

A look at baseball card history and its cultural impact.

To some, a baseball card is simply a piece of cardboard (or cardboard-like material) with a monetary value attached; to others, it represents a slice of nostalgia. To understand the allure of baseball cards to the latter group, we first travel to a time and place where one cannot see the latest news and highlights on a device you hold in your hand. Before television, pictures of baseball players might be the closest most people ever came to seeing their heroes. One of the most famous early sets was produced by American Tobacco as an advertising gimmick and is now referred to as the T206 set after its designation by Jefferson Burdick, who is typically recognized as the first super collector of cards.

The T206 set is shown in its entirety, including the different known variations, in *The T206 Collection: The Players & Their Stories* by Tom and Ellen Zappala with Lou Blasi. Though I am no art critic, thumbing through the pages of this book one sees the vibrant use of color in the card pictures and the simple yet pleasing design of the card fronts. The attraction of the T206 set is so strong that Topps has produced a brand of cards in their style – and has done so twice in the past 10 years (2002 and 2009).

In addition to its generally recognized beauty, the T206 set was also the most comprehensive set of its era and the largest baseball card set ever produced until the 1950s. The T206 Collection brings the players to life by providing a brief biography, usually limited to a paragraph or two, on every player in the set. The players in the set are categorized into six subsets: Hall of Famers, Overlooked by Cooperstown, the Uncommons, the Bad Boys of Baseball, the Minor Leaguers, and the Commons. While most SABR members are likely familiar with the general story of players such as Chase, Cobb, Mathewson, and Wagner, the brief biographies of players such as Bill Cranston, James Helm, and Dutch Revelle provide some brief insight into their playing careers. The final chapter has pictures of some of the high profile cards in the set that have been graded by PSA, typically in the 7 or 8 range. Seeing those cards in that high of a condition is amazing.

Baseball cards fell by the wayside until the 1930s when Goudey started using them to sell more gum and candy. After World War II, Bowman and Topps engaged in a heated competition for the rights to individual baseball players. Topps eventually won and held a monopoly for about 25 years. In 1989 Upper Deck launched the first “premium” brand of baseball cards available in pack form, and soon thereafter all the card manufacturers began inserting rare cards within the packs. Eventually a perfect storm of overproduction by the manufacturers, the exit of investors from the market, and a general decrease in interest by children as they turned their attention to other activities led to the decline of the baseball card market. These details of the history of the baseball card industry and more are included in Dave Jamieson’s *Mint Condition: How Baseball Cards Became an American Obsession*.

But Jamieson delves into more than just the history of the baseball card industry. He spends chapters on some of the more interesting characters who have helped shaped the

hobby, for better or worse depending on one's point of view. In one chapter he details the life of the original super collector, Jefferson Burdick, and the process he went through to have his collection become part of the New York Metropolitan Museum in the 1940s. Burdick is credited with bringing organization to the hobby, and many pre-World War II sets, including the T206 set, are still referred to using Burdick's designations. Woody Gelman is the subject of chapter 6, who was essentially the driving creative force behind Topps products from the 1950s-1970s.

Jamieson also tells the story of contemporary figures in the hobby. He profiles Mike Gidwitz, a super collector who was the first person to sell the T206 Honus Wagner for over \$1 million dollars. Gidwitz seems to epitomize the deep pocketed investor/collector that another figure in the hobby, Bill Mastro, would seek out as a buyer. The method in which Mastro conducted his auction business is detailed and Mastro is given credit for his part in elevating the hobby into a more respected diversion. In particular, his role as special consultant in the Sotheby's auction of the James C. Copeland collection is viewed as a watershed event in bringing the hobby to the mainstream. Finally, Jamieson turns his attention to some of the problems in the current hobby, interviewing noted card doctor Kevin Saucier. For those unfamiliar with the general history of baseball cards, Jamieson's work provides those details. To those familiar with that history, it is the in depth look at some of the primary characters who helped shape the industry that is the most appealing part of the work. In short, there is something for everyone interested in the history of the hobby.

For a specific example of the cultural impact of baseball cards, look no further than Josh Wilker's *Cardboard Gods: An All-American Tale Told through Baseball Cards*. At its heart, Wilker's story is that of a man recalling his past, with baseball cards as the window to that past. Upon finding an old box of his baseball cards in a storage unit, Wilker recounts the events of his life as he works his way through the cards. It is a moving story, and essentially a no holds barred one. Those who have collected baseball cards will recognize the power that looking at and holding a specific card can have.

Cardboard Gods is written in a journal style, with a specific card serving as a springboard to a memory. There's a 1975 Topps Herb Washington, representing the era of "trying new things", even if they (like the designated pinch runner) did not quite work out. Wilker's desire for bonding with his own brother reflected in the 1977 Topps Big League Brothers card of Paul and Rick Reuschel. The Carmen Fanzone's, Bake McBride's, and Rowland Office's of the world evoking laughter through some combination of their poses and names.

While Wilker's story provides an example of how one man reflects upon his life through baseball cards, John Bloom's *A House of Cards: Baseball Card Collecting and Popular Culture* presents an overview of the general baseball card subculture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Bloom's primary finding is that there tends to be a struggle, sometimes interpersonal, sometimes intrapersonal, as adult collectors attempt to recapture the fun of their youth while simultaneously yearning for the hobby to be recognized as a legitimate adult endeavor.

Many of the older collectors in that era returned to their collections as a way of returning to their past and were unprepared for the changes that the industry was undergoing. For many collectors in Bloom's study, their childhood pastime of baseball card collecting was simply play, without any thought to the collectability of the cards. At the sportscard shows he attended, he noticed that the competitive environment present upset that notion of play. The changes in the hobby though, particularly as baseball cards began to be viewed as a possible investment, are what brought legitimacy to the hobby. Prior to the 1980s, collecting baseball cards was viewed as a child's hobby, and many adults kept their collections hidden. Though Bloom's focus is on the subculture in the upper midwestern US, traces of the shame associated with participating in a child's hobby are scattered throughout the other works.

Indeed, Wilker stops collecting baseball cards as he transitions into his teenage years, viewing baseball cards as a child's hobby. Jamieson's book is rife with examples of collectors who keep their collections hidden. A story of Lionel Carter mentions that he received packages while serving in World War II and opened them in the barracks bathroom beyond the view of other soldiers. Woody Gelman was once interviewed by a New York Times reporter who labeled Gelman "a specific kind of nut" for his collecting habits.

An interesting follow up to the Bloom study could be conducted today, with 25-40 year old collectors who likely collected cards as children for many of the same reasons as their baby boomer counterparts (play, social bonding, etc.) but who were very equally likely aware that the cards held monetary value. Unlike their baby boomer counterparts, these gen xers and gen yers should be more at ease with the investment aspect of baseball cards.

While there will likely always be some struggle between the feeling of childlike innocence and adult legitimacy which lingers in the minds of collectors, the two can coexist. Perhaps the best advice for collectors of all ages was given in the early issues of the Beckett magazines. Baseball card *collecting* is a hobby and individuals should collect what they like. Do not think of items in your collection as investments any more than you would think of the movies on your shelf as an investment. Yet this does not rule out the investment side of the hobby either. If one chooses baseball cards as an investment, one should be prepared for swings in the market, just like with stocks. And one should be prepared to part with those investments.

Then again, parting with your baseball cards is easier said than done when holding them in your hand. Just ask Dave Jamieson and Josh Wilker.