

In 1945 Esquire Magazine Reported on the “Era of the Cigarette Card”



by George G. Vrechek

Early articles about the trading card hobby started to appear in a few publications in the mid-1930s. Articles were written by Jefferson Burdick for *Hobbies* magazine or for his own

small publication, *The Card Collector's Bulletin*. *Hobbies* had a significant circulation and published over 100 pages each month, but the Burdick articles were brief and seldom illustrated. A 1929 *The New Yorker* magazine article, *A New York Childhood, Cigarette Pictures*, by Arthur H. Folwell, was a rare blip as to mainstream publicity about card collecting. In a January 6, 2006, *SCD* article I covered Folwell's piece which was based on his personal experience in collecting cards during the 1880s. It was a nice bit of nostalgia but didn't bring readers up to date as to any 1929 collecting activity.

Esquire Magazine December 1945

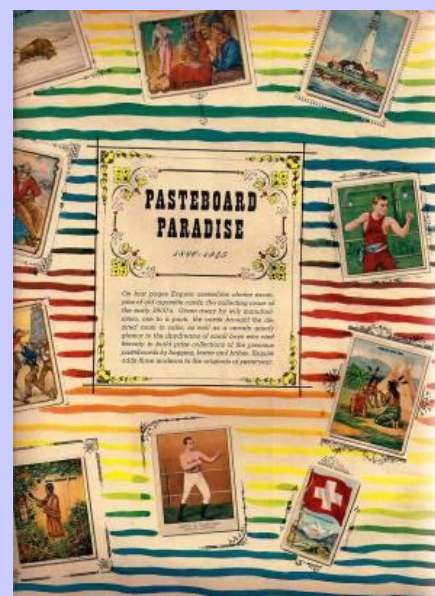
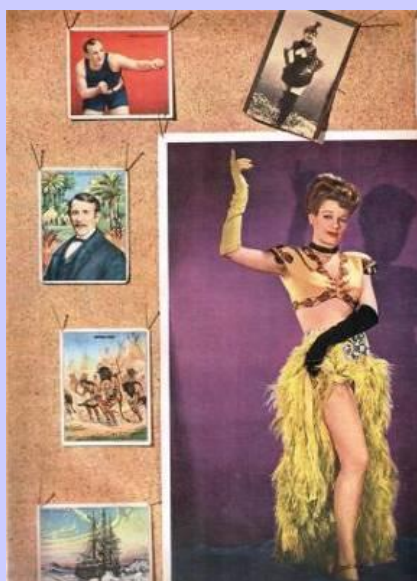
I had heard of another card article that appeared in *Esquire* magazine in December 1945. *Esquire* preceded *Playboy* as a publication targeting the male audience. Hugh Hefner worked as a copywriter for *Esquire* before leaving in 1952 to establish *Playboy*. *Esquires* from this era contained pin-ups by Alberto Vargas and are collectible because of his artwork. The issue I finally managed to come up with was intact, except for the Vargas girl. There were some marginally naughty cartoons and a few young starlets in two piece swim suits interspersed among 328 pages of articles and ads. *Esquire* writers included Sinclair Lewis and dozens of other notables including one Karl Baarslag, the author of the cigarette card article of my interest.

It was fun paging through to see all the merchandise advertised following World War II. There were plenty of ads for liquor, cigarettes, cologne, fancy ties (\$1.50 – or not so fancy for a buck), dress shoes (\$12), hats (\$6.50), topcoats (\$37), pipes (\$5), and some more liquor. There were few automobile ads and no pictures of cars since it was a few years before the U.S. resumed manufacturing passenger cars. However I had picked up this dusty magazine relic to read about cardboard.



Six Pages Plus Photos

Baarslag's article covered six pages and included images of tobacco insert cards such as prize fighters, Indians, explorers, "actresses," and a single baseball player – Christy Mathewson. Baarslag and *Esquire's* layout people seemed to have rounded up some cards and pinned them to a cork board – ouch! as to the holes in the T206 Mathewson. Thanks to the *Esquire* editors, the article also included three young "modern" ladies photographed in pin-up style outfits so that the *Esquire* subscriber wouldn't fall asleep doing all this reading.



Baarslag presented some background on how insert cards started, included limited information on cigarette manufacturers, researched collecting in England and the U.S., and, most importantly, got in touch with Jefferson Burdick. The gist of the article was that millions of tobacco cards were avidly collected for some 30 years but then evaporated as mothers cleaned house. "Eager collectors during the heyday of this now forgotten hobby sometimes paid as high as a dollar or even more for some particularly elusive, desired card" according to the writer. There was no mention of candy, gum, or exhibit cards.

Reminiscing about Collecting Insert Cards

Baarslag started by reminiscing very much like Burdick and other writers, remembering how young boys would pester their older relatives for the cigarette card inserts. Baarslag began "Every American over thirty remembers the colorful little cigarette cards distributed with such a lavish hand..." Sets were issued to cover every conceivable subject and collectors accumulated sets and wanted albums. Young boys flipped cards and accumulated piles of insert cards between 1895 and 1915. "Highbrow hobbies naturally never offered any serious competition to a hobby which could be carried around in one's grimy pockets and displayed on shortest notice. A good

pocketful of prize fighter and baseball player cigarette cards was the *summum bonum* (highest good) of every American boy.”

Burdick and Bray Mentioned

Baarslag reported how cards appeared in Great Britain and other European countries after they first appeared in the U.S. He claimed that Hitler had “ordered their suppression” until deciding that they could help distribute propaganda. In America though, the cigarette cards “passed into limbo about 1915 when costlier silk flags, miniature imitation oriental rugs, small felt pennants, cloth bows, hanks of yarn, and similar souvenirs designed to catch the feminine eye began to supersede them.” Baarslag didn’t mind jumping to conclusions and claimed that “incredible as it may seem, there are very few of these once so plentiful and popular cards available for sale today....A very small floating supply of duplicates changes hands either through the medium of advertising in a bulletin published bi-monthly by a Mr. J.R. Burdick of Syracuse, through direct correspondence between a handful of American collectors, or at mail auctions held six times each year by another outstanding collector, Mr. Charles R. Bray of East Bangor, Pennsylvania. Mr. Burdick, leading authority on these cards in this country, appears to be the only fan who ever had the interest, requisite knowledge, and time and patience to compile a checklist of most of the known cards and a catalogue of what he estimates to be their fair market value.” Hobby pioneer Burdick had published a loose-leaf catalog in 1939 and was preparing the first printed catalog book for 1946. Charles Bray was running the auctions in *The Card Collector’s Bulletin*.

Apparently Baarslag used information he received in a letter from Burdick (no sense making those expensive long distance phone calls.) The author found little information available in libraries or museums. He mentions checking the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress. Baarslag wrote that Burdick’s bulletin had been “published as a hobby for the past seven years.” Prices seemed modest and hard to determine. “Unlike philately and other expensive hobbies, there are no great classic rarities for which eager buyers will bid thousands of dollars. Fakes, forgeries, and counterfeits are therefore unknown.” (The good old days.) Baarslag stated that there were 50,000 cigarette card collectors in Great Britain at the time but only 200 or so in the U.S. The author’s punch line was that there should be more of these cards still around stuck away in closets despite efforts of “unsentimental American housewives” guilty of pitching out most of them.

Baarslag’s Bio

While Baarslag didn’t appear to be among the 200 or so collectors of U.S. cards, he did undertake some investigation of the hobby and put together an interesting article. What can we



learn about Mr. Baarslag? The same issue of *Esquire* featured a photo and bio of the writer. At the time Lt. Cdr. Karl Baarslag, USNR, was just out of the military. He had been bitten “by wanderlust” and had been an avid reader of Jack London books. He had worked as “a common laborer, hod carrier, railroad construction worker, surveyor, railway mail clerk, seaman, postal clerk, and finally, for over twenty years, a radio officer.” He had written three books: *SOS to the Rescue*, *Robbery by Mail*, and *Islands of Adventure*.

Self-Proclaimed Expert

Fortunately because of the author’s distinctive name, I was able to find out a few more things of interest about Mr. Baarslag. He was born in 1900 in Grand Rapids, Michigan (about the same time as Burdick and Bray) and died in 1984. His educational background consisted of attending two years of high school. He continued to write but his real notoriety came as a self-proclaimed expert on Communist

activities. Baarslag had the dubious distinction of assisting in the McCarthy era investigations and providing thousands of pieces of information about communism, labor unions, and individuals. According to Internet sources (none of which had anything nice to say), Baarslag had been with the “Russian desk of the Office of Naval Intelligence from 1941 to 1944 and from 1947-1954 he was employed by the American Legion as a ‘counter-subversive specialist’ and editor of its newsletter, *Firing Line*. He also served as a research director for Sen. Joseph McCarthy. The Church League of America sold 700,000 pages of Baarslag’s files to the Wackenhut Corporation, a private security and investigation company.”

FBI Had Strong Opinions on Baarslag

However even the FBI thought Baarslag a bit much to take. An August 1961 FBI memo reported that: “Mr. DeLoach advised that Karl Baarslag is a ‘professional anti-communist’ and makes his living posing as an expert on communism. Baarslag has been fired by the HCUA, the SISS, and a number of other Senate committees and commissions. He is regarded on the Hill as a professional ‘bum’. For a number of months he worked for H.L. Hunt in Houston TX, however, he eventually was even fired by Hunt...Baarslag is not reliable and, therefore, it would be most unwise to discuss any matter with him.”

A “professional bum” didn’t sound too good, but at least they didn’t accuse him of being soft on cigarette cards. What a great hobby. You start out researching articles on collecting and wind up learning about pin-up girls and professional bums.

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