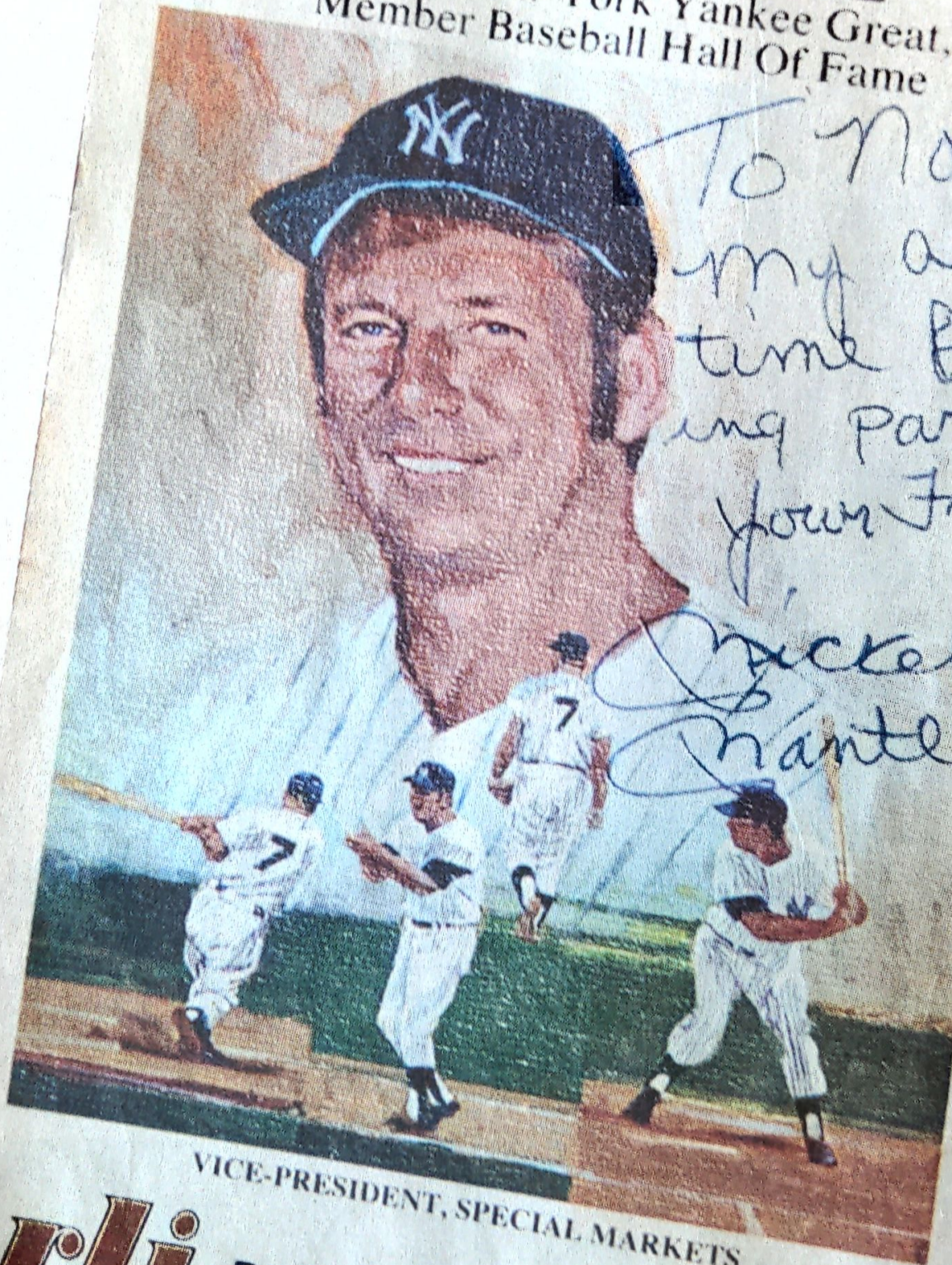


SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2004

## Continental's Most Famous

**MICKEY MANTLE**  
Former New York Yankee Great,  
Member Baseball Hall Of Fame



To Norm  
my all  
time fish-  
ing pard-  
your friend

Mickey  
Mantle

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**Above:** A card is shown with a note written and signed by Mickey Mantle.

**Left:** Norm and Helen Gerlach hold photos of Mickey Mantle and Billy Martin at their home in Continental Country Club.

**Michael Bean**  
Daily Sun

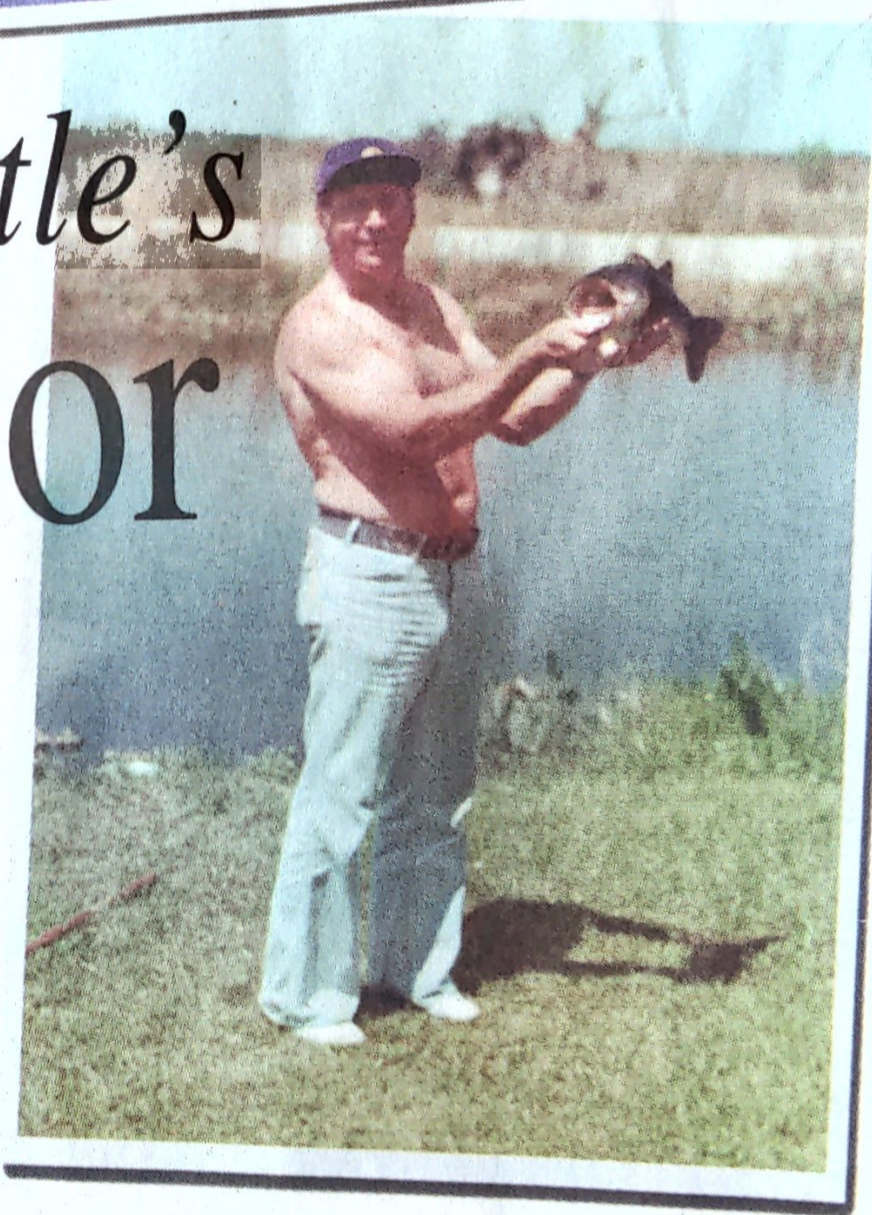
# Mr. Mantle's Neighbor

MICKEY MANTLE MADE HIS MARK AT CONTINENTAL

By **GARY CORSAIR**  
DAILY SUN

WILDWOOD – Sixteen-time All-Star Mickey Mantle blasted 536 home runs and won three American League Most Valuable Player Awards, but “The Mick’s” Herculean baseball exploits are seldom mentioned when Continental Country Club old-timers discuss their famous former neighbor.

“He would just come here to party,” said Doris Stegemerten, who has lived in the scenic retirement community on State Road 44, east of Wildwood, since



**Submitted photo** Mickey Mantle proudly displays a largemouth bass he caught while fishing Lake Okahumpka with Continental Country Club resident Norm Gerlach in the summer of 1979. Gerlach says Mantle spent mornings fishing and afternoons golfing when the former New York Yankees star owned a home in Continental.

See **MANTLE**, A10

1973, five years before Mantle moved into a spacious home on the corner of North Bobwhite Trail and Golfview Drive.

"About four or five times a year, he'd come down for maybe three or four days or so," said Norm Gerlach, 81. "He was the greatest guy I ever knew, and he was my friend."

Mantle had been retired 10 years from baseball when he agreed to be spokesman for the sleepy RV resort that owner Hershel Smith hoped to transform into a bustling mobile home park. His first gig: a 30-second TV commercial in which the Hall-of-Fame slugger was introduced as, "One of Continental's best-known homeowners."

Smith and Continental Director of Marketing George Cook were thrilled with the TV spot and a billboard announcing, "The Home of Mickey Mantle." Residents also loved having a celebrity in their midst.

Five years later, things were different. Smith had moved on, Continental's new owner was embroiled in financial troubles and Mantle had worn out his welcome.

According to the community's official history, Continental: It's conception and continuity, A history of Continental Country Club, published in 1994, "Mantle managed to offend more people than he pleased and was eased out, to be replaced by (golfer) Miller Barber."

"Nobody cared when he left," Stegemerten said. "He kicked up his heels a little bit when he was here."

It's been 21 years since Mantle offended any of his Continental neighbors, but hardly a day goes by that someone doesn't bring up the days Mantle spent there fishing, golfing and partying.

## The Mick's legacy

"Everyone who comes in, I

tell them about Mickey Mantle and the alligators," said Melanie Hadder, Continental property management specialist. "Those are the cool things about Continental. Everyone seems very impressed."

Mantle died nine years ago, and most of the Continental residents who knew him have passed on, but "The Mick's" legend remains alive and well. The spacious brown house he owned is still affectionately called "The Mantle House."

## Mantle stories

And Mantle stories continue to abound. The most enduring: that Mantle wrapped a golf club around a young tree in a fit of anger and that the shaft of the club is still embedded in the now-mature tree. Great story, but no one seems to be able to locate the tree.

"I looked into that, and it's not true," said Gerlach's wife, Helen.

She should know. Helen and Norm Gerlach are the undisputed experts on Mantle lore.

"It was an experience we were very, very fortunate to have. He (Norm) was his fishing buddy. At that time, we lived on Lake Okahumpka, and we were the only ones with a bass boat," Helen said. "He'd just walk in the house. He'd just come right in. I'd be taking a strudel out of the oven, and he'd grab it and take it and start eating while it was still hot."

Home-cooking wasn't the only thing Mantle had an appetite for.

"He liked to drink a little bit," said Sput Montgomery, a longtime Sumter County resident who often picked Mantle up from airports in Tampa and Orlando and transported him to Continental. "Most people just have a drink of two; he'd drink almost to oblivion."

Mantle's fondness for alcohol — which was first publicized when Jim Bouton's clas-



**Norm and Helen Gerlach** display some of the memorabilia from their five years of spending time with their friend, Mickey Mantle.

Michael Bean / Daily Sun

sic Ball Four was published in 1970 – led to one of Norm’s most-treasured keepsakes.

“Helen and I were at the bar at the clubhouse, and him and Billy Martin were eating,” Norm said. “Well, Mickey saw us and got up and came over and wrapped his arms around me from behind and slurred, ‘Norm, you’re my third best friend!’ I never did find out who his first and second best friends were. Probably Billy and George Steinbrenner, I guess.”

Martin frequently accompanied Mantle to Continental. Yankees owner Steinbrenner and former greats Roger Maris and Whitey Ford occasionally joined Mantle.

And there were other – less famous – visitors.

“Those guys, when they’d come in, they’d have a bunch of airline stewardesses with them,” Helen said.

“Mickey had a girl with him every time he came in, but he’d never take her up to the club,” said Norm, who quickly found out that fishing and golf weren’t Mantle’s only pastimes.

“He was up in front of the boat, and I said, ‘When we get back I’ll filet these bass for you and your wife.’ He didn’t say a word for two or three minutes, then he finally said, ‘Norm, that’s not my wife.’ And that’s the last I ever mentioned it,” Norm said.

*'We were probably blessed with knowing the soft, gentle side of him, probably the little boy side of him,' Helen said. "He'd light up when he asked what I was cooking for dinner tomorrow and he'd get all excited when I'd say, 'chicken and dumplings.'"*

### **Mickey's 'pardner'**

In Gerlach, Mantle found the perfect fishing partner – or “pardner” as Mantle affectionately called him. Norm didn't pry, and he didn't pass judgment.

“I never talked baseball with Billy or Mickey, and I think that's why they loved us,” Norm said.

That the feeling was mutual is evident when Helen brings out her “memory box,” which primarily consists of photographs but also contains the fishing lure Mickey used to bring a young alligator to the bank of Lake Okahumpka, a “gourmet” cookbook he gave Helen and a yellow T-shirt bearing the words, “My Third Best Friend” that was given to Norm after Mantle's boozy embrace in the Continental club.

The prize possession of the collection: an autographed card depicting Mantle excelling on the baseball diamond bearing a blue-ink scrawl: “To Norm: My all-time fishing pard – Your Friend Mickey Mantle.”

The Gerlachs loved Mantle,

but they don't deny that the man who is 11th on Major League Baseball's all-time home run list had weaknesses for women and booze. Still, they said, Mantle should be remembered as a kind, caring person, not an insensitive playboy.

“We were probably blessed with knowing the soft, gentle side of him, probably the little boy side of him,” Helen said. “He'd light up when he asked what I was cooking for dinner tomorrow and he'd get all excited when I'd say, ‘chicken and dumplings.’”

Even those who grew irritated by Mantle's antics recognized his charm.

“I spoke with him several times. He was very polite, very nice,” said Stegemerten, who paused before adding, “But I never got invited to any of his wild parties.”

*Gary Corsair is special projects editor of The Villages Media Group. He can be contacted by telephone at 753-1119, ext. 268 or by e-mail at Gary.Corsair@thevillagesmedia.com.*