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POPULAR CULTURE AND SPORT MEMORABILIA

BY

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Sports memorabilia are the artifactual remains of the living activity of sports. Memorabilia are our efforts to keep the activities alive in our hands, hearts and consciousness. They are part and parcel of the much larger world of antiques. Antiques, like sports memorabilia, freeze some element of the past and convey intrinsic value through that element of bygone periods. Benjamin Franklin's glasses supposedly have more real value than merely spectacles through which he read the newspaper he printed. The table at Appomattox that General Robert E. Lee and U. S. Grant effected ended the Civil War is assumed to have more value than the other bits of furniture in the farmhouse owned by Wilmer McLean, which was destroyed in 1893 but restored as a national historical park in 1954.

Sports memorabilia, on the contrary, except among the devotees, even those with great historical depth, contain little more than their intrinsic value, which is determined by their scarcity as well as their sentimental value. Thirteenth century golf balls would, it is true, have great value because of their scarcity. But most of the items housed in the several Halls of Fame are driven by the real power of sentimentality. Sentimentality, like love, is one of the great engines of human society.

Sports memorabilia are not without their value. Their sentimental overtones make them at times nearly priceless. And they continue to increase in value as societies achieve more and more leisure and turn more, as participants and observers, to devote their leisure to sports. Sports memorabilia are a spectator sport, but the artifacts--the paraphernalia--of the sports world will increase and become more valuable. Those of us who cannot participate in sports want more and more to become part of it and we do that by owning, loving, and making memorabilia part of our lives. These memorabilia take on a part of life their own, both private and public. Just as at times we are known by the memorabilia we own, we are also judged by the amount we display. The world of sports memorabilia is a significant part of the vast ocean of popular culture in which all people--especially in a democracy like America--swim.

It is also a complicated swirling world of many tides and eddies, which need study and explanation. This current examination will help us understand and appreciate the full importance of sports memorabilia and its place in our popular culture.