obsession that Yankee owner Colonel Jacob Ruppert used it as a weapon against Ruth. Consequently he arranged a nefarious deal with Boston Braves owner Judge Emil Fuchs. Ruppert humiliated Ruth by offering him a contract for a dollar, while the Judge dangled a contract as a player, stock-holder, and assistant manager. With child-like belief, Ruth signed the deal and happily returned to Boston and the National League.

Now it was the near the end of May and Babe was bitter, disillusioned and heart sick. His opinion was not sought on any matter involving the team and his only responsibility was to inform McKechnie of his fitness to play. He was tired and had contracted his usual spring chest cold, which had lingered on, sapping his huge body of its remaining strength. His eyes watered continually, he was heavily congested, his legs were weak and his coordination limited. He should have remained in his suite at the nearby Hotel Schenley.

As his familiar form appeared on the field for the pre-game warm-up a number of fans, especially youngsters, applauded loudly. This was who they had paid to see. But this Babe was a cruel caricature of the legend. He was batting .180 with just three home runs and only six runs batted in. He hit a home run on opening day in Boston and then managed only two more.

This was the final game in the three-game series, with the Pirates having won the first two. Over in the Pirate locker room, manager Traynor was holding the usual pre-game meeting with the team. Normally he would have written himself in, but he was suffering with an abscessed nose which kept him on the bench or coaching at third. He gave the veteran hurler, Red Lucas, the nod that day. When Ruth's name came up, some of the players laughed and snorted that he constituted no threat and was a "has been." Right-fielder Paul Waner, however, reminded his teammates that though the big guy had only two harmless singles in the previous games, coming on his last at-bats, the Babe had slammed deep drives to the fence, barely caught. He may have been old and fat, but he was still dangerous. Pitcher Waite Hoyt then spoke up. Hoyt, a former a star with the Yankees and a teammate of Ruth's, was ending his brilliant career with the Pirates. "There is no safe way to pitch to the Babe," he warned. "He has no weakness at the plate. You're better off to walk him in a dangerous situation." A few players laughed and hooted at the suggestion. Traynor went onto the next name on the lineup.

On the field, Babe posed for some pictures with a dozen youngsters who had won a contest sponsored by the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph. He autographed some balls and spoke with the sportswriters. "I should have had two homers in this series," he chuckled, "but the wind held them in. I'll start hitting better when the weather warms up and this chest cold breaks up." During batting practice, he split his favorite bat and would have to use a new one in the game.

Never awed by the vast dimensions of Forbes Field, Ruth did admit he wouldn't have enjoyed having it for his home park. At 365 feet down the left field line to the scoreboard, and 300 feet to the right field wall, it angled sharply to 330 feet toward center. A nightmare ballpark for sluggers, the left-center brick wall stood an
unbelievable 457 feet from home plate. During the 1925 Yankee-Pirates World Series, Babe had hit a pair of home runs there and had also smacked several during various exhibitions. But he was younger and healthier then.

The Babe, batting third, came up to the plate in the first inning with shortstop Bob Urbanski on second and one out. Ruth stood at the plate, moving ever so slightly as the first pitch was taken for a ball. Throughout his career, Ruth was feared for his intense concentration on the pitcher. On the second pitch, the Babe unleashed his graceful, powerful swing and drove the ball deep to right field. Paul Waner raced to the wall, but amidst the rousing cheers the ball sailed into the lower deck, giving the Braves a 2-0 lead. Successive hits then drove Lucas from the mound, but reliever Guy Bush retired the side.

Bush was no stranger to the Babe. As a Chicago Cub, he had faced Ruth during the 1932 World Series (in which the Babe hit his famous alleged “called shot” off of Charlie Root). During that series, Ruth had also stung Bush for two savage singles while Bush had struck Ruth in the arm with a fast ball. Neither was fond of the other.

The score was unchanged when Ruth strode to the plate in the third inning. Again Ruth faced Urbanski on second with one out. Bush worked the Babe to a full count. Ruth leaned into the pay-off pitch and the ball sailed into the upper right field tier directly above an iron exit gate — 431 feet from home plate. Only New York Giant first basemen Bill Terry had ever hit one there. The Bambino’s was a towering clout, and it was now Babe 4, Pittsburgh 0.

The Braves pitcher, Huck Brett, had allowed the Pirates to tie the score when the Babe’s turn at bat came again in the fifth inning. Although the fans were screaming for another homer, Babe noticed shortstop Arky Vaughn had over shifted toward second base, leaving a gaping hole. Ruth forgot about the fence and slapped the ball through the infield for an opposite field single, scoring Lee Malton and giving the Braves a one run lead. Ruth then surprised everyone on a follow-up by Wally Berger by going from first to third, sliding in safely only to be stranded at the inning’s end.

Manager McKecknie observed Ruth closely as he picked up his glove to return to the outfield. Even though Ruth was having a fantastic day, he was obviously tired; his legs shaking after the hard run. McKecknie asked if Ruth wanted to quit for the day.

"Hell no!" Ruth retorted. "I’m swinging in the groove today and I’ll be up again in another inning.” He vowed to remove himself after batting.

When the Babe led off the seventh, the score was Pittsburgh 7, Boston 5. Ruth had accounted for all of Boston’s runs. Once more, the crowd screamed for the Sultan of Swat. In Forbes Field history, only Rogers Hornsby had hit three home runs in one game — in 1931 while playing for the Cubs. Ruth had homered thrice in one game three other times. The hurler worked Ruth carefully. With the count 3 balls and 1 strike, Bush offered a slow-breaking curve that reached the plate knee-high. Lightning struck as the mighty Ruth connected.

As the ball climbed higher and higher, becoming only a faint speck, players from both dugouts ran onto the field to watch. Right-fielder Paul Waner never moved. The ball sailed over the roof, something never done before. After the game, chief usher Gus Miller learned the ball had hit the roof of a house at 318 Bouquet Street, ascertained to be about 600 feet from home plate. It was then seen to bounce off a neighboring house and roll into an empty lot, where a small boy retrieved it.

Bush stated later he never believed a ball could be hit so far or so hard. In fact, no one would ever hit a ball that far in all of Forbes Fields’ 61-year history.

Babe grinned and chuckled as he rounded the bases and touched home plate. After weeks of frustration and sickness he had made three brilliant catches, gone from first to third on a single, and batted four consecutive hits, with 13 total bases, six runs batted in, three runs scored and three home runs. And the last one was among the greatest of his career and quite possibly the longest in baseball history.

To the dismay of the adoring crowd, Ruth then took himself out of the game following his mammoth blast. As he disappeared into the darkness of the locker room tunnel, no one could know they had seen the great man obtain his last major league hit and score his last run. The Babe, in fact, never reached first base again, retiring the following Sunday between games of a doubleheader.

Despite the Babe’s heroics against the Pirates, the final score that Saturday was Pittsburgh 11, Boston 7. It seems appropriate that the last hit by the greatest home run hitter in the game’s history, until Henry Aaron overtook him in 1974 with his 715th, was such a majestic shot. It is also seems appropriate that the event occurred in Forbes Field, a park that so fully challenged the Babe’s strength.