March 1996

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Patrick Trimble

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 32, no.1, March 1996, p.45-57

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Babe Ruth: The Media Construction of a 1920’s Sport Personality

By PATRICK TRIMBLE

ONE COULD SPECULATE that had Babe Ruth not been born, he would have been invented by the bubbling social cauldron of the 1920’s. It was the Jazz Age, the decade of the flapper and of prohibition. The moral fiber of America was split along the lines of the rigid puritan work ethic and a hedonism that honored individual achievement and upward social mobility. In these hectic years, no personality represented the idea of celebrity better than George Herman “Babe” Ruth.¹

Ruth’s rise from the streets of Baltimore to the ballparks of New York was an Horatio Alger story, a blueprint for American success. He was, in the words of sport historian David Voigt, the most photographed man in America during the 1920’s.² His skill on the ballfield and his indulgences off the field were legendary. When he was not playing ball, he performed in vaudeville shows. Newspaper columns, “How to Play Baseball” guides and even a children’s book were ghost-written in his name. Ruth made his radio debut as a sportscaster in the 1920’s, as a regular on Kate Smith’s nationally syndicated show in the 1930’s, and finally as the star of his own program. The media used Ruth’s antics to attract large audiences who, clamoring for more, drove the media to seek more material on him. Fact and fiction came to blend in the image of Babe Ruth. This type of media saturation suggests America’s widespread acceptance of Ruth as a symbol of an era.

To understand the complexity of Ruth’s celebrity status in American culture, we have to examine how the media of the early 1920’s commercialized the image and formed a web of information that turned Ruth’s life into narrative drama. A careful examination of his first film, Headin’ Home, illustrates how the myth and the reality of this hero were created and sustained in the emergent medium of American popular culture. Headin’ Home, released in


September 1920, the year that Ruth came to the New York Yankees in a highly publicized deal, was not a landmark in movie making, nor did it break any new ground in narrative fiction as the story of a small-town boy who faces rejection and goes on to become a hero. What was important about *Headin’ Home* was the marketing and publicity that surrounded it.

The public image of Ruth was a key construction for the year 1920 and had a profound impact on the society and sports of the day. *Headin’ Home*, a small part of that construct, was a good example of how media and sport can blend together to create a cultural image. Ruth’s popularity was based on his ability to move from the sports pages into the mainstream of American consciousness. His celebrity was a product of a number of factors, not the least of which was Ruth’s own enormous talent on the diamond, his innate sense of showmanship, and the luck of being in New York just when the great media boom of the 1920’s was taking place.

Benjamin Rader wrote that “nothing before or since . . . created quite the hot romance between sport and the public as the newspapers of the 1920’s.”

Only a generation before, newspapers began to supplant magazines and journals as the primary means of covering sports. New technology and distribution systems reduced the cost, while industrialization and urbanization guaranteed a growing market. Sports, as a source of entertainment, became an indispensable section of the daily newspaper.

Further, there were three major editorial trends that affected newspaper content. First, to reach the mass audience newspapers decreased hard news stories and placed more emphasis on sensationalism. Second, the development of syndication began to standardize editorial processes, thus reducing costs—this trend was a key in the area of sports. Third, newspapers deemphasized the strident political partisanship that had been expected of publishers in the nineteenth century. The giant newspaper corporations wanted a mass production that would offend as few people and sell as many newspapers as possible.

Sport, and thus Babe Ruth, became the perfect content for the dailies. Ruth, despite his often questionable behavior, was never politically or culturally controversial. He presented a safe ideology that antagonized few, and, most importantly, he gave New Yorkers and Americans everywhere a sense of national pride. As the phenomena associated with *Headin’ Home* suggested, Ruth was at the center of a media storm that followed him everywhere. Manhattan alone had eleven daily newspapers in 1920, with the best known and most talented writers producing dozens of columns syndicated throughout the nation. While audiences watched Ruth in a screen melodrama, they

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5. Robert Lipsyte, *SportsWorld* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), 170; Lipsyte capably argues that the Golden Age of Sport was really the Golden Age of Sportswriting.
7. Wagenheim, 62.
also followed Ruth's real life melodrama in the newspapers.

In addition to the blossoming readership of the newspapers, there was a growing audience of filmgoers, and the movies were becoming another major source of information. Instrumental to the development of sport was the sports newsreel, introduced in 1911. Sports events—highly visual and filled with movement—lent themselves to economical preplanning and convenient filming, and newsreel footage could be rushed into theaters in a matter of hours.\textsuperscript{8} Audiences who might never attend a major league game could recognize the major sports stars of the day, and one of those stars was Babe Ruth.

On one level, the news reports on \textit{Headin' Home} were about movies and law suits, but in a cultural context the reporting echoed the film's plot. Articles revealed Ruth as an unsophisticated young man from humble beginnings, struggling for success in a complex economic social structure.

The close association of baseball as the center of both the film and Ruth's own life made the line between fiction and fact all the more insubstantial. Ruth always appeared as himself, an athlete. In this and all his films, he was always the Babe, in name as well as in character, and audiences came to believe that character and performer were one and the same. This confusion was aided by the media itself which often made the same mistake.\textsuperscript{9}

The fact that Ruth could not act undoubtedly helped him as a performer. The movie star Babe had a larger-than-life presence, yet he never appeared to take his roles too seriously. Each character he played fit his own personality and his air of self-depreciating humor added sincerity to his performances. In 1920 there were hundreds of small independent film production companies competing in the open market, struggling to amass as many production, distribution, and exhibition facilities as possible. The best insurance against financial failure in film was the presence of a marketable personality. Many popular stars had no formal training but were chosen instead for personal qualities with which the public could comfortably identify and enjoy. Another was the use of familiar plots and genres: romances, westerns, adventure stories. One surprisingly less popular genre was the sports film, where the sport was often used only as a background.\textsuperscript{10}

In the 1920's, many real athletes starred as leads in movies: Babe Ruth appeared in \textit{Headin' Home} in 1920 and \textit{The Babe Comes Home} in 1927;

\textsuperscript{10} Of the 11,795 feature films listed in the \textit{American Film Institute Catalogues} between 1911 and 1930, only about one percent of them had anything to do with sports. The first baseball feature, \textit{Little Sunset}, appeared in 1915. While a popular success, the film ranked theatrics over sporting activities. It was followed by \textit{Right Off the Bat}, starring the first professional ball player turned actor, Mike Donlin. Virtually all baseball features made at this time had the same archetypal storyline: a young man of rural origin with a great deal of natural talent heads for the big city to play baseball, often as not leaving behind a hometown sweetheart. Once away from home, events compromise the young man's talent, and he must prove himself by winning the big game. See Erickson, 6; and \textit{American Film Institute Catalogue of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States}, 2 vols., ed. Patricia King Hanson and Alan G einson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), I and II.
Jack Dempsey formed his own production company and starred in a 1925 feature called *Manhattan Madness*; Bill Tilden appeared in two films, *The Highbinders* (1926) and *The Music Master* (1927); even Red Grange (*One Minute to Play*, 1926, and *A Racing Romeo*, 1927) made movies. While these films were often popular, talent on the athletic field did not necessarily transfer into success on the screen.

Ruth, as an actor, was no better or worse than other athletes turned actors, but his film career covered a longer period of time—from 1917 to 1942—and engendered a great deal more publicity and showmanship. His first screen appearance was in *The Baseball Revue of 1917*, a documentary featuring current major league teams and most of the stars of the 1917 season. On a post-season western exhibition tour with Buck Weaver in November of 1919, Ruth talked to filmmakers about making a series of short films with titles like *Home Sweet Home*, *Touch All Bases*, *The Dough Kiss*, *The Bacon*, and *Oliver Twist*. Ruth biographer Robert Creamer even described Red Sox owner Harry Frazee posing for a publicity photo, doling out porridge with a spoon while Ruth supposedly says, “Please, sir.” The idea of Ruth starring in *Oliver Twist* seems far-fetched, possibly more a publicity stunt than actual fact. It is likely that Ruth and Frazee were trying to cash in on the Babe’s growing popularity and that the news release was a gimmick. The talks halted when Babe reportedly asked for $10,000—as much as he was making a year playing for the Red Sox—just to sign the contract. The fact that no record of these talks appeared in *Variety* or the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, which heavily covered the Hollywood film scene, suggests that the plans were either very preliminary or did not, in fact, exist.

Like baseball films before 1920, *Headin’ Home* started with a standard plot. Ruth played a good-natured, easygoing individual called “Babe,” who possessed a strong moral character and a God-given physical talent. Without education or good breeding, Babe had a sense of values that allowed him instinctively to do the right thing. He was supportive of his little sister and widowed mother—going so far as to break the law when their little dog was impounded by the dog catcher—properly respectful around women and on easy terms with the local minister. It is a typical idyllic image of the American heartland; yet it is at this point that the story breaks away from the traditional pattern of earlier baseball films. Babe’s character was scorned,

11. Creamer, 205. Still, Ruth appeared to have used the movies as leverage in his contract negotiations with Frazee. When salary talks broke down, John Igoe, Ruth’s business manager, publicized the Babe’s retirement plans. In a December 2, 1919 news story from Los Angeles, Ruth announced his intention to retire from baseball, forego movies as an option, and take up professional boxing instead. Several weeks later, Igoe announced that the boxing statement had only been a rumor but that Ruth was still considering a career in moving pictures. *The Sporting News* reported that “Ruth’s Liking for Boston is Pathetic,” and reaffirmed the idea that Ruth was “now thinking of making a contract with the movies.” It is unlikely that Ruth would actually have retired from baseball, but the contract dispute, coupled with Frazee’s money woes, forced the sale of Ruth to the Yankees on January 6, 1920. See *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1919, p.17; *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1919, p.10; *The Sporting News*, Jan. 1, 1920, p.1.

When a visiting ball team came to town, Babe was forced to play on their side. Using a homemade bat, he hit a home run that allowed the visitors to win, earning him even more of the village’s wrath. After being approached by the rival manager for a professional job, Babe realized that his talents could only be successful in the big city where people would pay to see him hit home runs. To a culture that was moving from the farmland into urban industrial centers, this was a familiar and welcome pattern.

The city was also seen as dangerous and threatening. Harry Knight, a “city fella” who drank and threw dice, tried to take advantage of Mildred, the heroine. Babe easily dispatched him by tossing him through a window and chasing him out of town. Later, in the big city, it was again Harry and a shady lady who almost talked Mildred’s brother Cyrus into embezzling funds from his father’s bank. Once again Babe stepped in, but now as a well-dressed, self-assured individual, wise in the ways of the world. He foiled the embezzlement plot, returned the young brother home, and won the hand of the heroine. The climax was back in the city with the Babe in action at the Polo Grounds. Here, fact and fiction were blended together as documentary newsreel footage was edited with shots of the fictional townspeople in the stands, rooting for Babe. The fictional Babe became the real Babe Ruth. It was his success, his feats of strength, and his popularity that were being celebrated, as well as his rise from small-town America to national hero.

How the film came to be made and its relationship to Ruth’s public image were, however, the more interesting stories. In October 1919, Adam Kessel and Charles O. Baumann announced the formation of a new New York movie company, Kessel and Baumann Productions. The ex-bookies first invested in film in 1912 when they financed Mack Sennett’s new Keystone Studios and signed Charlie Chaplin to his first screen contract. In 1920 they approached Ruth.

The New York Dramatic Mirror of July 24, 1920, under the headline “What Ruth Won,” reported that by hitting his thirtieth and thirty-first home runs in the Polo Grounds on July 20th, Ruth smashed his own record and won a $100,000 movie contract, to begin after the ball season. In early August, Kessel and Baumann announced signing Ruth as the star of their next picture, Headin’ Home, for an undisclosed amount. Citing the production team’s past successes and Ruth’s international fame as a home run slugger, the piece declared the film a guaranteed hit. On August 13th, a half-page ad appeared in Variety extolling the virtues of the endeavor to potential exhibitors.
From the beginning *Headin' Home* was designed to be a showcase film, exhibited in the largest houses possible, and booked only for individual engagements. A portrait of Ruth ran in the August 21st *New York Dramatic Mirror* over the caption, “BABE RUTH—The home run king who will start a new phase of his career as a motion picture star in the Kessel & Baumann special attraction picture, *Headin' Home.*” The media assumed filming would begin at the end of the season, but an article in the same journal ran a follow-up story under the headline, “Babe Ruth on Final Scenes of Picture.” The piece, correcting earlier statements, observed, “Without fanfare of trumpets the deal was quietly consummated and before any news of the event had leaked out, the mighty ‘Babe’ between home runs started on what will rank as a great box office bonanza.”

The hype was filled with pitches towards exhibitors. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* noted:

When the home run king was shattering records thereby arousing a high pitch of enthusiasm with the fans of the country, both Mr. Kessel and Mr. Baumann were more than positive that in acquiring this phenomenal baseball player, and starring him in a picture, they would be giving both to the exhibitor and the theater-going public an entertainment that would be a record breaker so far as box office receipts were concerned.

The article claimed that the announcement caused an unprecedented rush from all parts of the United States, not only for territorial distribution rights, but for actual playing dates from exhibitors.

The film had, in fact, begun shooting in early August at the Biograph Studios in New Jersey and on location in New York. Kessel and Baumann, busy with the finances, turned the actual filmmaking over to an independent producer, William Shea, and a private distributor, Herbert H. Yudkin. Shea, in turn, hired veteran filmmaker Raoul Walsh to supervise production.

Throughout this period Ruth was embroiled in a furious series of legal actions. The Educational Films Corporation had released a movie short entitled *Babe Ruth in Over the Fence.* Educational Films, trying to cash in on his popularity, took newsreel footage and spliced it together into what was being billed as a series called the Babe Ruth Instructional Films. The film, followed by a second called *How Babe Ruth Makes a Home Run,* led to an injunction on Ruth’s part to stop the series. Ruth received a temporary restraining order late on the night of August 30th and, the next day, asked for a permanent continuance to stop the exhibition of films being advertised throughout New York under his name. A civil suit for $1,000,000 damages was also launched against Educational Films, the B. F. Keith New Theatres Company, C. B. C. Sales Company, B. S. Moss Theatrical Enterprises, F. F. Proctor Theatrical Enterprises and Jack Cohen “on the ground that the use of

16. Ibid.
17. Erickson, 160. The film’s actual credits list Lawrence Windom as director and titles by Arthur “Bugs” Baer, a well-known humorist and sportswriter for the *New York American.*
such films without his consent for trade purposes constitutes a violation of the Civil Rights Law.”

The ensuing legal battle became even more involved. State Supreme Court Justice Guy, hearing the case, decided to modify the injunction to allow the films to be exhibited until the court could have a full hearing on the matter. On September 7th, Educational Films filed a countersuit against Ruth, the Yankee Photo Corporation and Kessel and Baumann claiming $250,000 for defamation of character. The next day, Jack Cohen filed a similar suit claiming that the films in question were made with Ruth’s approval, that the Babe had posed for several of the shots and that he had sat in the projection room when the first film was edited and titled. Cohen claimed that the entire legal hassle was nothing more than “excellent publicity work which is earning the King of Swat oodles of free space, not alone in the trade press, but in the dailies as well.” A week later, on September 15th, Justice Guy agreed with the defense and denied Ruth’s injunction on the grounds that the civil rights law did not apply in the case and that Ruth’s image and actions constituted current news and therefore a worthy subject of newsreel footage. With the injunction denied, all parties dropped their suits and countersuits.

In the same week that the injunction hearings began, the press announced that boxing promoter Tex Rickard had booked Headin’ Home for Madison Square Garden. Rickard bought the lease for the Garden in 1920 expecting that New York was about to reinstate professional boxing, but the reinstatement was delayed. With open dates, Rickard offered Kessel and Baumann $35,000 for Headin’ Home’s New York premiere.

Rickard wanted to reform boxing’s unsavory public image and spent a great deal of time and money preparing for the premiere. He had the Garden overhauled and redecorated and planned to use the Ruth film as a showcase, going so far as to hire new “ushers who neither looked or acted like brigsands,” and announcing he would charge top prices for the best seats in the house—$1.50.

The Garden of 1920 was capable of seating over ten thousand spectators, but its size offered a problem. The film required a twenty-seven by thirty-six

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18. Ruth v. Educational Films, 184 N. Y. S. 948 (1920); The Sporting News, Sept. 1, 1920, p. 10. Like Headin’ Home, the titles of these films are often debated: Smelser and Wagenheim refer to the second film as Babe Ruth, How He Makes His Home Runs while Erickson and Sobol refer to them as How Babe Hits a Home Run and Play Ball with Babe Ruth; the Eastman Kodak Company, which bought the home movie rights to the Educational Films, listed the second featurette as How Babe Ruth Knocks a Home Run in their 1936 catalogue of home movie rentals. Quoting a source closest to the time period, Variety, Sept. 17, 1920, p. 37, lists the titles as Over the Fence and How Babe Ruth Makes a Home Run.
foot screen, with projection over a distance of three hundred and twenty-five feet, too far for conventional movie projectors. Rickard announced he was having the “World’s Largest Motion Picture Machine” built with the most powerful lenses ever used on a motion picture projector, and would hang 4,000 yards of black cloth that would cover the hall’s large windows so that matinees could be shown.

Opening night festivities included a stage revue of George White’s Scandals of 1920, a million dollar chorus line, Lieutenant J. Tim Bryan and His Black Devil Band of 50, and numerous other screen and stage stars plus sports figures like Jack Dempsey and Benny Leonard with members of the New York Giants, the Cincinnati Reds, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the Pittsburgh Pirates, all in town for ball games. Ruth, in Chicago for a big series with the White Sox, would not appear until later in the week.

The premiere itself drew a large audience. One review set the crowd at a full 10,000 people while another listed it at a more modest 6,000. Variety commented on the circus-like atmosphere and the numerous items being sold during the show, everything from Babe Ruth autographs and records to sheet music for a song called “Oh, You Babe Ruth” which Tim Bryan and his band played over and over again.

While none of the reviewers particularly liked Headin’ Home, they all praised Ruth’s efforts. The New York Times lamented that the film was too long, but applauded its self-deprecating humor. “They try for comedy, not heroics, and score not infrequently. The picture is really entertaining in places— and that’s a lot to say for a production of its kind.” Variety was even more specific about Ruth’s presence in the film.

The story as a story is ridiculous and isn’t convincingly enacted. It couldn’t hold the interest of any one for five seconds if it were not for the presence of the great athlete. He, and he alone, makes it worth five minutes of anybody’s time.

The Tribune called the story disjointed and unconvincing, but singled out Ruth’s work as excellent.

It is difficult to gauge how profitable the film was after the premiere. Headin’ Home cost little to make; it was hastily shot on location with inexpensive set pieces, the more spectacular opening and closing sequences consisting of newsreel footage from other sources. Prints of the film remained in circulation throughout the 1920’s, so that it must have made some kind of profit, but it was not the runaway sensation Kessel and Baumann had hoped it would be—and more legal and financial woes were in store. In early...
October, rumors came from Tex Rickard's office that gambler Abe Attell, the man accused of having a hand in the Black Sox scandal, had lost $25,000 backing the film. Kessel and Baumann denied it but also declared that they no longer had any connection with the Ruth picture.29

All of this became even more problematic when Ruth decided to sue the film producers. For the first time, the real financial arrangements of Ruth's contract were made public. Ruth signed with William Shea on June 25th for $50,000—$15,000 due during the making of the film and the rest upon completion. Ruth received the first check, but found the $35,000 check to be worthless when he tried to cash it.30 In an effort to collect his money, he filed a civil rights claim, asking for an injunction against Shea and distributor Yudkin who was still exhibiting the picture throughout the state. Judge Mullan in the New York State Supreme Court found Ruth's civil rights arguments inappropriate, noting that the statute in question was not intended to serve the purpose of procuring a settlement from the producers. Any chance to reclaim the money disappeared in November when Shea's Yankee Photo Company filed for bankruptcy.31

Headin' Home and its surrounding publicity perpetuated the cultural image of Babe Ruth as an American success story. His individualism and hedonistic sense of self-fulfillment were an affirmation of many of the personal values that were mosi admired in a cultural celebrity during the 1920's. The public perceived that his humble beginnings created strong moral fiber, while individual ability and courage provided personal growth and financial well-being. Ruth's failure on the financial end of Headin' Home reflected these themes. Despite his successes, he was seen here as a victim of the mechanizations of the complex economic system; he fell in with unscrupulous men and was robbed of his rightful due. The text of newspaper reports only reaffirmed what the film said—that the world is a hostile place filled with pitfalls and only the very best can get by them.

The dollars discussed in these articles probably staggered the readers of the 1920's, but what was seldom reported was how much money Ruth actually made on the film—the $15,000 up front. This was a lot of money for four weeks of work, especially when the average ballplayer in 1919 was

and the impossibility of seating patrons at the evening performance. The lighting must have been awful because, according to the article, the matinee was attended by five hundred very enthusiastic fans, and "there's no denying the fact that Headin' Home would have cleaned up if the three-day showing had gone through." See Variety, Oct. 1, 1920, p. 40.

30. The question of who signed Ruth to his film contract was one of debate and the cause of some confusion as well. Kessel and Baumann's early announcement of August 7th suggests that Ruth was under contract to them, but, in fact, as later legal papers show, this was not the case. Ken Sobol in his book on Ruth states that Ruth signed with the Kessel and Baumann Theatrical and Motion Picture Enterprises in June of that year; see Sobol, 119; more confusing is Smelser's contention that Ruth signed to make another picture in 1920 for Raoul Walsh. According to Smelser, money was paid to Ruth and production was about to start when another group of operators under the name of Educational Films Corporation released a series of Babe Ruth shorts; see Smelser, The Life That Ruth Built, 201-03; New York Times, Oct. 12, 1920, p. 16.
31. See Variety, Oct. 29, 1920, p. 46; Variety, Nov. 19, 1920, p. 35. Ruth was not the only one losing money; the Biograph Company was stuck with a bill for over $1,000 due on the rent of their studio in the production of the movie.
making about $3,000 a year.\textsuperscript{32} The news, however, stressed the $35,000 lost and further inflated the public image of Ruth. Ball players and sportswriters reported that for years after, he carried around the worthless check Shea had given him, going into new places and asking if the management could cash it. He would then have a good laugh when they saw the size of the check.\textsuperscript{33} Thus the circumstances that might be tragic for a normal person became a symbol of Ruth's greatness as well as a symbol of the hedonistic 1920's spirit.

By examining Ruth's first film, its images and cultural messages, and the media coverage surrounding it, we can begin to understand how the social context of a public image is created. Babe Ruth was more than just a great ball player to the people of his era. His accomplishments, his unique personality, and his presence in the media became symbols of how Americans saw themselves in the 1920's. \textit{Headin' Home} and the news reports about Ruth did not create those symbols so much as they reflected an image that audiences, the media, and Ruth himself, wanted to see.

It is an image we still wish to see today. If anything, the legendary aspects of Ruth's life have grown larger: his boyish enthusiasm for play, his masculine individualism, his climb from squalor to become an American success story, all reflect a modern sensibility as well. His familiar form still sells everything from candy bars to banking firms and computer software. Two recent films—one made for television and one starring John Goodman—are based on his life, and noted documentary filmmaker Ken Burns devotes an entire two-hour episode of his popular eighteen-hour tribute to baseball to what he labels "A National Heirloom." During the 1994-95 baseball strike, the tabloid \textit{World News} reported the ghost of Babe Ruth haunting Yankee Stadium. Ruth is nearly as prevalent a force in our culture today as he was fifty years ago.

Ruth has become a part of our community knowledge, a reaffirmation of social and cultural values that celebrate and maintain the American society. In the past, his exploits and adventures enacted a familiar drama that drew people together and allowed them to participate vicariously in a larger social context. Today, those same exploits have become a part of our urban mythology coupled with a growing need for nostalgia about what is perceived as a simpler time and place.

Without question, Ruth and the media helped to change sport in America from the amateurism of the nineteenth century to a more professional, commercially driven entertainment complex. More to the point, Ruth came to symbolize the dream of new twentieth-century America. He was the self-made man of courage, individualism, and humility that came to represent the best our society had to offer.


\textsuperscript{33} See Smelser, 201; Wagenheim, 73.
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