



Harry Lilien – Pioneer Collector (1922-2007)

By George Vrechek



Harry Lilien was a name I remembered from reading the *Card Collector's Bulletins* published by Jefferson Burdick starting in 1937. Harry Lilien and his brother Sid corresponded and traded with many of the early collectors. I also remembered seeing letters from Lilien in the correspondence of Lionel Carter starting in 1938. Of the pioneer collectors from the 1930s I had assumed that all were gone except the 89 year-old Carter who started serious collecting in 1933. Carter assumed the same.

An email I received a few weeks ago confirmed the age-old advice that you should never “assume.” Jason Lilien, Harry Lilien’s son, let me know that his father had just died March 8, 2007 at age 84. Jason had found some of my previous *SCD* articles mentioning his dad as an early collector. Harry Lilien had been even younger than Carter when he began trading cards with Carter, Jefferson Burdick and others in the late 1930s. Jason and his brother Ian shared many stories with me about their father and their uncle Sid Lilien’s (1920-1998) collecting history. I also interviewed the Liliens’ surviving sister, Rose Solecki. Harry Lilien is survived by his wife, Shirley.

Collectors #35 and #37

Harry Lilien and Lionel Carter had the distinction of finding Jefferson Burdick and subscribing to his *Card Collector's Bulletin* at the same time. Carter had been trying to find other collectors and came across Edward Golden of Connecticut in 1936. Golden let Carter and Lilien know about Jefferson Burdick’s publication. Both quickly subscribed to the *Bulletin* in the same month.

Carter of Colfax, Illinois and Lilien of 509 W. 160th Street in New York City are listed by Burdick as the 35th and 37th collectors in his directory of collectors in the June 1938 *CCB*. Most of the collectors described their interests as “general collecting” except for Carter, Golden, Lilien and John B. Wagner who mentioned their particular interest in baseball in these early *Bulletins*. A Dr. Lawrence Kurzrok of New York City appears in later *Bulletins* expressing an interest in meeting local collectors like Harry Lilien. Jason Lilien pointed out that other collectors had no idea how young his father was at the time and Harry may not have volunteered to tell

CARD COLLECTORS BULLETIN

J. R. BURDICK
417 SO. CROUSE AVE.
SYRACUSE, N. Y.

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No Bulletin had been originally planned for this date but publication at this time serves two purposes and so seems advisable. First, the listing of Blankets and Rugs is urgently needed by collectors. Together with Leathers, these complete the listing of all known tobacco inserts. It is again requested that all collectors interested in any of these "other inserts" write me. Several have already done so.

Secondly, publication at this time allows me to notify collectors that after June 24th I will be back at my original address of 417 South Crouse Avenue. This is, I hope, a permanent change, although present conditions do not seem to favor certainty in many things. 417 South Crouse Avenue is the address printed on the first four Bulletins.

Additional collectors names at this time:

Lionel Carter	Box 306	Colfax, Illinois	Baseball card specialist
Jack Holland	29 Bartlett St.	Brooklyn, N.Y.	Collector and dealer
Harry Lilien	509 W. 160th St.	New York, N.Y.	

CANDY AND GUM CARDS - Aside from the various classifications covered in this and previous Bulletins, no other card listings are contemplated except those of candy and gum cards including those of ice cream, cracker jack, etc. Bulletin

them. He had a deep voice and acted older than his years. The 16 year-old Lilien started trading cards with Carter and others sending groups of cards back and forth every week. Low numbered Batter-Ups in the Midwest went east in exchange for high numbered cards from the same set. Ed Golden joined in on the fun. Lilien, Carter and Golden traded and corresponded for years – but never met. Mail even showed up at the Lilien home in New York years later misaddressed to Lionel Carter (of Colfax, Illinois), they were so closely aligned as collectors.

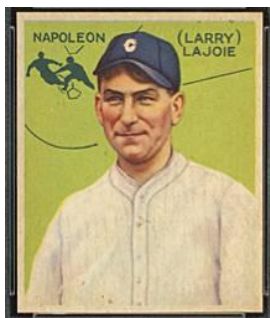
As teenagers Harry and Sid Lilien worked for a relative who had a drug store in New York City. The collection of cards they assembled may have come, in part, from the drug store days. Their sister Rose Solecki remembers all of them buying cards for a penny at a time at the local candy store. Mrs. Solecki fondly recalled her older brothers playing “toss the card” with her in the 1930s and eventually losing all her cards to them. As the boys grew older, they were less apt to mishandle the cards (there was less tossing) and their cards were in fabulous condition.

Harry Lilien with his sister Rose and stepmother Rita Lilien about the time he found Jefferson Burdick.



Lajoie and Gehrig

Harry and Sid worked together and created a joint collection. Harry was particularly fond of his extensive 1933 Goudeys. When Burdick obtained the missing Napoleon Lajoie card directly from Goudey, he received 10 copies of the card, all obviously in uncirculated condition. Lajoies were eventually sent out to Lionel Carter and Harry Lilien. Rose Solecki recalls her brother getting his Lajoie directly from Jefferson Burdick and that Harry met Burdick in New York City. Burdick was surprised to find that Harry Lilien was some 20 years his junior.



Harry's sons felt that their father's interest in baseball card collecting was a wonderful outlet for him during the Depression. Harry's mother died at an early age. The family lived modestly, worked hard, and encouraged Harry's interest in collecting and sports. Harry and Sid shared a small bedroom in their Queens apartment. Harry was a classic sports fan and an organized collector of cards, stamps, records, Indian head pennies, movie theatre programs, and undoubtedly other items. He was a huge fan of the Yankees as well as the Giants. In the late 1930s Harry even managed to get Lou Gehrig's autograph and got to feel Lou's bicep at the same time. Harry recalled how strong he thought Gehrig was. Harry and Sid Lilien were in the bleachers at Yankee Stadium when Gehrig gave his famous farewell speech.

Research by Harry Lilien – Tights and Paintbrushes

Lilien showed his interest in hobby history research as early as 1940 as an 18 year-old. In various 1940 *Card Collector's Bulletins* Harry Lilien reported on early tobacco cards and quotes from George H. Duke/Master Builder by John Wilber Jenkins (G.H.Doran 1927). “Duke began to popularize his cigarettes in 1885 or 1886 by putting photographs of stage celebrities in each package. Then coupons were placed in the packages entitling the holder, for a given number, to a crayon picture of some

historical notable.... Later pictures of baseball players, sovereigns, rulers, and flags of all nations were placed in cigarette packs. Boys began to make collections of cigarette pictures, to trade and preserve them, and the craze extended to every town and village.... While Duke sent out sign painters who blazoned the names of his products on walls, barns and billboards, Allen and Ginter stuck to tradition, putting in each package of cigarettes a bright picture of a lady in tights. It was a spectacular fight, a battle of tights and paintbrushes”

Lilien returned with three more articles after finding the trade magazine *Tobacco*. This journal was sent to retailers and reported card issues, albums, and censorship. Cards designed for the retailers to advertise cigarettes quickly evolved into insert cards put into the packs of 10 cigarettes. Information from 1887 and 1888 issues included: “Portraits of baseball players used to advertise Old Judge cigarettes attract much attention in the midst of the present baseball furor.” Lilien deduces that the photos (Old Judge) preceded the colored litho types (A&G). The small colored cards were issued at the same time as albums to hold the cards, but by 1892 were virtually eliminated. “The small flare-ups of cards about 1899 were mostly issues with cigars.” *Tobacco* gives the dates of issue of various sets (mostly non-sport issues featuring attractive ladies) that seemed to come out at a rate of one new set per week in 1888, 1889 and 1890. Harry’s last article in the *Bulletin* based on the *Tobacco* research is in the December 1941 issue. Harry collected the nineteenth century baseball tobacco cards as well as the tobacco cards from the early 1900s. Rose Solecki remembered the felt pennant inserts they had as well.

World War II

Harry Lilien went off to World War II from 1942 to 1946 and his collecting went on hold. The only report in the *Bulletin* during the war years was from brother Sid who was back in New York stationed in Brooklyn. Amazingly collectors like Carter and Dr. Kurzrok continued to trade cards and keep up on the hobby, despite being in combat overseas, by utilizing their brief stays of home leave and keeping their copies of the *Bulletin* out of the mud. Lionel Carter and Harry Lilien were even in the Army and stationed in New Guinea at the same time but still never met. Upon Harry Lilien’s return in 1946 he again wrote Carter “I guess you are surprised to hear from me after such a long time. I got out of the Army a few weeks ago...I haven’t looked over my collection since I’ve returned. My brother, Sid, was taking care of it until he went into the Army. From what I did see it doesn’t seem as much was issued during the war. I guess it was because of no gum.”



Harry (left) and Sid Lilien (right) during WWII

The CCCS

On March 10, 1948, 25-year old Harry Lilien announced the formation of the “Cigarette Card Collectors Society” (CCCS) via an article in the *Bulletin*. Meetings were to be held monthly at the home of Dr. Lawrence Kurzrok at 9 East 96th Street in New York City. Dues were \$1 for 6 months with all correspondence and dues payable to Harry Lilien, acting secretary and treasurer. Jason Lilien added that Dr. Kurzrok was something of a mentor to Harry and that they shared an interest in completing sets and getting together with other collectors. Jason recalls his father talking about Dr. Kurzrok’s spectacular home being a wonderful meeting place where Harry Lilien had the opportunity to meet many early collectors. Honorary President Burdick reported in the *Bulletin* that this was the first “society for insert

and advertising cards” and was enthused about the activities that were possible given the New York City location. Projects included a master checklist of all issues including gum and candy cards.

Within a year though Harry’s name disappeared from the pricey (\$1) full page ads run by the Society. The Treasurer became Mrs. John Lund and Mr. Ken Schoeneman was the Vice President. Later *Bulletins* reported/advertised that the CCCS had produced checklists, received some early TV publicity, had a wantlist service and handled resales of duplicates for members. Famed British collector E.C. Wharton-Tigar and Harry Lilien also got connected during this period, perhaps through the CCCS. By the early 1950s though news of the CCCS and input to the *Bulletin* by Lilien petered out. It appears that Harry’s interest in the newer cards went on hold after the mid 1950s. Harry became a manager with the brokerage firm of Bear Sterns, Sid was a probation officer and both raised families. Harry and Sid surviving sister, Rose Solecki, is also a pioneer collector of sorts. Rose is a noted archaeologist who conducted significant excavations in the Middle East. She published on the subject with her husband Ralph and both remain active in the study of archaeology.

Bug Bites Again

Harry veered over to stamp and record collecting for a time but the card collecting bug bit both Harry and Sid Lilien again as they neared retirement and their own sons came along. Harry starting going to card shows in the 1970s and picking up cards for his young sons. Jason remembers his dad being particularly enthused buying three-part cello packs of 1977 Topps cards at a McCrory’s store at the end of the season for 10 cents each. Harry thought his sons could use a set of 1969 Topps and assorted other cards, particularly those related to the New York baseball teams. He “cornered the market” picking up 50 packs of Burger King Yankees. Jason recalls his father’s involvement as being very serious, getting plastic sheets, card set boxes, picking up regional sets, and continuing to go the increased number of shows at Elks Clubs and VFWs. His interest seemed to be in the new cards, rather than going back to the 1930s and 1940s. Heck, he had most of the cards from those eras, even Lajoie.

With their dad’s assistance, Jason and Ian Lilien wound up with collections of cards starting in the early 1980s, all organized in plastic sheets although they personally preferred flipping the cards and putting them through stress tests.

Mr. Rosen Comes for Cake

Over the years the cards in Harry and Sid’s collection slowly dwindled away. By the late 1980s the brothers thought it was time to sell what remained. They met Alan Rosen (Mr. Mint, in case you somehow missed one of Al’s ads) at a 1986 show at the Nassau Coliseum on Long Island. Buying cards from the Liliens was one of Rosen’s top three card buying stories along with the Topps High number find and the 1987 Paris, Tennessee Topps/Bowman find. Al remembers Lilien’s 1948 to 1951 Bowmans, Leafs and Berk Ross cards as being the best cards he ever bought. He recalled: “The 1948 Bowman actresses had snow-white edges. They had thousands of mint cards....They didn’t like the 1952 Topps though because they were too large.” The Liliens were in their late 20s or early 30s when these cards were collected so they were never subjected to the card-tossing gambling with sister Rose.

In his book *True Mint* and in an interview for this article, Al described his experience of several visits to the Liliens. The brothers lived nearby in Queens and Rosen always went to Sid’s house. Rosen looked forward to the visits because he knew that the Liliens not only had great cards, but they also treated him with courtesy and respect. There was a civilized ritual to the entire process. Sid was serious. Harry was

jovial. Nothing could be discussed until coffee cake and tea were served and finished while sitting at the vintage kitchen table. Harry would then wipe the table clean. Only then would cards appear from a small room off the hallway, a box full of fabulous cards, one box at a time. Mr. Rosen (as the Liliens called him) was asked to stay seated at the kitchen table and always wondered what was in the little room that seemed to produce so many great cards. (The Liliens had Rosen rather anxious to buy cards.) Jokingly, Al even offered the Liliens' wives \$500 just to peek in the room from the doorway. "I would have loved to have gone in that little room." (Jason Lilien reported that the small room was lined with industrial strength shelving to help keep the cards organized.)

Finally Rosen purchased a set of 1951 Bowman baseball cards from the Liliens. The cards were stacked in numeric order and were great as usual but Rosen noticed that card number 1 of Whitey Ford had an uncharacteristic crease across Whitey's neck. For some reason Al pointed out this relatively minor problem in the big scheme of things. Harry Lilien said to wait a minute. He made a visit to the small room and brought out two more 1951 Bowman Fords in mint condition to choose from. Unfortunately after this transaction the Liliens said that they were sorry but "they were out of cards" (except apparently two 1951 Bowman Fords.)



Collector #37

Rose Solecki told me that I "would have loved to have talked to her brother Harry. He retained a fantastic memory" and enthusiasm for collecting. He enjoyed seeing his sons and grandchildren collect. I missed him by a few months. I also missed finding out about him a few years ago when I looked for people who had ever met Jefferson Burdick. At his eulogy the family remembered card collecting as being part of their upbringing with fond memories of Harry Lilien, collector #37.

RECOLLECTIONS OF LIONEL CARTER ABOUT HARRY LILIEN

It was Edward Golden who wrote me about Burdick and his Bulletin (3-31-37) and then I wrote Harry Lilien and his name is listed as a new subscriber in the 6-1-38 Bulletin along with mine. So we were writing back and forth before either of us had heard of Burdick and his Bulletin.



Harry and I would swap want lists and what we had to trade, so small packages of cards were going back and forth every other week. On the odd weeks I'd be doing the same thing with Eddie Golden, so I'd be mailing and receiving small boxes of cards every week. I'd include Lilien's wants along with my wants to Golden and vice versa, and it was unusual if a week went by without a small box of cards from one or the other. The packages would not fit in our mail box at the post office, so Dad had to wait until all the mail was put up to go to the General Delivery window and pick them up. So many boxes made him mad, so I rented a larger box to hold them and paid for it.

Harry would always send me a coupon from *The New York Times* for the weekly college football contest of picking winners. I didn't do too well, but one day I got all twelve games right! (Must have been a day when the good teams were all playing push-overs.) The prize money must have been considerable (\$50 in those days could be a month's work.) I couldn't wait for my check to arrive. But the newspaper was swamped with winners and a lucky drawing was done to determine the winner. It wasn't me.



Harry was stationed in the Pacific on the same island as Lionel Carter

Lionel Carter April 2007

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