

Hobby Odds and Ends

Mystery cards, variations that don't vary and collecting it all



By George Vrechek

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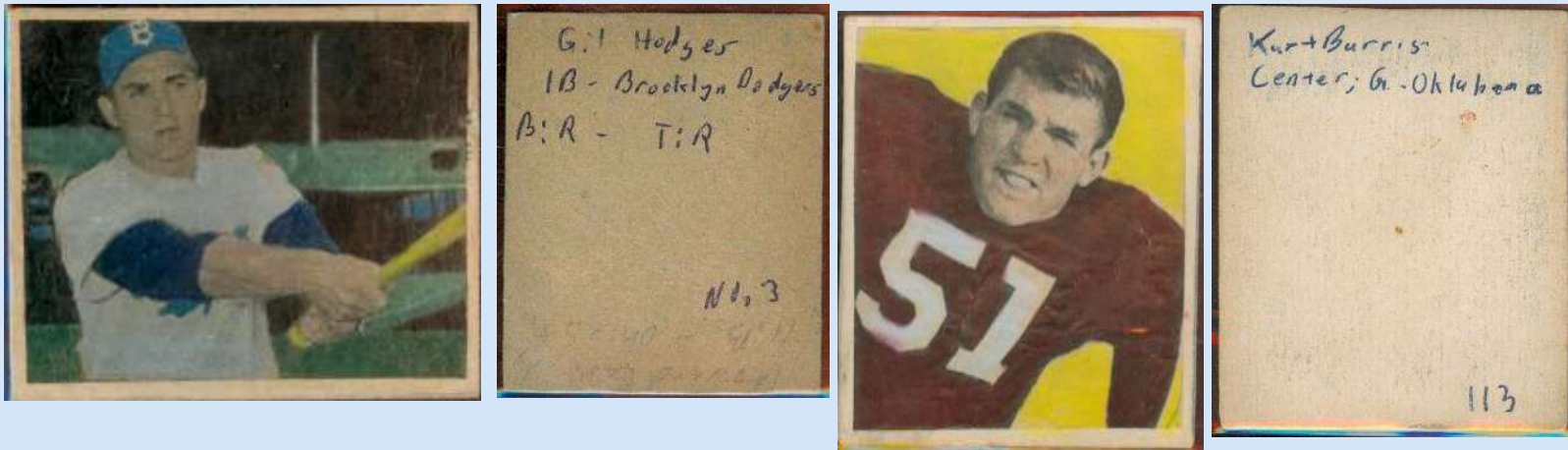
Mystery photo cards of Williams, Berra, Musial and Thomson that McKie would like to identify.

MYSTERY CARDS

You would think that 68 years or so would be enough time to figure out what kind of sports card you have in your shoeboxes. However, obscure issues apparently take some archeological digging. Collector Fred McKie contacted me because I had written a 2012 *SCD* article about Landon Sims' mystery cards from the 1950s.

In 2012 Sims bought several baseball and football cards offered for sale at a Hot Springs, Arkansas, flea market. The fronts of the cards looked like colorized Bowman-style cards from the 1950s.

The backs had handwritten notes about the player and team. While the players involved and their teams pointed to a 1955 to 1956 production date, we never figured out where the mystery cards came from. Our best bet was that they were prototypes that wound up in the hands of Richard Gelman, art director at Topps, whose stepfather Sam Rosen, sold them to an Arkansas collector.



These baseball and football cards from the mid-1950s surfaced in 2012 and remain a mystery.

McKIE'S MYSTERIES

McKie has some different cards and contacted others interested in such mysteries through Net54. McKie's cards are 4" by 5" and blank-backed but have numbers on them. Other collectors have picked up additional samples.

McKie wrote, "After 60+ years in the hobby, anytime I see something I have never seen before, I try to pick them up. Especially in my 'sweet spot' era of the 50s and 60s. Thus, my interest in this issue. If they weren't numbered, I probably would not have as much interest when I saw the first group. I missed out on the Mantle and a few others but managed to pick up the rest of them. Then six or eight months later I found another group from an entirely different source. "

After thinking about the mystery cards for a while, McKie wrote, "These cards must have been issued in multiple years as some of the team photos have 1954 and 1955 printed on them while a few have the same photo with the year whited out. A few photos were used in other sets. Wertz on his Exhibit card and Seminick on a Dixie Premium for instance. They seem to be numbered by team: Looks like one to possibly three per team. AL first then NL. Thomson is numbered 21 as is Gene Freese of the Pirates. Looking at the numbering of the set, I have to assume he was to be #31 after Mays as that would fit in with the numbering system by team."

McKie's partial checklist with players generally grouped by team is as follows: no numbers - Billy Martin, Mantle, 2 Berra, 3 Ted Williams, 5 Harshman, 7 Garcia, 8 Evers, 9 Wertz, 10 Finigan, 11 Fowler, 15 Ennis, 16 Seminick, 17 Newcombe, 20 Clemente, 21 Freese, 21 Thompson/Thomson, 23 Aaron, 25 Greengrass, 26 Banks, 27 Moon, 28 Musial, 29 Antonelli, 30 Mays, 32 Kluszewski. There are also teams: White Sox, Indians, Tigers, Senators, Yankees, Orioles, Giants and Dodgers.

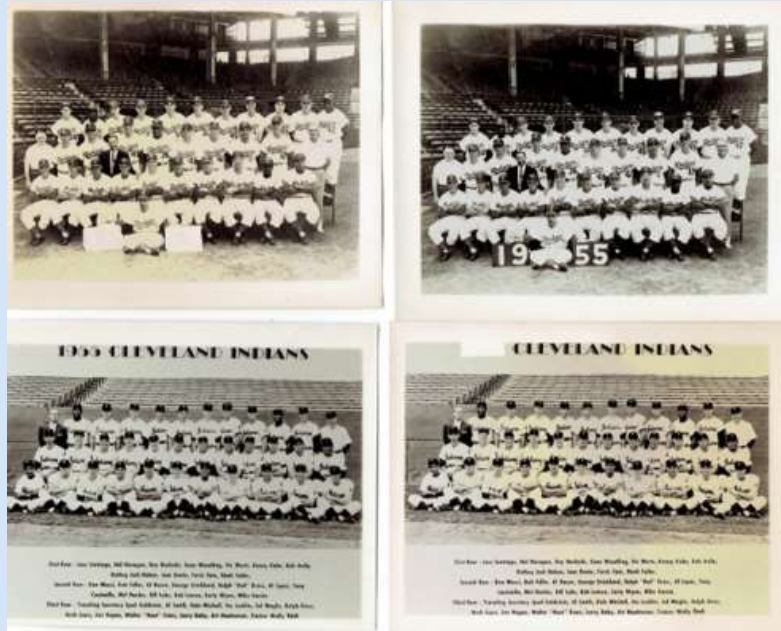
McKie added, "I am hoping someone out there knows what these are, who issued them, and can add to the checklist."



Most of the photo cards have name plates and a number. The photo used for Mantle is found in at least one other set.

The name "plates" on the cards look like small scraps of paper were cut out using scissors, placed over photos and then photographed again. Bobby Thomson's name is spelled Thompson on his card and Mickey Mantle's name was already written in script, so no name tag was added. The Mantle photo is one-half the size of the same photo found in the set catalogued as 1956 New York Yankees Action Pictures consisting of 12 Yankees with printing on the backs as to the players (12) and price (75 cents). Not all images match the 4 by 5 format and are printed with additional white space (Ted Williams). The team cards using official 1955 team photos look like they were a work in progress. This does not look like an issue licensed by anyone.

Cleveland team card images are identical to that used in the 1956 Topps set. The Brooklyn team card appeared in team issues.



SPEAKING OF MYSTERY CARDS

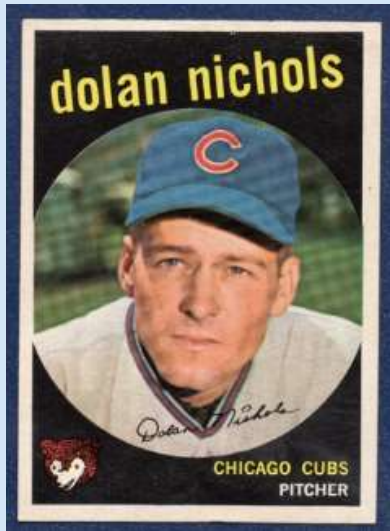
Patrick Prickett has been a fan of the W590 strip cards issued apparently between 1925 and 1931. Prickett and others have found several variations because the cards were re-issued over seven years and also added significantly to the known number of cards which includes some 200 baseball players, boxers, historical figures, movie stars and other athletes. Burdick's American Card Catalog did not quite figure out all the cards that fit in the category of 1 3/8" by 2 1/2" strip cards. Ballplayer Roy Spencer has been listed in catalogs as being in the W590 set, however Prickett among others doubt it ever existed.

VARIATIONS VERSUS PRINTING DIFFERENCES

Like many collectors who enjoy continuing to work on a favorite set, I collect master sets involving all known variations found in an issue. For good measure, any printing differences I notice are also thrown into the box.

Most collectors have heard about the definition of a variation versus a printing difference. Variations are created when a card on a sheet is altered in some way in how it appears before the cards are printed. Printing differences come about when some noticeable difference happens during the printing itself with no change to the setup of the card. The intentions of those doing the setups or the printing are not a determining factor, but they may provide clues.

For example, Cub pitcher Dolan Nichols gets optioned to Fort Worth in March 1959. Some 1959 Topps cards have been printed already, but there is plenty of time left in the card-selling season. Topps adds a line to the back of his card #362 keeping collectors up to date with the news that Nichols didn't actually make the team as they left spring training and, along with a bunch of other guys, Topps updates cards by wedging a comment in the text before going on to the next print run.



Dolan Nichols (1930-1989) managed to get on just one regular baseball card in his career, and they had to stop the presses and add the comment that he was back in the minors again.

Nichols never made it back to the majors after his cup of coffee with the Cubs in 1958, but at least he got to be on a variation card.

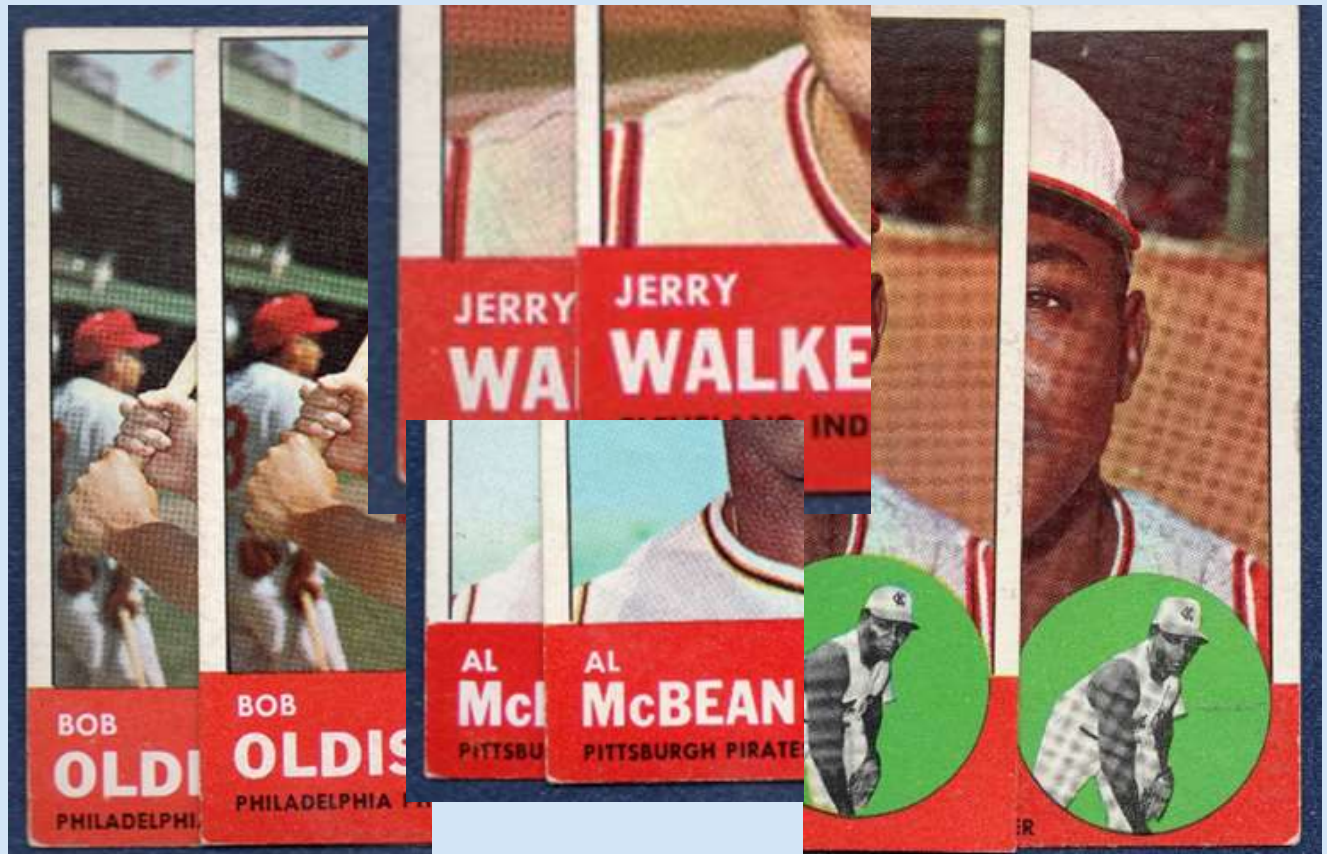


Pancho Herrera's 1958 Topps card is found with various stages of both the "r" and the "a" at the end of his name disappearing. Photo courtesy of Tom Billing.

Pancho Herrera appears on Topps 1958 card #433. Sometime during the printing of the sheet, Herrera loses some of the "a" at the end of his name on the front of the card, and then most of the "a" and the last "r" disappears. At least Herrera got to play two more years with the Phillies and appeared on Topps cards again in 1960 and 1961 with all the letters in his name.

I consider the various Herrera versions to be printing differences, but they surfaced early in the hobby, get identified when graded, gather interest and generally sell for significant prices.

VARIATIONS THAT NEVER VARIED?



The two 1963 Topps cards of Bob Oldis, printed in the same print run, are framed so that the number on the back of the player behind him is a bit more visible on the card on the right.

The 1963 cards of Wyatt, Walker and McBean are also framed differently so that more or less of the stripes on their sleeves are shown; inset photos differ as well. Some of the rest of the 11 variations move up and down in their frame rather than left or right

Thirteen years ago, collector Dennis Elkin and I reported in SCD our find of 11 new variations in the 1963 Topps baseball set. We determined that the same 11 cards appeared in two different rows of a print run. However, the two rows of cards had slight differences in how the photos were framed inside the card borders. The card numbers involved are 372, 376, 386, 387, 388, 407, 409, 413, 438, 439 and 445. The differences on cards of McBean, Wyatt and Walker are the most noticeable with stripes on their sleeves chopped off, but all 11 images got moved around as did the inset photos. McBean and Wyatt have slight differences on the card backs as well.

However, variation news travels slowly sometimes, both versions of these 11 cards are found easily, the differences are not monumental and there are no stars involved. Therefore, I don't think the 11 cards have been selling at any premiums and have not been included in catalogs.

You could argue that they really aren't variations as defined since they were never changed from how they were laid out on day one. However, that would mean that the slight differences found on most Topps checklists from the 1961 to 1972 shouldn't be defined as variations either. Most such checklists were printed in two different print runs and, just like the 11 1963 cards, they were set up with slight differences, sometimes with corrections.

No, I think the checklists and the 11 1963 Topps misfits are all variations, whether they make it into catalogs or command any premiums. It is just that our definition of a variation must consider that an alteration prior to printing may have created two versions of the same card printed at the same time.



The Sandlock on the left abutted Willie Mays' card and used a painting that was intact. The Sandlock card on the right has some additional white space under the cloud in the upper left, like someone had pulled a piece of tape off the edge of the image BEFORE it was printed.

The 1953 Mike Sandlock card is an example of a variation found in two places on a print sheet. When six cards were removed from the 1953 Topps set due to player contract concerns, Sandlock got dropped again in next to Sid Hudson despite his black base block not matching up with Sid's red block. Miscuts of Sandlock have been found next to different cards – Mays and Hudson. Sandlock likely appeared in six places on the sheets used for the last high-numbered printing.

Only on the Sandlock/Hudson card does the upper left edge of the painting have a white area where there should be blue sky. It looks like it would be a printing difference, but I think it is a variation since it likely changed before they printed the cards.

Printing differences though just don't rate the same type of enthusiasm as variations since we have to draw the line someplace, and we could be chasing minute printing differences into eternity instead of gainfully using our time to work on more sets.

COLLECTING IT ALL

I wrote a series of articles for *SCD* in 2014 and 2015 suggesting that we take the advice of the Father of Card Collecting, Jefferson Burdick, and expand our collecting horizons into increasing the number of vintage single sports cards in our collections.

"Mike from Michigan" took my article as a personal challenge to get to the 100,000 different vintage (pre-1981) sports card level and has been approaching that number. His current breakdown by sport is roughly 57% baseball, 18% football, 13% hockey, 3% basketball, and 9% all other sports which includes European issues.

Mike Glasser of Baltimore also took the suggestion to heart and got to work adding to his sports and non-sports card collections. Glasser confesses to never finding a card that he didn't like. While his collection of vintage sports cards is significant and covers the major sports and eras, his non-sports card collection is even more far-reaching. In the process he has accumulated more N25 "actresses" than likely ever appeared in any performances. His online wantlist with type card images is like a modern-day version of visiting Burdick's collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – as if that were at all possible.

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