

# Ruled foul: Shock as top collector

By PETER J. NASH  
and BRAD HAMILTON

**I**N 1985, five New York Yankees gathered at the Stadium to pose with George Steinbrenner for The Sporting News, each wearing an old-time Hall of Famer's vintage jersey and paste-on handlebar mustache.

The gimmicky cover story would hail the renowned collection of memorabilia king Barry Halper, whose \$40 million cache of cards, balls, bats and prized antiquities was on par with Cooperstown's, according to top baseball experts.

Halper, also a 2 percent owner of the Yankees, stood by in a tan overcoat, his hand resting on the shoulder of all-time steals leader Rickey Henderson, who had put on a rare Ty Cobb uniform. Manager Yogi Berra sported a 1905 New York Giants jersey of legendary skipper John McGraw. Two more players and a coach donned uniforms once worn by Cy Young, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson and Pud Galvin.

"What a collection!" crowed the headline.

They were all fakes.

"That picture is the Mount Rushmore of uniform fraud," said authenticator Dave Grob.

Six years after his death — and on the day the Hall of Fame inducts Roberto Alomar, Bert Blyleven and Pat Gillick — Halper and his remarkable legacy as the country's top collector are being hit as hard as a Babe Ruth moon shot.

The vaunted dealer, with a wing named after him in Cooperstown, has been unmasked as a con artist who hawked replicas and forgeries as one-of-a-kind gems.

But Halper didn't just buy fakes and pass them off as real.

He allegedly paid people to back his lies about how he acquired some pieces, and he's the primary suspect in a notorious heist of the New York Public Library's Fifth Avenue branch, where \$1 million worth of letters to baseball pioneer Harry Wright and other scrapbook entries vanished in the 1970s.

The FBI already has carted away photos and documents from Halper's

# Treasure trove is baseball's history in the faking

collection that were allegedly swiped from the Boston Public Library, but not before some of the artifacts were auctioned by Sotheby's in 1999 as part of a \$30 million sale.

"When tracking the stolen items, all roads seem to lead to Barry Halper," said a source familiar with an ongoing FBI probe of the New York theft.

The lineup of those he duped includes baseball Commissioner Bud Selig and actor Billy Crystal, who plunked down \$239,000 for a 1960 Mickey Mantle glove that experts say wasn't made until 1964 at the earliest. Oddly enough, Halper even persuaded Mantle and Reggie Jackson to vouch for prized rookie jerseys that weren't really theirs. (Jackson forgot that he wore No. 31 with the Kansas City A's in

1967, not the No. 9 jersey Halper had him authenticate.)

**B**ARRY HALPER sure could tell a story. Not only did he weave elaborate yarns, he collected them along with artifacts, and the tales of how he acquired his rarities grew into legend.

He recalled stopping in Greenville, SC, while driving home from the University of Miami in the late 1950s to visit "Shoeless" Joe Jackson's widow, whom he chatted up in her living room. She rose and returned with a treasure seeker's trove: the slugger's 1919 "Black Sox" jersey, along with his bat, glove and pocket watch. "She brought out the pieces, and I bought them for \$150," he claimed.

A chance encounter with Yankee clubhouse attendant Pete Sheehy led to another score: Mantle's

1951 jersey, Halper said.

Sheehy had heard that Halper owned Ruth's rookie uniform, and when the two saw each other at a game, the collector told him, "Yeah, I got it." Said the attendant, "Come back tomorrow, and I'll have something for you."

The gift turned out to be a paper bag with The Mick's first jersey, which Sheehy said he saved from Mantle's rookie campaign "because I knew he was going to be something special." Halper got it for free.

He recounted tracking down Ty Cobb's biographer Al Stump and purchasing Cobb's diary and a shotgun that Cobb's mother supposedly used to kill his father.

He said he secured a lock of Babe Ruth's hair from a man in Iowa, along with a letter of authenticity from the Bambino himself, getting the tresses by



**HALL OF SHAME:** Memorabilia collector Barry Halper with his photo of Babe Ruth and Ruth's wife.

swapping some of Gen. George Custer's hair.

Halper, who grew up in Newark, said he honed his collecting skills as an 8-year-old in 1948, when he ducked under a Yankee Stadium police barricade to snag the autograph of an ailing Bambino on "Babe Ruth Day."

Halper claimed he took that sheet of paper with him to college in Miami, where his baseball coach, Hall of Famer Jimmie Foxx, added his autograph, as did Mel Ott, who was on hand for a visit with the coach. The sheet then had the signatures of all three men who had hit 500 home runs.

The media devoured Halper's stories. He also had the means to bid on almost any item that caught his eye, thanks to profits from his family's paper-products business.

"My advantage was buying things years before

they became real collectibles," Halper said. "Rockefeller wouldn't have had enough money to buy these things now."

By 1985, the year of The Sporting News photo, Halper claimed to have more than a million cards, 864 uniforms and the autographs of every player enshrined at Cooperstown. Two of his Honus Wagner cards and documents that sent Babe Ruth to the Yankees, all genuine, would together fetch about \$2 million today.

He kept his jerseys on a dry-cleaning carousel hidden in a secret compartment in his den. The one missing piece? An Eppa Rixey, the only Hall of Famer whose jersey he claimed not to own. Halper was also known to leave visitors alone for a few moments, saying he had other business to attend to — then would