

Arcade cards provided cheap thrills

By George Vrechek



Arcade cards bring back memories of penny arcades. However, the number of people with memories of penny arcades decline each year, and arcade cards don't usually come to mind when you think of valuable cards. However, they can be fun to collect.

Pennies from players

Arcade cards were inexpensive attractions to coax a few pennies from each "player" starting in the early 1900s. Arcades were frequently associated with amusement parks and were filled with games of chance and card dispensers, designed to continually attract customers and requiring minimal labor to operate and maintain.

J. Frank Meyer was a young man in the printing business in Chicago, who understood the arcade market and set out to fill the needs. By 1910 Meyer took control of the Exhibit Supply Company in Chicago (ESCO). While there were always competitors, ESCO became the number one issuer of arcade cards, which are often just called "exhibits." To understand the cards, it helps to look at the business model and history of ESCO.

Passing those censors

Most of the ESCO cards were non-sports subjects designed to interest young patrons thinking of romance and amused by fortune or joke cards. For some reason pictures of pretty girls always helped sales. Whether you were selling cigarette packs or arcade cards, you couldn't go too wrong. ESCO sales

Categories of sets

Cards can be divided into categories such as art models, actors and actresses, cowboys and Indians, fortunes, jokes, sports cars, novelties, airplanes and sports figures. Film stars and athletes printed on sheets of 32 might have a few cards added and subtracted each year. However some novelty sets created by ESCO's art department would go for years with no significant changes. You didn't have to worry about movie stars past their prime or athletes retiring. Set names included Gypsy Queen Card Reader, Palm Fortune, Blind Dates, Your Ideal Love Mate, Future Partner and Family, True Love Letters and New License Bureau. Gore was printing some of these sets for old customers into the 1960s, still showing ESCO copyright dates from the 1920s, according to Marchant.

Cataloging the sets, an endless endeavor

Even Jefferson Burdick, the Father of Card Collecting, had difficulty organizing all the arcade cards when he started cataloging cards in the late 1930s. Arcade card collectors were still refining Burdick's categorization into the 1990s. From 1989 to 1996 Bob Schulhof (1942-2015) published the *Penny Arcade* newsletter which had 100 subscribers and included articles to further catalog the plethora of issues. Sometimes it was hard to tell if ESCO or a competitor issued a set. A competitor might be taken over by ESCO and the brand of the acquired company maintained.

Postcard dealers

ESCO cards can be found at postcard shows buried in boxes hauled around by dealers and organized by subject. Sometimes they are nicely segregated into a section called arcade or amusement cards. While ESCO initially produced cards that could be used as postcards in the early 1900s, most of their cards issued after the 1920s had no printing on the back, although in ESCO's final years, they did print some with descriptions on the back.

Postcard collectors look at arcade cards as an offshoot; they are not really postcards. Non-sports card collectors likely do the same since the cards are large, unnumbered and with limited text. The good news about arcade cards is that they were inexpensive to start with and remain so today. They also present a significant challenge to collect sets with variations and with cards only printed for a short time. Non-sports arcade card prices can be \$1 or \$2 per card, sometimes more, occasionally less.

Movie, radio and recording stars were adjusted to suit the times. Cowboy cards were popular



It is impossible to describe arcade cards in a brief article, however the images included herein depict what you can buy if you get those pennies together.

George Vrechek is a Chicago collector who bought arcade cards at Riverview Amusement Park in the 1950s. He cut the baseball cards to fit in a box with his 1956 Topps baseball cards. He collects vintage sports cards and has written for Sports Collectors Digest for 30 years. With encouragement from Bill Christensen and Les Davis and the camaraderie found in issues of The Wrapper, he has slowly ventured into the non-sports world. He can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net and welcomes any feedback or additional information.

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A page from ESCO's 1961 catalog for arcade operators

A FREE SIGN WITH EACH INITIAL ORDER OF A SINGLE CARD SERIES WHEN REQUESTED
ADDITIONAL SIGNS LESS THAN COST ONLY 50¢ EACH

HOW TO INCREASE YOUR CARD SALES

To increase your card sales—be sure to keep new clean signs in all your card vending machines—they always attract the players. Combine your selection of picture card series, 2 series in each machine as suggested in illustration of cards. Orders on all fast selling cards placed far in advance will ultimately prevent any unexpected shortage. It's wise to keep an adequate supply of Exhibit Cards on hand at all times. The enormous selection and consistent new releases of Exhibit Cards is an essential contributing factor to prove a safe investment for steady profits from all your Exhibit Card Vending Machines.

ATTRACTIVE DISPLAY SIGNS ARE YOUR SALESMEN



NOTICE! The machines pictured below are no longer available — they are shown only to help identify your model card vender when ordering display signs. Please specify 1c, 2c, 5c or 2 for 5c sellers.



TYPE No. 1 SPEEDOMATIC
 Full Transparent Sign. Size: 12½" x 24¾". Machine Size: 3'11" High, 18¾" wide, 10½" deep.



TYPE No. 2 STREAMLINE and 1951 Silent Salesman
 Transparent top sign 12½" x 18¾". Lower Sign cardboard 8½" x 12½". Machine Size: 6'4" high, 21" wide, 12" deep.



TYPE No. 3 MODEL "D"
 Full Cardboard Sign 12½" x 26¾". Machine Size: 6' high, 20" wide, 11" deep.



TYPE No. 4 DELUXE MODEL
 Two Cardboard Signs. Top Sign, 12½" x 18¾". Lower Sign, 8½" x 12½". Machine Size: 38" high, 17" wide, 8" deep.



TYPE No. 5 MODEL "E"
 Two Cardboard Signs. Top Sign, 12" x 15". Lower Sign, 8" x 12". Machine Size: 30" high, 18" wide, 11" deep.



TYPE No. 6 "IDEAL" MODEL and 2c Silent Salesman, Jr.
 Cardboard Sign. Size: 6½" x 6¾". Free upon request. Machine Size: 11" high, 9" wide, 9" deep.

We maintain a special Art Department to provide a full supply of clean attractive display signs for immediate shipment. All display signs with illustrations are expertly hand colored. Signs for the light-up Speedomatic and Streamline Card Venders are printed on a special transparent paper. Previous model venders, "D", "E" and DeLuxe are printed on cardboard and also hand colored. When ordering a "DeLuxe size" sign, specify either "cardboard" or "transparent". Please use our new Order Form.