

Bob Thing Interview

Bob Thing Started Collecting Baseball Cards 60 Years Ago and Hasn't Stopped



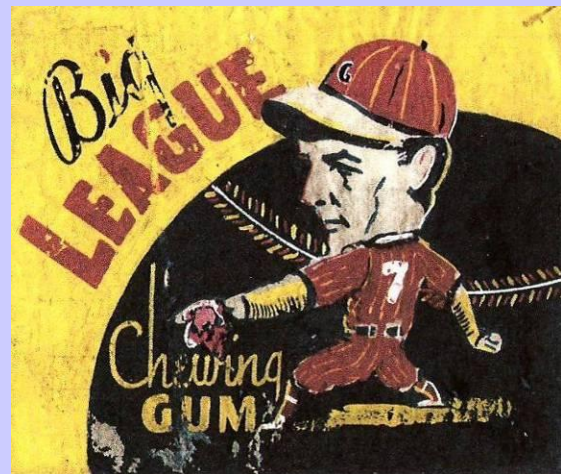
Bob Thing



Artwork for 1938 Heads-Up purchased for \$1

By
George Vrechek

Bob Thing of Skowhegan, Maine, is one of those rare collectors who got started and never really stopped. Born in 1941, Bob was a youngster when he started picking up 1951 and 1952 Topps. He was almost over-the-hill as a young collector in 1953 when he ran across a copy of *Grandstand Manager*. This “publication of the fans by the fans” where “every baseball fan is a grandstand manager” was one of the earliest periodicals dealing not only with the teams and players but also featuring hobby-related advertisements in the “Trading Post” classified ad section. Collectors such as Wirt Gammon, Ernie Harwell, Jack Smalling, Steve Vanco, Roland Villard, and Stan Martucci advertised. Classified advertisers offered to sell cards of any 1950 to 1952 player for 3 cents each. If you shopped around you might get them for 2 cents each. The ad that caught Bob’s attention was from 19-year-old Conrad Anderson of Billerica, Massachusetts, who was looking to sell 1952 Topps high numbers. The high numbers had never come to Maine and Bob thought it would be great to buy some. Bob bought the ‘52s and has kept buying cards and subscribing to hobby publications ever since. Sometimes hobby publications would feature the “collector of the month.” Bob could be described as the “collector of the last 60 years.”



Collector and Hobby Publication Subscriber

Bob continued to buy cards and complete sets. He would come home from school to check the mail and find packages or envelopes from hobby pioneers like Buck Barker and Charles Bray. Bob didn't drop collecting while in high school; he seemed to be a natural-born collector. In the 1950s he subscribed to the *Grandstand Manager*, Jefferson Burdick and Charles Bray's *Card Collector's Bulletin*, Burdick's *American Card Catalog*, Charles Brooks's *Sport Hobbyist*, and Bob Jaspersen's *Sport Fan*. Bob has even hung onto his copies of most of these early publications.

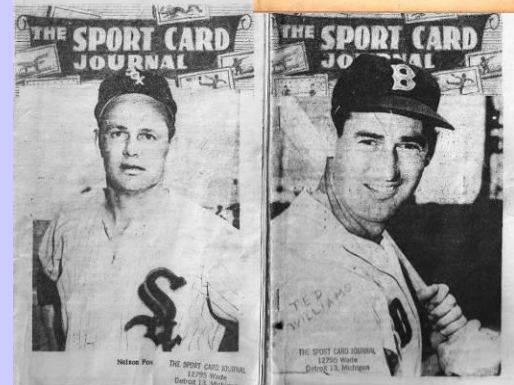
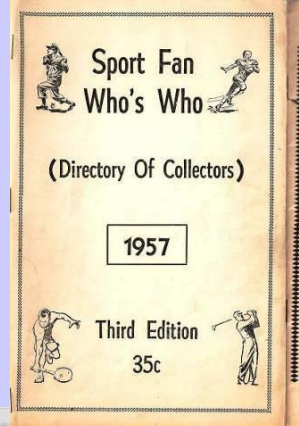
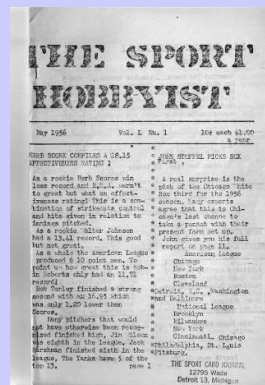
I found Bob's bio in the *1958 Sport Fan Who's Who, Directory of Collectors*. The bio stated that 17-year-old Bob collected baseball cards as well as "photos, postcards, exhibit cards, decals, buttons (pin-back and others listed in the *American Card Catalog*), novelties, and baseball magazine posters." This struck me as a very advanced wantlist for a young collector.

Bob started branching into regional sets, team issues, and player postcards, but he always stayed with baseball and cardboard. He would write to baseball teams to get their team-issued sets starting in the 1950s. He attended some of the earliest gatherings of collectors, contributed to hobby publications, and morphed into a part-time dealer as he set up at some of the earliest card shows. When I caught up with Bob, he had just returned from the 35th Annual Cranston, Rhode Island, Card Show. He made all the earlier shows as well.

Grandstand Manager, the first issue of *The Sport Hobbyist* by Charles Brooks in 1956, *Who's Who Directory* 1957, and the first two issues of *The Sport Card Journal*.

Pre-War Collection

Except for collecting all things having to do with his beloved Boston Celtics, Bob has stuck to collecting cards of baseball players. Once he worked his way through the "current sets" of the 1950s, he began going back and working on sets from the 1930s and the tobacco era. He never considered himself a high roller, even at 1960s prices, so he never picked up the T206 Wagner, Plank, or some of the scarce minor leaguers. However, he has managed to acquire about 80% of the T206 set. Bob also picked up mint T201s and T202s. If Bob had a particular area of emphasis or a difficult section to his wantlist, it would probably be the individual player postcards from the



early 1900s and team-issued or McCarthy postcards from the early 1950s. He actually helped write the book on the subject – the player postcard section of Bert Sugar's *The Sports Collectors Bible* first issued in 1975. Some of those sets like The Rose Company postcards of 1908-1909 have very scarce cards and very high prices today.

Bob sold a few singles from the early years and a few sets walked out the door but generally he has hung onto his cards. Like many of us, Bob's enthusiasm for new sets petered out in about 1990. Still he has a significant portion of all the sets from 1900 to 1980. It was fun to talk to Bob about a number of topics and people. The following is a sample.

Buck Barker

Bob corresponded with Buck Barker starting in the 1950s. If Bob was 14 years old at the time, Buck would have been 44, not an unusual disparity among the early collectors who corresponded by mail and would not necessarily have any idea of the age of the other person involved in a trade. Bob visited Buck and his family during the 1960s in St. Louis, and remembers Buck and his wife Alice and their dog. Buck described how he had fallen off his bicycle on his way to work and had a nasty spill. His cards were usually notated with "Buck Barker" penciled on the back. Bob would always try to see Buck when he went to any of the Midwest shows since he was one of Bob's earliest and most prolific trading partners. Bob remembers him as a generous collector with an enthusiasm for baseball and cardboard.

Conrad Anderson

Conrad Anderson provided the 1952 Topps high numbers and Bob corresponded with him for many years, although they never met in person until the 1970s. Anderson continued to run ads in hobby publications and attend shows. Anderson then retired to Florida and Bob would stay in touch until recent years.

Charles Bray and Bill Haber

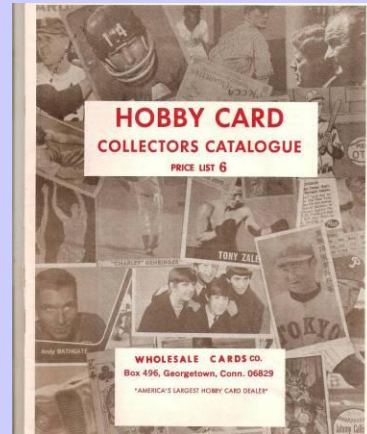
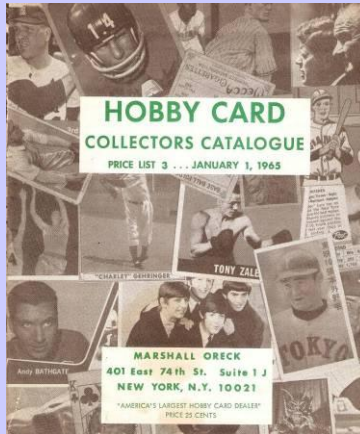
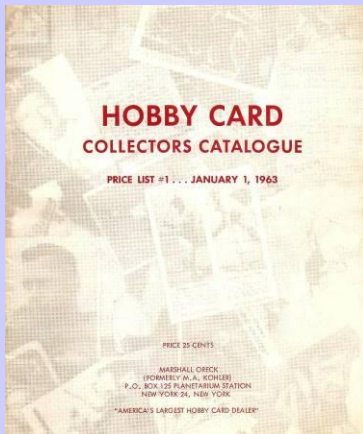
As a subscriber to *Card Collector's Bulletin* founded by Jefferson Burdick and turned over to Charles Bray, Bob would buy and sell cards in Bray's monthly auctions. One memorable sale Bob made through Bray was his duplicate 1952 Topps set that went for \$100. At the time, this was viewed as big bucks as opposed to a bargain sale. Bill Haber, who worked for Topps and visited Bob at his home in the 1960s, told Bob that "he couldn't believe" Bob had gotten that much for a set of Topps cards.




Collector Directories

Bob has volunteered his name for about every directory of collectors produced since his first appearance in the *1958 Sport Fan Who's Who Directory*. It is interesting reading the ages of other collectors in 1958 - Dwight Chapin 18, Dick Dobbins 22, Dan Even 14, Larry Fritsch 20, Jack Smalling 16, and Roland Villard 22. Bob wasn't the only serious young collector. I also found Bob Thing in the *1968 jfc Directory of Sports Collectors* and in Irv Lerner's *1969 Who's Who in Card Collecting*. Bob's 1969 bio stated that he was a 28-year-old manager with First National Stores, a large food chain company. "Bob started buying gum cards as a kid back in 1951 after acquiring a copy of *Grandstand Manager* and has never stopped. He stores his collection in large metal filing cabinets and is proud of his completed mint set of Wilson Weiners and his sixteen different Bill and Bob postcards." In 1969 Bob wrote that he had about 20,000 cards and 100 complete sets.

From Bob Thing's closet:

1. Oreck's 1963 Catalogue, formerly M.A. Kohler which was formerly Gordon B. Taylor
2. Oreck's 1965 Catalogue
3. Similar format but now it is Bruce Yeko's Catalogue in 1968

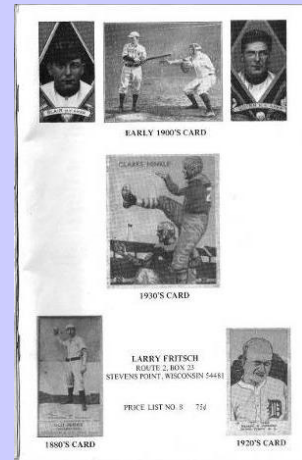


	<p>1954 250 cards in full color, 2-5/8" x 3-3/4". Ted Williams appears on both #1 and 250.</p> <p>Single cards, except as shown below, each07 #1 and 250, each25 Complete set of 250 cards \$17.36</p>
	<p>1953 274 cards in set. Set is numbered through 280 but six cards (#'s 153-261-267-268-271-275) were not issued. Cards are in color and are 2-5/8" x 3-3/4" in size.</p> <p>Single cards through #219, each10 Single cards #'s 220-280, each15 Complete set of 274 cards \$31.00</p>
	<p>1952 407 cards in full color, with numbers 311-407 extremely scarce. Cards measure 2-5/8" x 3-3/4". #1-80 also appear in black or red backs. Three error cards are in existence.</p> <p>Single cards, #'s 1-75, Redbacks, each15 Single cards, #'s 1-80, Blackbacks, each20 Single cards, #76-310, each10 Single cards, #311-407 (scarce) each, when in stock 1.00 Set of 310 cards \$34.75 Set of 80 cards, blackbacks \$16.00</p>

Topps prices in Oreck's 1963 catalogue look pretty good today – 1952T highs are \$1 each “when in stock.”

Cooperstown Shows and Larry Fritsch

Bob has been going to Cooperstown during the Hall of Fame induction week for 38 years and has been a dealer at their show for 31 straight years. While at Cooperstown, Bob has met a number of his hobby friends. Bob remembers talking to hobby pioneer Larry Fritsch. While Larry's idea of a Cooperstown sports card museum had not worked out the way he had hoped, Larry enjoyed the opportunity to "pull out a six-pack of beer, lock the front door to the museum, and go through his collection of cards bringing back great memories."



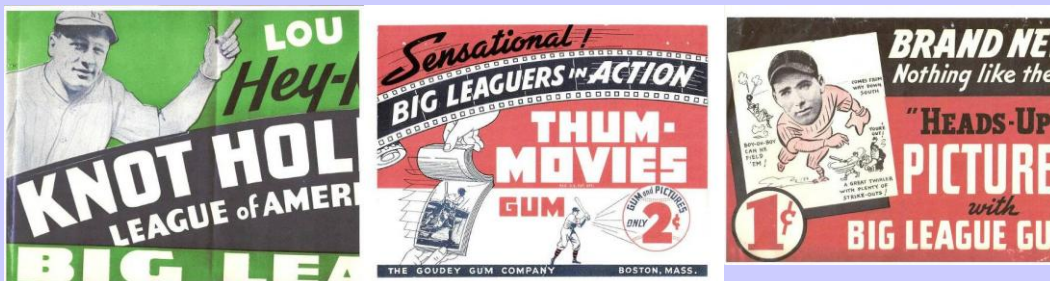
Charles Brooks, Tom Tuschak and *The Sport Hobbyist*

Bob got to know *The Sport Hobbyist* publisher Charles Brooks and his friend the late Tom Tuschak. Bob was among the first 56 subscribers to *The Sport Hobbyist* which was started by fellow high-school student Brooks in 1956. Tuschak made it to the Cooperstown shows and kept in touch with Thing and Brooks in Florida in his later years. Brooks and Frank Nagy set up at shows in Plymouth, Michigan, and Cincinnati, Ohio, at the same time as Bob.



Lionel Carter and Bob Solon

Thing tried trading with hobby pioneer Lionel Carter. Carter's wantlist was a challenge to hit because of his pursuit of the highest quality cards in an era that did not emphasize condition. Thing also met fellow collector Bob Solon and visited him in Oak Park, Illinois, in the 1960s. Solon had a much different position on condition than did Carter and shared Thing's interest in going right to the card manufacturers. Thing likes decent cards but has never gotten into professionally graded and slabbed cards.



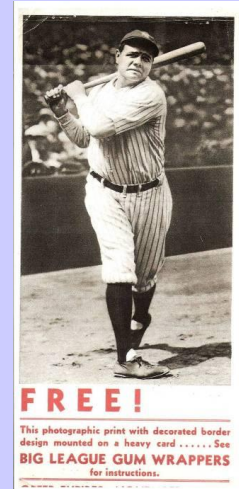
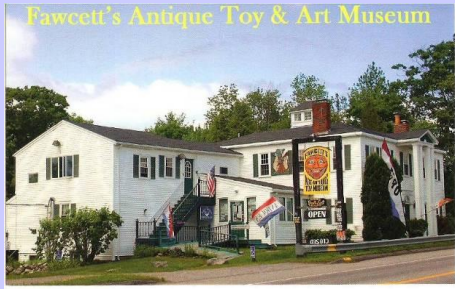
John Fawcett's Goudey Purchase

In a prior article on pioneer dealer Bruce Yeko, I described Yeko's purchase of uncut Goudey sheets that John Fawcett had purchased directly from the former president of the Boston-based Goudey Gum Co. in the late 1960s. From that same find came gum wrappers and store promo posters that Thing bought directly from Fawcett and still owns. The posters really illustrate the artwork and advertising of the 1930s in promoting issues like Heads-Up, Thum-Movies, 1933 and 1935 Goudeys "Third Series, New Players." The posters were



designed to be taped or applied to the inside of store windows. One of the particularly interesting pieces in Bob's collection is original artwork used for the Heads-Up issue purchased for \$1.

Fawcett still has a toy museum in Waldoboro, Maine, which features the Mickey Mouse cards purchased from Goudey. Bob has visited the museum and describes it as "everything from Mickey and Minnie to sports to cowboys...all collectibles and memorabilia, really awesome."



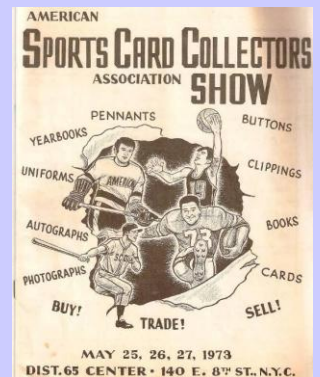
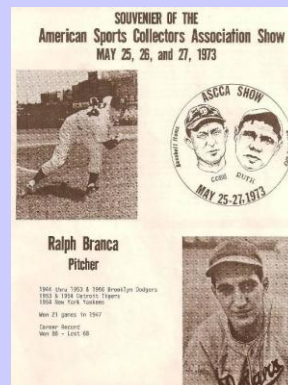
Early Shows

In 1969 Mike Andersen of Boston gathered seven other New England collectors at his home to view and trade cards. Of course Bob Thing was there and thought to take a picture of the occasion.



Bob kept this picture of New England collectors who met at Mike Andersen's house. Left to right: Jim Cheever of Rhode Island, Jim Capobianco of Massachusetts, unknown, Bob Thing, standing – host Mike Andersen, Glenn Johnson of Vermont, unknown, and Art Ouellette of Massachusetts.

In 1973 Bob attended a card show in New York City run by Mike Aronstein, Paul Gallagher, Bob Gallagher, and Bruce Yeko called the American Sports Card Collectors Association Show. He had a table at the show the next year. Other participants included Charles Bazina, Conrad Anderson,



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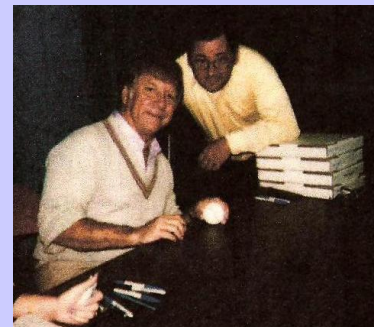
Bob has been a subscriber to *SCD* since its inception and “somewhere around the house” he has a copy of every issue. He has contributed information to Bob Lemke’s work on the annual catalog especially on team issues. Bob regards fellow-collector and friend Jack Webster as being one of the experts on check-listing the master sets of Jays Publishing issues of the 1960s and 1970s.

Boston Celtics

One of the exceptions to Bob’s “all about the cardboard” approach has been his pursuit over the last 10 years of all things related to the Boston Celtics. He is there on Fan Appreciation Day buying whatever he can. He has seats from the old Boston Garden, hundreds of 8 by 10 autographed photos, bobble-head dolls, and even unusual items from a Larry Bird-owned hotel like a shower curtain, wrapped soap, and menus.

Yankees?

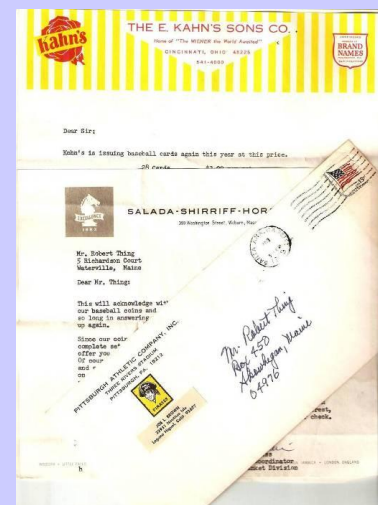
Surprisingly for a life-long resident of Maine, Bob has always been a New York Yankees fan and his favorite player is Mickey Mantle. Bob was there at the first show run by Tom Catal in 1977 when Mantle came to sign autographs. Bob lined up with the rest of the fans for a Mantle autograph and a photo. Bob has endured a fair amount of grief over the years from his neighbors due to his Yankee allegiance, but handles it all good-naturedly. When Bob was a youngster, the Yankees were in the World Series practically every year; it wasn’t hard to get enthused about the pinstripes.



Mickey Mantle signing for Bob in 1977

Pack Rat

Not surprisingly, Bob admits to being a pack rat. This helps explain how Bob got into collecting cards as a kid and never stopped. Although he claims to only collect baseball cards, he does seem to have retained a number of other things. Bob has hung onto correspondence from baseball product issuers like Kahn’s and Salada, letters from Pirates GM Joe L. Brown, and a letter from Buck Barker covering a myriad of topics and cards. He has other items like old baseball coins, plates, photos, autographs, Elvis memorabilia, old hobby publications, catalogs, show programs, inserts to the 1966 Volpe plastic Sunoco tumblers, Franklin Mint die cast cars, confetti from the Celtic’s 2008 victory parade, a Zimmer neo-classic automobile, and enough stuff to fill a 10-room house/museum.



Letters from Kahn’s, Salada, and Joe L. Brown

Spring Training in Florida

After 20 years with First National Stores, Bob spent 24 years working for the U.S. Postal Service. He retired six years ago and now heads from his home in Maine to Florida for the nice weather and to see the teams in spring training action. He will visit with long-time friends from the hobby, like fellow postcard and team-issue collectors Dan Even and Jack Webster, Lenny and Carol LaCroix, David and Wally Varga, and Eddie Gelter. Bob will also take off to attend classic car shows, performances by 50s and 60s musical groups, and anything else that attracts his interest. Bob said that while traveling “a few years ago I picked up on something. I started buying little souvenir magnets of various places....now have a whole wall of over 600.” He’s even enlisted some of his traveling buddies in the process - “crazy but that’s the fun of collecting.”

Dealer Today

Bob still sets up as a dealer at five or six card shows a year: the National, the Greater Boston Sports Collectors Club (GBSCC), Rich Altman’s Boston Show, and Cooperstown among them. Bob likes the old fashioned collector shows like the annual GBSCC show with vintage collectors and a dealer banquet. While he may sell a few of his dwindling supply of duplicates, he focuses on providing hobby supplies such as plastic sheets produced by UltraPRO, something everyone can use which doesn’t involve dipping into his collection or trying to acquire vintage cards for resale at high prices. He will still look for an old postcard or two, and maybe some team issues. He hasn’t gotten into upgrading, variations, or modern issues. While the pursuit of cards got Bob together with hundreds of people over the years, it is now visiting with old friends and meeting new people at hobby events that keep Bob’s interest. Bob can still be reached at PO Box 450, Skowhegan, Maine, 04976. He hasn’t jumped into the internet age, yet.

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net.

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