

# Hobby Odds and Ends



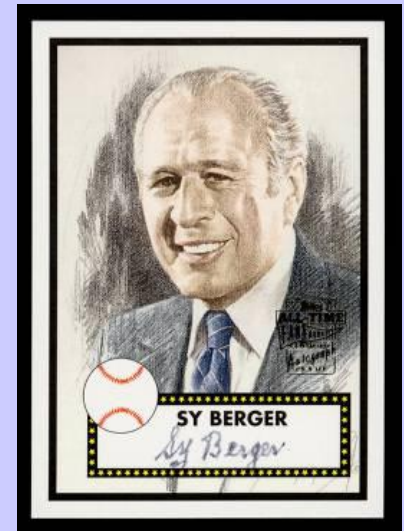
by  
George  
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Thanks to *SCD*, my stories on hobby history have reached a wide audience. Readers respond to articles with their own recollections and provide leads to stories that may be of interest to subscribers. Sometimes these result in interesting glimpses of the hobby and not lengthy articles. I also run across tidbits of hobby news. I thought these short stories worthy of a periodic column which I'm naming "Hobby Odds and Ends."

## Sy Berger calling

You don't often get a message on your answering machine "This is Sy Berger calling." But that's exactly what I received recently from the 88-year-old Topps legend, often referred to as "The Father of the Modern Bubble-Gum Card." In fact Sy called me again and talked for nearly an hour. Sy was responding to my request described in an earlier *SCD* article involving mystery cards with a Bowman and Woody Gelman connection. Sy couldn't shed much light on the 55-year-old mystery cards. Sy reiterated, "I was never a collector. I was a gatherer." Sy covered a range of subjects. He mentioned hanging onto some of the Topps artwork from 1953 and their recent sale. He was organizing a trove of additional memorabilia including photographs, magazines, and dinner programs for disposition. Sy's father lived to 96 and his mother to 88; Sy is hoping for some more good years as well. He gets occasional requests to autograph Topps cards which he will sign as long as the request is not onerous. Sy could talk about baseball and cards into the wee hours as he recalled instances involving Johnny Pesky, Tommy LaSorda, and Woody Gelman in this memorable phone call.



## 1952 Topps 3<sup>rd</sup> series gray backs

While I had Sy on the phone, we talked again about the 1952 Topps third series that was printed in low quantities with gray backs. Sy has been asked what he knew about the printing before; his answer remains the same: nothing. Sy said he was involved with the players, contracts, and

design. Printing was handled by others; he didn't get involved and wasn't too excited about the color of the cardboard.

Gray backed third series Topps cards numbered 131 to 190 have been on the want lists of variation collectors for awhile. They weren't always listed separately in price guides. However, the *SCD 2012 Standard Catalog of Baseball Cards* lists the cards at \$125 in mint and \$60 in excellent. Apparently good and very good cards are even more expensive in that recent eBay auctions resulted in incredible prices with a good-very good card of the immortal Clarence Marshall going for \$1,123 and a good Bob Miller going for \$1,223. What in heavens is going on to "excite" collectors?

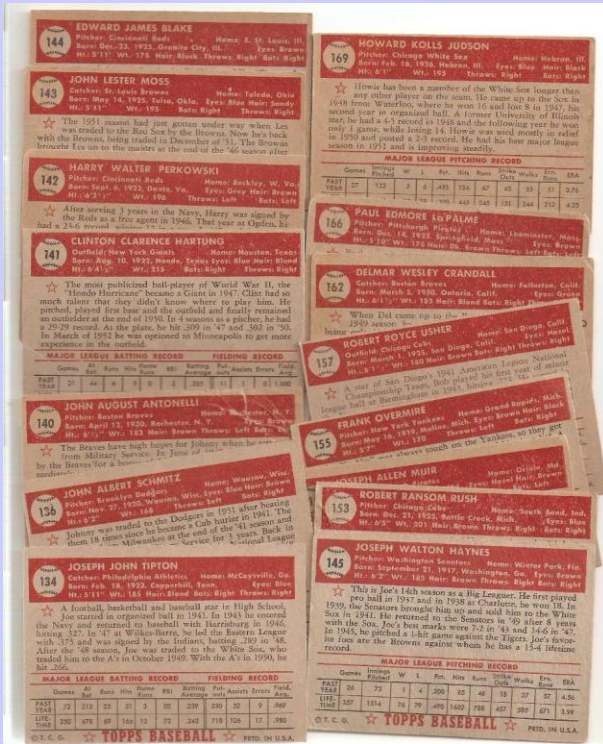
I had noticed that gray backs were starting to be listed on eBay and identified as variations. Apparently 1952 Topps advocates finally realized that they didn't have everything and figured they better jump in and collect the gray backs before they were all gone. Fortunately all the cards in the series are basically commons except Billy Martin. Prices for cards in good to very good shape were sold at what seemed to be high prices of \$200 to \$300. Then someone decided that numbers 171 to 190 were scarcer than the other numbers. Topps usually printed 200 cards in a print run. For the last 20 cards to be noticeably scarcer than the other 40 cards, 40 cards would need to have been quadruple printed and 20 cards only double printed for the algebra to work out. Prices for the cards above #170 started to take off, with logic reminiscent of the Dutch tulip bulb craze. 707 Sportscards apparently noticed the action and listed 24 of their gray backed cards in average condition all at one time. Prices realized ran in the \$200 to \$300 range except for some of the cards above #170 which went for much more. Another seller listed an EX+ #188 Podbielan that went for \$1,900. While there were a number of bidders on each of the cards listed, most collectors dropped out when the bids went beyond \$300. Two individuals were responsible for prices on some of the higher numbers going through the roof. After the above flurry of activity, a PSA6 of Clarence Marshall sold for a lousy \$860, whereas a G-VG had gone for \$1,223 two weeks before. Maybe the market for these babies was pretty "thin" and prices were starting to return to earth? Alternately, the activity demonstrated the enthusiasm collectors have for sets like the 1952 Topps, their willingness to pay the price to complete long-standing want lists, and the difficulty in determining market values for scarce cards.

I talked with a collector who was successful in buying nearly two complete sets of the third series gray backs by just looking at the fronts of cards featured on eBay at "common" prices. The gray backs also have noticeably duller or muted colors on their fronts, apparently different enough that this collector was able to pick them up without paying any premiums before the tulip bulb craze hit.



"Higher numbered" 3<sup>rd</sup> series gray backs

## Topps gray backs, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series



The fronts of the gray backs look duller than the fronts of the white backed regular cards.

### Creative grading

A recent eBay advertiser described a 1960 Fleer football card as Ex-Mt (ST). The implication was that the seller thought the card was in Ex-Mt condition, but that it had a stain. The stain turned out to be staining on two front corners and the back. I would call this a VG card, (Ex-Mt except for a bunch of stains.) However if you continue with the seller's logic, lesser conditioned cards sound a lot better, even if they don't look any better. All cards would be Ex-Mt but you'd have Ex-Mt (Hvy Crs), Ex-Mt (Tckhl), Ex-Mt (bkspokes), etc. I also love the logic that a seller touts that a card is priced at 50% of book value. This is rarely the case. The book value referenced is usually based on a mint card. The card available is maybe VG. Therefore if it's priced at 50% of book value, it is probably at 200% of actual value based on a VG card. You might as well say that a card of Sibby Sisti is priced at only 5% of Mickey Mantle's card.

### Bill Loughman and the papers

I recently had a chance to talk to 75-year-old Bill Loughman of Elmhurst, Illinois, who has been collecting cards for a long time. He was listed in Bob Jaspersen's *Who's Who in Collecting* starting in 1954. His particular enthusiasm has been salvaging and retaining sports sections of newspapers and sports photographs. He hasn't just picked up a few old magazines to stick in the closet; he has purchased major accumulations of archival material from newspaper publishers, magazine publishers, and libraries. The urge of some organizations to rid themselves of bulky, fragile paper collections in favor of digital storage, has been an opportunity for collectors like Loughman. Bill is a retired airline pilot who always kept his eye out for acquisitions during his

travels. He dealt with many of the hobby veterans over the years including Goodie Goldfaden and Ray Medeiros. Thanks Bill, for hanging onto literally tons of ephemera.

*Bill Loughman and son Mike at one of the first card shows in 1973*

### **Jim Zak, editor of Woody Gelman's magazine**

In the mid 1960s, Jim Zak took on the job of editing a magazine produced by the Card Collectors Company owned by Woody Gelman, design director for Topps. Zak was barely 21 years-old at the time, which was more the norm than the exception among early hobby publishers. He visited both Woody and his son Richard Gelman in New York.



I talked to Jim a few times recently. Jim has cut back as a store owner, dealer, and collector but has kept an eye out for a few wants. He remembers most of the active collectors in the early 1960s. Jim retains an interest in baseball trivia with stories like rookie Ritchie Ashburn hitting his mother in the stands twice with foul balls or Stan Musial of the Cardinals and Frankie Baumholtz of the Cubs battling it out for the 1952 batting title on the last day of the season. For the first and only time in his career, Musial came in from center field to pitch. He faced one batter, his rival for the batting crown, Frankie Baumholtz. Baumholtz reached base, but on an error, and Musial finished with a .336 average to Baumholtz's .325.

### **John England**

John L. England is a long-time hobbyist who had a hobby store in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, until 1996. John mentioned to me recently that he still has a few (as in 250,000) cards left over from the prolific 80s as well as some 1952 Topps and some Goudeys. However, most of John's collection and store inventory was sold to Larry Fritsch in 1984. The cards included T3, T205, and T207 sets and all but three of the T206s. At the time this was one of the biggest single sales of a collection ever. John picked up cards through a bookshop he owned and then through sources like Charlie Bray's auctions and sports writer and collector Wirt Gammon. By the late 1970s he was buying cases and sticking them in his garage.

### **OBC at the National**

Old Baseball Cards (OBC) is an on-line group of collectors who will just send cards back and forth among their 130 members to whoever needs them, knowing somebody else will end up sending them something. The cards are usually vintage cards in what is referred to as "OBC" condition, meaning pretty lousy shape. Usually two dozen or so members will show up at each National Convention searching for cards to complete sets and embracing the cards of the star players in lousy shape. At the last Chicago National the OBCers were readily identified by their white baseball hats with OBC logos. When dealers saw them coming, they were sure to bring out their worst stuff, which made everyone happy. Some dealers even advertised "OBC cards." Members of the group work on Goudeys, pre-1980 Topps, Bowmans, Playballs, tobacco cards, other sports, and non-sports - just about anything old made out of cardboard. Check out their

website for more on this concept: <http://oldbaseball.com/>. In the interest of full disclosure, I am a member.



*Dealer Kurt Tourdot snapped this 9-man photo of OBCers at the 2011 National. OBC didn't prearrange the meeting--everyone just happened to be at Tourdot's table. L-R: Larry Gersbach, Richard Labs, Sal Domino (front), Ron Perry (back), Tom Housley, Mike Rich (front), John Leroux (back), Spike Glidden, and Mike Mroz.*

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*This article appeared in the August 10, 2012, SCD; a big OBC thank you to [Sports Collectors Digest \(SCD\)](#) for allowing us to reprint George's article here on the OBC site.*