

COLLECTING

The world of vintage baseball cards

BY MICHAEL OSACKY

The hobby of collecting baseball cards picked up steam in the early 1950s, when athletes such as Mickey Mantle, Hank Aaron, Willie Mays and Sandy Koufax graced the baseball diamond. The sport was embraced as the national pastime, and boys were in heaven trading and coveting the cards of their favorite players.

Many of the era's best baseball players fought for their country in World War II and were deeply proud of their service. Like them, my grandfather returned from the war, married and started a new life. When I was 16, he gave me a musty old shoebox full of old baseball cards rescued from the attic. My excitement and passion for collecting was ignited that day.

As a vintage card/sports memorabilia appraiser and collector, I want to help preserve these pieces of history. As I travel through different states, I relish the thrill of the hunt for vintage baseball card collections. Each has a unique story of how and when it was obtained, its significance to the owner, and the question of how the collection will be passed on to future generations. Unfortunately, an unknown amount of vintage memorabilia will never see the light of day again, lost to the passage of time or landfills.

Sports memorabilia is a niche hobby that has evolved over time. Many people are unsure of how to value their vintage card collection, so here are a few tips for the amateur card collector:

Is your card trimmed? Unscrupulous people trim cards to make it seem like the card has four perfectly sharp corners. Use a ruler to determine if a card is the appropriate size.

Has there been paper loss? Many cards in the early 1900s were glued in scrapbooks. I've seen cards that look great, but when I turn them over, the entire back is missing. Remember to look at both the front and back of the card. If it's glued into a scrapbook, do not remove.

Pay attention to centering. People pay less money for cards that are "off-center." Cards with off centering (top to bottom and/or left to right) are visually unappealing.

Creasing matters. Creasing, big or small, will significantly lower the value of a card. Use a magnifying glass to help identify creases.

Most cards manufactured after 1975 are worthless. There are a few exceptions, but these are rare.

POPULAR SETS Many veterans were baseball card collectors before and after their military service. On a recent trip to New York, I met with a Vietnam War veteran who was reluctant to share his story. When he went off to serve his country, his mother threw out his card collection, which had been passed down to him from his grandfather. She thought she was just getting rid of "clutter." When her son returned home from war, his room had been cleaned, and Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Ty Cobb cards from the 1920s and 1930s were among the items thrown away. A treasure trove of history gone forever.

The more popular sets collected include:

Tobacco cards from 1909-1911 These were inserted into tobacco packages. The reverse sides are ads for different tobacco brands.

Cracker Jack cards Issued in 1914 and 1915 in Brooklyn, N.Y., and Chicago, these were a gimmick to increase sales. One of the most famous advertising ploys in sports history, cards featured future Hall of Famers such as "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, Ty Cobb and Christy Mathewson. Caramel staining is usually prevalent.


1933 Goudey This set of 234 cards includes many future Hall of Famers. The set has four Babe Ruth cards and two Lou Gehrigs. The key card needed to complete the set is Nap Lajoie. The only way to obtain it was to write the Goudey Gum Co.

1952 Topps This year produced Mickey Mantle's rookie card.

A BIT OF HISTORY Hall of Famer and World War II veteran Bob Feller is the only pitcher in Major League Baseball history to pitch an opening day no-hitter. Shortly before his death in December 2010, we met for his last sit-down interview. He served as a gunner on USS *Alabama* and missed four years of baseball to defend his country. Feller struck out all-stars such as Mantle, Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio. He never struck out Ruth but did see him pitch.

Michael Osacky is an expert appraiser and historic preserver of pre-1970 sports cards and memorabilia. He writes a column for Parade.

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Wartime veterans inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame

55 Army

25 Navy

4 Marine Corps

1 Coast Guard

Inductees in the National Baseball Hall of Fame who served during wartime in more than one conflict are Larry MacPhail (Army, World War I and World War II) and Ted Williams (Marine Corps, World War II and Korean War).

Source: Baseball-Almanac.com