

## **Historic Home Run: Giants Beat the Dodgers**

VAN METER, Iowa (AP) – Ralph Branca signed the baseball carefully, then passed it to the lanky, white-haired gentleman sitting to his right.

On the 53rd anniversary of a moment that will link them forever, Bobby Thomson was still waiting on a ball from Branca. Only this time, he signed it instead of hitting it out of the park.

Thomson's pennant-winning home run off Branca on Oct. 3, 1951 remains firmly etched in each man's memory and has defined their place in baseball lore – Thomson the jubilant hero, Branca the dejected loser.

But out of it has grown a friendship based mutual ideals and respect. Once opponents in a bitter rivalry, Thomson with the New York Giants, Branca with the Brooklyn Dodgers, they genuinely like each other.

When one makes a public appearance, the other usually is close by. They've visited the White House together. They were honorary co-captains of the National All-Star team in 2001.

"Let's face it, when that happened, it was like we married each other," Thomson said. "Without that moment, we wouldn't be invited here."

Here on this pleasant autumn Sunday was a museum honoring Van Meter's contribution to baseball, Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller, who grew up on a farm near the central Iowa town.

As Feller mingled with the crowd, Thomson and Branca signed baseballs, trading cards and photos of the historic home run that sent Giants' announcer Russ Hodges into a frenzy that produced his most remembered phrase: "The Giants win the pennant. The Giants win the pennant."

In those days, players from the Giants, Dodgers and New York Yankees often found themselves together at functions during the offseason. Branca and Thomson didn't know each other then except as rivals.

"I didn't like him because he was a Dodger," Thomson said. "I'm sure he felt the same way about me."

Gradually, though, they discovered they got along well. They knew they couldn't change their history, so they embraced it and the two have been doing card shows and autograph sessions together since 1984.

Their friendship even endured through a controversy in 2001, when it was disclosed that the Giants had been stealing the Dodgers' signs.

"We just got to know one another," Branca said. "We pretty much have the same outlook on life, we have the same outlook on family, we have the same outlook on being patriots."

They've been together so often they can play off each other like a comedy team.

Question: A young Willie Mays was on deck and he had been struggling. If it had been your call, would you have walked Bobby and pitched to Mays?

Branca (with a smile): "No, he's my out man."

Thomson: "He's not the only guy that can say that."

Branca actually got a lot of batters out. He was 21-12 with a 2.67 earned run average as a 21-year-old in 1947. By the time he was 25, Branca had won 76 games. Roger Clemens, Branca points out, had 78 wins when he was 25.

Yet Branca knows how most fans remember him.

"They think my career was two pitches," he said.

The Dodgers were leading the Giants 4-2 in the third and deciding game of their National League playoff series when Branca was summoned from the bullpen to relieve Don Newcombe. There was one out and the Giants had runners on second and third.

Thomson stepped in and took a fastball down the middle for strike one. Then Branca came with another fastball, this one high and inside. Thomson swung and the ball jumped off his bat, sailing into the left field seats and carrying the two of them into baseball history.

"Ralph said he made the pitch he wanted to make," Thomson said. "I always said I was lucky to hit the damn thing. I didn't get a good look at it."

Branca had pitched eight innings two days earlier and two innings the day before that. So should manager Charlie Dressen have brought in someone else?

"Silly question," Branca replied. "I was too competitive. I always wanted the ball."

Branca injured his back at spring training in 1952 and won only 12 more games before retiring from baseball. Thomson finished a 15-year career with 264 home runs, but he would have been just as famous if he had hit only one.

"They're still talking about it, they're still showing it on TV," Thomson said. "It's just a natural relationship we've had living with the thing. Of course, I think it's been easier for me because I was the winner."