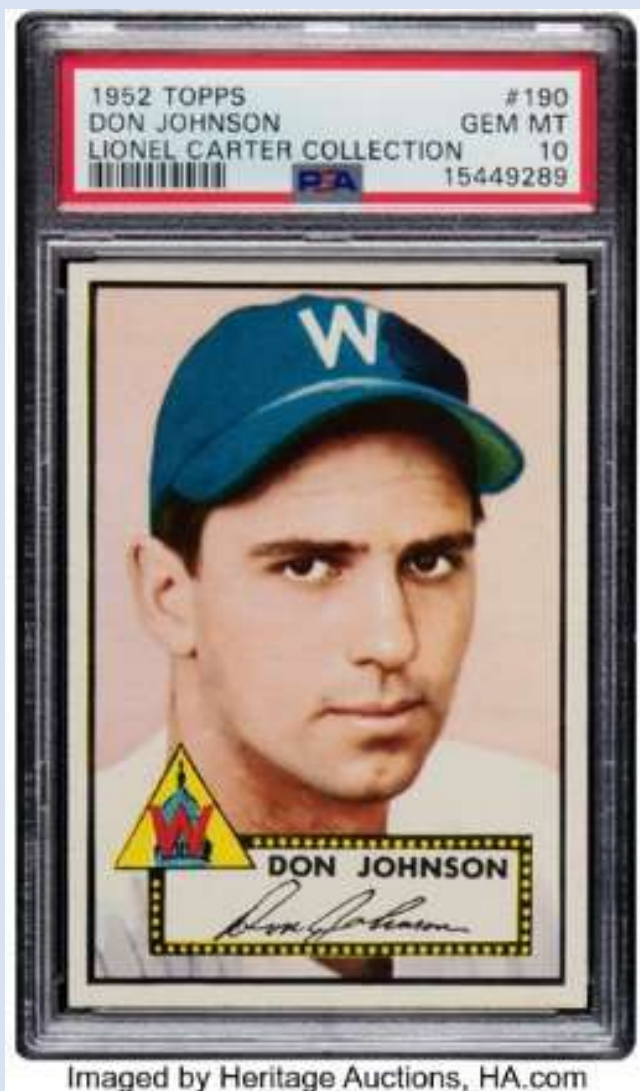




# A look back at hobby pioneer G. Lionel Carter and the sale of his collection

By George Vrechek

When G. Lionel Carter died on August 28, 2008, at age 90, the sports card hobby lost a significant link to its prior history. In 2007 he sold his collection of 50,000, mostly mint baseball cards. I was fortunate to be in contact with Carter during the last seven years of his life.





*Carter cards were included in a 2023 Heritage auction. Photos by Heritage Auctions.*

## **Carter and Burdick**

Carter of Colfax, Illinois, wrote his first of several articles on baseball card collecting in 1936 for the Kaw Chief Stamp Journal. His articles led a few other collectors to him and, in turn, he learned of Jefferson Burdick, who had written about tobacco cards for Hobbies magazine in 1935. Carter became subscriber #35 to Burdick's monthly Card Collector's Bulletin.

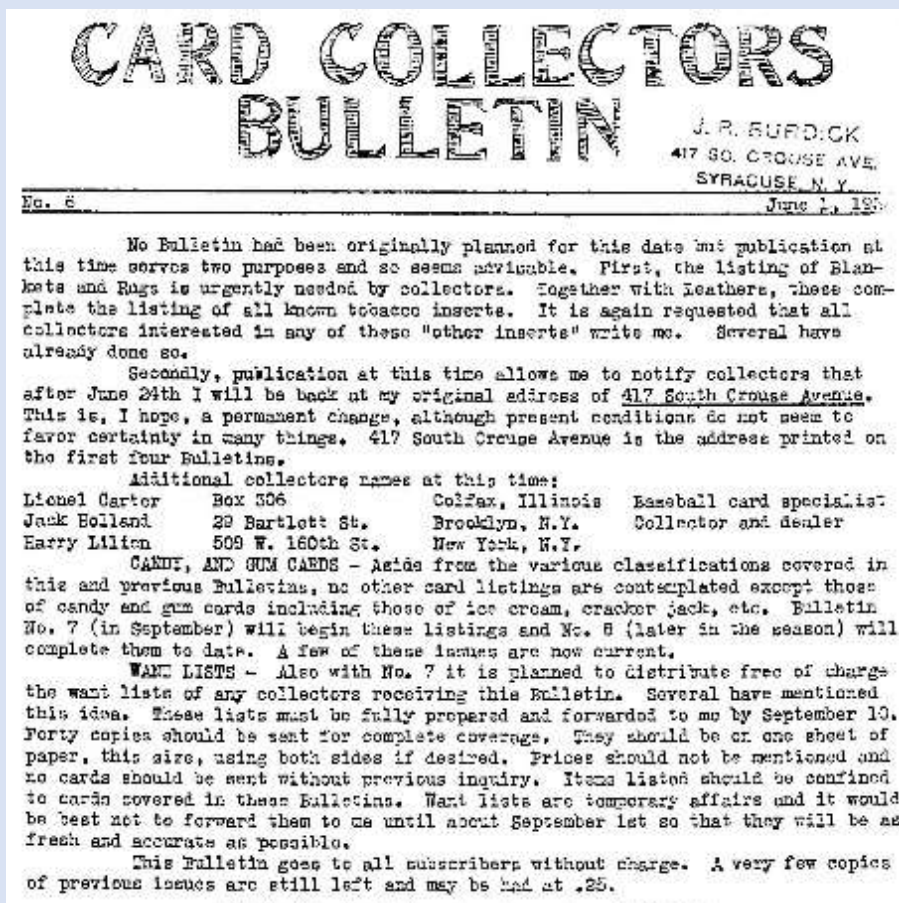
Burdick is known as the "Father of Card Collecting." Burdick called Carter the "King of the Mounties" because he carefully inserted cards into scrapbooks using corner mounts. Burdick was interested in cards, postcards and probably anything else you could gather and organize - inexpensively. Carter played baseball and basketball on the Colby High School teams despite his slight build. His interest was primarily baseball cards. His father worked as a farmer, grain elevator operator and then a grocery store clerk. His mother took in laundry, and he initially worked as a laborer after high school.

Like Burdick, Carter was comfortable writing and organizing; both could be opinionated. Neither of them hit it off with people looking to invest in cards or with new collectors who thought they knew everything.



*G. Lionel Carter's Colfax High 1936 graduation photo*

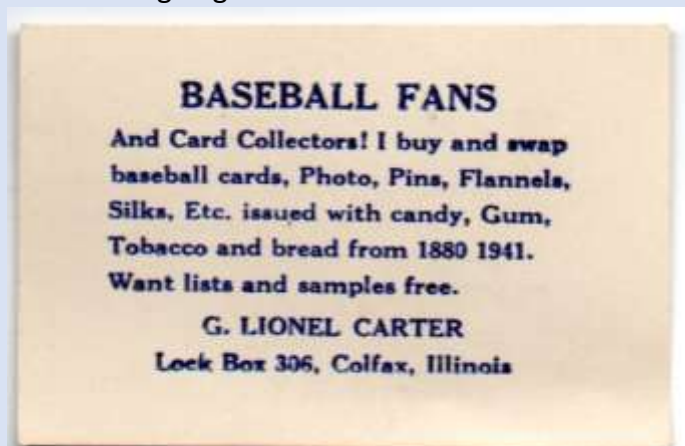
*Burdick's June 1938 CCB mentions new subscriber "baseball card specialist" Lionel Carter.*



### Collecting after WWII

Carter was drafted as an Army private during WWII. He wrote interesting memoirs including a 47-page chapter about his patrol finding themselves on the wrong side of the frontline in the jungles of New Guinea.

Despite being overseas, Carter subscribed to two copies of Burdick's Card Collector's Bulletin with one going to his mother and the other forwarded to his posts.



*Carter likely had this card printed when he got back into collecting right after WWII.*

After the war, Carter moved to Chicago and worked at North Shore National Bank of Chicago. He lived in apartments near the bank and transit lines. As a bachelor new to

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## Chicago Bank Officer Amasses \$1,000 Sport Card Collection



Lionel Carter, Evanston, Ill., card collector, boasts of having the only complete set of DeLong gum cards in existence today. Shown here viewing the valuable set are Carter, left, and John Sullivan, Chicago collector. Story on page 3.—Sport Fan Photo.

Chicago, he spent much of his free time working on his collection – much like Jefferson Burdick was doing in Syracuse at the time. He married fellow employee Irma Matthes in 1953 and eventually moved to a modest home at 1621 Cleveland, Evanston, Illinois. He wrote hundreds of letters to other collectors, contributed to Burdick's American Card Catalogs, visited collectors including Burdick, participated in the earliest card shows and wrote for just about every hobby publication that came along. He wrote letters on other subjects to editors as well; he seemed to enjoy doing rebuttals. He helped originate and then organize military and family reunions through about 2002. He and Irma never had children.

*Carter's "\$1,000 sport card collection" was featured in Bob Jaspersen's Sport Fan publication in 1956. Carter is shown with Chicago collector John Sullivan (right).*

Carter was particular and meticulous. Since his card-collecting began as a 15-year-old, he didn't own any cards to mishandle as a child. He only wanted to keep cards that were in the best possible condition – well-centered, no creases, clear printing and bright colors. You could call him the original Mr. Mint. He would buy cards in auction lots, keep what he needed and re-auction cards that didn't meet his standards. By the late 1950s, he was buying a case of Topps cards each year, assembling the best examples into one set and selling the rest. He had worked backward into tobacco cards. They were challenging to find in great shape, but he kept trying to improve them as well.

### Meeting Carter

I had read articles by Carter and encountered him at Chicago shows, but I didn't really meet him until 2002 when I was writing an article about my first visit to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to see Burdick's collection.

Lionel was just back from a hospital stay when I met him and Irma at their home. He probably weighed 125 pounds and was maybe 5'5". He had a controlled stutter. His attire was card-collector casual, but always very neat. He was polite, a gentleman. I think it was because I first contacted him about Burdick that we hit it off from the start. I was interested in talking about the early days of the hobby and the pioneer collectors and not looking to talk him out of his

collection or about values. I didn't even realize how incredible his collection was until he insisted upon showing it to me.

*Lionel and Irma Carter outside their home in 2006. Photo by George Vrechek*



### **Hobby pioneer research**

I read every letter that Carter had received and retained from Burdick and other collectors – and Carter kept about everything. Carter loaned me his complete copies of the Card Collector's Bulletin, which I read, copied and returned. Correspondence between Burdick and Carter could be quite personal, including one where Burdick doused the flames coming from an irate Carter letter. Burdick had sent a collector to see Carter, who wound up getting drunk at the Carter home. I have written dozens of articles about hobby history thanks to Carter.

Carter wasn't into texting, email or the internet. By necessity, our contact was by phone, mail or in person. My wife and I lived in downtown Chicago and the Carters were a pleasant 12-mile drive up Lake Shore Drive. I could "run up" there and join him in the basement where he kept his cards. His oldest cards were mounted in scrapbooks using corner tabs. He carefully bent cards a little if he wanted to remove them from the tabs. He kept collecting until the junk wax era. I was interested in variations; Carter was not. As Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry in "Magnum Force" said, "A man has got to know his limitations."

My visits were an opportunity for him to look at his cards again and re-read letters and articles. He made copies of things of interest and mailed me 20 envelopes over the years. His letters to me could be lengthy even though I lived minutes away. We exchanged Christmas cards.



*Carter bought a 1959 White Sox World Series ticket for \$7.20 and found himself in a newspaper crowd photo. Photo by George Vrechek*



*Cub cards from various eras decorated Carter's basement. Photo by George Vrechek*

*Carter pointed to himself on the Colfax High basketball team photo. Photo by George Vrechek*

### **All in the family**

I had partial season Cubs tickets for two seats in the first row of the upper deck behind home plate. I invited Carter to a game. Because of his health, he was hesitant in having to get to the park and up to the upper deck, but I arranged for parking nearby and for us to take a (rare) Wrigley Field elevator. He had been a bank officer, and I had been a CPA. It was like talking to my dad at a baseball game - if my dad had collected baseball cards. Carter had a newspaper photo of a 1959 White Sox World Series game he attended. Carter is in the photo. My dad attended the same game.

Carter was six months younger than my dad and both served in WWII. The Carters' modest home was nearly identical to my parents' home built in 1951, 12 miles away with a 900-square-foot first floor and a self-finished basement. His house sold in 2011 for \$170,000; his metal cabinet of cards in the basement was worth at least 15 times that.



*Carter returned to Colfax annually to see relatives and organize the family softball games. Photos from Mark Carter*

Carter was the second youngest of nine children and grew up 130 miles from my mother's hometown. Lionel's first name was actually George as well. His dad's name was George Isaac Carter (1865-1946); my dad's name was Henry George Vrechek. Thanks to the Family Search database, I just learned that Lionel and I were 12<sup>th</sup> cousins. We shared the same 12<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather, Sir Nicholas Bacon (1510-1578, Suffolk, England). Amazingly, I wasn't even a cousin once or twice removed. The actor Kevin Bacon must be in our family tree somewhere as well, given the rule of Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.

### **The theft and its aftermath**

In November 2006, I phoned to ask his opinion on a hobby matter. We talked until he had to put down the kitchen phone to go to the front door. I could hear him in the background. I stayed on the phone for a few minutes and then hung up assuming he had more pressing matters and had forgotten the phone. The matters were pressing and disturbing. Scam artists managed to get him into his backyard while accomplices rushed through his house looking for valuables. The thieves took Irma's jewelry from the bedroom and got to the basement where they missed Carter's card cabinet but grabbed a small box of cards before darting out.

Carter called the Evanston police. It was a few days before I found out what had happened. Hobby publications and dealers were notified by me and others. Fortunately, a dealer on the East Coast read about the theft and led the police to the thieves' "fence" near Evanston. Carter estimated the value of the jewelry at \$25,000 and the cards at \$420,000. The police managed to get most of the cards returned in exchange for Carter not pressing charges against the source. Irma's jewelry was never found. The police advised Carter to either put everything in a bank safe deposit box or sell the collection if he wanted to avoid a return visit by thieves.

The theft led to the Carters agreeing that it was time to dispose of his collection. He couldn't see putting 50,000 cards in a bank vault, even though he and Irma had worked in a bank their

entire careers. He pointed out that stuff can be stolen from a bank vault as well. Also, fine print on box rentals contains language limiting a bank's liability.

Irma probably considered the theft the last straw in the problems of safeguarding increasingly valuable cards over the past 53 years of their marriage. She wasn't happy about losing her jewelry either. Lionel rationalized that he didn't really look at the cards much anymore and had not been pursuing the few cards he still needed for upgrades like the 1934-6 Batters-Up. Card prices had become too expensive for his tastes. Carter had already completed most of his sets when he first considered selling his collection in 1971. He thought the hobby had become too much about money, a frequent complaint of his.



*In addition to cards, Carter hung onto other sports and hobby ephemera. Photo by George Vrechek*

### **Mastro and Allen auction the collection**

Shortly after the theft, Carter told me he had already talked to Doug Allen and Bill Mastro of Mastro Auctions about selling his collection. It was Allen who made timely contacts right before and after the theft. Carter had known Mastro from the early years of Midwest shows, and Mastro and had stayed in touch. One 2002 Mastro inquiry on behalf of a customer was to see if Carter was interested in trading his 1952 Topps Pete Runnels for a replacement in lesser condition plus cash. It may have been one of Carter's first introductions to graded card scrutiny. He viewed the bulk of his cards among the best examples available. He was fussy in an era of non-fussy collectors.





Mastro apparently got back to Carter after inspecting the card that it wouldn't receive as high a grade as his buyer was seeking (PSA 8). Carter didn't own any cards at that time which had ever been graded. Carter had no reason to be concerned about anyone else's opinion of the condition of his cards.

That changed quickly though when Mastro Auctions got the collection ready for auction. SGC was chosen for grading certain cards and provided a quick turnaround. Carter's albums went as-is to Mastro Auctions where the cards were carefully removed from pages to send to SGC. SGC slabbed the cards with a pedigree: Lionel Carter Collection. Mastro generated national publicity through newspaper articles, a video and massive auction catalogs. The Chicago Tribune ran a front-page story about Carter's cards.

*The 288-page June 2007 Mastro catalog included an article on Carter and the second installment of card listings from his collection.*

One of the benefits Carter anticipated from the consignment was that he was told that his military memoirs would be turned into a book. Carter had been working on the book for about 60 years but was never able to find someone to publish the entire book the way he wanted it done. Affordable, self-publishing platforms had just started to become available. Carter enjoyed working on the book and was an excellent writer; the unfinished typed manuscript bugged his sense of orderliness.



*SGC graded cards sold through Mastro in 2007 were included in a 2023 Heritage auction. Photos by Heritage Auctions*

## **Auction results**

Carter cards were quickly put in Mastro auctions in April, June, August and December 2007. It wasn't easy to track the sale of Carter's collection in 2007, and it is even harder today.

Publicity mentioned an expected collection value of \$2-\$3 million. Following the April auction, the Chicago Sun-Times reported proceeds of \$1.6 million, highlighted by \$235,000 for his graded 1938 Goudey Heads-up set and \$165,000 for his 1951 Bowman Mantle graded SGC 96 and that "by year's end his whole collection could fetch \$3 million or more."

Carter had taken a pass on a \$150 price for Preston Orem's T206 Wagner in the 1950s, which Frank Nagy ultimately purchased for \$125. However, Carter did have a T206 Plank, which he had picked up along with other cards for \$5 in a 1957 Charles Bray auction. The card was graded poor 10 by SGC. Paul Mifsud purchased the card in April 2007. In 2020 the same card sold for \$32,701. Carter also had a 1933-4 Goudey of Lajoie, courtesy of Burdick, which was graded SGC 88 and included in the August auction. Also in the August auction was a raw 1934 Goudey set still in Carter's original scrapbook.

The final auction of Carter cards in December 2007 included his ungraded complete 1952 Topps set which went for a reported \$159,000 with 40 bids.

In a December 2007 post, Rich Mueller of Sports Collectors Daily reported information from a press release about the sale of the 1952 Topps set, "The '52 set, like some of the other items Mastro has sold from Carter's phenomenal holdings, included some slight imperfections because of the storage method and the passage of time, and thus were not graded by Mastro."

Mastro auction descriptions of some raw sets still in Carter's binders mentioned, "The stated grades are derived solely from observation of obverse appearance...however, we have no reason to suspect the presence of back damage." Carter liked the idea that some of his cards might be sold as complete sets in the binders he put together.

Hindsight is 20/20 and graded card prices have been soaring, but why weren't key 1952 Topps and Goudey cards graded? A photo of the ungraded Mantle looked sharp and just slightly off-center. Wouldn't Mickey Mantle deserve a grade even if he had been dumped in the Atlantic? Even a photo of the back would have been nice, rather than having the buyer conservatively suspect some "presence of back damage."

Carter told me that he felt that the proceeds he received from the auctions were less than he expected. He missed the cards and in retrospect felt that he had been "forced" to sell due to the theft.

## **Mastro and Allen**

In March 2009, Mastro Auctions "shut down" according to Auction Central News. The Chicago Tribune reported in 2015 that Bill Mastro was "sentenced to 20 months in prison for jacking up prices through shill bids and selling fraudulent merchandise." In 2016 Doug Allen was sentenced to 57 months in federal prison and employee Mark Theotikos was sentenced to 12 months. The activities prosecuted through the FBI occurred between 2002 and 2009.

Sports Collectors Daily reported in 2014 that the judge in the Mastro case also heard from a consigner as to problems stemming from the December 2007 Mastro auction. "Jeffrey W. Evers told Judge Ronald Guzman that he consigned his collection of 1,500 rare, vintage baseball cards including 1933 Goudey Babe Ruths, but the company didn't give him a receipt with a detailed list. Evers claims Mastro Auctions had some of the cards graded by SGC and sold them only to offer them again in later auctions, with higher grades from PSA. His contention is that Mastro purchased the cards at a lowball figure, had them re-graded and then presented them in smaller or individual lots in order to maximize profits. He also claims he was never paid for some of the cards he consigned."

Mastro was released from prison in 2017 and Allen in 2019.

### **2023 Auction**

A May 11, 2023, Heritage auction included 73 1952 Topps from the "Lionel Carter Collection." The grades were phenomenal with five PSA 10s, 65 PSA 9s and three PSA 8.5 ("beaters"). Over 83% of Carter's 1952 Topps were described as "none superior" (as rated by PSA) and with only a handful of cards in an equal grade.

If there were a term like "even more phenomenal," it would come close to describing the prices realized. A PSA 10 of journeyman Don Johnson #190 (whiteback) sold for \$117,000 according to the Heritage website. The four other PSA 10s in the auction averaged \$55K each. Nine PSA 9 high numbered cards averaged a relatively modest \$15K each. (Johnson is the last number in the print run and thought by some to be from two rows of short prints.)

Other low-numbered commons graded PSA 9 sold in a price range from around \$5K to \$50K for minor stars and averaged \$11K each. A few SGC graded cards from the original auctions were also in the Heritage auction. Notably a SGC 96 of 1957 Topps Willie Mays sold for only \$3,600 and similar SGC commons sold for a lot less. The totals for 73 of Carter's 1952 Topps cards exceeded \$1 million per my calculator.

### **The slab story**

The slabs for the PSA 1952 Topps were in a design used after 2017. How did the raw cards make their way from Carter's albums in 2007 into new PSA slabs in 2023? I asked Heritage Auctions for any comment.

A spokesperson responded, "While Heritage does not know the exact date of when these cards were graded initially, the cards were clearly graded many years ago due to the generation of labels that appeared in the PSA holder. Heritage had the cards reholdered by PSA once they determined a pedigree would be warranted. As to the merit of the pedigree, the documentation provided by the consignor to both PSA and Heritage was substantial. PSA only adds a pedigree when they feel entirely comfortable with the origin of an item."

For those of us previously unfamiliar with "reholdering," a long article could be written on the risk, rewards and reasons behind getting a card reholdered versus regraded.

For cards submitted for reholdering, PSA's website states, "The 'Reholder' service applies to trading cards that are currently graded and encapsulated by PSA that the customer would like placed into the most current PSA holder. For this submission type, the cards will not be graded. The cards will be received and then inspected by a member of the grading team to determine if the card and PSA holder are authentic. Once it is determined that the holder and card are genuine, the card will be removed and placed into a new PSA holder. This service is generally used for cards that are housed in PSA holders that have been damaged, or to create label consistency within a collection."

It would appear from the comments that Carter's 1952 Topps set was sold raw and intact in his albums in 2007. The bidder had at least some of the cards graded by PSA after the auction. Heritage had 73 of the cards reholdered by PSA before the May 2023 auction.

PSA has graded about 300,000 1952 Topps and only 0.6% of them graded PSA 9 (1,701 cards) or PSA 10 (93 cards). This one auction of 73 cards accounted for 4% of the 1952 Topps PSA 9s and 10s in the world. Mr. Mint, Al Rosen, bought 4,400 1952 Topps high numbers in a 1987 find of an entire case. Coincidentally, exactly 4,400 high numbers have been graded by PSA as 8, 9 or 10. The Rosen find may have put some damper on the need for Carter's almost-perfect high numbers.

Mantle and super stars from Carter's 1952 Topps set did not appear in the 2023 auction. However, there was the Pete (James E.) Runnels black-back graded PSA 9, which sold for \$24,000. Did the same Pete Runnels card judged not good enough in 2002 improve with age?



*Page 1 of Carter's 1952 Topps album included the Pete Runnels card. Two clear plastic tabs held cards in place. Photo by George Vrechek*

*Runnels appeared in a new PSA9 holder in the 2023 Heritage Auction. Photos by Heritage Auctions*

## **Lionel's death**

In mid-2008, I called for Lionel. Irma answered and told me Lionel had gone from the hospital to a nearby nursing home and had been there for a week or two. Lionel had been diagnosed with a leak in the aorta valve in 1995, suffered small strokes starting in 2002 and periodically complained of pains and confusion. I visited him in June 2008 at the nursing home. He did not appear to be in discomfort but seemed to run out of gas. His sense of humor was intact, and we talked about getting together when he got home. I had an attendant take a picture of us, which was likely the last photo taken of Lionel.



On August 29, 2008, I called for Lionel and found out from Irma that Lionel had died the previous day. She declined my offer to be of any help. She said there would be no obituary and no service with a comment that there was no one around anymore. The last of his eight siblings had died in 2004. However, he had nephews and nieces aplenty who he had seen at prior family reunions in Colfax. Lionel told me a great-nephew, Mark Carter, had shown an interest in cards at one time.

A few months later, I called Irma twice. In the conversations I mentioned that I was interested in seeing that Lionel's hobby publications and correspondence were preserved, and that if she wanted to sell the hobby material to me, I would be happy to buy it at her price. Lionel had told me that there had been no discussions about auctioning his hobby publications or correspondence. I thought his keeping it was a way for him to stay in the hobby without worrying about safeguarding cards. Irma said that Doug Allen had already been there and had taken whatever hobby material was left in the basement. She didn't specifically know what had happened to Lionel's correspondence and hobby publications. She said she presumed Allen was going to sell what he took and give her the proceeds. She said she was not interested in talking to me or anyone else about this ever again and that our conversation was over.

## **Irma's death**

In December 2010, I received a call from one of Lionel's nieces, Paula Laub. She said that a neighbor was worried not seeing Irma and called the police who did a wellness check at the Carter home. They found Irma had died on December 5, 2010. Laub learned that I had written about Lionel. Laub and her sister Mona Hubbard were arranging a 200-mile trip to the Carter home. She asked for my help in identifying anything related to the hobby.

I met Laub and Hubbard at the Carter home. The basement cabinets contained nothing related to the hobby, and the attic crawl space, where Carter's correspondence with hobby pioneers had been kept, yielded nothing either. Laub already had Carter's thin book of well-worn

duplicates in plastic pages. The only hobby material we found were Lionel's copies of Sports Collectors Digest stacked from the floor to the ceiling under the basement stairs.

I talked to Laub again in 2024. She recalled Uncle Lionel as "always special, so funny and so much fun to be with." Laub's father, Loren, was Lionel's younger brother and had died in 1972. Subsequently, Lionel walked both Paula and Mona down the aisles for their weddings.

Laub learned that Irma had fallen in a grocery store parking lot a few days before her death. She had been taken to a hospital but then released and given a change in her medication. Irma apparently neglected to continue to take other blood thinning medication, had fallen in her bathroom, hit her head and died from the resulting blood loss. A Christmas card from Laub, left on the dining room table, led police to contact her as being a likely next of kin.

### **The will and the estate**

According to Laub, the family did not find a will for Lionel but there was a relatively recent document for Irma, apparently sufficient for probate, identifying Northern Trust as executor. Irma was an only child. Attorneys from Hamilton Thies & Lorch LLP represented the estate per probate court records. Laub said that Chicago Cubs Charities, the Levy Senior Center Foundation in Evanston, the Greater Chicago Food Depository and one non-family individual were named as beneficiaries.

Lionel was active at the senior center and is well-remembered there; they confirmed that a donation was received. The Chicago Food Depository confirmed a donation was received in 2013. The Estate of Irma Carter is mentioned on one line among a list of over 30,000 donors for the year. A spokesperson for Cubs Charities found no major contribution by the Carters. Relatives of the Carters received nothing, according to Laub.

A spokesperson for the attorneys handling the estate told me that the third charity was not the Cubs Charities but another organization, and that there was more than one individual named in a living trust for Irma Carter. The trust was prepared for Irma after Lionel's death, which essentially governed the distribution of the estate.

For someone as organized as Lionel, it seems regrettable that more thought wasn't given to communicating the wishes for his estate and conveying that to his family. Family members don't always ask either. The collection sale seemed like an impulsive decision that could have been better planned. It is unlikely that Lionel and Irma ever spent a nickel from their proceeds.



*The Carter home  
in December  
2010. Photo by  
George Vrechek*

### **Recent contacts**

In 2021, Lionel's great nephew, Mark Carter, contacted me to see if I knew anything about Carter's unpublished military memoirs that Mastro had been given. Allen had posted on Net54 that he hoped to have the book "Carter in the Cavalry" published in the summer of 2008.

I sent Mark Carter copies of what I had from one chapter of the book. In 2024 I learned that Laub had access to two copies of Carter's manuscript, except for the last chapter. She would like to track down that chapter and see that Lionel's book is printed.

I also talked to Helen Andreae, 89, of Sibley, Illinois, another of Lionel's nieces. She called him her favorite uncle and provided background on the Carter family.

The Carters are buried together at the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Illinois, with the inscription "Carter, George L., PFC USA, World War II BSM (Bronze Star Medal recipient) 1918-2008, Irma M. 1923-2010 Beloved Wife."

### **Carter's cards**

Cards slabbed with the Carter pedigree today are reminders of the man and a collection assembled in the early days of the hobby. If Carter added a card to his collection, the card effectively tells the new owner that Carter searched around and felt that this card was the best he could find. Carter didn't settle for a lesser conditioned card to save a few nickels, which is about what most of them cost him.

The 50,000 cards from Carter's collection continue to spread through the card-collecting hobby – in sometimes puzzling ways. The demand for high-grade cards has not abated and 2007 prices

seem like bargains. Like Burdick, Carter would have trouble relating to the prices for his cards today.

### **Last letter**

The last letter Carter sent me was in September 2007. He explained that when he retired from the bank in 1983, he was delighted to be able to get a memory typewriter through the bank at a good price. The typewriter finally died in 2007, and Carter apologized for his handwritten letter. He commented on recent Cubs shortcomings and commended me on an “exceptional” article I had written about his baseball card collecting buddy, Buck Barker. He enclosed a baseball card, a 1985 Topps of pitcher Ken Schrom, adding a note: “Sending you a baseball card the Mastro Gang must have missed – you can stamp it from ‘the Famous Lionel Carter Collection’ and sell it for \$150,000.” Yes, and then I could have bought Apple stock at \$6 in 2007.

Thanks, Cousin Lionel, for the memories and your contributions to the hobby.

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