

# Diamond Dreams

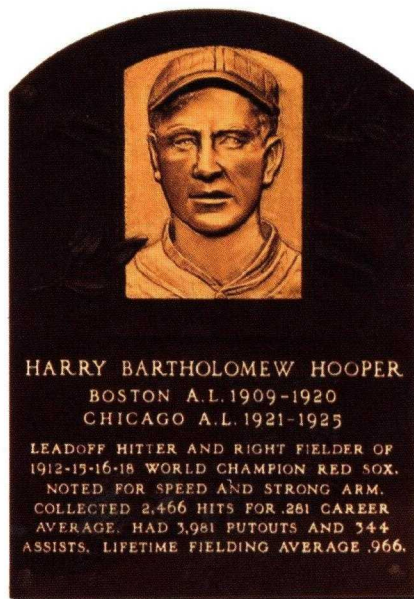
Capitola's Harry Hooper played "like a wild fire" into baseball's Hall of Fame

By Geoffrey Dunn

**F**For those of us of a certain age who were raised in Santa Cruz County during the post-World War II era, the name Harry Hooper evokes memories of a sweet and upright elderly gentleman who often graced our local sporting events — the dedication of a new baseball field or Opening Day of the Little League season—with a steady smile and a kind word.

Hooper — who served as the Capitola postmaster from 1933 until his retirement, at age 70, in 1957 — was the gray eminence of Santa Cruz County baseball for half a century. He was our community's direct link to the Golden Age of the National Pastime, someone who once rubbed shoulders during his playing days with the likes of Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, Walter Perry Johnson and Christy Mathewson.

Indeed the immortal Ruth had been a teammate of Hooper's on the Boston Red



Harry Hooper's bronze plaque, one of the 295 in the gallery at National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

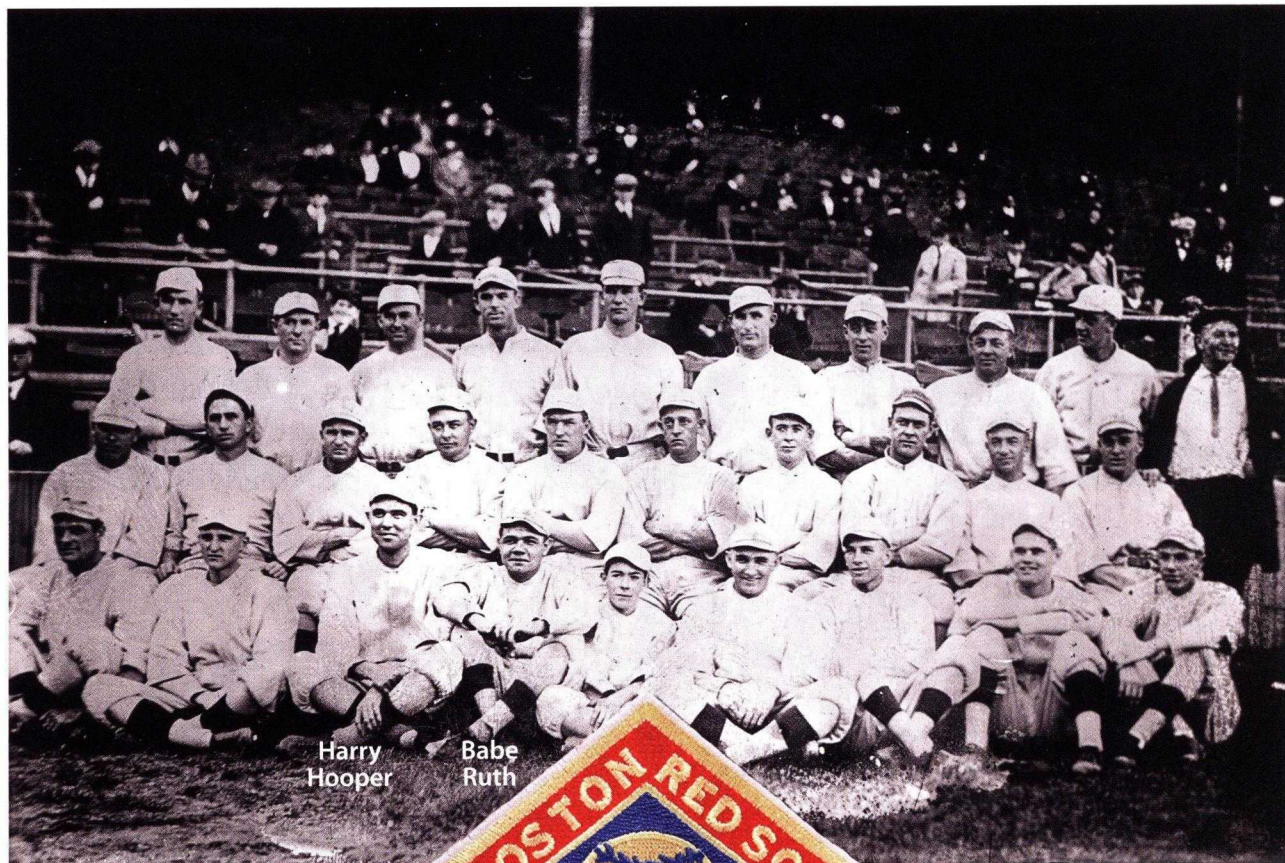
Sox when the "Great Bambino" first broke into the Major Leagues. And it was Hooper who first steered him away from pitching into an everyday player in the Red Sox outfield, where he first showed the promise that would make him the most feared home run hitter of his generation.

Ruth looked up to Hooper and viewed him as an early mentor. Later in his life, the Babe would write that Hooper was the "greatest fielding outfielder ever ... No doubt about it."

Hooper, for his part, saw Ruth as a diamond in the rough. "Sometimes I still can't believe what I saw," Hooper would later recall. "This 19-year-old kid, crude, poorly educated, only lightly brushed by the social veneer we call civilization, gradu-

(Top) Raised on a ranch near Gilroy, Harry Hooper became one of baseball's biggest stars.



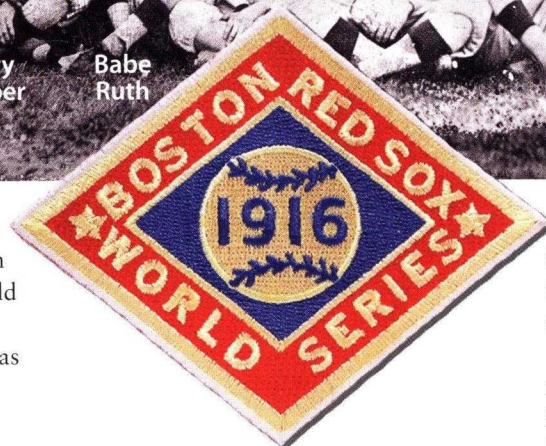


ally transformed into the idol of American youth and the symbol of baseball the world over — a man loved by more people and with an intensity of feeling that perhaps has never been equaled before or since.”

Despite his modesty, Hooper himself forged a remarkable big league career, one that would eventually find him enshrined in Cooperstown in the Baseball Hall of Fame. He was named the captain of the Red Sox world championship teams of 1912, 1915, 1916 and 1918. “If there was ever any one characteristic of Harry Hooper’s,” said his teammate “Smoky” Joe Wood, “it was that he was a clutch player. When the chips were down, he played like wild fire.”

For 17 seasons, Hooper was one of the game’s biggest stars, and was regularly among the American League leaders in triples, stolen bases, runs scored and assists for outfielders. By the time he retired in 1925, he held 19 major league records and he still holds the all-time American League mark for assists and double plays by a right fielder.

He was considered the anchor in what is widely considered one of the greatest defensive outfields of all time, with Hall of Famer Tris Speaker in centerfield and Duffy Lewis in left. With four championships



over a six-year period, the Hooper-led Red Sox constituted the heart of baseball’s first dynasty.

In 1919, however, after Boston finished a dismal fifth to the ill-fated Chicago “Black Sox,” Red Sox owner Harry Frazee found himself in financial trouble, and he began dismantling his four-time championship team. He sold Ruth to the Yankees and sent Hooper to the White Sox. Hooper responded with a trio of .300 seasons for Chicago, including an average of .328 in 1924 at the age of 37.

But Hooper never forgave Frazee for selling the Red Sox down the river. “It was disgusting,” Hooper told me shortly before he died in 1974. “It made me sick to my stomach. It was really a darn shame. Frazee was only interested in the money. He didn’t care a bit about baseball.”

**H**arry Bartholomew Hooper (he would later be nicknamed “The Cat” because of his quickness) was born in 1887 outside of Bell Station in the southern reaches of the

Santa Clara Valley (today better known as the home of Casa de Fruta). His father was a rancher and farmer.

Several have contended that Hooper moved to Capitola only after his playing days were over, but, in fact, his family moved to Capitola in 1907, where his parents lived in semi-retirement and ran a rooming house

After receiving an engineering degree from St. Mary’s College, where he starred on the baseball team, Hooper played semi-pro and “outlaw” ball for teams in Soquel, Sacramento and Alameda before being called up by the Red Sox in 1909.

He soon earned a starting position in the Red Sox outfield, rose quickly to being a team leader — this on a squad with the legendary Speaker ensconced in center — and developed a reputation for his sure hands and strong arm. During the so-called “dead ball” era, Hooper — who threw right handed but batted left handed — hit .300 or higher five times, stole 20 or more bases nine times and finished in the top ten list in triples seven times during his career.

The team photo of the 1916 world champion Boston Red Sox which included both Harry Hooper and Babe Ruth.





As was the case with most baseball players of that era, Hooper's "retirement" from the White Sox in 1925 did not put an end to his playing days. He served as a player-coach for the San Francisco Missions of the Pacific Coast League and later was named head baseball coach of Princeton University.

In 1929, he played briefly for the Marysville Giants, and, in 1930, he played a season — not recorded in official record books — for the Santa Cruz Padres of the California State League. In one game against Alameda, he went 6-for-6 (not bad for a 43-year-old) and he won the league batting championship with an astounding .506 batting average.

In the aftermath of his baseball career, Hooper returned to Capitola, where he became both a fixture — and a pillar — in the local community as both postmaster

and a real estate agent, but his star on the national front faded as a new generation of players — Joe DiMaggio, Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, Frank Robinson and Mickey Mantle — assumed center stage.

With the publication of Lawrence Ritter's superb oral history on early baseball, *The Glory of Their Times*, first published in 1966, Hooper's reputation returned to national attention. The following year, with the Red Sox in a World Series matchup with the St. Louis Cardinals, Hooper's heroics during Boston's heyday brought him significant acclaim.

With an added push from his son John — who himself had starred locally at Chaminade High in the 1930s — Hooper was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971, where his plaque resides among baseball's immortals. In more recent years, his life has been chronicled by

Harry Hooper with the Soquel Giants. Harry, fourth from left is wearing his Red Sox hat and belt. The steeple of Soquel's Congregational Church is visible in the background.

historian Paul Zingg, while Harry's diaries and letters from his early years with the Red Sox were featured in Ken Burns' landmark PBS documentary *Baseball*.

A more local tribute to Harry, however, appears at the entrance of the Capitola Wharf, where a memorial describes him as "one of Capitola's favorite sports heroes..."

He is buried with his beloved wife Esther at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cemetery in Aptos, where Boston Red Sox faithful from around the country still come to pay homage to the man who led their beloved Red Sox to four World Series titles a century ago. 🍌

