

# Collector and sports journalist Dwight Chapin looks back on his 68 years in the hobby



By George Vrecek



*Dwight Chapin, 2015*

Do you remember the good old days of the hobby when you could write to Ty Cobb for an autograph, when you could ask Babe Ruth's and Christy Mathewson's widows for cancelled checks or when you could send away to complete your 1952 Topps set with the 97-card high numbered series for \$5.25? You probably don't remember those days, but you may have heard rumors of such hard-to-believe opportunities.



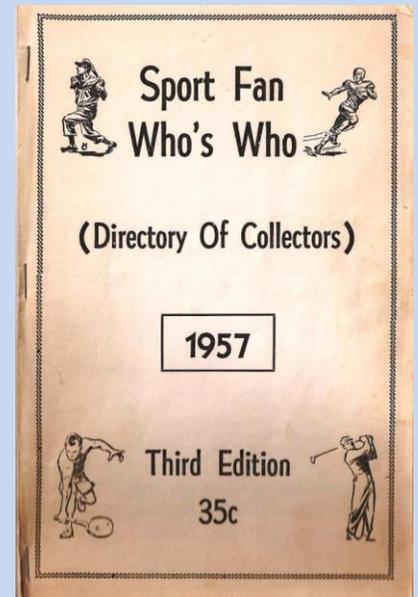
*Cobb, Ruth and Mathewson autographs could be obtained, if you asked.*

Dwight A. Chapin, 77, of Mill Valley, California, remembers those days vividly. Dwight is a retired sports columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who started collecting in 1948 and quickly became a serious collector. As a teenager Chapin corresponded with many of the hobby oldtimers, accumulated older and older sets and developed his writing career sending articles to the many early hobby publications.

## 1957 Directory of Collectors

I remember seeing Chapin's name in several old hobby publications including Bob Jaspersen's 1957 *Sport Fan Who's Who Directory of Collectors* which I purchased a few years ago. The listing mentioned Chapin was an 18-year old University of Idaho student from Lewiston, Idaho, who rooted for the St. Louis Cardinals. The St Louis Cardinals were the western-most and southern-most team in the 1950s, and they garnered the support of far-flung neglected baseball fans. The other 60 hobbyists listed in this directory included Mel Bailey, Buck Barker, Lionel Carter, Walt Corson, Wirt Gammon, Goodie Goldfaden, Frank Jock, Preston Orem, Elwood Scharf, Jack Smalling and John Sullivan.

Chapin collected many of the major vintage sets including the T206s (minus Wagner and Plank), Old Judges and runs of Topps and Bowman. Chapin was happy to discuss his early years of collecting and respond to questions in writing.



*Grandstand Manager was one of the first publications that led Chapin to other collectors.*

## Chapin recalls his first cards and hobby contacts

"I started buying cards -- Topps Magic Photos and Leaf baseball -- at a neighborhood grocery store in my hometown of Lewiston, Idaho, when I was 10 years old, in 1948 and 1949. I really didn't know that anyone else was collecting cards until I picked up a copy of *Grandstand Manager*, a New York Giants publication, on the newsstand in 1950 or 1951, I saw ads from some of the earliest dealers, including (as I recall) Sam Rosen of Card Collectors Co. in New York. I was also able to make contact that way with Wirt Gammon, a Chattanooga, Tenn. sportswriter who sold cards through the mail. He became my first hobby friend, and, eventually, a card mentor. He would send me cards on 'approval,' the way stamp dealers long had done, I'd pick the ones I wanted -- usually for a nickel or a dime each -- send him payment and return the cards I didn't want. I did that for several years. We never had a problem. The majority of the cards were tobacco issues, T205, T206 and T207 primarily, that helped me start a long-time passion."

I can attest to the difficulty finding other collectors or dealers years ago. You had to stumble across them or make a dedicated search to find anyone. Today, if you type in "1952 Topps Mickey Mantle" on a search engine, you get something like 144,000 matches in less than a half-a-second. Even "1952 Topps Sibby Sisti" will have 1,500 listings.

Chapin continued, "I remember spending a very enjoyable summer in 1952 sitting on my family's front lawn and opening packs of Topps baseball cards. We never got the '52 high number series in Idaho, but I was able to buy it complete from Sam Rosen for -- as I recall -- \$5.25. I know. Astounding."

### **The autograph addiction**

"The autograph side of my collection (or addiction!) started in early 1952, when I picked up a *Baseball Magazine* and saw a story titled 'The Autograph Man,' on Leslie V. Stockton of Schenectady, N.Y., who became my mentor in that phase of the hobby as Gammon was in cards. Stockton, who also sold me address lists of athletes and celebrities, and I struck up a decade-long correspondence in which he advised me in all phases of autographs. And throughout my teen-age years in the 1950s, I was either buying cards or writing away for autographs of "famous" people both in and out of sports. I found that the large majority of them answered autograph requests in those days, and it was a real kick going to the mailbox to see who had responded. "

Among those who responded were Ty Cobb and the widows of Babe Ruth and Christy Mathewson. The very first autograph Chapin obtained was from Ty Cobb. "My Ty Cobb autograph is on a 2-cent postcard, signed in his usual green ink. He even added a one-cent stamp to the one-cent postage. Rates must have gone up just before that! Two of my best autograph items are cancelled checks signed by Christy Mathewson and Babe Ruth, both obtained from their widows just by my asking if they could send me anything signed by their late husbands. Collecting was different in those days."

### **Collecting through the mail**

As to his early days in the hobby, Chapin recalled, "At that time, I never sold or traded any cards or autographs, mainly because I didn't yet know any other collectors. Everything was done through the mail or over the grocery store counter. Slowly, my hobby contacts began to expand in the 1950s, to people like Buck Barker (another very valuable correspondent and adviser), Frank Nagy, Charles Bray of *Card Collector's Bulletin* and Lionel Carter."

Collectors got in touch through the mail in those days. Phone calls were rare as were personal visits. Chapin recalled, "The first adult collector I met in person was Gammon, but this wasn't until the late 1960s or early 1970s when I was a sportswriter for the *Los Angeles Times* and he was a sports columnist in Chattanooga and we both were working a college football game in Knoxville. Maybe it's strange, but I never did meet Stockton, Barker, Nagy, Bray, Carter or any of the big-name oldtimers."

### **Back into it again in the 1970s**

Chapin discussed his experience as an adult collector. "I always tried to complete sets, pretty much across the board. I took about a decade's sabbatical from the hobby in the 1960s and early 1970s, but then I returned to it with a passion, with the help of Los Angeles-area collectors and dealers like Merv Williams, Jim Nowell and Goodwin Goldfaden, whom I'd corresponded with for many years but never

met. I filled in many of the gaps in my card collection that way, although I still hadn't returned to autographs. I never bought collections, but I began filling in the gaps through ads in publications like *The Trader Speaks*, *Sports Collectors News*, *Sports Collectors Digest* and *Baseball Hobby News*.

"I was able to put together a complete T206 set minus Wagner and Plank, and complete T205 and T207 sets, about 100 Old Judges and various other T and E sets, at a time when all of them were relatively affordable. My favorite set was always T3 Turkey Red baseball cabinet cards -- I pieced it together back in the 1970s. I collected all the other sports, too, and non-sports, as well, going way back. There was a time when I tried to collect everything new that was issued in a given year -- when you still had at least a reasonable chance of doing that, without breaking your bank or the storage shelves in your basement.

"Eventually, I resumed collecting autographs, too, focusing on Hall of Famers in various sports. My theory there was that the greatness of Hall of Famers was established, and they'd always have appeal, an idea that I believe still works. I don't write or seek autographs through the mail, anymore. It's all done through auctions and dealers now, and I'm in much more of a selling than a buying mode these days.

"The first show I attended, as I recall, was one of the early ones in Los Angeles in the 1970s, with people like Nowell, Mike Berkus, Gavin Riley, Steve Brunner, and a terrific guy who has become a lifelong friend, Ray Medeiros. It was nothing like the giant shows and conventions of today, just a few guys sitting about talking sports and trading and selling cards - very low key but fun....Two of my best Northern California collecting friends, both deceased now, were John Spalding and Dick Dobbins, both absolutely first-rate people."

*Early hobby publications were happy to run articles from a professional sportswriter and collector like Chapin.*



### **The professional sports writer**

Chapin easily kept his amateur writer status by writing for the early hobby publications since the honorarium involved was the honor of seeing your name in a byline or perhaps getting a free subscription. Such subscriptions would last as long as the publications did, which were dependent on the energy and financial commitment of the founder, usually not very long. He also contributed information on sets and variations to Bob Lemke when he edited the Krause annual catalog.

Chapin's professional career was perfect to compliment his early interest in writing and in sports collecting. He became a sports journalist starting with the *Lewiston Morning Tribune* in 1956. He was with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* as a sportswriter in the mid-60s and then the *Los Angeles Times* until 1977. He then moved to San Francisco and continued as a sportswriter or city columnist with the *San Francisco Examiner* and then the *Chronicle* until his retirement in 2005.

*Dwight Chapin in the 1980s*

### **Chapin's 1974 article on cards**

It was during his tenure at the *Los Angeles Times* that Chapin wrote a great article about baseball card collecting that was syndicated throughout the country. Chapin felt that it may have opened the hobby to a wider audience. It ran across page one of the sports section and managed to cover everything you could say about the hobby. It was apparent that the hobby had already changed as collectibles became more valuable. The only change to the accuracy of the June 14, 1974, article today is that more zeroes have been added to the prices. The title of the article was "This Man is a Card-Carrying Member of a group of zanies who buy packages of bubble gum and then throw away the bubble gum. Here is his confession."



Stadium postcard specialist Ray Medeiros remembered the article well. "Dwight's article for the *Los Angeles Times* about card collecting and their then-developing values set off a stampede all over the area to attics where old baseball cards might have been stuck away."

The long article covered it all: Wagner's T206 rarity, Jefferson Burdick's organization of the hobby, 1974 Washington/San Diego variations, Lew Burdette posing as a left-hander, Jim Nowell's 1969 show and the escalation in prices.

Hobbyists mentioned or quoted included Bill Haber, Wirt Gammon, Gar Miller, Ed Broder, Larry Fritsch, Jack Wise, Buck Barker, Lionel Carter, Edward Golden, John Wagner, Preston Orem, Bob Jaspersen, Frank Nagy, Richard Egan and Ted Taylor.

Golden nugget excerpts from the *Los Angeles Times* article:

- Where have you gone Joe Di Maggio and your Yankee pinstripes? To the bank, obviously.
- A famous Sy Berger quote on what to put on the back of baseball cards: "You don't know the agony of trying to say something nice about some guy who hit .176 and made 25 errors. What can you say 'This guy stinks?'"
- Gar Miller, who is still a *SCD* advertiser, is quoted, "We're sports fanatics – children under 80 who refuse to pack their junk in a trunk and get on with life's more important things."
- Sportscaster Ted Taylor: "Values have gotten completely out of hand. Many guys are in it strictly to make a buck. There seem to be younger collectors with an unlimited supply of money, too."

### **Selling the cards**

Chapin decided to start selling his cards about twenty years ago. "It did get harder over the years to try to collect almost all the new issues in various sports and non-sports, as I once did. And I lost interest when the market became more and more glutted. But more, as I cut back other areas of my life as I aged, it just seemed the right time to take a more distinctly focused view of the hobby. So I've pretty much settled on Hall of Fame autographs. I do think the hugely increased focus on money and

'what's it worth' in collecting has not been a good thing. If you compare how things are now with how they were in the 1950s, it makes your head swim. At least my old gray head.

"The condition of the cards I sold through Lew Lipset and others over the last couple of decades generally was first rate, with many Near Mint or better. But I never graded anything. As an oldtimer, that just didn't seem appropriate for me, although I generally do see the merit in grading (at times)."

Lipset, however, had some of Chapin's cards graded. Chapin's 1955 Topps Doubleheader set included many cards in various shades of Mint condition. His T202 Hassan Triple Folders included 130 of the 132 cards in a master set.



*Six of Chapin's T202s*

*Two of the graded 1955 Topps Doubleheaders from Chapin's collection*

### **Autograph authentication stumps Chapin**

As to Chapin's feelings on autographs, "Autograph authenticating looks to me to be primarily a money-making venture for the authenticators. I've seen too many examples of their mistakes over the years to feel comfortable with them. I think it really is true that the only way you can make sure an autograph is good is if you saw it signed in person, so paid authentication, by someone who was not present when the autograph is signed (and may have little if any knowledge of the signer or his signature), is a very murky enterprise, at best, to me."

### **Current hobby connections**

Chapin added, "In recent years, Lipset is the guy I've had the most contact with, and he remains a very good friend, as does Medeiros, and I've also developed a good relationship lately with Josh Wulkan of Huggins and Scott auctions and autograph dealer Jim Stinson."

Lipset commented that, "Dwight and his wife Ellen, were the only consignors my wife and I went to dinner with on a regular basis. He was more a friend than a consignor."

Ray Medeiros called Chapin “one of the genuinely nice guys out there” and observed that Chapin “was not one to bring attention to himself.”

*The Wizard of Westwood –  
hardcover and paperback*

### **The sportswriter versus the collector**

Chapin covered many important stories during his career, especially those involving Los Angeles or San Francisco professional or college teams. He was the *Los Angeles Times* beat writer for the UCLA Bruins during their run of 10 championships under John Wooden. With Jeff Prugh, he co-authored *The Wizard of Westwood*, a John Wooden biography. He had many opportunities to interact with athletes and coaches. I asked him if that provided opportunities for collecting.



Chapin responded, “I’m old school in this regard, I guess. I did have access to many of the country’s top athletes over the last several decades, but I just never felt it was right to trade on those relationships by asking for autographs or memorabilia. I’m not saying that’s the only way to go, but it worked for me before my retirement as a sportswriter a decade ago. I think because I didn’t ask for anything, I could call their athletic performances the way I saw them, without anything extenuating getting in the way of that -- making me beholden to them in any way, that is.”

### **40+ year-old observations right on target**

Chapin told me, “I might just say that over the years, people have looked at me as if saying, ‘This guy is nuts to be collecting all that stuff,’ but it was, and is, a good life. I have so many fond memories that I know will last for the rest of my lifetime.”

Chapin concluded his 1974 *Los Angeles Times* article with the following passage which sounds accurate today, except for the passing of the players, “It seems like such a long time ago...that spring of ’48 in Idaho. Musial and DiMaggio wear business suits now, Robinson is dead. Williams is off fishing somewhere. I don’t know what happened to Dick Wakefield and George Vico and Hank Majeski. But I can still open a drawer, pull out a stack of cards and remember how it was. That way you don’t see the frailties of man and the erosion of time – the pot bellies on guys like Ted Kluszewski and Joe Nuxhall. You see heroes and memories...a boyhood that ended all too soon, and then began again.”

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