

Earle Bryan Combs, 1899- 1976

CLYDE PARTIN

Emory University

Earle Bryan Combs of Madison County, Kentucky, is probably remembered by most baseball fans as the man who playedd centerfield alongside Babe Ruth, but Combs was a star in his own right. He played with the New York Yankees for twelve years and had a lifetime batting average of .325. Combs was also known for his brilliant defensive play. For example, in 1925 he batted .342 and had a fielding average of .977. His career culminated

upon his election to Baseball's Hall of Fame in 1970. Since his retirement from baseball, he has been an educational and community leader in his native state.

Earle Combs first became interested in baseball as a youngster in the backwoods of Kentucky. His father wound old socks together with twine and then sewed a piece of leather over this to serve as a baseball for Earle and his playmates. He attended a one-room school house in Owsley County before continuing his education at Eastern Kentucky State Normal School at Richmond. It was while he was at Eastern that he became qualified to teach. He then taught for part of two years at Levi, Kentucky. This, he believed, would be his life's work, but in the fall of 1920 he returned to Eastern Kentucky State Normal School. The following summer he took part in what he thought was an ordinary faculty-student baseball game; but Earle's performance in that game, two long home runs, convinced Dr. Charles Keith, Dean of Men at the Normal School and a former big league pitcher himself, that Earle had the potential to make it to the major leagues. It was at this point that Combs decided to give baseball a fling. He advanced rapidly from college baseball, where incidentally the students offered him a banana split for every home run he hit, on to semi-professional baseball where he hit .444 his first year and received \$225 per month plus room and board and two new suits. Finally he attained stardom as a professional player with the Louisville Colonels of the American Association and the New York Yankees. It was the year that he batted .356, led the league in total hits (231) and triples (23), including a league record of three in one game. The 1927 team has generally been recognized as the greatest baseball team in the history of the game, and Combs was a vital part of that team.

Upon his retirement from the playing field in 1935, he returned to his native state. In 1936 he was called back as a coach with the Yankees. The Yankees especially wanted him to train a new rookie they had just signed, Joe DiMaggio, who was to become one of the greatest centerfielders the game has ever known. Combs served as a coach with the Yankees until 1944, then again retired to his farm in Kentucky. In 1947, he again returned to baseball as a coach with the St. Louis Browns for one year. Then it was on to the Boston Red Sox from 1948-1954, concluding his coaching career with the Philadelphia Phillies in 1955.

Again Combs returned to the farm and in 1959 was named to the Board of Regents at Eastern Kentucky State College. He also served for two years as State Banking Commissioner under the administration of Governor A.B. (Happy) Chandler.

Combs was known as a great gentleman on and off the field. Miller Huggins, longtime Yankee manager, once said: "If you had nine men like Combs on your ball club, you could go to bed every night and sleep like a baby." Joe McCarthy, another longtime Yankee manager said: "They wouldn't pay baseball managers much a salary if they all presented as few problems as did Earle Combs." Said Babe Ruth: "Combs was more than a good ballplayer. He was always a first-class gentleman." Combs' philosophy of life is to live according to the Golden Rule, never forgetting his heritage. Success never went to his head.

The ability to play in the shadow of Ruth and Lou Gehrig, his humility, his loyalty to the game of baseball and his contributions to education and to his state make him a sterling example to children today and he will continue to serve as an example for generations of children to come.