

Collecting in the '50s



Some neighborhood collectors cut their cards to stay with the 1951 and 1952 Bowman size, creating the first appearance of “mini” cards.



by George Vrechek

Most *SCD* readers have fond recollections of their early days of collecting. My nostalgia-clouded recollections are probably typical. I thought it might be interesting for readers to compare their experiences to mine and for me to test my own recollections versus reality.

Three phases

Dealers can probably guess your age by looking at your cards. In general I believe childhood collections have three phases. The first phase consists of cards collected prior to age 9. Cards are beat up and not in great quantity. The “middle ages of collecting” from age 9 to 13 are characterized by cards in better condition and in considerable quantity. The final stages are characterized by cards that decrease rapidly in quantity per year while increasing dramatically

in condition. In the 1950s you had this natural phasing going on for post war baby boomers. The 1950's were also characterized by a dramatic increase in the interest in cards and the conclusion of a war for our collecting nickels between Topps and Bowman.

Gum dust and minis

My earliest collecting memory is going to the “milk store” (the 50's equivalent of a 7-11) and buying 1951 Topps Redbacks. I was 6. I don't remember the cards coming in panels, but then again I don't remember much about them other than they were baseball cards and they looked like a game could be played with them. I only had a few though and never thought of playing a game with them. By 1952 I had started to collect. I remember the gum “dust” on the 1952 Bowmans. When the “dust” cleared I found Al Brissie, Billy Johnson, Smoky Burgess, Birdie Tebbetts and a host of other middle series characters. The 1952 Topps don't seem as memorable. Maybe the gum wasn't as good or more probably they weren't available at our milk store. I remember their size being a problem, because I had picked up a few 1951 Bowmans and they were the same size as the '52s. The Topps were odd. One of my collecting buddies wanted me to join him in trimming our Topps to the same size as the 1952 Bowmans. I declined, but my collection still includes some of those “minis” obtained from my friend as he gave up collecting.



Some of the boys in the 1952 Bowman set started to look alike, gum dust and all.



Some guys got cut to odd sizes for no good reason, just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

20 old cards for a quarter, forget it

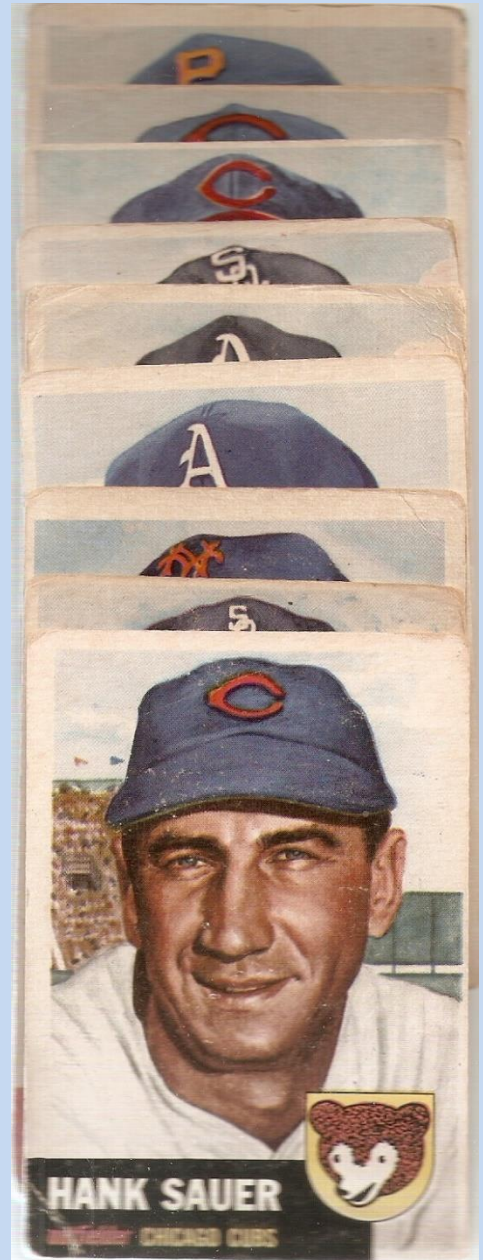
A year or two later I remember seeing 1952 Topps wrapped in cellophane at the 5 and 10 cent store. I looked at the backs and the fronts for anyone of interest. Again middle series prevailed: Don Kolloway, Mickey Vernon, Red Munger, Hank Majeski, Monte Kennedy, Bill Rigney, Don Bollweg. No one I really needed, plus they were old cards, not current, and they were 25 cents for a pack of maybe 20 with no gum. Forget it! I wasn't born yesterday.

The 1952 high numbers never made it to our neighborhood stores. The first series probably didn't make much of a stay either, because black backs were thought to be scarce even in the 50's.

1953 Topps and Bowman options

The 1953 Topps turned it all around. The colorful drawings, large team logos, backgrounds, and wider distribution to stores in our area made the 1953 Topps an instant hit. After a while you could tell who the player was just by looking at a small corner of the card. The quizzes on the back were fun. The final series was worth the wait. If you were from the north side of Chicago you wanted Cubs no matter how lousy they were, Hank Sauer, Eddie Miksis, Paul Minner, Toby Atwell. When Ralph Kiner got traded to the Cubs, I agreed to trade my entire collection of cards for one card of Ralph Kiner sight unseen. When the eager Kiner trader showed up, I was disappointed to find Ralph still in a Pirates uniform. I wanted to see him in a Cub uniform. I gave him all my cards.

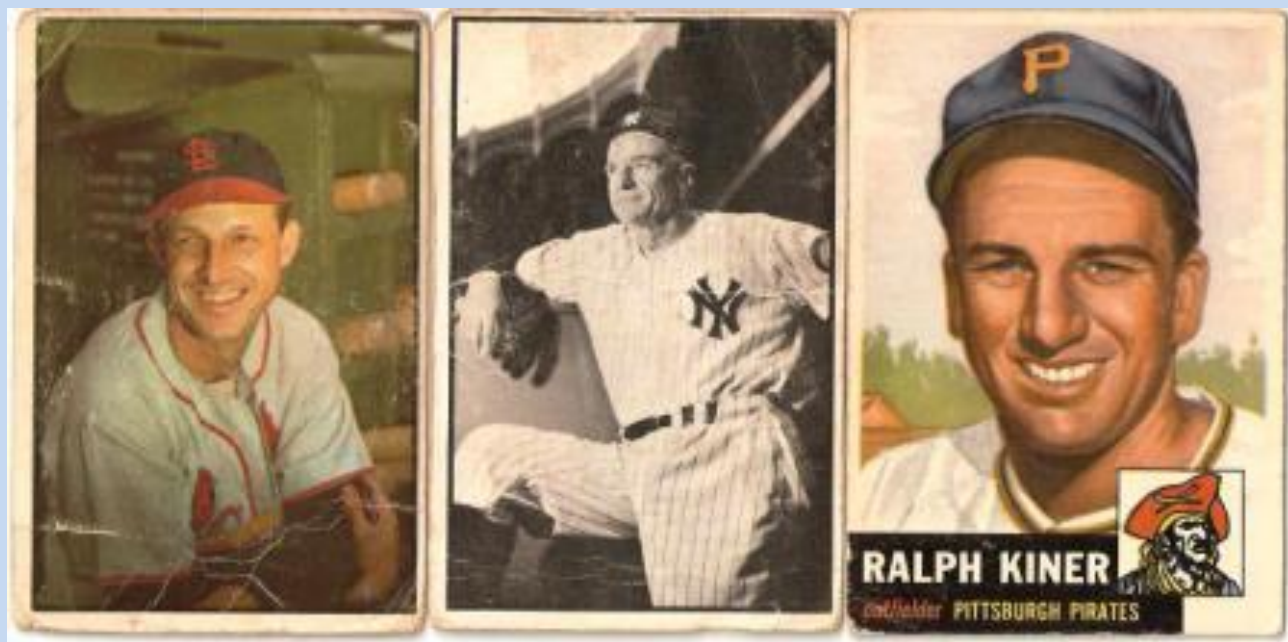
If there was any logic or system to the collecting, it was not by sets or numbers but by players and teams. I organized players by teams and kept them up to date. This helped playing the baseball dice games between teams which had developed by then in our neighborhood. We wanted to see a player pictured with his current team. Enos Slaughter didn't look right in there with those Yankees in his bright Cardinal uniform.



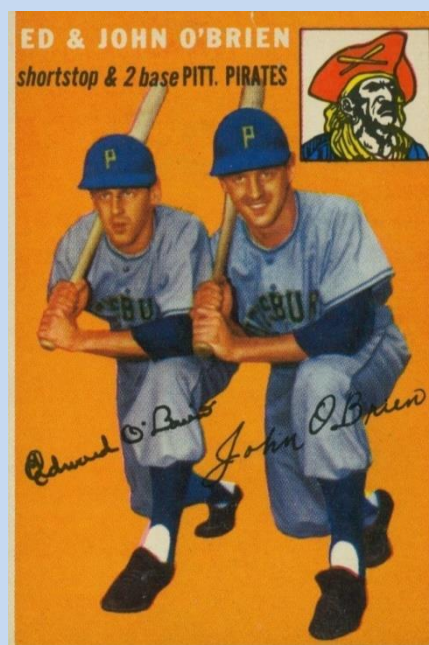
After a while, you could tell who the player was by just looking at the top of his hat.

Valuable (to us) cards

The '53 Bowmans were around but not as popular, except for Stan Musial. If you wanted Stan Musial you had to go with the '53 Bowmans or wait until 1958. I always thought of my 1953 Bowman Musial as my most valuable card. There wasn't much interest in cards from prior years. You hung around with guys your age or perhaps a year one way or the other. They started and stopped collecting about the same time you did. They weren't checking out the 1948 Bowmans or Goudeys. I never saw a 1948 or 1949 Bowman as a kid, a long bygone era - of all of two or three years earlier.



Tough cards were Musial and Stengel because we could only find them in the 1953 Bowman sets. Kiner was the object of my affection, but I was expecting to see him in a Cub uniform.



Topps and Bowmans

In 1954 and 1955 I remember collecting in earnest with a preference for Topps. Two Ted Williams cards were the big news, a real eye opener. The O'Briens' card also got our attention. I didn't like the TV set cards, except for the umpires. If you wanted umpires to ump those dice games you needed the 1955 Bowman high numbers and I had them. We noted the Bolling and Johnson variations. It seemed to take

forever for those 1955 Topps high numbers to show up. I kept opening packs with Corky Valentine in them trying to get the last series. At one time I remember having about 15 Corky Valentine cards. I still keep one Valentine duplicate today as a reminder.

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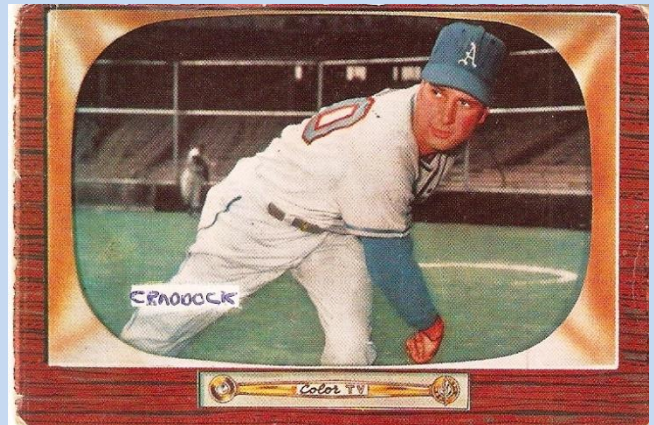
VIRGIL TRUCKS

Pitcher — St. Louis Browns
 Born: Birmingham, Alabama, April 26, 1919
 Height: 6 ft.; Weight: 192; Bats: Right; Throws: Right

Virgil won only 5 games for the Detroit Tigers in 1952, while losing 19, but the first and last of his five wins were no hit ball games. The first was over the Washington Senators and the other over the Yankees, no mean trick. He began in 1938 and came to the majors at the end of the 1941 season with the Tigers. He remained with them until traded to the Brownies for 1953.

MAJOR LEAGUE PITCHING RECORD										
	Games Played	Innings Pitched	Games Won	Games Lost	Pct.	No. of Hits	No. of Runs	Strike Outs	Ba. on Balls	Ern. Runs Ave.
Past Year	35	197	5	19	.208	190	99	129	82	87 3.97
Life time	294	1682	108	91	.560	1514	730	1003	669	649 3.69
This Year										

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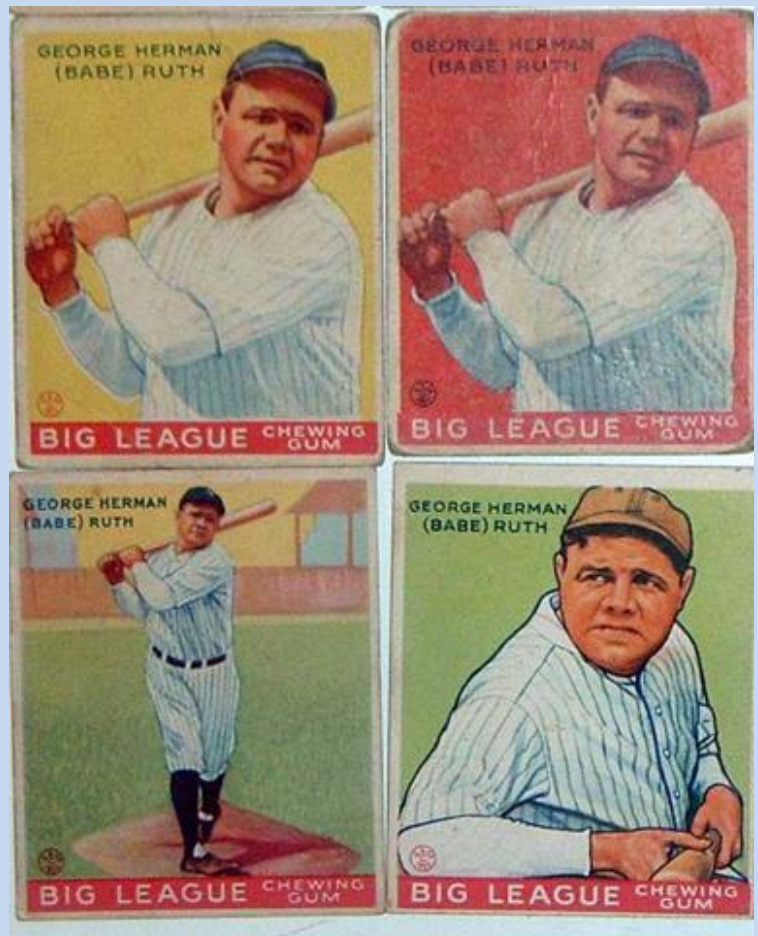


The Bowmans seemed easier to use to create cards of players not yet in sets. I turned Virgil Trucks into some other player by just erasing his name and neatly penning in that my new player was an infielder. Thinking better of the idea, I reverted Trucks to his original name – in neat ballpoint pen. An Art Ditmar duplicate became Walt Craddock. Frank Bolling was re-incarnated as Coot Veal. Willie Mays also became Bill White but that card got traded. You had to be careful how you erased the original name.

A new softball for the Babe et al

By 1956 the card war was over. Bowman suddenly disappeared without first telling us, but there was no problem finding the player you needed - except for Musial. No waiting forever for the last series. And there were football cards, team cards, checklists, multi-player cards. Collecting had come a long way from the 1951 Topps Redbacks.

One day I traded a new softball for a box of this kid's dad's cards. Much better than my Ralph Kiner trade. I now had nearly complete sets of 1933 and 1934 Goudeys. My favorite player had always been Babe Ruth and now I had four Ruth Cards.



Peaking out

The middle age of collecting quickly turned into the final stage. Plenty of 1957 and 1958 Topps were followed by a modest number of mint 1959s and 1960s and then nothing. I sold many of my duplicates, 25 cents for a home-made pack of cards (being careful never to touch the Goudeys.) Those younger kids in the neighborhood were getting a bad deal: old cards for 25 cents a pack. If you found a 1953 Topps Joe Collins in your pack you got another pack free; and I had a lot of Joe Collins cards. I probably managed to get \$10 for about \$5,000 of cards at today's values. I still keep a Joe Collins duplicate.

Reality

Mom never threw the cards out. They stayed intact (except for the fire sale casualties described above) for 20 more years. In 1980 I found others had also kept their cards and were collecting again. I took an inventory. Now comes the comparison of my memory to reality that I had promised. My inventory in 1980 is shown to the right.

Interestingly, despite the years of collecting, I had no complete sets from the 1950s. The table shows that the percentage of the sets that I had as single cards started to build rapidly. The Bowmans trailed off as the Topps picked up. Interest peaked in 1958 and then declined rapidly. Cards were organized by team not by set. I had the 16 major league teams, players who had retired, and players who had gone back to the minors. I had no particular slant towards

star cards. In addition to the singles shown above, there were many duplicates. I had plenty of 1954 Jackie Robinsons, but I also had plenty of Corky Valentines, two 1953 Topps Mantles, but no 1951 Bowman Mantle. I had picked up only 7 1952 high numbers from collectors outside the neighborhood. The 1954 Aaron was there and plenty of Ted Williams, but no Ernie Banks - a Cub at that. And no 1953 Topps Ralph Kiner! I must have traded him back for the 1951 and 1952 Bowmans. I had no 1955 Topps doubleheaders. I remember seeing them, but thought they were pretty useless- hard to put them with one team. Although I had no sets I probably had at least one card of every player who had appeared in the majors between 1953 and 1958. Like my friends I was trying to get a card of every current player in their current uniform. The condition of the cards was predictable. Early years were ragged, later years were OK.

Football was second fiddle to baseball. No basketball or hockey cards were to be found.

	Singles	Cards in Set	Percent of Set
Bowman			
1948	0	48	0%
1949	0	240	0%
1950	1	252	0%
1951	26	324	8%
1952	175	252	69%
1953	90	224	40%
1954	49	225	22%
1955	128	206	62%
Topps			
1951	4	52	8%
1952	155	407	38%
1953	228	274	83%
1954	204	250	82%
1955	175	206	85%
1956	194	346	56%
1957	270	407	66%
1958	460	494	93%
1959	392	572	69%
1960	175	572	31%
1961	0	589	0%
1962	0	598	0%

I had football cards but with no particular vigor. My inventory was as follows:

	singles	cards in	Percent
		set	of set
1954 B	24	128	19%
1955 B	82	260	32%
1956 T	31	121	26%
1957 T	19	154	12%
1958 T	27	132	20%

Card Comments

The second piece of “reality” was *Card Comments* “magazine.” I had subscribed for a year or two and managed to retain many of the magazines. Unfortunately I was in my latter stage of collecting by then and never bought or traded as a result of the magazine. I subscribed in order to get a master checklist of cards. I ignored their ad: a complete set of 1952 Topps for \$65. Who had \$65? *Card Comments* was published by Gordon B. Taylor of New York City. The biggest issue I have is 24 pages and dates from 1960. Before re-reading the issues, I anticipated that they would be as loose as I had been about collecting. Not the case at all. Each issue was filled with information on card issues, scarcities, errors, new findings. It covered all types of cards not just baseball. The names mentioned included: Dan Even, Jack Smalling, Larry Fritsch, George Husby, Steve Vanco, Jim Zak, Gavin Riley, B.A. Murry, Barry Newman, Richard West and even George Vrechek.

Detailed collecting information in the 1950s

Articles included a very detailed and accurate explanation of the annual series of Exhibit cards. They observed the background in common for the 1955 Topps doubleheaders. 1948 Leafs were still a mystery as to the number in the set, but most other sets were pretty well check listed. The reversed 1957 Aaron and 1959 Lou (Lew) Burdette reversing himself were all known. Johnston Cookies, yellow letter variations, regionals, whitebacks/graybacks, wrong backs, wrong birth dates, were all known to the serious collectors.

There was no mention of star cards or rookie cards. Condition was rarely mentioned.

In Gordon B. Taylor’s Card Collectors Price List all cards were priced the same in a set with a few exceptions: the 1953 Bowman Musial was a premium (\$1), as was Stengel’s B&W (\$1),’ 54 Bowman Williams was \$1 as was the Piersall. Better deals could be had on 1952 highs at 50 cents including Mantle and anyone else you wanted. The “tough” 1958 cards Harrell, Hardy, Ward and Geiger ran \$1 - twice the price of a ‘52 Topps Mantle. Cards before 1948 were not mentioned.

Card Comments was full of useful information.

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CARD COMMENTS

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Conclusions

The limited evidence then points out that 1) we all should have bought sets of 1952 Topps 2) Bowmans faded as Topps grew, although their complete disappearance was a surprise 3) football cards were limited 4) basketball cards were nowhere to be found 5) serious collectors were knowledgeable 6) collectors didn't solely pursue complete sets 7) stars were not at a premium 8) 1952 Topps were not an instant hit and 9) collecting is fun.

If you have any comments or observations about collecting, send me a note through *SCD* and I'll do a follow up. I've written about 4 or 5 articles over the past 17 years, so I wouldn't be overdoing it if I put together one more piece on this subject. If anyone has any further information on Gordon B. Taylor, I'd appreciate your input. I'd like to find some of the earlier issues of *Card Comments* - a photocopy would be fine.

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to *SCD* and can be reached at vrechek@ameritech.net

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