



**Sports Collectors Digest  
founder John Stommen  
started with an idea**

*50 Years of SCD*

*John Stommen was a sophomore first team all-conference cager at Kalamazoo College, which is a member of the Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MIAA). photo courtesy of the Kalamazoo College Archives*



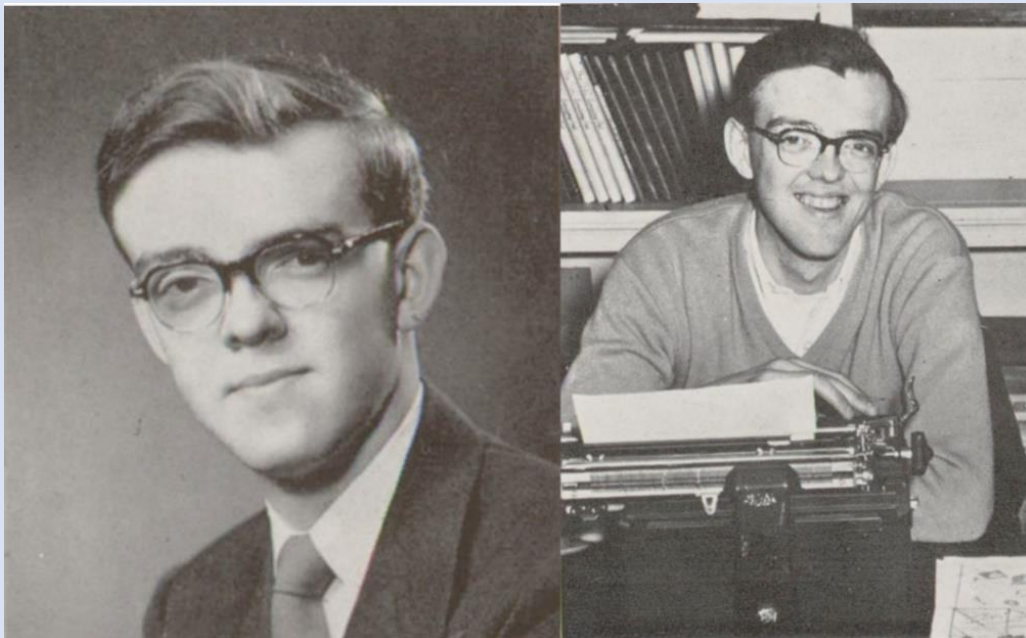
BY GEORGE VRECHEK

John Stommen (1931-2001) was an athlete, collector, writer, publisher, entrepreneur and family man. In 1973, he was publishing two weekly papers in Milan, Michigan, when he came up with the idea of publishing Sports Collectors Digest.

In honor of SCD's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we reached out to the Stommen family to get their memories about the early years of SCD. Two of John and Barbara Stommen's sons, Jeff and Phil, were happy to share their experiences of working with their dad in publishing SCD between 1973 and 1981. Jeff Stommen, the oldest of the Stommen children, was in college in 1973. He remembered his dad's reasoning that he was already full-time in the publishing business for the past 20 years, and he saw an opportunity to succeed in a new niche of sports collecting publishing.

### **FROM KALAMAZOO TO MILAN**

John Stommen was born in Chicago in 1931 but moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1945. He was proud of being the center on the basketball team for St. Augustine High School's 1949 Class C State Champions. He continued playing basketball at Kalamazoo College, leading the freshman team in scoring and making first team all-conference as a sophomore. He was the sports editor for the college yearbook, alumni magazine and newspaper as well as the student sports publicity director. He was also on the student senate and played varsity basketball and tennis for his four years, graduating with an English major in 1953. With an enrollment of under 400 students, yet with a full range of athletic teams, publications and activities, Kalamazoo College provided John Stommen with many opportunities to play and write about sports.



*Stommen's college career enabled him to combine his interests of writing and sports. All photos courtesy of the Kalamazoo College Archives*



*Stommen was to the right of the ball in the team photo.*

His first job out of college was working for the local paper in nearby Vicksburg, Michigan. Within a year he seized the opportunity to buy a small weekly regional paper, the Milan Leader, in historic Milan, Michigan, 12 miles south of Ann Arbor. John and his wife Barbara moved to Milan and began to raise a family. Old farm towns like Milan likely saw large families helping on the family farms. John didn't have any farm, but he could use the extra hands helping put out a weekly paper; he ultimately had six children available – Jeffrey, Michael, Patrick, Philip, Paul and Mary Jo. All of them eventually got involved with getting the publications out the door.

*The first of likely 150,000 pages of SCD to date appeared in 1973.*

**SPORTS COLLECTORS DIGEST**

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1973  
Issue Number One  
Published By Stommen Publications  
P.O. Box E, Milan, Michigan, 48160

NEW YORK CONVENTION SCENES





**OVER 1,000 PERSONS TURNED OUT FOR THREE DAY EVENT**

## NEW YORK CONVENTION DREW A LARGE CROWD

The three-day American Sports Card Collectors Association Show better known as the New York Convention enjoyed a very successful three-day run, September 14, 15, and 16 at the District 65 Center, 140 East 8th St., in New York City.

Over 1,000 persons attended the convention, with some 175 being on hand opening night, another 575 going thru the Green Room of the District 65 Center on Saturday and then a fine Sunday crowd pushing attendance over the magic 1,000 number on the final day.

Talking with many persons Saturday and Sunday, we discovered a feeling that this second

New York Convention in less than four months was an even better event than the one held at the same location late in May of this year.

Collectors felt that a better representation of cards, publications, etc., was available for those attending to select from and thereby further their own collections.

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Jim and Marylin Miller, 137 President Street, Hempstead, N.Y., were a couple of the folks on hand at the New York Convention providing much card material for interested buyers.

**OHIO'S FIRST SPORTS COLLECTORS CONVENTION NOVEMBER 9-10-11**

## CINCINNATI AREA SETS NOVEMBER CONVENTION

The Southwestern Ohio sports collectors will stage the first annual Cincinnati Area Sports Collectors Convention November 9, 10, and 11.

Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge at 1-75 & Sharonville Road (15 minutes north of Cincinnati) will be the site of the convention.

Collectors only will be admitted to the Friday night session, November 9. That evening's get together will run from 5 p.m. to midnight.

On Saturday and Sunday, November 10 and 11, the convention will be open to the public with Saturday hours from 9 a.m. until midnight and Sunday's final session from 9 a.m. to 5:00.

Table fee for the Cincy affair is \$5.00.

Convention rates are \$1 for adults and 50¢ for the youngsters for a single day. The special family rate for all three days is a bargain priced \$5.00 or \$2.50 for adults and \$1 for children.

Special added attractions include either a Hall of Famer or a current Reds player as the guest speaker. There will be Auctions on Saturday and Sunday afternoon with well known Don Steinbach of Joliet, Ill., as the auctioneer. There will also be free beverage and food for collectors in the hospitality room to be provided by the sponsoring committee.

The Howard Johnson Motor Lodge is located close to a movie theatre, bowling alley, night club and shopping center to give a wide range of fun opportunities for collectors and visitors attending.

Rates at the Motor Lodge are quite reasonable for collectors - \$16.00 for a single room and \$21.00 for a double. The Motor Lodge also boasts a lounge, heated pool and restaurant.

Committee members are David Manley, Stan McClure, Tom Pfirman, Bob Rathgeber, Tim Turner and Jeff Valentine.

For information or to register for the convention, you should write Bob Rathgeber at 2035 Foycrest Drive, Cincinnati, Ohio 45208. He may be reached by phone at 1-513-922-1554.

The top photo above shows the crowd attracted to the sales tables of Ken Villani, seated, and Jim Buchanan, at right. Ken is from Somerville, N.J., while Jim calls Lambertville, N.J., his home.

Jim Carl of Alexandria, Va., who has been collecting cards since 1959, is pictured at right in the center photo above making a deal with Carleton Schooley, Sr., another Jerseyite, while Charlie Newman of Brooklyn, N.Y., looks on.

In the bottom photo, Tony Spezza of Dix Hills, N.Y., answers a card question from his son David, 8, while another son, Steve, 6, concentrates on finding just the right card.

## **STOMMEN'S CONCEPT FOR A HOBBY PUBLICATION**

John Stommen was a card collector and was aware of the gradual emergence of hobby publications and card shows. His children joined in the card collecting as well. John attended the early 1970s Midwest Collectors shows in the Detroit area. He observed that some hobby publications were very basic and not always timely. Publications were often produced by young collectors trying to support their collecting habits. He thought he could produce a better product that would come out on time and be reasonably priced. He was interested in all sports and all collectibles, not just baseball cards. His obituary mentioned, "He never saw a sport that he didn't like."

He thought that the format he was already using for his weekly Milan papers would work well for a hobby publication. Phil Stommen (son #4) remembered, "My dad knew it was important to subscribers and advertisers that a publication needed to come out promptly and predictably. He was used to the weekly deadline of his papers. He was also an incredibly fast typist. I remember my dad bouncing different names around among family members, before landing on the Sports Collectors Digest. He very quickly decided that the name had to include sports collecting or sports collectors, so people would know what it was at a glance."

The first 16-page issue of SCD appeared on October 12, 1973. SCD reported on card conventions or meetings in New York, Northern California, the Mid-Atlantic, Indianapolis and Cincinnati. John Stommen wrote, "We feel that bringing sports collectors in touch with each other is the chief function of a sports collecting publication." He surmised that there were many collectors who didn't know that others were collecting as well.

The first issue included three pages of classified ads from collectors like Ray Hess, Roland Villard, Jack Urban, Bill Klink, Bruce Yeko, Ron Gold, J.E. Spaulding, Jack Smalling, Tim Newcomb, Jay Barry, Steve Vanco, Fred McKie, Gar Miller and Fred Kopp. Articles covered media guides, the history of card-collecting in publications, an auction calendar, checklists for a few sets and bios of collectors. The biggest ad was from insider Jeff Stommen, auctioning programs from the major sports. Subscriptions ran \$7.50 for 24 issues per year, or only \$6, if you rocketed them a check by the end of October 1973.



*Barbara, Jeff, John and Paul Stommen all manned their table at a 1976 show, photo Bob Wimmer*

## **STOMMEN FAMILY PITCHES IN**

Barbara Stommen got to be the circulation manager. She also got to keep track of deposits, organize ads, visit the bank, get to the post office and take care of the house, meals, laundry

and the rest of the family in her spare time. Jeff and Phil helped by driving to the printer 90 minutes away and by handling mailings, what both brothers called the nuts and bolts of a publishing operation.



*The Stommens were well represented at the 1975 Midwest convention in Troy, Michigan, left to right Phil, Sally Taylor – Jeff’s future wife, Jeff, Barbara and John.*

Phil Stommen remembered, "In 1978 alone, I flew to 25 card shows around the country promoting SCD and selling cards. Dad joined me at a few shows, but usually stayed in Milan to get the next SCD to press." Jeff Stommen was with his dad at an early Midwest Collectors Show when a 1952 Topps Mantle was being auctioned. His dad told him that he should bid on the card. Jeff was in college and not in the market to spend a lot of money on a card. He took a pass. Hindsight is 20/20 for all collectors, dealers and publishers.

John Stommen was the editor and handled much of the writing with steady, factual reporting. He wasn't looking to stir up debates. According to Phil Stommen, "My dad really disliked drama and tried very hard not to create any or let SCD be used as a vehicle for it." Freelance writers contributed articles and a few editors-at-large, like Dave Meiners and Ted Taylor, participated, but it remained a Stommen family endeavor.

Phil Stommen was still a college student when he handled SCD phone calls in Milan. There was no world-wide web providing a market for sports collectibles. Subscribers and advertisers would call in with a "constant drone" of questions that required patience and attention to detail. He recalled, "An always present frustration for John was that no matter how rigid the

publication and shipping schedule, SCD's arrival at collectors' doors was at the mercy of the post office. Countless hours were spent on the phone with collectors upset that the guy up the road had received his SCD days earlier."



*This January 11, 1974 issue was mailed to subscriber Jim McConnell for 16 cents and was in a collection of pioneer dealer Goodie Goldfaden.*

### **GROWTH OF SCD**

The hard work paid off with increased subscriptions and advertising. What started as a 16-page paper in 1973, doubled in size within a year and grew to over 150 pages by 1981 with plenty of advertisers. In 1974 SCD had 2,647 subscribers; by 1981 SCD reported 8,500 subscribers. Phil Stommen felt, "Dad knew we could raise rates considerably and work less crazy hours, but he didn't want to price the little guy out of the magazine." Subscribers were even given free classified ads.

At the 1975 Midwest show, the editors of the various hobby publications met and adjourned to the hotel bar for refreshments. Hobby pioneer Bob Jaspersen wrote, "Following the meeting, Dan Dischley called a meeting of sports hobby publishers, all of whom were present. Adjourning to the bar, in addition to Dischley (The Trader Speaks), were John Stommen (SCD), Mike Bondarenko (Sports Collectors News), Charles Brooks (The Sport Hobbyist), and Bob Jaspersen (Sport Fan), where they held a two-hour discussion and pledged to join forces in fighting some

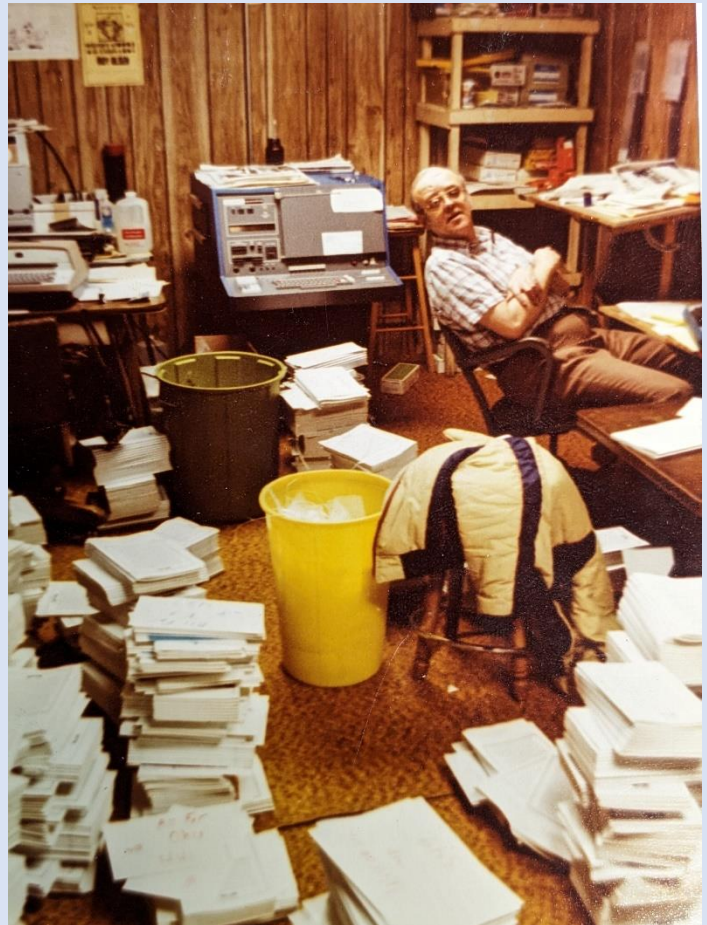
of the hobby's undesirable elements." The mean age of the hobby publication czars at the time was 31, and they were in the relatively brief golden age of sports hobby pulp.

As Bondarenko later stated, when Stommen came along with Sports Collectors Digest, it blew his publication, Sports Collectors News, "out of the water with pictures and professional printing." The Trader Speaks had the highest circulation in 1973, but within a few years, SCD surpassed TTS as well.

According to Phil Stommen, "After John and Barb sold the local paper along with the downtown Milan building that housed it, the SCD production office moved to a not-so-fancy 350 square foot room in a former dairy building shared with the farm radio programming business Dad co-founded.

"As for collecting, Dad avoided competing with other collectors for things advertised in SCD. He had a couple of early twentieth-century sets (wide- and fine-pens for example) that he focused on, but publications in general, Michigan football, and older hockey stuff were his favorites. Between shows, local opportunities, relationships with Detroit area collectors, and sheer time, he did amass a significant volume of collectables."

*Stommen is caught taking a break in the action in the small farm radio office where SCD was produced in the late 1970s. At the rear is the typesetting machine. The stacks in the foreground are bundles of SCDs ready to go.*  
*Photo by Phil Stommen*



### **MEMORIES OF EARLY SUBSCRIBERS**

Subscriber Mark Camps' memories seemed typical, "I thought SCD was the bomb. I would go straight to the want ads and see if people were selling cards I wanted at reasonable prices, and they usually were. I'd go through the ads line by line with my yellow highlighter -- it was a ritual. I bought several 'starter' sets via SCD and my first baseball card checklist book from Larry Fritsch. I remember Dean's Cards was always advertising and so was Kit Young. SCD was the only resource I could find that had this info."

George Altemose remembered, "I learned to check the classified ads and responded to many of them. Probably the most productive one led to a visit to a retired airline pilot in Key Largo, Florida, where I wound up purchasing his father's collection of tobacco cards from around 1910. This included around 300 cards, mostly T205's, T206's (including Eddie Plank) and a few orange borders."

It was more common then to just list sales prices rather than go to the considerable trouble of running an auction, and subscribers wanted to get to any great deals before some other subscribers beat them to it. New issue information was a hot topic. Many collectors still had a lot to learn and enjoyed the education through the articles, ads and the convention calendar.

### **THE PHONE RANG**

One day in 1981, Phil Stommen fielded a phone call that he thought would be like many other calls he had handled. However, this time, the call was from a stranger from Iola, Wisconsin, an even smaller town than Milan. The caller was Chet Krause, who owned a stable of hobby publications and was looking to purchase a publication like SCD. Bob Lemke was editing Baseball Cards Magazine for Krause at the time and had a previous brief conversation with John Stommen on the subject. Phil got the message to his dad, who had not been looking to sell. However, the growth of SCD had also meant more work for the family. John Stommen reasoned that he either needed to invest to get even larger, or a larger publisher like Krause might “eat them alive,” as Phil Stommen recalled. Within a few days, the Stommens and Krause came to an agreement on an attractive-enough price and SCD was sold in 1981.

### **THE LAST ISSUE BY THE STOMMENS**

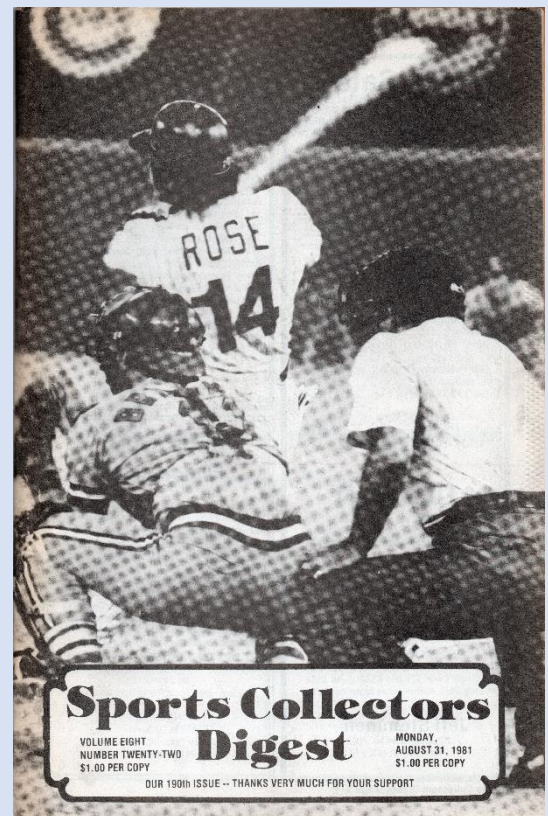
In the final 152-page SCD dated August 31, 1981, under the Stommens, associate editors John and Phil Stommen wrote, “This column is a little tougher to write than most because after 200 issues (190 regular SCDs and 10 of SCD Express) it is also our last. We have sold the publications to Krause Publications of Iola, Wisconsin, the publishers of Baseball Cards Magazine as well as many other publications in the hobby field. After eight years serving the hobby with its largest publication both page-wise and in paid circulation, we bow out of the business with mixed emotions. It has been fun, but a whale of a lot of work for a small family operation.”

Writers contributing to this final issue included Larry Shenk, Roland Chapdelaine, Steve Freedman, Jim McConnell, Steve Cooper, Wayne Ebinger, Tom Gregg, Dan Even, Bob Parker, Bill Dod, Ted Taylor and Ed Kobak. Bob Wimmer provided photographs from shows. Articles made up 30% of the magazine.

### **REFLECTION BY JIM MC CONNELL**

Long-time collector and sports journalist Jim McConnell remembered the early SCDs and John Stommen, “SCD had a very positive effect on the hobby. Part of it was being in the right place at the right time, as the hobby took off with card shows, card shops and the general rise in the popularity of sports in the 1970s. John was a professional journalist and kept his product away from some of the personality clashes and ego inflation that hurt other hobby pubs in the past.

“He had a nice mix of articles on all phases of the hobby, even something as obscure as pocket schedules (which McConnell wrote). He kept the ads affordable. The bane of his efforts was the U.S. Post Office, and John’s ultimate aim was to go to newsrack sales, which is partly the reason





he sold to Krause. The editorial content of SCD was helpful to most collectors and encouraging to those new to the hobby. Certainly, it would be fair to say John (and myself) never envisioned what the hobby would become and the amount of money being thrown around on a simple baseball card that cost a penny when new.”

#### **FORMER EDITOR T.S. O’CONNELL’S PERSPECTIVE**

T.S. O’Connell started writing for SCD in 1985 and served as editor from 2000 until 2011. He had also been an early subscriber. O’Connell provided his perspective:

“It may be impossible to overstate the significance of the fledgling publication Sports Collectors Digest to the expansion of the baseball-card collecting hobby in the 1970s and, perhaps more importantly, the 1980s. In the 1970s it was suddenly fashionable to point out to the uninitiated that tiny little pieces of cardboard could be worth a lot of money, a revelation that enabled a couple of generations of collectors to ‘come out of the closet’ and proclaim their fealty to a hobby previously thought to be restricted to adolescence.

“When all of this started to develop in the early 1970s, publications like SCD and The Trader Speaks gave those very same collectors an avenue to buy, sell and trade those treasures to a degree never previously imagined. Where you once thought you were alone (relatively speaking), there were now hundreds and even thousands of others who shared your passions. As the hobby expanded through the 1970s, the stage was being set for an even more portentous moment, the historic court rulings that opened the door for new competitors in the baseball-card manufacturing arena.

“SCD was at the center of that phenomenal expansion, producing magazines that ultimately would boast 300 to 400 pages, even with a publication schedule that by then had reached weekly status. The magazine played a role in the similarly stunning growth of the card show circuit, the development of a complementary autograph circuit and, just as importantly, the explosion of the vintage memorabilia marketplace that would take the hobby to even greater heights. Not bad for a homespun family newsletter imagined and designed at the kitchen table and dutifully mailed out to a loyal legion of followers.”

#### **SCD UNDER KRAUSE**

Announcement of the sale of SCD to Krause Publications came suddenly to subscribers with a new issue that looked very similar to the printing format under John Stommen but slightly wider. Krause tweaked the publication schedule slightly to fit in with their publications, but the transfer went smoothly with many of the same writers continuing. What was noticeable was that the masthead had several names on it, and none were Stommen. Suddenly SCD had a publisher (Doug Watson), editor (Bob Lemke), associate editor (Steve Ellingboe), editorial assistants and an advertising manager (Dan Albaugh).

#### **SCD INTERVIEWS STOMMEN**

Bob Lemke interviewed John Stommen for the January 15, 1982, issue. Stommen said, “We had five boys who at the time (1973) were between 8 and 17. We were all interested in card collecting and thought it would be kind of fun. Since we were already involved in the publishing business, we just decided to get something in print and go from there.... Mailing was probably the biggest bottleneck, coming out twice a month and just being a family operation....We got a lot of people interested in the hobby, and they were able to get two issues for the price that

anyone else was getting for one issue. And we did keep our ad rates relatively low. I think those were the things that we were most proud of during the time we had SCD.” Readers will notice that John Stommen’s succinct paragraph summarized what all the people interviewed remembered.

#### **AFTER THE SALE**

The growth under the Stommens continued under Krause with larger and more frequent issues. For a time, SCD even went to a weekly schedule and added catalogs and other titles.

SCD benefited from Krause’s full-time employment of editors experienced in journalism and sports collecting. Krause was also an ESOP which gave employees a stake in the company’s success. Other hobby publications came into the market in the 1980s, but most did not continue very long. Even long-time magazines like The Trader Speaks disappeared as SCD took over their subscribers in 1983.

According to Phil Stommen, “After the sale of SCD, John focused more on the farm radio programming business he co-founded several years earlier. He and Barbara used their newfound time to organize their collection and, after a couple of years, returned to the show circuit. The opportunity to do shows and travel together in retirement was both a joy and a supplement to their retirement income.”

John died in 2001. Barbara died in 2021. Paul is the youngest of the Stommen brothers and has remained active in collecting, along with his son Josh.

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*We thank SCD for allowing us to post the article on the OBC website*