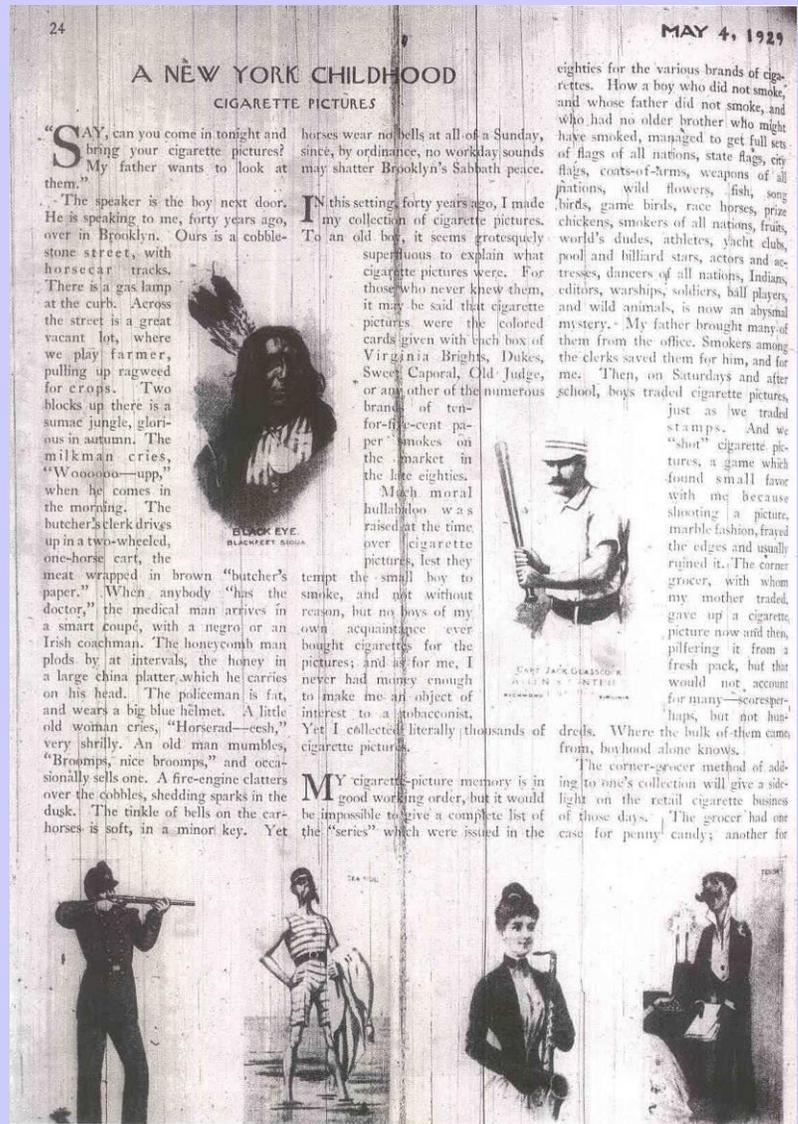


The First Article on Baseball Cards?

by George G. Vrechek



First page of *The New Yorker* article from 1929



Collectors have always had an interest in “the first” as in the first baseball card, the first card of a player, or the first World Series program. Some of us who write about the hobby have a similar interest in the first hobby publication or the first article on baseball cards.

In researching Jefferson Burdick (1899-1963), the father of card collecting, I had found articles written by Burdick and collector Lionel Carter in the 1930s dealing with card collecting and baseball cards specifically. Carter’s story in the *Kaw Chief Stamp Journal* of December 2, 1936, was the first article I found entirely about collecting baseball cards. Jefferson Burdick’s December 1935 piece for *Hobbies* magazine dealt with cigarette cards and their organization. Burdick’s *Card Collectors Bulletin* from the late 1930s also had frequent pieces on the earliest known cards and recollections of old-timers who, as kids, had collected the tobacco cards of the 1880s.

1973 SCD Article

One of our readers, David Kathman of Chicago, sent me an article by early *SCD* columnist Dave Mieners that appeared in the October 12, 1973, *Sports Collectors Digest*. Dave had also been busy researching early hobby publications. He listed several books including *Cigarette Card Collecting* by A.J. Cruse, 1951 and *The Mighty Leaf: Tobacco Through the Centuries* by Jerome E. Brooks, 1952. There were only two periodicals listed though that preceded the Burdick/Carter articles. The two listings were:

- *Ruth Throws a Mean Signature*, by Billy Evans, published by NEA Syndicate, December 8, 1924, and
- *A New York Childhood, Cigarette Pictures*, by Arthur H. Folwell, published by The New Yorker, May 4, 1929.

Billy Evans was a familiar name. After a little research I realized Billy Evans had to be the Hall of Fame umpire (1884-1956). He was also a professional baseball and football executive, college football player and published writer. His New York Times obituary mentioned that he contributed to national magazines and, for a time, operated his own syndicate. Unfortunately whatever magazine the above article appeared in has not surfaced for me. I learned that after one game Evans had gotten into a fight with Ty Cobb under the grandstand. I also learned what it says on his Hall of Fame plaque: "Umpire and executive, employed by American League in 1906 at age 22, making him the youngest umpire ever in the majors. Served on A.L. staff though 1927. Officiated in 6 World Series. General manager of Cleveland Indians 1927-1935, farm director of Boston red Sox 1936-1940. President of Southern Association 1942-1946. General manager of Detroit Tigers 1947-1951." It did not say, however, that he had written the first article on baseball cards. I am going to presume that Evans article was about Ruth or autographs, but not baseball cards.

1929 New Yorker Article

The good news is that it is a lot easier to find old *The New Yorker* magazines. *A New York Childhood* is a well-written, four-page article with illustrations. I found that Arthur Hamilton Folwell had written at least two other (non-hobby) articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* in the 1920s and had collaborated on a 1905 book as well. He grew up in Brooklyn in the 1880s, collected as a kid, hung onto his cards and shared his recollections as a writer in a major publication, in fact one of the few periodicals from the 1920s that is still around today. His story is full of nostalgia, remembering his neighborhood, the stores and the cards. You can tell Arthur was a collector as he commented on specific cards, particularly baseball. Folwell wrote:

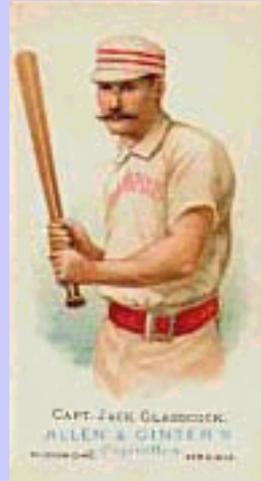
"Say, can you come in tonight and bring your cigarette pictures? My father wants to look at them.' The speaker is the boy next door. He is speaking to me, forty years ago, over in Brooklyn." Folwell then painted a vivid picture of vacant lots, milkmen, butchers, a doctor making a house call, a policeman on foot, people selling brooms and horseradish. He continued: "In this setting, forty years ago, I made my collection of cigarette pictures." In 1929 it would not be surprising if people didn't know much about cigarette cards. Their appearance was fast, furious and brief. For example Lionel Carter was born in 1919 and seriously collected cards in the 1930s. He had never even seen a cigarette card until about 1940. But if you were in Brooklyn in 1888, cigarette cards were quite the rage. Folwell pointed out that there weren't "newsreels, roto sections or picture newspapers in the 1880s.

A cigarette picture was no mere plaything. It was life.” No wonder his friend’s father was interested in seeing the color pictures on the cards that Folwell collected.

Capt Jack Glasscock appeared in the 1929 The New Yorker story along with Black Eye of the Sioux.

Tobacco Insert Sets

Folwell continued: “My cigarette-picture memory is in good working order, but it would be impossible to give a complete list of the ‘series’ which were issued in the eighties for the various brands of cigarettes. How a boy who didn’t smoke, and whose father didn’t smoke, and who had no older brother who might have smoked, managed to get full sets of flags of all nations, state flags, city flags, coats of arms, weapons of all nations, wild flowers, fish, song birds, game birds, race horses, prize chickens, smokers of all nations, fruits, world’s dudes, athletes, ...and wild animals is now an abysmal mystery. Where the bulk of them came from boyhood alone knows....Boys traded cigarette pictures just as we traded stamps. And we ‘shot’ cigarette pictures, a game which found small favor with me because shooting a picture marble fashion, frayed the edges and usually ruined it.” (a true collector).



Folwell observed that Charlie, the corner grocer, could occasionally be talked into breaking the revenue stamp on a pack of cigarettes and giving him the insert card. The opened pack would then be sold as two cigarettes for a penny. Most sets had 50 cards and Folwell collected everything. Indians were particularly appealing since the Sioux and Apaches were still active fighters and the Wild West nickel novel was quite popular. “To many a boy, back in the eighties, the pictures given with Old Judge cigarettes were the most fascinating. Birds, dudes, flags of all nations were well enough, but miniature photographs of leading ball players in all the leagues, even the Western Association, were far and away the best. There has never been anything like the Old Judge ball players. Each was a photograph, full-length, cigarette-box size. Each season a new set was taken, in all big league towns, so that the teams were up-to-date.”

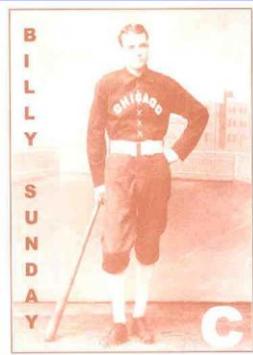
Billy Sunday’s Card

“Somebody in the Old Judge shop kept an eye on midseason trades. I remember a picture of Billy Sunday – yes, the evangelist. He started out one season in center field for Chicago. The picture showed him, hat in hand, standing before a home-plate that looked suspiciously like a newspaper thrown on the studio floor. He had the dark suit and white stockings of the Chicagos, but across his shirt was the word, ‘Pittsburgh,’ very clumsily lettered. Some time after the teams had all been photographed, Sunday had been sold or traded. Some handy man, not a very expert engraver, had filled in with metal the ‘Chicago’ on William’s uniform and with a sharp tool cut, none too deftly, the word ‘Pittsburgh’ in its place. (Actually it appears to be ‘Pittsburghs’ on this early “traded” card). All that season, at least

for Old Judge boys, Billy Sunday played for Pittsburgh in a Chicago suit, which shows how Old Judge watched over us and kept the record straight.” The photo of Sunday before the engraver’s alteration can be found at the Billy Sunday Home and Visitors Center in Winona Lake, Indiana, about 40 miles from Ft. Wayne. Sunday played professional baseball only for eight years hitting .248; he went on to preach to millions according to the baseball card created by the museum using his unaltered Chicago uniform photo.

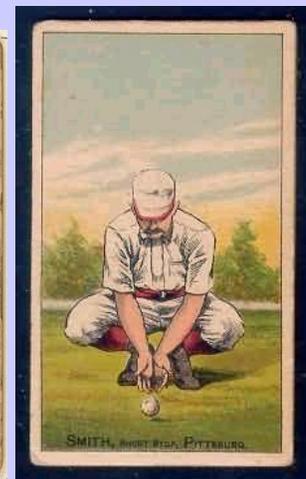
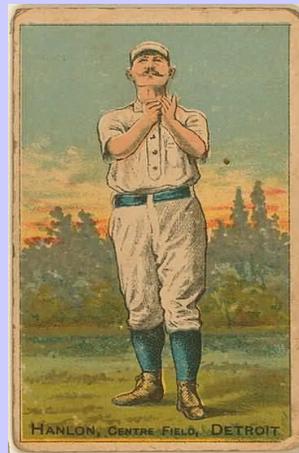
Billy Sunday playing for Pittsburgh(s) in a Chicago uniform, courtesy of the Billy Sunday Visitors Center, Winona Lake, Indiana

Billy Sunday in his Chicago Uniform, courtesy of the Billy Sunday Visitors Center, Winona Lake, Indiana



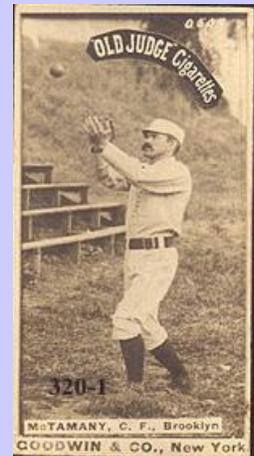
Gold Coin Cards

Gold Coin cards (N284) struck Folwell as too basic. With Gold Coin Chewing tobacco you would get generic pictures of players labeled to represent the individual players on each team. One cut, with change of ink, would do for all players of one position. First basemen, for example, had “legs far apart, one foot on the bag, arms outstretched, waiting for a throw. All second basemen were shown with one hand down, planting the ball on a base runner who wasn’t there, the other hand upraised, asking judgment of an absent umpire.” There wasn’t a glove among them. Folwell’s generalizations about the generic pictures were probably a bit harsh in that there are at least a few variations of poses at each position. However the poses are rather unusual with the center fielders all looking like they are catching butterflies and the shortstops like they are playing marbles.



Old Judge Poses

The earliest baseball pictures Folwell recalled bore the date 1887 and he remembered no series after 1889. "Unlike the Gold Coin series, they were all studio photographs, full length, those of '89 much better than the '87 set. Yet none of them was from an instantaneous photograph, taken on the ball field, for such photography was unknown. Catchers stared at the cameras with a garden "drop" behind them. Base runners slid to make-believe bases over grass mats. A batsman looked savagely at a ball hung on a string, not always invisible. The Brooklyns were photographed one year with a corner of the bleachers showing; phony bleachers and gray grass. The Chicagos all had the same canvas "drop," a picture of a fence with buildings painted above it. If you returned a certain number of pictures, Old Judge would send you, postpaid, a photo of your favorite player, cabinet size. Being a Brooklynite and loyal, I cherished a big picture of Clark and Hughes, Brooklyn, the later sliding to a base on a rug, the former touching him with the ball, and both looking hard at the camera."



The Brooklyns played on a field with suspiciously small bleachers, photo courtesy of David Levin, Dave's Vintage Baseball Cards

The author had managed to hang onto his old cards and mentioned that they were "in a box beside me as I write. Their colors are as bright and their edges as crisp as when my father brought them home from the office, or Charlie, the grocer, broke a revenue stamp."

I enjoyed Arthur's story, his writing and wit. I haven't found any additional information about him but imagine that he would have been a willing contributor to Jefferson Burdick's Card Collectors Bulletin in the 1930s had the two ever contacted each other. Until I can go back any further into the yellowed pages of publications, I declare Arthur Hamilton Folwell's *A New York Childhood, Cigarette Pictures* of May 1929 to be the first known published article on baseball cards as a hobby.

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