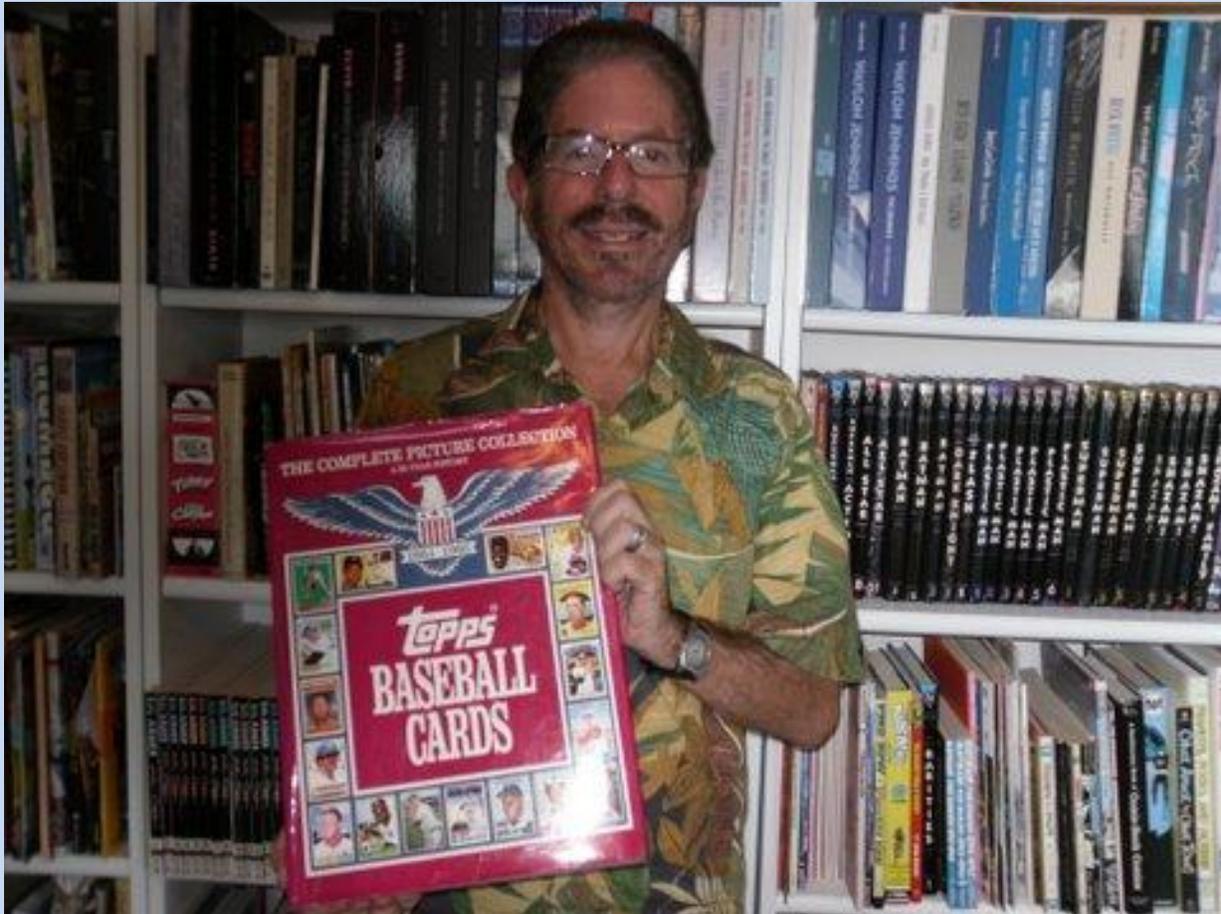


Len Brown, 41 years at Topps: he wrote the cards



Len Brown holding Topps Baseball Cards



By George Vrechek

Barry Manilow may be famous for “I write the songs,” but for baseball card collectors an equally famous person should be whoever wrote the backs of the vintage Topps cards. Incredibly there is such a person, and he is still very much with us today.

Len Brown is a 73-year-old retiree. He and his wife Abby live near Austin, Texas. He hosts a weekly radio station for country music, has a collection of comics, has written comic books, has published other works geared to youngsters and was the co-creator of T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents and Mars Attacks comic series. He also happens to have been employed at Topps Gum for 41 years working directly for Woody Gelman in the product development department. Starting in 1959, he wrote most of the backs of the Topps baseball cards and continued through the late 1960s.

Gelman has the “Big” Idea first?

Brown contacted me recently regarding an article I wrote about mystery prototype cards from the 1950s and Woody Gelman’s handwriting (SCD, Mysteries from 1956? June 1 and June 15, 2012). Brown concurred with my findings that the notations on the mystery cards were not made by Gelman. But what got me really excited was that I had stumbled into the opportunity to talk to someone about the design details of vintage Topps cards. Basic math skills would cause alert readers to scratch their heads and ask was Brown really responsible for the backs of the Topps cards as an 18-year-old in 1959? Would Topps have hired someone so young to handle so much? They sure did. In the movie “Big” a 12-year-old boy is temporarily transformed into the body of a 30 year-old played by Tom Hanks. He is a big hit with the MacMillan Toy Company owner, played by Robert Loggia, because he knows what interests kids; he is one of them. It sounds like Woody Gelman had the idea first.

The fateful Brooklyn bus ride

Brown was 14 years old in 1955 and lived with his widowed mother, brother and two grandparents in a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. He looked out the window from a bus one day and saw a newsstand with a magazine featuring Davey Crockett, the subject of a popular TV show at the time. Brown got off the bus, doubled back to the newsstand and bought the magazine which was a Triple Nickel publication priced (not surprisingly) at 15 cents. The publisher of the 64-page magazine was Woody Gelman. Gelman asked readers for their ideas as to subjects for future magazines. Brown took the initiative and sent Gelman a letter giving him his thoughts.

Meeting Woody Gelman

Four days later Brown received a call from Gelman inviting him to the Topps offices on 36th Street in Brooklyn. Gelman had a number of interests like the Triple Nickel books before working exclusively for Topps as their director of product development and temporarily continued those interests at Topps based on an understanding with president Joe Shorin. Sy Berger (SCD Sep 26, 2014) was very involved with Topps baseball cards at the time as was art director Ben Solomon. Gelman and Solomon had been in business together prior to joining Topps.



Len Brown as a high school student in 1957 listed his future ambition as: writer.

Gelman gave Brown a tour of Topps, and he met Sy Berger (1923-2014) who handed him several boxes of baseball and football cards to take home. Gelman also gave Brown boxes of non-sports cards and said he would stay in touch. Brown recalls: “Woody did stay in touch, calling me at home once every few months from 1955 on, and encouraging me to call him if I thought there was a TV or a pop culture property that might be a good trading card series. Woody would bounce a potential non-sports idea at me to see if I thought kids would collect such a series. TV Westerns were big in the late 1950s, and we probably talked about those shows. I was a big Elvis fan, but probably Woody saw the excitement about Presley as well. Woody invited me to his home a number of times. We were both science fiction fans

and it was wonderful to go to his place and look through his fabulous collection of pulp magazines, i.e., *Amazing Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Argosy*, etc. I met Woody's son Richard who was about my age and Woody's daughter and wife. They treated me very cordially." Brown's father died when he was only five years old. Woody Gelman eventually became a father-figure to Brown.

Brown resumed his boyhood interests of following baseball and collecting baseball cards, non-sports cards, comic books and comic strips. He collected such issues as the 1951 Topps Redbacks, 1950 Topps Hopalong Cassidy cards, and the 1956 Topps Flags of the World cards. Space in the small apartment was at a premium. When the new baseball cards came out each year, Brown's mom reasoned that he didn't need the old cards anymore and out the door they went. Brown kept collecting anyway. Somehow the comic book collection survived, squirreled away in the basement of the apartment building.

Topps employment starts in 1959

"When I got close to my 18th birthday," Brown recalled, "Woody asked me if I had time to work at Topps a couple of days a week. I was starting Brooklyn College and I was able to adjust my school schedule to allow perhaps 15 or 20 hours a week at Topps. I started the day after Columbus Day in 1959." Since Brown's mother was collecting social security benefits as a widow, there was a limit on how much income the family could have before the benefits were reduced. Brown let the Topps personnel people know that he could only make so much money. They were glad to oblige. He recalled that his initial salary at Topps was \$70 or \$75 per week. Brown was back on the bus for about two hours each day commuting across Brooklyn from his home in East Flatbush to Topps offices in Bay Ridge, where he punched a time clock at the beginning of his career.

The product development department consisted of Gelman, Stan Hart, and Brown. The art department, headed by Solomon, had seven or eight people to work with the cartoons and paste up the photos, logos, and stats for printing. If Gelman needed to send a letter, Brown typed it. Executives had private offices and dressed in suits. Brown remembers that on his first day at Topps Stan Hart grabbed him and asked him what he knew about teen singing sensation Fabian. Topps was considering doing a card set featuring Fabian and the 18-year-old Brown's opinion was a quick, inexpensive market survey. Brown remembers the Fabian set as not doing too well. Brown's first assignment from Gelman was to read humor and joke books and magazines to look for gags that could provide inspiration for the Bazooka Joe comics inserted inside wrappers for Bazooka Gum.

The standard design took time to evolve

It wasn't long before Brown was writing the backs of the baseball cards for the upcoming 1960 issue. There were so many interesting aspects to the design of that set, that Brown's involvement in the 1960 Topps will be covered in a future SCD article. In 1960 Topps creative staff considered several general design issues involving size, orientation, photos, stats, text and cartoons. The formula that eventually became prevalent for Topps was the 1957 design: reduced size, one full-color photo with a natural background, vertical front, horizontal back, year-by-year stats and a cartoon. However In the 1950s and early 1960s Topps was all over the landscape with horizontal fronts on their 1955, 1956 and 1960 cards; paintings rather than photos and vertical backs for their 1953 cards; two front photos on their 1960 and

1963 cards; and full stats on their 1957, 1959 and 1961 cards. There were cartoons on the backs each year after 1952.

The 1960 and 1963 cards utilized two photos of the player. This worked pretty well, if a player wasn't traded. However if a player was traded, and they used a hat-less photo for one image, they would probably have to airbrush the cap on a second image to reflect the new team. Using two photos also created more work for the art department and there were plenty of other projects to work on.

1963 ROOKIE STARS

NELSON MATHEWS
CHI. CUBS, O.F.

HARRY FANOK
ST. LOUIS CARDS, P.

DAVE DEBUSSCHERE
CHI. WHITE SOX, P.

JACK CULLEN
N. Y. YANKEES, P.

1962 ROOKIE STARS

NELSON MATHEWS
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HARRY FANOK
ST. LOUIS CARDS, P.

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JACK CULLEN
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54 **1963 ROOKIE PARADE**

MINOR LEAGUE LIFETIME RECORDS

N. MATHEWS CHIC. CUBS—OF	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RB	AVG.
	459	1563	248	434	68	37	43	229	.278
HARRY FANOK ST. LOUIS—P	G	IP	W	L	PCT.	SO	BB	ERA	
	93	589	42	28	.600	544	333	3.85	
D. DeBUSSCHERE Chic. White Sox—P	G	IP	W	L	PCT.	SO	BB	ERA	
	15	94	10	1	.989	93	53	2.49	
JACK CULLEN N. Y. Yankees—P	G	IP	W	L	PCT.	SO	BB	ERA	
	114	679	48	33	.593	556	276	3.27	

ST.C.G. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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ST.C.G. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

This combination card of four rookies in the first series didn't have any text and wouldn't have come across Brown's desk. The original print run had a heading of 1962 Rookies and was changed to 1963 when the error was noticed. Since the first series of 1963 cards were designed in late 1962, it would have been understandable to mislabel them 1962 Rookies, although they got the dates right in all other years.

VETERAN MASTERS

Casey Stengel • Gene Woodling

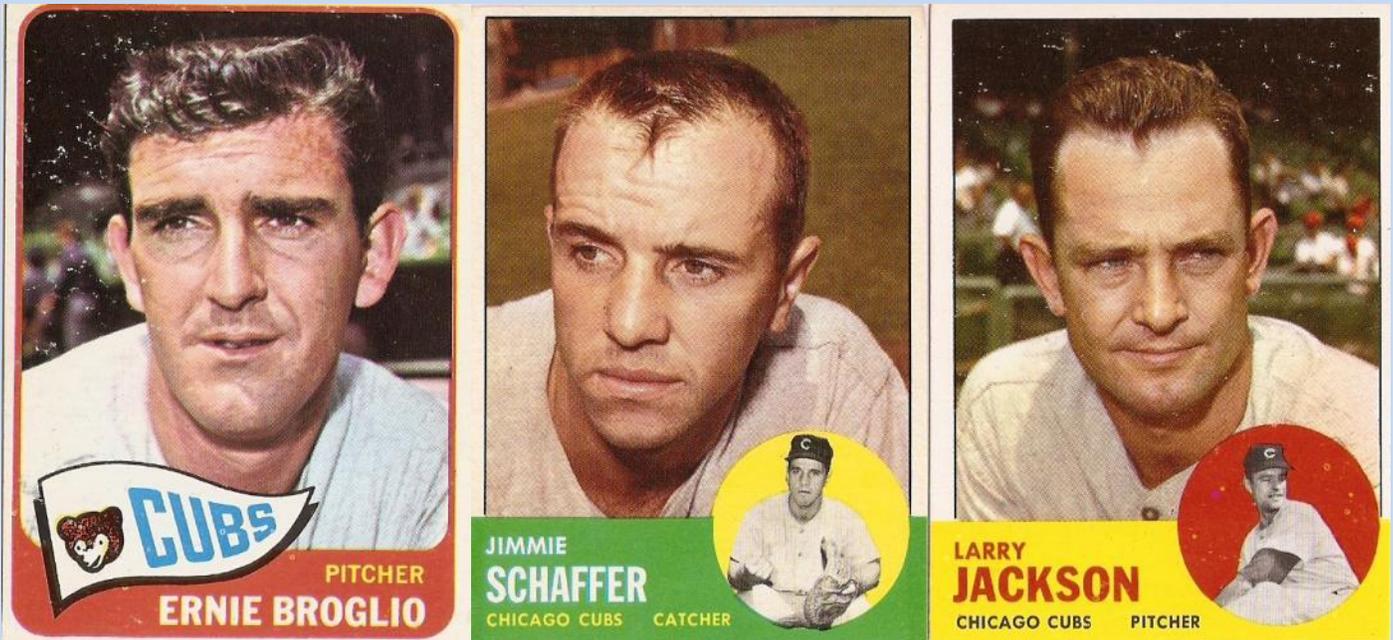
43 **VETERAN MASTERS**

Casey Stengel — Gene Woodling

Casey Stengel and Gene Woodling were reunited last season as they both joined the New York Mets. These two veterans of baseball were previously together for six seasons with the New York Yankees. Casey managed the Yankees for 12 years and brought the Bronx Bombers 10 pennant flags. In 1910, the old professor played in his first professional baseball game and he didn't hang up his spikes till 22 years later. Casey compiled an amazing World Series batting average of .393 in 12 games. Gene Woodling, one of the game's most reliable performers, won 4 minor league batting titles with such amazing averages as .344, .385, .394 and .398. In 26 World Series games with the New York Yankees, Gene batted .318.

ST.C.G. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

It was always more work to do multiple player cards.



The Cards might trade someone to the Cubs (like Broglio for Lou Brock!). A hat-less photo helped, but then you needed to airbrush the cap logo in any second image.

Finally after 1963, the standard baseball card layout went back to the 1957 format described above. This format had exceptions. In 1967, 1968, 1973 and 1975 Topps went with vertical rather than horizontal backs. Cartoons were a feature each year until 1978 and 1979. Cartoons resumed in 1980, but finally disappeared after 1982. The 1971 Topps issue was another exception to the formula with condensed stats and a player photo on the back rather than a cartoon.

Sources for information

I asked Brown where the information they used came from. He responded: "Sy would arrange to get me the press guides from the various teams. The press guides usually had information that I could use as a cartoon fact. I never found that part of the assignment very tough. We also got the various yearbooks, and I know I had a lot of annual Baseball Registers that the Sporting News published. Not sure the Registers had lots of information, but they were always on a shelf in my office. I'd say most of the material appeared that I used came from the press guides. Some teams were better than others for data." The player's height, weight, birthdate, and hometown were also available from these sources. In 1959, Topps revised Warren Spahn's birthdate and created three variations of his card #40, but Brown said that was just ahead of his time at Topps. I asked if they ever took any "literary license" filling in information. Brown responded, "I don't believe so. If it wasn't common knowledge, I would say we wouldn't have dared to make it up....or face the scorn (Brown laughs) of Mr. Sy Berger."

There was plenty of writing for the \$75 per week part-time budding writer to do, and Topps soon added a few freelance writers to help him. By mid-1960, Brown started working at Topps full-time and went to school in the evenings. He became Woody Gelman's assistant

The 1962 Woodies

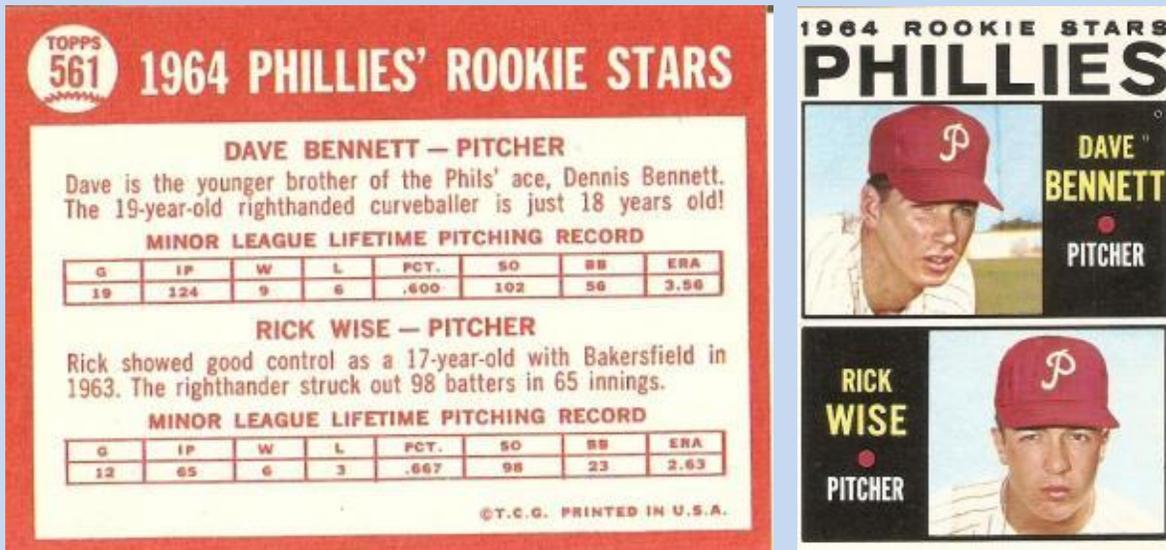
Brown remembers the 1962 Topps card design going through the process of a large committee picking among several design alternatives. Brown recalled that Kodak ads at the time featured a bottom corner that was turned up. The Topps executives liked the look and may have even requested permission from Kodak to use the idea. Topps coupled the turned-up corner with a wood frame, which some thought looked a little like the distinctive 1955 Bowman TV set design. Topps used a second printer for the second series which resulted in the green tint variation cards with completely different cropping as well.

The second print run of 1962 Topps cards were printed by two different printers resulting in variations in poses, a distinct green tint from one printer, and differences in how images were cropped.



Proofreading

Writers were expected to proofread and correct their own work. Getting everything right could be a challenge. Sometimes it was easier to notice someone else's mistakes than your own. One card was a famous example of what could happen. Rookie Dave Bennett was featured on #561 Phillies Rookies in the 1964 Topps set. Brown wrote the two sentence blurb for Bennett appearing on the back of the card, "Dave is the younger brother of Phils' ace, Dennis Bennett. The 19-year-old right-handed curveballer is just 18 years old!" Oops.



Dave Bennett – the 19-year-old who was only 18.

remember collectors laughing about this card several years ago, but had assumed that it had escaped earlier detection. That was not the case. Shortly after the card was issued, Brown remembered that it came to Sy Berger's attention who stormed into the product development department and asked, "Doesn't anyone check this?" For a while the final proofs had to go to Berger to read before they went out the door to the printer. This card was in the last series in 1964 and they probably decided not to correct it.

There were also unavoidable goofs as players would have fun fooling the Topps photographers by posing left handed if they were really right handed, having another player pose for them or even sending the bat boy to do the job (Aurelio Rodriguez' 1969 Topps, #653).

Cartoons

Brown remembered, "The cartoon factoid would be picked up from an interesting piece of information about the ballplayer in either the press guide or yearbook and then sent to Jack Davis (a long-time artist for Topps, I recognize his style). He was a very popular artist who drew for Mad Magazine and Mad Comics for years. He also did a series of non-sports cards for us too - Funny Valentines and Funny Monsters (the latter was sometimes referred to as 'You'll Die Laughing' because that appeared on the back of the cards, but the packaging called the card product Funny Monsters." The cartoonists were

freelancers who worked outside Topps. The Topps artists would hand-letter the text that went with the cartoons.

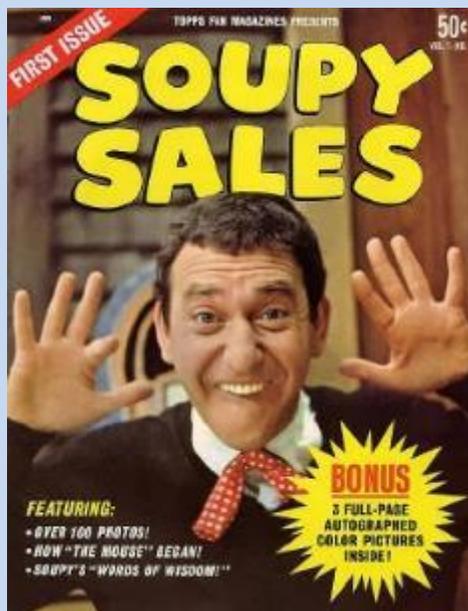
Inserts and test issues

Brown enjoyed working on the various inserts and test tissues that Topps started to add in the 1960s. The creative people got enthused when they had to think about new products. Brown remembers that Topps would print small runs of cards to test the market. They would usually just go to nearby stores in Brooklyn. Brown would show up at the store when the kids got out of school to see how the products sold. Many of those test issues never made it into production and therefore can command some pretty significant prices when they eventually surface today. He remembered the 1961 Topps Dice Game as something they tested and then dropped. He never hung onto any of the cards. The 18-card set was priced at \$240,000 in the last Standard Catalog of Vintage Baseball Cards.

More than just baseball

Brown's description of the creative process at Topps was interesting. There weren't dozens of writers or artists and their responsibilities weren't limited to baseball and football cards. While baseball cards were a big part of their work (and "almost ran itself," according to Brown), there were also other sports, inserts and non-sports cards the same Topps people created. Actually the type of projects that got the creative guys enthused seemed to be the non-sport issues, tending to the pulp fiction genre.

According to Brown, the original thinking at Topps was that there was a season for baseball cards, a season for football cards and in-between kids would buy non-sport cards. They felt the kids had only a certain amount of money each week, and they would work on one thing at a time. Two or three non-sports sets per year would meet the demand. However the Topps thinking evolved. They decided some kids liked non-sports cards more than sports cards and would buy them throughout the year. Other kids had money to collect baseball cards as well as other products. It wasn't long before Topps was working up two non-sports sets per month. Topps needed to figure out what products would sell, and they needed to stay up on pop culture, just like Gelman had done by tapping into the opinions of 14-year-old Len Brown.

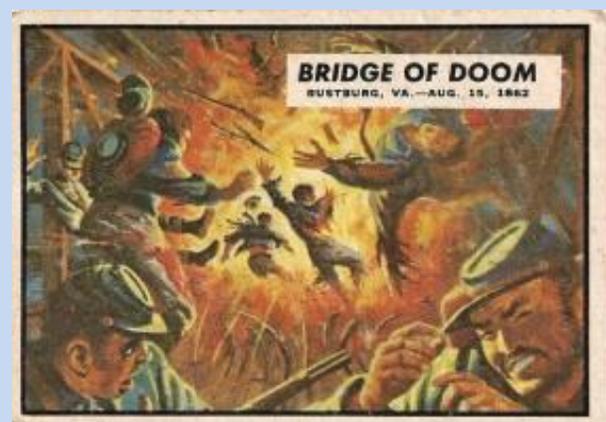


The first issue of the Topps Fan Magazine in 1965 featured popular TV comedian Soupy Sales, left to right: Brown, Sales, and Woody Gelman.

Brown worked for the first four or five years doing everything including the backs of the baseball cards, but Topps kept growing with more products and people. Brown got involved in non-sport issues like Soupy Sales, Civil War, Mars Attack, Garbage Pail Kids and Star Wars. While working on the Star Wars issues he met George Lucas and Mark Hamill, who turned out to be a collector.

Civil War set

Brown described the 1962 Civil War set: "I know when I was writing the backs of the cards for the Civil War series, Woody and I would dream up lots of battle situations and send the ideas to the pencil artist. He would pencil them on illustration board and then the drawings were sent to our card painter. The situations were mostly dreamed up for dramatic impact. When it came time to write the backs, I made up dates and towns that were involved in various battles. But mostly, it was very fictional. Woody and I both were fans of newspapers and we used a newspaper as a card design a number of times. I remembered the series 'Scoop' I collected as a kid (1954). I liked the miniature front page newspapers on the back of those cards. Do you recall we included a buck of confederate money with the cards in the five cent packages? The confederate money was counterfeit courtesy of our art department. (We just wanted it to look like the real thing.) The bucks were printed on a parchment paper and had the feel of real paper money. I hope that was a forgivable sin."



The 1962 Topps Civil War cards (top) used the fake newspaper back that Brown remembered as a 1954 customer. Note the curled corner on the 1962 back which was similar to the curled corner on the front of the 1962 baseball cards.

Topps people

Gelman left Topps in the late 1960s and setup Nostalgia Press. Brown continued to work with him on book ideas and postcards. Gelman died in 1978.

Jack Klinge headed the sports card sales. His group also handled the artwork for store displays and promotional items.

Butch Jacobs worked for Sy Berger for most of his 34 years at Topps. Sy promoted him from the mail room and had him handle the instructions to photographers.

In 1988 Ira Friedman joined Topps in a similar role to Gelman's and Brown enjoyed working closely with the very creative Friedman his last years at Topps. Friedman is still with Topps.

Memorabilia

Woody Gelman, Ben Solomon and others at Topps kept a pretty complete archive, according to Brown, of their various card issues and original art work. Topps auctioned much of that material a few years ago.

As is the case with most of us and our day-to-day work, Brown didn't hang on to much of the voluminous work product that he produced, but he has some great memories of the mountains of cardboard that we treasure today.

In a future issue, we will look at Brown's recollections of the 1960 Topps baseball card design.

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net

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