

Right- Bruce Yeko today

Interview with Bruce Yeko, the first full-time card dealer



By
George Vrechek

Bruce Yeko was an interesting name that I remembered from the tales of the early collectors. I remembered reading that he had gone from Milwaukee to New York City in the early 1960s and had millions of cards coming out of every nook and cranny of his apartment. Long-time collector and *SCD* reader George Husby contacted me to let me know that 70-year-old Bruce Yeko was “in rare form” recently as he reminisced with George about his career as a baseball card dealer which started in the 1950s. I thought I should try to reminisce a little with Bruce as well so I gave him a call, sat back, and listened.

Milwaukee Boy Visits Canada

A young Bruce dabbled in late 40s and early 50s cards.



The Topps 1952 high numbers proved an inspiration for the young Bruce Yeko getting into the card business. Bruce described how he had dabbled in baseball and football cards as a pre-teenager, remembering the awful colors of the 1948-9 Leafs and the less-than-exciting early Bowmans and 1951 Topps. He also collected comics and records. He was twelve years old when he visited Canada with his parents in 1952. He came across a store selling Topps cards and bought a few. To his surprise the cards were ones he had never seen



before even though he had increased his “dabbling” in 1952 and had quite a few cards purchased from his meager allowance. The cards Bruce found were the 1952 Topps high numbers that included Mantle, Robinson, Campanella, and others. Bruce knew a good thing when he saw it. He pleaded with his mother that he needed a large advance against future allowances. He was successful in talking his mother out of about \$1 and bought all the cards he could.

Bruce returned home with his unique stash of Topps high numbers anxious to tell the card-collecting world about his find. Bruce soon found though that the guys his age in the neighborhood who had been collecting cards in the previous year had now put aside such frivolity and had retired from the penny card collections. In order to get any positive reinforcement for his “find,” Bruce approached a young collector an entire year his junior. This young collector was appropriately impressed with the cards. The entire episode taught Bruce Yeko lessons about cards, collecting, and marketing.



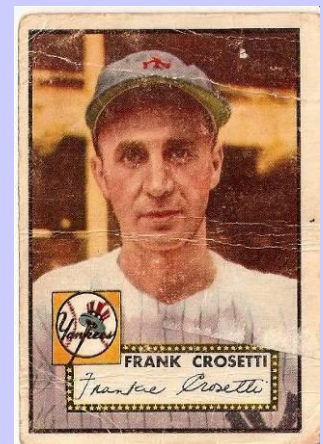
1952 Topps High Numbers were inspirational

Always Thinking

Bruce was a good student but perhaps even better at trying to analyze opportunities. As a fan of the newly-arrived Milwaukee Braves, Bruce would try to get autographs. He found that many others had the same idea and would overwhelm the Braves players. No one though seemed to bother the visitors very much. Why not avoid the crowds and track down the visitors? Stan Musial wasn't too bad a ballplayer. Yeko found that if you arrived at the park in the 7th inning, you could get in for free. This worked well with Bruce's school schedule. He started hanging around the visitors' locker room area after the games and going to the Schroeder Hotel, frequented by visiting teams. He found people who looked like ball players, but he made a few wrong guesses at the outset. He decided to bring his baseball cards along to help identify the players and to have them sign the cards. This

approach seemed to work fine and most players were glad to oblige.

American League players though didn't visit Milwaukee. As Yeko got more addicted to the autograph hunt he branched into the American League by mail. He started to write fan letters to players and asked them to sign for him. He even had reasonable luck sending baseballs and getting them signed. He decided that he might have even better luck, if he could convince the team manager or a coach to have all his players sign the item or ball. Surprisingly, this was also reasonably successful. For example, he wrote coach Frank Crosetti of the Yankees and tactfully asked for his autograph as well as that of one other player – Mickey Mantle. That worked as well! You wouldn't say that the young Bruce Yeko lacked initiative or had trouble thinking outside the box.



Yeko had luck by writing Coach Frank Crosetti and asking him for Mickey Mantle's signature – as well as his own

Yeko the Early Boy Dealer

While the rest of the guys put away their cards, Bruce decided to keep going. He wasn't much of an athlete; he claims he couldn't "throw, catch, or bat." However, he was a great fan, very organized, and enjoyed collecting. If the other guys didn't enjoy collecting anymore, he decided he could help them out and help redistribute the cardboard wealth to others who would appreciate the cards. Confirming his concept was a 1956 ad he saw in the *Sporting News* which said that "collectors were willing to spend surprising amounts of money." Bruce started buying cards from other youngsters. He kept some for his collection, but found that he could sell his surplus cards to dealers who would in return sell them to younger kids just like the youngster who appreciated his 1952 Topps high number find. Bruce and his boyhood friend, Jay Lerner, started reselling their purchases to part-time New York dealer Gordon B. Taylor who was active in the late 1950s in reselling older cards.

Bruce also noticed though that the kids were not really as interested in the older cards as he was. They wanted the current year's cards. Bruce thought, why not start buying the current cards by the box and put together sets that he could sell for more than his investment? One of his childhood friends was the son of a store owner who bought cards by the box rather than just the penny or nickel purchases that others made. That seemed to be the way to go. Buy in quantity, put together something of greater value, and sell to others who could help finance Bruce's own collecting.

Yeko Starts Selling Sets

Bruce continued with his part-time card dealing putting together sets from the late 50s and early 60s from boxes and cases while attending the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. Yeko had noted the printing process used by Topps and how series and sheets were divided. He determined how many sets could likely be made from boxes of cards and how many cards would be left over. He also figured that it would be cheaper to get the cards without the gum or product and tried going directly to the manufacturers whenever he could.

Yeko started advertising that he had cards for sale. He received mail order responses and starting filling orders. He started to get a little gun-shy in advertising since he would be deluged with work. On a rare occasion a customer would come to the door of the Yeko residence. One such customer was 15-year-old Wisconsin collector George Husby who remembers "tracking down Yeko at his house in 1960 and buying some non-sports cards from him at a reasonable price." Larry Fritsch arrived from Stevens Point, Wisconsin, during this time as well in to buy Johnston Cookies cards.

Yeko got to know Gordon B. Taylor, Woody Gelman and Marshall Oreck (of Oreck Vacuum Cleaning). At one time Taylor had worked helping Rosen. Taylor's cards wound up with Oreck. Sam Rosen was Woody Gelman's father-in-law who had retired from the garment business. Gelman was the art director for Topps and encouraged his father-in-law to get into the card business. They figured that there were plenty of old surplus cards that Topps would be glad to relinquish. Yeko makes the distinction that none of the early card dealers were "full-time card

dealers” before he was. Goodie Goldfaden was certainly a full-time dealer well before Yeko, but dealt primarily with sports periodicals as opposed to cards.

Yeko the Young Accountant

Yeko graduated in 1962 with a degree in accounting. He had seen the bright lights of New York City years earlier and was particularly enthused about the glamour of Broadway shows. Why not get a job in accounting in New York City, keep the card business going on the side, and see every Broadway musical show? Bruce came to work for Touche Ross CPAs in New York in the summer of 1962. He took a room at the YMCA and started to follow his plan.

Yeko contacted Fleeer Gum and was given a tour of their plant in Philadelphia. He thought he should go to the Topps plant in Brooklyn as well. With the help of Woody Gelman, Bruce got in the door of the plant, but not much further. Topps was suspicious of anyone wanting to wander through their facility. Eventually Bruce confessed that he just wanted to buy cards, a case of cards for \$31.80. A clerk agreed and asked for a shipping address and a check. He had brought cash and wanted to cart the stash with him, but he gave them his check and had the cards shipped to a New York hotel since the YMCA wasn't going to facilitate someone running a business out of one of their rooms. Nothing was easy for the early card dealers, but nothing was very expensive either.

Bruce's accounting career turned out to be short-lived. He worked one busy season for Touche Ross and then was let go. He fumbled with the adding machines, had trouble developing enthusiasm while mired in the inventory and securities details, and his mind often wandered to his part-time business of card dealing which seemed relatively more glamorous. Touche Ross in effect made Yeko into a full-time dealer. He didn't want to go back to Milwaukee, he liked the bright lights of New York, and he liked the cards. He decided to do it full time.

Yeko, Full-Time Dealer and Part-time Theatre Goer

In the summer of 1963 Yeko turned most of his efforts to card dealing; considerable time was also spent at Broadway shows which could be attended for as little as \$5. The more Yeko advertised to buy and sell, the more cards started coming in the door of his small one-bedroom apartment on 78th Street. Yeko advertised in the *Baseball Digest* and other publications. He was consistent and prominent with his ads and his sales prices seemed right at \$13 or \$14 per set. Buying cards was pretty easy. Cards were not very valuable (some people were glad to get anything for their old cards) and there weren't many dealers around to buy them. Bruce remembers “that no one ever walked out the door without selling me his cards.” Fortunately cards kept going out the door as well. His then wife Doris joined in the fun as well handling the newest cards. The company, which was started while he was in high school, was called “Wholesale Cards Co.” because Bruce thought it would convey the idea that his prices were a good deal.

Collector Joe Isaac was a typical customer for the “new” cards and remembers “answering an ad Bruce had in *Baseball Digest*. This was the first mail in order I bought as a kid. I had to save my allowance money.” But there were other adult collectors who found Bruce as well including hobby veteran collector and dealer Irv Lerner who bought from Yeko once he got back into the hobby in the early 1960s.



BASEBALL CARDS
TOPPS COMPLETE \$12.95
 1967 SET — only

Get your full color picture cards of almost every major league baseball player! **SPECIAL**—order a complete set now, and you will receive **FREE** set of 33 full color **HALL OF FAME** cards (Ruth, DiMaggio, etc.). Send only \$12.95 (plus 95¢ for postage) for the complete 7 series totaling about 600 cards or send down payment of \$2.90 and five \$2.20 payments later.

EACH SERIES (1-7) \$2.25
 Single cards 4¢ each.
 Order by card number — minimum order 75¢

SPECIAL ALBUM TO HOLD COMPLETE 1967 BASEBALL SET \$3.75
 "Topps 1967 Baseball" in gold on hard cover

WHOLESALE CARDS CO. — Dept. BD8
 Box 496, Georgetown, Conn. 06829



BASEBALL CARDS
TOPPS COMPLETE \$13.95
 1968 SET — only

Get your full color picture cards of almost every major league baseball player! **SPECIAL**—order a complete set now, and you will receive **FREE** set of 33 full color **HALL OF FAME** cards (Ruth, DiMaggio, etc.). Send only \$13.95 (plus 95¢ for postage) for the complete 7 series totaling about 600 cards or send down payment of \$2.90 and five \$2.40 payments later.

EACH SERIES (1-7) \$2.45
 Single cards 4¢ each.
 Order by card number — minimum order \$1.00

GET ALL THE PLAYERS ON YOUR FAVORITE TEAM . . . \$1.95

1968 TOPPS AFL & NFL SET OF 220 CARDS (SINGLES 4¢ EACH) \$5.95

Send 35¢ for 1968-69 **CARD CATALOG (#5)**. Big 8½ x 11", 36 pages, pictures of every sport & non-sport cards issued 1910-1967.

WHOLESALE CARDS CO. — Dept. BD9
 Box 496, Georgetown, Conn. 06829

As a full-time card dealer in New York City in the 1960s, Bruce Yeko started to get less attached to the cardboard. A fellow came in with a complete set of 1952 Topps to sell. Bruce bought the set very reasonably. Since he liked the set so much himself, he thought he would "protect" it by putting a robust \$100 sales price on the set. It sold immediately. With that lesson learned, Bruce dug out a 1952 set missing 11 cards and offered it for \$300. That set sold immediately as well. There were no price guides available to the general public. The hobby pioneers may have priced cards at a penny or so apiece but that didn't mean he had to agree with them. Bruce put prices on cards that he thought would result in the best results to him. If the price was too high, an item wouldn't sell and he could always lower the price. Yeko priced star cards at a premium and got the prices he asked.

Business was good; cards accumulated by the millions in the small Yeko residence. Baseball, football, non-sports, tobacco cards, Post Cereal cards, Pepsi Houston Colts and Tulsa Oilers, everything imaginable was purchased and resold. Yeko used trays a banker friend of his found to organize some of his cards. The trays had been used to organize canceled checks at the bank and were the perfect size. At his peak, Yeko sold 3,000 sets of current Topps cards. Assuming about 600 cards in a set, 3,000 sets would mean 1.8 million cards just in current year complete sets.

Card "Show"

Just like Bruce's experience in Milwaukee, not many customers walked in the door of his apartment in New York either. He might have 10 to 15 people drop by in a year. All that started to change when TCMA founder Mike Aronstein approached Bruce about coming over to Aronstein's house where 20 adult collectors would gather in the basement. The meeting was great, with a good time had by all, particularly in the self-confirmation that they weren't all crazy and that collecting could be enjoyable and rewarding. The next step was to rent a hall to facilitate buying cards from people and distributing any purchases to the core group. The idea of turning around and selling the cards at these gatherings to other collectors was not on the front burner yet. Years later Bruce would set up at shows including the nationals.

Rosen to Gelman, Taylor to Oreck

Dealer Sam Rosen died from a heart attack and Woody Gelman took over his father-in-law's inventory in Franklin Square. Yeko and Gelman remained friends and Gelman sold cards to Yeko and kept him in touch with the folks at Topps. Gordon B. Taylor "looked like Santa Claus"

according to Yeko and appealed to the kids with his monthly magazine, *Card Comments*. I subscribed to *Card Comments* as a kid and received Gordon B. Taylor's complete alphabetical baseball checklist. However Taylor got into trouble with another part-time mail order business he owned and abruptly disappeared.

Marshall Oreck got into card dealing by purchasing Gordon B. Taylor's inventory. He worked out of his apartment on 74th Street in Manhattan. The late collector Bob Solon told me that Oreck "started pricing star cards at a premium in the 1960s and the hobby has never been the same since." When Oreck had had enough though, he decided to sell his 4 million card inventory. He wanted \$10,000 for everything. While Yeko was initially lukewarm about Oreck's offer, he decided to go ahead with the deal in 1966 and at least reduce his competitors by one. Oreck also had Red Heart Dog Food cards and Salada coins that attracted Yeko's collector interests.

Older Cards

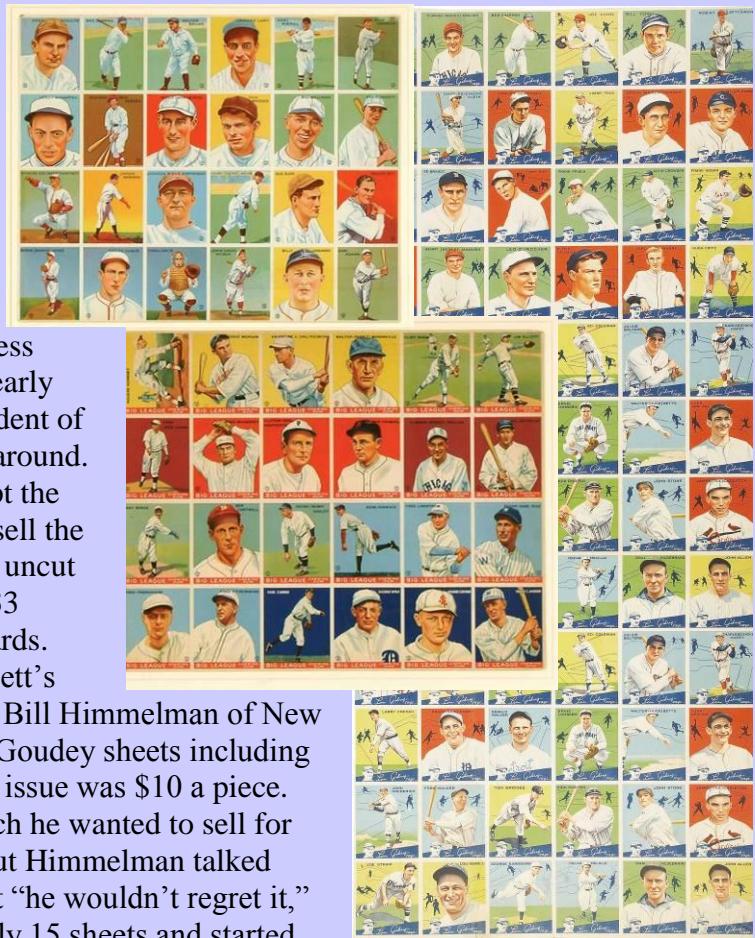
Not everyone was lusting after the really old cards. Many of Bruce's customers were kids who wanted the current players and current sets. However Bruce saw value in the older cards immediately. He would purchase older post-war cards but also would buy and sell tobacco insert cards. T206s would come in the door at about 10 or 15 cents per card. He would resell them at 3 for \$1. Honus Wagner never got in or out of Yeko's door though – as far as he knows.

John Fawcett

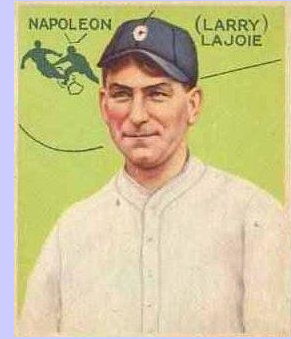
Bruce remembered a deal around 1968 with John Fawcett, a collector of Mickey Mouse memorabilia. Yeko visited Fawcett's house which was like a shrine, a museum. Fawcett had wanted to obtain cards produced by Goudey of Mickey Mouse with movie

stars. Goudey went out of the card business during World War II, but on a hunch in early 1968 Fawcett contacted the former president of Goudey to see if he had any cards lying around. He did and Fawcett bought them. He kept the Mickey Mouse cards but was willing to sell the baseball cards. The cards included many uncut sheets of Goudey products including 1933 Goudeys and 1938 Goudey Heads-Up cards.

Accompanying Yeko on the trip to Fawcett's home in Connecticut was Yeko's friend, Bill Himmelman of New Jersey. Fawcett's asking price for uncut Goudey sheets including the "copyright set" used to copyright the issue was \$10 a piece. He also had a Napoleon Lajoie card which he wanted to sell for \$10 also. Yeko thought the price high, but Himmelman talked him into buying it, admonishing him that "he wouldn't regret it," and he didn't. Yeko bought approximately 15 sheets and started reselling them for \$20 or \$30 each. Yeko bumped the price to \$50 then to \$100 and sold the final sheets for \$300 to \$400 each. Years later a collector came to buy old 78 records from Yeko.

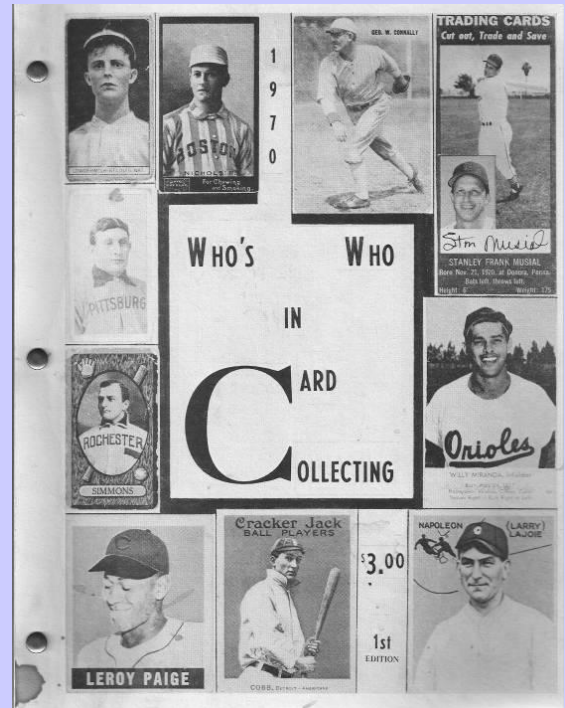


When Bruce pulled down the pile of records, he found one last 1938 Goudey Heads-Up partial sheet with the rookie Joe DiMaggio included. That sheet was eventually sold in a Mastro auction for around \$4,000.



Who's Who in Card Collecting 1969

Collector/dealer Irv Lerner put together a 113-page booklet in 1969 called *Who's Who in Card Collecting*. Lerner acknowledged Yeko for his "help in reaching new hobby collectors through distributing questionnaires as well as supplying cards" (including the Lajoie) which were reproduced on the cover. The only others specially mentioned by Lerner were associate editors Bob Jaspersen and Richard Reuss, and other contributors: George Martin, Charles Bray, Frank Nagy, Buck Barker, Lionel Carter, and Wirt Gammon – a Who's Who in itself. The bio included in the publication stated that the 29-year-old Yeko "prizes his Rocky Graziano card (the 50th in the set) in 1948 Leaf boxing, his photo variation (portrait type) of the Dick Donovan (#72) card in Leaf's 1960 issue, and his recent acquisition of Lajoie (#106) in the 1933 Goudey Big League set. Outside of his business and hobby, Bruce enjoys traveling, records, and attending musical-comedy shows."



Bruce supplied Irv Lerner with cards for the cover of Lerner's Who's Who in Card Collecting in 1969 including the recently acquired Lajoie.

Bruce's ad in Who's Who in Card Collecting mentions that every collector should have a copy of his complete price list from 1910-1969 in his possession. Unfortunately, Bruce didn't take the advice himself and no longer has any of these early catalogs

WHOLESALE CARDS COMPANY BOX 496 GEORGETOWN, CONN. 06821

Topps 1969-1970 NHL Hockey Series #1 (1-132) \$3.95, Series #2 (133-264) issued only in Canada \$5.95. Complete set of all 264 cards \$8.95; all singles 5c each, both series contain all 12 teams. Topps 1970 NBA Basketball, set of 99 cards for \$4.95; singles 10c each. Topps 1969 Football Series #1 (1-132) and Series #2 (133-264), each series have 70% NFL and 30% AFL players complete set of 264 cards - \$6.95. Series #1 or #2 each \$3.75; singles 4c each, complete checklist 20c. 1969 Topps Baseball Cards: Series #1 (1-109); Series #2 (110-218); Series #3 (219-327); Series #4 (328-425); Series #5 (426-512); Series #6 (513-588); Series #7 (589-664). Send \$13.95 (PLUS 95c for postage) for the complete 7 series set of 664 cards or send a down payment of \$2.90 and 5 payments of \$2.40 later (one after you receive each series.) Separate series (#1-7) are \$2.25 each. Single cards and checklists 4c each (10c for some rare cards). Special album to hold 1969 set (TOPPS 1969 BASEBALL) in gold on hard cover \$3.75.

Our #6 Catalog with many price changes is ready. Complete Price List of all cards (Baseball, Football, Hockey, Basketball & non-sports) we have, from 1910 through 1969. It has 36 pages, and contains pictures and prices. EVERY COLLECTOR SHOULD HAVE ONE IN HIS POSSESSION FOR 50c.

100

1978 Article

One of the early sports hobby publications, *Sports Collectors News*, published by Mike Bondarenko included a story in a 1978 issue on Yeko. The article was reprinted from a story by Dennis Lyons of *Gannett News Service*. The article mentioned that Bruce was thought to have the largest card collection in the world with 15 to 20 million cards. (Bruce wasn't quite sure how many cards he had under his roof.) *SCN* reported that the cards in his Connecticut home were "everywhere, wall to wall, ceiling to floor. The presence of living room furniture is an unsubstantiated rumor." Cards were even in the oven. The adjacent barn and caretaker's cottage were no different. Business was still good then and Yeko barely needed to advertise with repeat customers sending in 20 to 40 orders a day. Yeko called the 1952 Topps set his favorite.

Condition Condition

Collectors weren't always over concerned about condition and centering of cards. One exception was hobby pioneer Lionel Carter. Yeko remembers that Carter bought a set from him and then returned about a dozen cards asking if they could be replaced with well-centered cards. Yeko remembers this as a little more work for him, but there weren't many condition-conscious Lionel Carters to deal with. That started to change as more people wanted perfect cards. Bruce still doesn't understand the crazy price premiums associated with perfectly-centered, high-grade common cards from the 1950s and 1960s.

Cards Dwindle Away as Times Change

However, pretty soon the *New York Times* was running articles about baseball cards. By the late 1980s, the proliferation of shows, price guides, stores, and competitors caused Bruce to get out of the full-time card business. He remembers going from selling 3,000 new sets per year to one set in his last year.

One of his last memorable sales was a few years back when he auctioned on Ebay one common card from an obscure 1966 Topps test issue called "1966 Topps Punch-outs" that he had picked up through Woody Gelman years ago. The card measured 2-½ by 4-5/8th and was blank-backed. This one little card with a tiny picture of a player sold for several thousand dollars.

Original Cast Records

If you look into Yeko's business now, you find scant mention of the baseball card guru but find in *Wikipedia* that Bruce and his ex-wife Doris are known for preserving "obscure theatre recordings, primarily cast albums from little-known Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway and other stage productions, but also theatre-related film scores, cabaret, concert and solo artist recordings." Yeko's company is known as Original Cast Records and handles the recording and sale of recordings of New York stage productions. If you need to find the original version of any show, you can go to Original Cast Records of Georgetown, Connecticut.



Bruce proudly claims to have attended every Broadway musical that ever opened and some that never opened over the past 44 years. He also attends off-Broadway shows and will see 200 musicals in a typical year. Recounting his experiences in this endeavor would require a much longer article than this one. While Bruce was a pioneer in the card dealer business, he feels that if he hadn't gotten into it someone else would have. However Bruce feels, if he had not recorded the shows, no one would have done so and the record of many performances would have been lost.

Seventy-year-old Bruce Yeko is an energetic, upbeat, inquisitive, quick-thinking veteran of many card deals. Bruce is still working at the recording business with his daughter Toni, and retains good memories of the early days of the collecting hobby. He can be contacted at bruce9111@aol.com.

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net.

A big OBC thank you to [Sports Collectors Digest \(SCD\)](#) for allowing us to reprint George's article here on the OBC site.