



**Bob Solon – A Collector  
Starting in 1931  
Goudeys, Hobby Gatherings and  
Chasing Card Issues  
by George G. Vrechek**

Not too many of us collected cards in 1931, owned sets of T205s, T207s, complete runs of Bowmans and Topps as well as thousands of regionals and team sets and are still at it sorting current cards into sets. Did I also mention having a card set named after you? On Jeopardy the question would be “Who is Bob Solon?”

Bob Solon was a name I had seen in *The Card Collector's Bulletins* of the 1950s and 1960s. He was an active hobbyist during those years writing occasionally for the Bulletin and other publications. He had participated in the early card shows in the Chicago area. I remembered buying an early 1980s baseball set from Bob and talking to him briefly 23 years ago. I was glad Bob was around to get my second call a few months ago.

Bob was born in Chicago in 1923. His family lived in the Lawndale neighborhood on the west side. Today as a retired school teacher he has a remarkable memory of events and

people that have been part of his baseball and hobby experience. He also has a good grasp of the business end of the hobby as it has evolved. It takes more than a few hours to hear the full story. This article gives you a glimpse.

### **Mickey Mouse Comes to Lawndale**

Bob's interest in baseball came first. He remembers being with his father listening to a radio broadcast by announcer Pat Flanagan of a 1929 World Series game between the Chicago Cubs and Connie Mack's Philadelphia A's. Hack Wilson dropped two balls in the outfield that day and Bob's father was irate. Bob thought to himself that this was great, following the best teams as they made it to the World Series. Every year since he has made it a personal challenge to guess the annual World Series participants before the season starts. As a result he has always had his eye on "the front runners." Rather than being a hometown team die-hard fanatic, Bob closely follows the best teams. He is a self-described "elitist" in his allegiance to teams.

Bob's neighborhood provided drug stores and confectionary stores where Bob first found the R89 Mickey Mouse cards by Gum, Inc. in 1931. By 1933 Bob had his eye out for baseball cards. He saw the DeLongs in one store, but he bought the Goudeys. Bob pursued the Goudeys in earnest eventually accumulating about 500 of them; organizing them by the color of their backgrounds. He remembers having card # 181 of Ruth with a purple background that should have been printed with a green background. I don't know that the card has ever surfaced again. He was interested in the players (and the color of the backgrounds) and didn't pay much attention to the numbers on the back. He had three Ruth cards, never running across the fourth card – a full-length pose of Ruth batting that was actually a double print. He was unaware of Foxx and Gehrig having two different numbers. High numbers were very hard to find in Lawndale. They were issued after the pennant race was over. In an instant Bob rattled off the high numbers that he had trouble finding over 70 years ago: Dean, Root, Hartnett and the two Hubbells. Bob vividly remembers a 1933 Goudey Leo Durocher card with a number different from his correct number of #147. Perhaps it was the #106 proof card listed in the SCD Catalog? Number 106 was also used for Lajoie. Like many collector/fans, Bob was interested in getting cards of all players. The obscure players became more of a challenge

than readily available stars. Years later Bob would meet hobbyists like Buck Barker who shared the same opinion.

Bob's collecting coincided with the Great Depression. His family had an opportunity to move into a flat with steam heat rather than a stove and they jumped at it. Bob's sources of cards were altered in the new neighborhood. He picked up some cards from other kids and would buy a few new cards as they came out. The 1934 Goudeys didn't inspire him like the '33s. The 1935 puzzle cards were "a disaster." How could you put four players on one card from different teams in any kind of order? Bob remembers the 1938 Goudeys, 1940 Double Headers, and 1941 Goudeys as not much better. The 1939 and 1940 Playballs never made it to Bob's neighborhood. Bob's collecting had the normal interruptions like school, girls and also a World War. The cards disappeared as quickly as they had accumulated. Phase one of Bob's collecting ended as he went off to war in Europe.

### **The Second Bug Bites**

Fast forward to Bob Solon school teacher in 1954. A kid in his class dropped a 1954 Topps Gus Zernial on the floor. Bob liked what he saw. Some of the older kids had a 1953 Mantle and a 1953 Musial. Bob caught the bug for the second time. He was off and running by 1955. He went to wholesalers and picked up the Topps, Bowmans, and Topps Double Headers. He kept collecting in quantity through wholesalers, except for the tough 1957 Topps series that was only available in one candy store. Bob subscribed to the Sporting News and saw dealer Sam Rosen of New York City's ad: baseball cards for sale. Soon Bob was buying 1952 high numbers for 5 cents each from Rosen and selling him the 1957 tough series that were hard to find in New York. Jack Wise of Virginia became a source for more 1952 Topps as well as 1939 Playballs. Wirt Gammon had tobacco cards for Bob. Bob subscribed to Burdick's *Card Collector's Bulletin*. He found fellow-Chicagoan Lionel Carter and began trading and corresponding with about 12 collectors around the country including Bill White, Irv Lerner and Lionel Carter. He remembers the vast majority of people he came in contact with in the hobby as "straight arrows." Bob has retained the many articles he wrote for *The Card Collector's Bulletin*. The subjects varied but there was always an interest in the hard to find, regional issues.

### **The 1958 Gathering**

Through Carter, Bob met other collectors. The turning point being a meeting of four hobbyists at Carter's home in late September 1958. The foursome was Buck Barker of St. Louis, Charlie Bray of East Bangor, Pennsylvania and Bob Solon and Lionel Carter (both from the Chicago area). Bray had taken over as editor of *The Card Collector's Bulletin* and continued to run his bi-monthly auctions of cards. He brought along a T206 Wagner that he kept in a type of picture frame, Carter recalls. Buck Barker was the avid baseball fan and collector that joined Bray and Burdick as an editor of the *American Card Catalog* helping catalog the post-war baseball sets. Lionel Carter was probably the first to write an article about baseball cards in 1936 and continued as a frequent hobby publication writer as well as a collector of quality baseball cards. The last series of 1958 Topps had just come out and Bob had visited his wholesaler. He brought to the gathering the triple printed 1958 Musials as well as the tougher "single prints" of Hardy, Harrell, and Preston Ward. He gave them to anyone who needed one. Without hesitation Bob remembered that he needed card #51 of Charlie Grimm to complete his recently assembled 1933 Goudey set. Lionel Carter just handed him the card and said to keep it.

### **The Stars Come Out**

Carter wanted the best condition cards. Bob and Buck Barker had an interest in the more obscure players. Barker told him that he would rather have cards of ten obscure rookies than a duplicate of Mantle. Barker and Solon agreed that the Wagner (pulled from circulation) and Plank (broken printing plate) should be at a premium but didn't see a reason for premiums on star cards. Bob said that others did however like Bruce Yeko. Yeko wound up completing a chain of transactions starting with Sam Rosen. Bob recalls that Rosen was ill and sold his card business in New York to Gordon B. Taylor. Taylor began publishing the monthly *Card Comments Magazine* in 1958 including a master checklist (that this writer purchased some 45 years ago.) Taylor's business was taken over by Marshall Oreck. Oreck in turn sold the business to Bruce Yeko who had moved from Milwaukee to Connecticut. Yeko, like the others, would sell most any card for 10 cents. But soon Yeko found that he could get a premium for stars like Mantle and rookies and by 1962 began selling them at premiums. According to Bob Solon, the hobby has never been the same.

### **Marbles and Marshall**

An example of Bob's interest in the obscure player is demonstrated by his story of finding that a card had been issued of Marshall Renfroe, a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants. Now if you say to yourself that you remember Marshall Renfroe you might be just remembering his 1960 Leaf high numbered card, because to have seen him in action would have required extreme vigilance. Like Topps having to picture such household names as Stan Jok and Paul Penson to come up with a set of players not under contract to Bowman, the 1960 Leafs practically cornered the market on obscure players. Renfroe made one major league appearance in late 1959. He started a game, pitched 2 innings and retired with a 27.00 ERA. He appeared in no other set and 1960 Leaf high numbers weren't too easy to find. Bob found the cards were in packages with marbles not too far away on the west side of Chicago. He went to the plant and talked them into selling him a case.

### **Collector Issues**

Bob developed an affinity, or perhaps more accurately an affliction, for going after regional and team issues in quantity. Anyone could go to a store and buy the one annual issue of Topps cards, but Cardinal postcards, Seattle Rainiers issues, Kahns, Kelloggs and other regionals were a challenge. By the late 1960s collectors were "augmenting" the Topps regular issues with some of their own creations. If the teams weren't going to put out sets, some collectors felt an obligation to help them along. Bob and friends put together 5 sets between 1969 and 1970: Expos (2 sets), A's, Royals, and Orioles. "Fud's Photography" Montreal Expos was the first effort with 200 sets selling at the time for \$2 per set. The set still appears in the SCD Catalog as a "collector issue" and now lists at \$40 per set. Although Bob was involved with the set, he thought the photography was not the best. The Kansas City Royals issue is also listed in the SCD Catalog as the "1969 Solon Kansas City Royals" and is still at an affordable \$16. The 1970 La Pizza Royale Expos was a set that I had been looking for to add to my type card collection. I finally found one card a few years ago. It is amazing that I found a single card. I should have asked Bob for a set. Bob and friends made up the name La Pizza Royale as well as about 800 sets and issued them to collectors for a few dollars a set. The photography, write-ups and sales were quite an accomplishment and a lot of work.



*FUDs Photography*



*The Colorful LaPizzaRoyale Cards*

### **Exhibits Pulled**

The Exhibit Supply Company operations were in Chicago and Bob made contact with them as well in the 1960s. Bob recalls veteran collector Stan McClure having a fantastic run of early exhibits including some sepia toned 1927 and 1928 exhibits. Even the Exhibit Supply Company couldn't find out much about them. The company began issuing sport cards in 1921 (joke cards in 1919) and continued into the 1970s. Chet Gore purchased the company during the Depression and sold to Paul Marchant in 1979. Bob Solon met with Gore in the 1960s and instantly recalled specifics about the baseball issues including relative production runs, players added and removed, and legal problems with Topps. Bob recalls that in 1966 Topps forced the Exhibit Supply Company to delete six

players from the issue: Aaron, Matthews, Spahn, Groat, Drysdale and Colavito. The cards had already been printed and Bob wound up with a few of the cards that were pulled.

Bob had a knack for getting quantities of Kellogg cards in the 1970s. Kellogg went so far as to print 3 of the cards in the 57-card 1976 set at a different printer in another part of the country in order to make collecting the set a bit more of a challenge. Bob was fast and furious hobbyist for about 25 years.

### Still a Few Cards

Bob's recollection of these cards are so accurate that in checking my notes against catalogs after my interview I soon stopped being amazed that Bob still knew Charlie Grimm's card number or who the short prints were in 1958.

Opportunities came along to buy out collections such as that of J.J. Siko's of Pittsburgh. Bob bought everything including a Goudey Lajoie. In 1979 Bob retired from teaching and decided to part with his collection as well. Bob sold off his Goudey, Playball, T206 (missing Wagner and Plank), T207s, T210s, Bowman and Topps sets. But the story doesn't end there. I asked Bob: "Does he still have a few cards?" He does. Bob has kept his hand in buying a few cases, sorting the cards and swapping with others. The cards are mostly from the past few years, quite unusual for an old-time collector to still be interested in the current cards. He has the 2003 and 2004 Topps broken down from packs into sets.



*Obbdalls and Obscures all from the shoebox*

It is not surprising that Bob has also retained a few items from his older collection. The cards and photos are those of the obscure players that Bob and collectors like Buck Barker worked to chase down. If Bob couldn't find a one-time card of someone like Marshall Renfroe, he would find a photo. The back of the photo might have vintage baseball photographers "George Burke" or "George Brace" stamped on it. Bob's other surviving interest has been the odd-ball cards. Bob can produce shoe boxes of cards with random assortments of Topps inserts, O-Pee-Chees, '70s basketball and hockey, Kelloggs, Jack in the Box Angels, collector issues, and exhibits. Bakery and candy issues from the 1910s and 1920s appear from the bottom of boxes in no particular order. Looking for a Senator Police issue, a 1967 Topps Red Sox sticker, or a 1963 Pepsi Colt 45? Bob has them in a box somewhere. (In Bob's experience the toughest post-war card to find by far is the 1963 Pepsi-Cola Colt .45 of John Bateman.) Minor league team issues from the 1970s are there along with pins from 1910. Dig a bit further and you can find a dozen or so Roberto Clemente 1962 Post Cereal cards. Bob will reach into another box, pull out a recent obscure baseball issue, read the back of a card, find an error and thereby continue to stay involved in cards years after purchasing the Mickey Mouse cards of 1931.



*Bob Still Looks for the Obscure Player*

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