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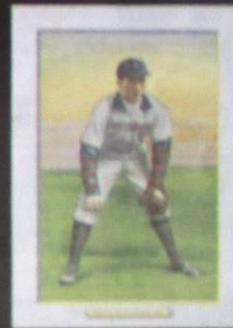
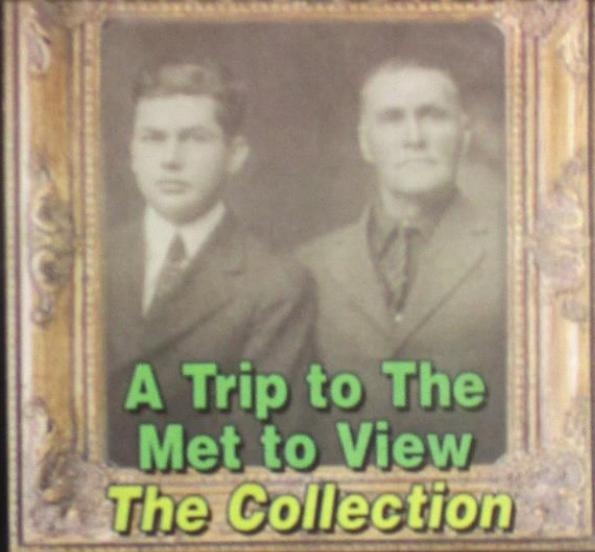
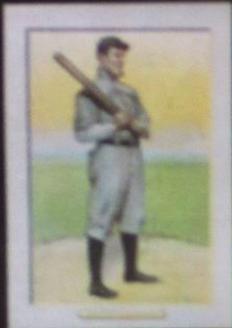
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Burdick Revisited

A Trip to The
Met to View
The Collection



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*The New York Metropolitan
Museum of Art, photo G. Vrechek*

Burdick Revisited

By George Vrechek

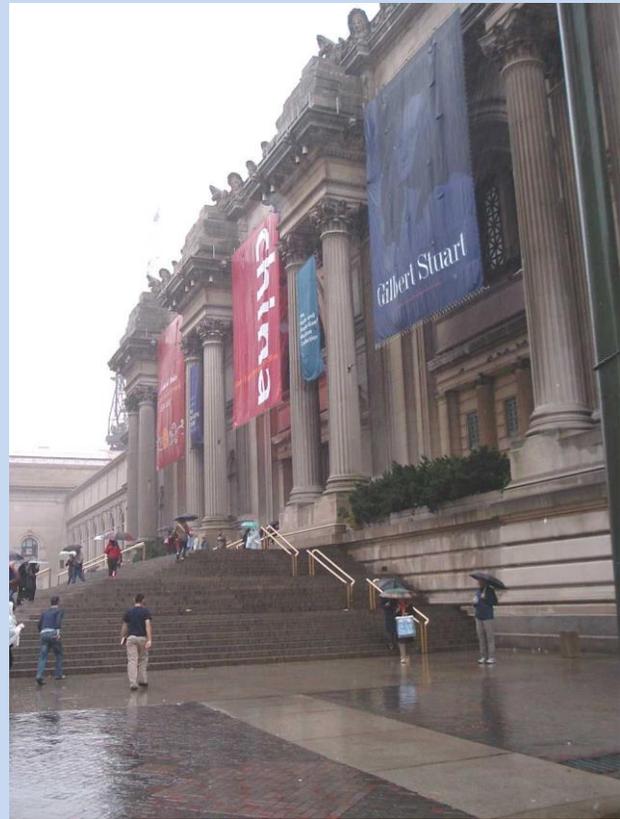
In the October 18, 2002, *SCD*, I described my experience in visiting the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the collection donated by Jefferson Burdick, the “father of card collecting,” the originator of the system for cataloging issues. Burdick was born in 1900 and died in 1963. He spent 15 years organizing his 306,353-card collection for the museum.

In visiting the museum in 2002, I expected an “oasis” of cards but wound up only getting a “sip,” as I had to satisfy myself with seeing perhaps a hundred cards on display. Those wishing to see more of the collection housed in the Department of Drawings and Prints had to make advance arrangements. Access was limited to those doing “serious” research, in the words of the museum staff. I spent the next several months getting as serious as I could about wanting to see more of the collection. With the permission of the department head I was finally able to make a return visit to see parts of the collection not on display.

What was Burdick Thinking?

I had read that Burdick glued(!) most of the cards into albums. Before my visit I tried to understand why Burdick would have done this. In his own publication *The Card Collector's Bulletin*, Burdick described how to mount cards using corner mounts. (Plastic sheets were years away.) He wrote that cards should not be glued. What caused him to ignore his own advice?

*Undated family photo of Jefferson Burdick left and his father.
Courtesy of Burdick's great niece Betty Clark.*



Burdick started collecting as a 10 year-old. He collected any type of American ephemera. Most of his collection was acquired inexpensively. As he became more serious about expanding his collection, he found himself having to acquire more and more items. As a collector with many sets to conquer and no thought of selling his collection, rising prices were not helpful. Burdick may have helped keep the prices modest that were reflected in *The Card Collector's Bulletin* and eventually in the several editions of *The American Card Catalog*.

In 1948 he wrote in *The Card Collector's Bulletin* that it was time to do something with what he had assembled. In order to keep it intact and make it available for future collectors to enjoy, he donated the collection to the museum. Burdick wrote to fellow collector Lionel Carter in the late 1950s that he was struggling with the problem of how to mount the cards at the museum, concluding that "all the plain backs and printed general backs would be pasted down." My feeling is that Burdick wanted the cards to remain with the museum permanently and that the corner mounting was too likely to result in cards being lost or removed. It was more important to Burdick that the cards remain in the collection rather than retaining their condition and value. I think he preferred to think of the collection as more of a testament to persistence and organization than to any financial achievement.

The glue added permanency. The glue also took a lot of time. If you could pick out a card, turn it over, grab a jar of glue, spread the glue on the back of the card, replace the glue stick, turn the card over, place it in an album, align it in the right spot, press down on the card, and remove any excess glue; maybe you could glue 1 card in 30 seconds? If you worked 6 hours per day with no breaks, no organizing the cards, and made no mistakes, you would glue 720 cards in a day, 3,600 in a week, 18,720 in a year. 306,353 items glued would take 17 years. Burdick mounted most of the cards himself. Try gluing a few hundred thousand cards into albums with the arthritis that afflicted Burdick.

Ring the Bell to see 306,353 Cards

The Department of Drawings and Prints is surprisingly easily concealed right in the middle of the museum. I reached the door to the room, rang a small doorbell and was admitted. Any bags, containers or pens are left with the receptionist. The reading room is a wonderful space with a high ceiling, views toward an inner light court, a long wooden table with four chairs on each side, surrounded by books. Unfortunately no photographs are allowed (without an act of Congress.) Another room held storage items including the bulk of the Burdick collection. Curator Connie McPhee greeted me and asked what I wanted to see in the 2½ hours allotted for my visit. Among many other things, Connie is responsible for seeing that the collection is properly handled and is available to answer questions. I asked if I could see the albums with Goudeys, Play Balls and Diamond Stars to start. It was soon apparent that no one there had the slightest idea of what I was talking about. They were card custodians, not collectors. In fairness, the department keeps track of 11,000 drawings and 1.5 million prints; so even Burdick's collection is just a drop in their bucket.

The directory includes a silhouette of Burdick, page from SCD article



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The Directory

Burdick and the department head in 1948, A. Hyatt Mayor, put together a wonderful guide to the collection. The printed brochure is in the exact style and font as *The 1960 American Card Catalog* published by Burdick and others. It has been kept intact as the reference for selecting items to review. The first page is an introduction by Mayor. Burdick explains the organization of the collection in barely over one efficient additional page. The remaining few pages list the 394 albums and boxes; all numbers carefully assigned by Burdick.

Mayor's introduction provides background on Burdick. He "made his living at the Crouse-Hines Company in Syracuse by assembling intricate electrical connections for use in mines, flour mills, or wherever an open spark might set off an explosion (Crouse-Hinds is now part of Cooper Industries and is still in business in Syracuse)...Early in life arthritis began to stiffen his joints and warp his fingers until finally so simple an act as putting on his hat cost him a painful minute to contrive...Living in meager lodgings and spending little on himself, he threw his earnings as well as his energy into publishing books and acquiring the finest collection of American cards and ephemera...How could we keep these thousands of cards...from being disarranged by public handling? How should we mount them to preserve them from damage? We tried one thing after another until Jeff was satisfied...Many enthusiasts came to help him (at the museum), the chief support being given by Fred Baum. We bought him more and more scrapbook binders, more and more pure rag pages, and more and more pots of paste."



The study room for drawings and prints at the Met, photo Metropolitan Museum of Art

Burdick writes in his introduction: "No attempt has been made to collect quantity by including every minute difference that is of no particular importance to the vast majority of card students. While many recent issues are shown in whole or in part, there has been no effort to obtain completeness in the flood of new cards since 1952. (Yes, Burdick seemed overwhelmed by the explosion of card issues in the '50s – several each year, ridiculous!) ...A very few actual

duplicates are included for a specific purpose, such as showing both front and back of a card, or an open and closed metamorphic. In older material, the problem has been to find cards. It is impossible to over-emphasize the extreme scarcity of many old cards. Many whole sets are known by a single specimen and even where considerable quantity survive, they are often found as a single lot and never appear again. The fortunate finder of the lot has all there is. Under such conditions, a collector can only hope to obtain the commoner cards and a good showing of the scarcer ones. The present collection, through the help of friends and fortune, is better than average (Burdick being the master of understatement) in both quantity and quality...A few of the cards were obtained in 1910, but most of them have been acquired since 1933.”

Album #324, R300-318

After consulting Burdick’s directory, I asked for Album #324. One of the staff members went to the storage room and returned with a 12 ½ inch by 15 inch scrap book with a green cover. A label on the spine listed the contents: R300 – R318. The staff member placed two velvet covered small boxes on the table in front of me. The album was placed between the boxes so that when opened the book would not be forced to lay completely flat thus conserving the binding and pages. You are asked to not have a pencil in your hand when turning the pages to avoid marking the cards. The staff member sits in the room with you for security of the cards but refrains from breathing over your shoulder.

The first page of the album contained R300s, the rare George C. Miller Co., 32 card set. Burdick had only perhaps 8 of the cards. I remembered Burdick’s 1960 letter to Lionel Carter that I had come across and reported in the November 21, 2003, *SCD*. Burdick wrote: “A lot of people think I have everything, but I don’t. I lack a lot of R300, two of the 1934 Big Leagues and two of the Diamond Stars (batting average backs)” Four of the R300s had been removed from the album and replaced with a penciled notation that they had been “removed to Mat 5/4/92.” This notation appears relatively frequently in the albums as many of the expensive cards and other representative cards have been placed on “mats” for display in the public area of the museum.

Three of the George Miller cards still in the album were missing the bottom one-quarter of the card. The cut-off portion of the card was designed to be returned to the issuer for a prize. The final card on the page was intact but in fair condition. Cards were taped onto the pages. The tape runs across the edge of one side on the back with an attempt to avoid covering the printed description. The tape forms a hinge so that the cards can be flipped over to examine the backs. When the pages are turned these cards have a tendency to flip over, so the staff instructs you to cover the cards with a piece of cardboard before turning a page so that the cards don’t move. After turning the page you then pull the cardboard out – at the risk of dinging some of the cards in my opinion. Burdick was well aware of the problem and writes in his directory: “Most cards are pasted down or hinged so that normally they will turn with the page without damage, but it is requested that some care be given to avoid bending the cards.”

It quickly got better as I turned the page (carefully) to R301 Overland Candy, large cards in beautiful shape (except for being glued into the album), a complete set, all in order. Next were the 1943 M&Ps. What were they doing in this sequence? This was not chronological. However Burdick assigned them R 302-1 so this is where they belong.

As you thumb through the pages R302, R303, R304...you think: “He had everything!” I had to share my discovery with the print department staff. (God only knows what they were thinking as they nodded back.) Well of course he had “everything.” What Burdick owned became THE system. There was no sense leaving gaps in the numbering for something that Burdick didn’t have. He had it all. R304s are the 1935 Al DeMaree die-cuts. Burdick had Meyer, Bartell, English, Hendrich, and Koenig. I had only seen this set listed in one guide other than *The*

American Card Catalog and I had never even seen a card from this set before. In a few cases Burdick adds brief notes on the pages in his restricted handwriting. R309 is another set you don't see: Goudey premiums with players and large team cards. R311-2 is a set of large cards of football players and scenes including number 77 Red Grange. Some players are bareheaded and the stands in some backgrounds have about as many fans as you would find at a frosh-soph game. We are so used to looking for baseball players that at least I was unaware that sets like R317 include not only Gehrig and Goslin, but Tom Mix and Hoot Gibson. Burdick notes the color variations in the R318 Batter-up set. Not all of the cards have backs. It is apparent that cards 1 through 80 are in a different format than the higher numbers.

Album 325, Ruth and Rockne

Album 325 starts with the R319 1933 Goudeys. All are hinged in the album with tape. Most cards are VG-Ex. Lajoie has been "removed to Mat 5/4/92." The spot that should hold card #144 of Babe Ruth has a note "not in place 10/6/82," perhaps a card that disappeared during a viewing. The 1935 Goudey Puzzle cards are glued down. However Burdick collected enough duplicates to glue down both the fronts and the backs, thereby showing all fronts and all backs. He does the same with the R322 Goudey game cards. The 1941 Goudeys include all color variations: red, green, yellow, and blue. The R325 Knot Hole cards are hinged. R327 Diamond Stars include both the 1933 and 1934 average back variations. In order to show the variations, Burdick glues the fronts and shows the backs. The high numbers are in mint condition and held by 2 or 3 corner mounts; the first use of corner mounts that I saw. R328 U.S. Caramels Famous Athletes includes a Ruth in good condition, Gehrig, and four cards with creases. The R331 football set includes a Rockne in Ex-Mt.

DeLongs and Fleer Funnies

Album 326 has 1933 DeLongs as well as Play Balls in Ex-Mt. The '39 Play Ball DiMaggio was missing. R337 was a set in the album unfamiliar to me. It is also called the 1933 Eclipse Import. The drawings are crude with generic players but the cards are in superb condition with rich, red backgrounds. Babe Ruth is among the "players in action." Sport Kings are in this album along with an uncut paper sheet of the Sport Kings cards. R343 was another set that I had not seen. It is a large set with scenes of football games; no face masks in the entire set. Burdick handwrites the players name if they aren't listed. 1948 Bowmans are here including an uncut sheet.

Early Topps are in another album pulled for my review. However, there are no Connie Mack All Stars and the 1952 high numbers are missing with no notation. The archivists had no idea when I asked: What happened to the '52 highs? Burdick did not make any distinction as to back colors or any variations: Page/Sain. As Burdick warned in his introduction to the directory, he made no effort to obtain completeness in cards issued since 1952. He probably didn't like those 25-cent each prices on the 1952 high numbers at the time. Burdick also states that there were just too many issues in the 1950s for him to include. I counted about 120 issues in the 1920s, 170 issues in the 1930s, 115 issues in the 1940s, and 260 issues in the 1950s. He would not have done well with the 260 (?) issues per year pace of recent years. Burdick needed help from others like Buck Barker and Lionel Carter to get up to speed on the "recent" gum issues after 1933.

I covered most of the baseball cards issued from 1933 to 1948 by going through just three of the 394 albums. Except for a few cards that had been removed, I believe I had seen complete sets of most every issue. It had been cumbersome turning some of the pages due to the size of the cards glued down. I didn't want to cause any of the cards to bend. Frequent turning of the pages have occurred in the past 40 plus years the collection has been at the museum. More page turning won't help the cards.

I only had 391 albums and several hundred boxes of cards to go in order to see the rest of the collection and I had less than an hour left. My next choice was Album 332 “Gums since 1948.” It contains R714 though R790 including Topps Scoops with Ruth, the four horsemen, Tarzan 3-Ds, Topps Magic Photos, Adventure cards, Fleer funnies, Indian Gum reprints, Leaf Pirate cards, and one Fleer basketball card. All of these were relatively recent issues and Burdick mounted them either with corner mounts or by making cuts in the album pages. They were less secure than the other cards I had seen. Burdick was changing his approach as he progressed or perhaps he felt there was little risk of losing cards that were so recent.

Album #1

For something different I picked Album #1, pre 1870 cards with 789 items. It contained an introduction on typed notepaper by Burdick on the history of advertising cards and trade cards. I recalled seeing something similar in *The American Card Catalog*. Again everything is glued. This time there are cards of hotels, businesses, advertising pieces, travel destinations, jewelry, medicines and food. The years on the cards are 1797, 1802, 1830s etc. There are invitations to President James Buchanan’s inauguration ball, mourning cards for Abraham Lincoln, cards evidencing racism following the Civil War.

Tobacco Cards

Album #346 contains T200 to T212. Most cards were originally in Ex-Mt condition, glued in a tight side-by-side fashion. Burdick made 1950 vintage photocopies of the card backs and pasted the copies on the backs of each page. T201 Double folders are glued shut, but Burdick uses duplicates to show the players underneath the folds (the “closed metamorphic” as Burdick wrote). For the T206s Burdick shows all the known backs: Uzit, Lenox, Broadleaf, etc. Plank and Wagner have been removed for safekeeping. Magie is there, though in fair condition. I didn’t have the time to determine if all other variations were there, but it appeared to be a complete set of what was known at the time. This one album contains cards (minus the glue) worth a Park Avenue penthouse, or two. Album #70 demonstrated the range of the collection including H815 prizefighters, H818 with a female footballer, cards on bull fighting, harness racing, children and miscellaneous sports.

Observations

My 2 1/2 hours quickly came to an end. I had seen (or more accurately “glanced at”) about 2% of the collection. The staff had been very cordial and a little amused by my extreme interest in everything they had. I gave them a photo of Burdick to include in the collection. They had never seen a picture of him. I went through nine albums, three of them rather quickly. I would have stayed the week had they let me.



I found that Burdick’s collection appeared to be in much the same shape as when he finished mounting it. The albums were original, Burdick’s handwriting is evident, the same directory is in use. The increased value of the cards, the possibility of damage or loss, and the increased interest in seeing the cards has led to the unfortunate situation that the collection is not available to the general public to enjoy as Burdick had envisioned when he decided to give his collection to the museum.

The museum’s A. Hyatt Mayor finished his introduction to the collection and Burdick as follows: “On the 10th of January 1963 he told us at five o’clock that he had mounted his last card. As he twisted himself into his overcoat he seemed suddenly tired. When he bade us goodbye, he added ‘I shan’t be back.’ The next day he walked from his hotel on Madison Avenue at 26th Street to the nearby University Hospital, where almost exactly two months later, he died.... On first meeting, one felt sorry for this racked, frail man, with black-lashed eyes of a haunting gray

