



Jeff Escue in 1974 and in 2013, photos J. Escue

## The Hobby in the 1970s – an education in buying, selling and sleeping on the floor

A teenager's memories, frozen in time, as he moved from collector to seller



By George Vrechek

The early days of the hobby involved slightly embarrassed collectors meeting in living rooms and trading cards without much concern for condition or value. There were a few people who picked up old cards and would sell them at reasonable prices.

Maybe this golden image of the hobby was never exactly the way it was, or perhaps it was rapidly fading by the early 1970s. Jeff Escue was a young collector in the early 1970s and caught the beginning of the boom in card collecting and selling. Unlike many hobbyists, Escue got heavily involved, but then got out of the hobby quickly. As a result, his hobby experiences from the 1970s, as he describes them, are “frozen in time.”

### Hobby names in the 1970s

If you look through hobby publications from the 1970s, you will find familiar names. Those early advertisers in *Sports Collectors Digest* or *The Trader Speaks*, for example, stayed involved for many years. Some are still active in the hobby today to varying degrees such as Gar Miller, Lew Lipset, Irv Lerner, Rob Lifson, Keith Olbermann, John Rumierz, Bob Thing, Wayne Varner, Ted Taylor, Ron Gordon, Pat Quinn and Roger Marth. You also see names of now-deceased

collectors and dealers like Larry Fritsch, Lionel Carter, Bill Haber, Dick Dobbins, Goodie Goldfaden, Bob Solon, Ray Hess, Barry Halpern, Don Steinbach and Mike Keasler.

### **The 16-year-old advertiser**

Jeff Escue's name as a hobby advertiser popped up for a few years in the mid-1970s and then disappeared. It turns out, he was then a 16-year-old seller. Escue contacted me recently looking for leads on finding copies of his old ads, a somewhat unusual request until I learned the rest of the story. While there are many people who remember collecting and selling in the 1970s and have had much more hobby experience, Escue's first and only detailed impression of the hobby in the 1970s was like opening a time capsule.

Escue's family worked hard and lived modestly in the blue-collar town of Joliet, Illinois, population 75,000. He was an adequate baseball player in an area that was a hot-bed for future major leaguers Jesse Barfield, Bill Gullickson, Jeff Reed and about 25 others who were drafted by major league teams. It turns out Joliet was also the hot-bed for avid collector/dealers Don Steinbach (1947-1997) and Mike Keasler (1942-2005). Escue got involved with baseball cards like many of us did as kids and put them away, so to speak, by the time he got to college.

### **Not your typical teenager job**

However, his experiences as a teenager were probably a lot different than most of our own. Before he was 18 years old, he had been on hotel card buying trips with Jim Beckett. He advertised in newspapers to buy cards and in hobby publications to sell cards. He put together Goudey, Play Ball, Bowman and Topps sets and then sold them. He had tables at the early card shows. He wrote a booklet on collecting and sold hundreds of copies to collectors. He was making \$1,000 on a weekend when his summer job was paying him \$2 per hour.

Escue took the profits from his initiatives, cashed in his cards and used the proceeds to pay for college. He worked quickly, spending just three calendar years in college and earned both bachelor's and master's degrees majoring in business and finance. At the time, they charged the same for tuition no matter how many classes you took. He decided he might as well finish as fast as possible and get into the work world.

### **The barber's bag**

He was in sixth grade in 1969 when it all started. "My barber loved the New York Yankees. It knocked his socks off that a sixth grade kid from Illinois knew in great detail about the 1930s Yankees, which is the team my barber loved when he grew up in New York. My barber gave me a bag of 1952-1955 cards, probably 1,000 or so total that his son had collected and left behind when he married and moved out years before." Escue was now a vintage collector.

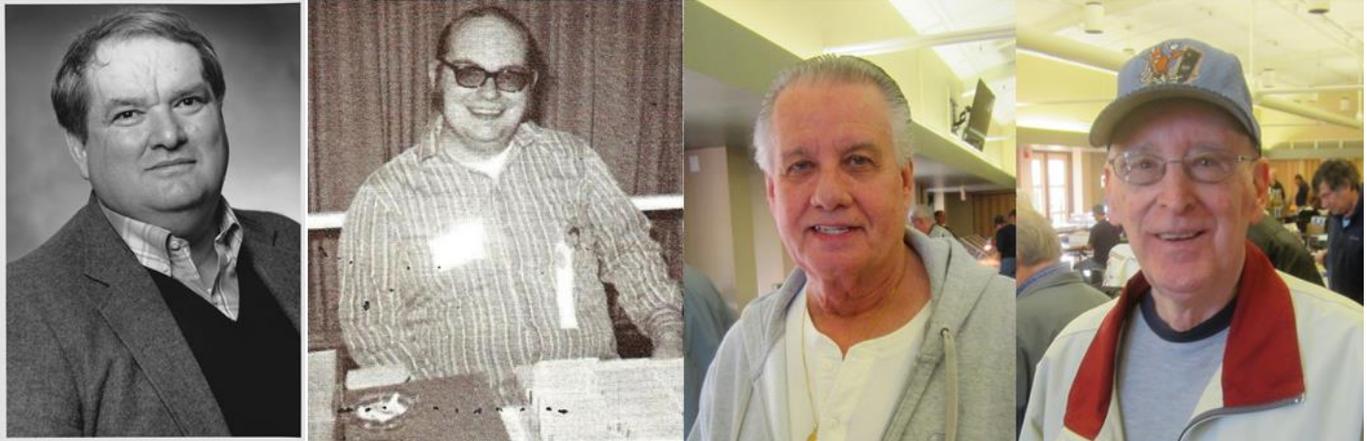
### **Keasler's ad**

Escue described how he first got involved in earnest: "In my freshman year of high school (at Joliet Central), I saw a wanted to buy baseball card ad in the *Joliet Herald News*. I figured if he was buying, maybe he would sell and I could get more cards, so I called. That is how I met Mike Keasler. Keasler traded me about 100 1960 through 1965 commons for the 30 or so '52-'55 cards he selected."

Like many of us with our initial trades, we probably look back and feel we didn't really know what we were getting into. Escue said, "I learned to never do a trade like that again, however it was worth it, as it opened the door to everything. Now I had access to Keasler's brain and his collection. To see complete sets from 1930s and sets of tobacco and candy cards was a revelation. I knew baseball history and the old time players. I could appreciate what I saw.

“If I had given Keasler all the old cards I had, it would have been worth it for the knowledge I would eventually acquire, and the money I would make from cards. In hindsight I am quite happy to have paid such a small price.”

Keasler became a partner in the Sports Collectors Store in Chicago which Pat Quinn, Don Steinbach and Jay Barry opened in 1976. Roger Marth then became a partner and Barry and Keasler left the group. Marth remembers Escue as “a young wheeler-dealer” who actually introduced him to Keasler.



*Left to right: Mike Keasler, undated photo; Don Steinbach, 1973, photo SCD; Pat Quinn and Roger Marth, 2015, photos G Vrechek*

Escue said: “Keasler was very entrepreneurial. He had been a basketball player in high school (Jerry Sloan was a teammate). He became a high school and later a college basketball coach. One of his other business lines was that he wrote scouting reports on high school basketball players in the metro Chicago area and sold the reports to colleges for recruiting.” Keasler is in the NAIA Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame.

### **Steinbach’s basement**

Escue would go to Steinbach or Keasler’s homes to look at the old cards and recalled: “Don Steinbach had a deeper collection especially in the E and T areas than Mike Keasler, but from 1933 forward Mike’s cards (and condition) were far superior. I told a buddy of mine about the great cards Don had, mostly trying to show I was not some freak collecting cards as adults also collected. On a Saturday, we rode our bikes over to Don’s. Don was not home, but his wife, Henny, let us in and told us to go to the basement, you know where the cards are. I took my buddy, Chuck Wickstrom, to the basement and showed him E and T sets, sets of Goudeys, Play Ball sets, Topps and Bowman, and of course the really important desirable stuff (to me), the premiums. I remember the Goudey Babe Ruth cabinet premium and the team card cabinets from the 1930s. We handled everything with care and put everything back.”

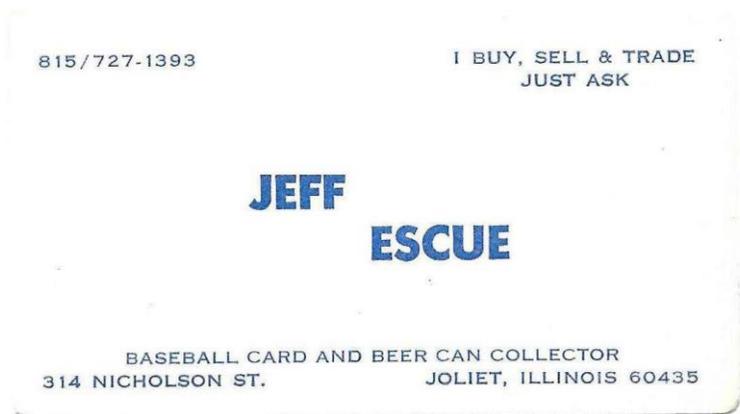
Don Steinbach died in 1997. “In maybe 2007,” Escue said, “I saw a Mastro Auction catalog and went to the pre-sale viewing to handle those great cards again. Don’s wife, was working there so I got to say hello and thanks. She always treated me great.”

### **Getting into the business**

Baseball cards were the first great opportunity for Escue to develop his financial abilities. Dealing with cards was the equivalent of a prep school for the future business entrepreneur. He

found out who the sellers were, where shows were held and how to go about buying cards in bulk. He had business cards printed and left them with antique dealers. Often, others were not all that happy to have him asking a lot of questions and competing with them. However experienced collectors wound up buying cards from him.

*Escue left his business card with anyone who might encounter some old cards – or beer cans. Escue collected cans well before he could drink the beer.*



### **Buying teams roam the country**

Escue described what he found in the 1970s: “I will give some perspective of how much material went through the big buyers’ hands. Pat Quinn and Don Steinbach were a buying team of substance. Another team was Michigan guys. Wisconsin had a team of buyers. Jim Beckett, Gar Miller and many other groups, whom I did not know, roamed the country.”

Quinn, Steinbach and others journeyed to Canada and Venezuela looking for cards. (Watch for a future *SCD* article on such adventures as told by Pat Quinn.)

Keasler had come from the tiny town of Eddyville in Southern Illinois and was an avid Cardinals fan. “Keasler’s favorite player was Stan Musial and he got dibs on Musial cards. He kept the near mint and mint ones. As I recall he had a stack of maybe 50 mint and near-mint 1959 Musial Topps cards from buying out of classified ads in Joliet and doing hotel buying trips. He did not buy these from other table holders. How many other cards do you imagine went through his hands?”

### **Buying with Beckett**

It wasn’t long before Escue found Jim Beckett. Beckett was still teaching statistics and had not yet published his successful price guides. Escue said: “Jim Beckett had done some prior card buying jobs out East before he worked with me to give the Illinois area a try. We did very well in Springfield and Aurora. For my share, I made over \$1,000 (in card values, realized later through sales) for the weekend for both Springfield and Aurora. This was when I was making \$2 an hour working in a factory, which in the summer reached over 120 degrees. It was not hard to figure out this was a very good and enjoyable adventure.” Escue and Beckett split costs and the cards obtained 50/50.

“We got a Hires Root Beer set in Springfield, and as we were buying I pulled Jim into the separate room we had in the hotel and said - wow this is Hires Root Beer regional set or some such thing. I was very excited. He said he knew already. (He knew way more than me, but I could not always tell.) Jim later explained, correctly, to me that I should never do what I had just done, because then the seller would start to think they were worth a fortune. The cards were not worth a fortune at that time, but I was so excited because I had never had any.

“The purchases were typically based on the seller setting the price. We would try not to set the price. It was up to the seller to do the hours of research we buyers had already done in order to learn the values. We let them set the price and they walked away happy. Sometimes we paid 90% sometimes we paid 20%, sometimes we said no thanks; 50% was not uncommon.” After

deducting travel costs and ads you had to buy at something like 50% to really make it worthwhile.

### **On his own in Peoria**

Escue continued: "For Peoria Jim had to cancel showing up, so I took the cash needed for the buying and did the trip with a non-collector friend. I held the cards bought in Peoria until Jim was in the Chicago area some months later, and we sat on my parents' living room floor and split up the cards. As Jim could not make it to Peoria and we already had our money sunk into the newspaper ads, my dad would not let me go alone as I was only 17. As a result, I asked a 16-year-old friend Larry to tag along. Jim and I paid Larry maybe \$20 a day and free food. Larry and I thought ordering hotel room service was the greatest thing on earth. Before these hotel buying trips, I had never ordered hotel room service. I was always underfed as a kid growing up; I always spent money on food when I had money.

Peoria was so lousy, evidently some other buying group had been there before us, there was no way to tell who had hit a town already, I never did another hotel after the Peoria bust. I figured the major cities were all picked clean and gave up on hotel buying trips." Escue's hunch about other buying groups was later confirmed by the Peoria Public Library. They dug out a Peoria newspaper ad by Pat Quinn which appeared shortly before Escue's trip. Escue considered Quinn one of the smartest people he had met.

### **Buying trip approach**

"I suspect every older city, of a metro population of 100,000 or more, had a hotel buying group show up by 1976. I do not know when the hotel buying groups started, but Gar Miller may have been the first to create this buying model for baseball cards. Gar was a true hobby innovator and pioneer and a good baseball player.

"Jim Beckett had the advertising display copy prepped and sent it directly to the paper. I did not know anything about ad placement so Jim was the whole brains here. He understood how to work with the hotel front desk staff to get the sellers up to our room, etc. My main contribution was I knew what Illinois cities were prosperous in the 1950s and also of size, population-wise, from the 1910-1940 era that may not have been picked over by earlier buying groups. Joliet was, of course, picked clean by Steinbach and Keasler from many years of advertising in the classifieds.

Ads were run a week in advance of the trips and would cost several hundred dollars. They might be lucky and have the local newspaper do a "puff piece" before their trips. Their Peoria ad sought pre-1960 baseball cards and displayed a 1934 Goudey. "Ask for Jim or Jeff."

**WANTED TO BUY**

**BASEBALL CARDS**  
prior to 1960

will be at:  
**RAMADA INN**  
415 St. Mark Ct.

**SATURDAY, MAY 1**  
9 AM TO 7 PM

BRING your cards or call  
and ask for Jim or Jeff  
**Phone: 673-6461**



### **Getting buyers to the room not always easy**

“Jim educated me in tipping the front desk and thanking them in order to get the collectors sent upstairs to our room with their boxes of baseball cards. Our ad mentioned pre-1960 baseball cards; the market for other sports was not my interest, and prices for other sports cards were pretty weak.

“People would call the hotel and be connected to our room. When they arrived at the hotel, they would stop at the front desk, and the desk was told to send them to our room, not something you would do today with a pile of cash sitting in the room!

“In some towns, local collectors were irate at the out of town buyers showing up on their turf. They would intercept the sellers walking into the hotel with boxes of cards either in the parking lot or in the hotel lobby. I heard in some buying trips things got a bit heated when the out of towners figured out no one was showing upstairs.”

### **Sizing up towns to visit**

“You could not find cards in a town that was newly-born so to speak. For instance, Orlando, Florida, had the population of about 100,000 at this time, but likely had so few cards, it would never have been visited by a hotel buying group for two reasons: air conditioning and human mobility.

“The South was not air conditioned until the 1950s, which means hot, humid climates had a large degree of problems with cardboard being able to maintain its condition without mold. More cards were thrown out relative to those same cards collected in dry climates.

“Secondly, and more importantly, Orlando was a relatively newly-born city. It had a small population in 1910-1940 for the E and T and early R cards era. Orlando was comprised of lots of people who had moved there. When people moved, they threw out what was of no value. Baseball cards had no value to most people through the mid-1960s. Not until hotel buying ads appeared, did the general public realize baseball cards had value. People downsize when they move; it's that simple.

“One interesting demographic oddity is lots of hi number series cards were in Canada cities as it seems Topps dumped their year-end remainders up north and for some reason the kids bought them after the season ended, I guess?”

### **Hobby shows and sleeping on the floor**

Escue continued, “The early shows of 1972-4 were not as well publicized as the shows in 1975-6; likewise the growth of the hobby was not as large in 1974 as in 1976. I attribute this to the influx of cards from the hotel buying groups, providing inventory and profits for the sellers and lots of choices for new collectors. Likewise the star card concept really picked up steam, and I suspect for the same reason - availability.”

A full-page *SCD* ad for one 1975 Chicago show mentioned \$2 admission fees for three days, \$7.50 table fees and \$26 hotel rooms.

“To save money at conventions, we packed 4 or so to a hotel room, I slept on the floor to save money for cards. The shows ran normally from 9 AM to 4 PM. There was also typically an evening auction. Then people got together and talked until after midnight in the various rooms and swapped some cards, but mostly talked baseball and of course baseball cards. Cards were

just left on the tables overnight for the most part. No one bothered the cards; you just put a sheet over them, no security, nothing.” Escue didn’t recall running into any full-time dealers at these once or twice a year regional shows.

“At the shows I was absorbing all the knowledge in the room. I walked to every table and asked what everything cost. If it was underpriced, I bought it. I was persistent in asking prices from other sellers during the shows and acquiring knowledge, since I knew buying in bulk was the only way to make a sure profit, that is what I focused on. One seller got so frustrated with my questions, that he tossed the card at me and said, take it but leave him alone. OK with me, a free card.”

### **Players on leaves?**

“My first Chicago show where I set up a selling table was likely in 1974. I shared a table with another young collector, Charles. Keasler, one of the show promoters, arranged the table sharing. Charles had an acquaintance arriving at the show and delivering some cards. These were going to be ‘rare Leafs.’ I had no idea what a rare Leaf was. I had T series printed on silks and had seen T series on leathers, so I was intrigued. Well it turned out to be something pretty simple, 1948-9 baseball cards by Leaf Gum Company which, in this case, were most of the rare short prints.”

### **Dealers buying in bulk, collectors chipping away**

“Don Lepore and another gentleman (likely, Herb Ross) would hit the Midwest shows with big wallets of cash and literally buy out tables at the end of conventions. This is a key insight. You could not move a big volume of better items typically. People in the early shows just did not have the money, and the cards were starting to pour into the hobby from the hotel buying trips. For most collectors, their wife was ticked, if they spent a lot i.e. \$200 or \$300 that was a very common theme. The big wallets came from NYC, the Northeast metro areas and California. The influx of cards eventually brought the money, and then it steamrolled from that point.

“Most people completed a set and moved on to another set. That’s it, no stockpiling, little speculation as to future price appreciation and no huge effort to upgrade, unless they knew they had a particularly ratty card. Condition was a minor consideration. Anyone would take the better of two cards offered, but it was not an all-encompassing motivation. Filling holes in your sets was the motivation.”

### **Gauging the market**

The hotel buying trips and shows increased the awareness of card values and saved many cards from going into the trash, according to Escue. “These hotel buying trips found 30 or 40 years’ worth of cards in 3 or 5 years maximum. The hobby did not increase 30 or 40 times the number of collectors during that same time. When the hotel buying trips arrived, collectors finally had nirvana, tons of quality cards to build their collections. One thing they saw with all the cards was that, relative to the number of collectors, they actually had way more inventory than they had collectors with spendable cash for a short while.”

Despite the uptick in card values and publicity, Escue felt hotel card buyers were concerned that the hobby momentum might fade and leave them holding the bag with a lot of cards that exceeded the future demand. For example, beer can collecting was also becoming popular at the time, but the expansion of that hobby never really took off. Years later the enthusiasm for Beanie Babies came and went quickly. In the 1970s, it would take someone several months to re-sell their purchases. Would the demand still be there?

For example, Escue said: "Around 1975, there was a find of '52 Topps high numbers in either Canada or Seattle from a hotel buying group trip. The announcement raced through an Indianapolis baseball card show. As a result, the prices of high numbers collapsed from \$10 each to \$6 each, at which time I waded in and bought. By the next show 6 months later, they were \$9 or \$10 each again. Once again this reflects the lack of confidence in buying by the public. "As a collector, I was willing to take the risk, and that risk paid off for me. Hindsight is quite easy; real time decision making trying to gauge the future, with money on the line, is not so easy. What is obvious 40 years later, is not necessarily so obvious in the moment."

### Escue's guide

Although Escue's grammar and syntax had not developed as quickly as his nose for business, he decided to become a writer. He noticed that there wasn't much useful written information about the hobby. He decided to fix that and make a few dollars from his expertise by publishing a guide to help beginners.

"I wrote a baseball card collectors' guide. My brother printed the guide with a student discount and it cost me 12 cents for each complete copy. I sold hundreds of copies for \$2 or \$3 through ads and card shows. I found three of the sale advertisements for the guide in old issues of *SCD* and *The Trader Speaks* from 1976. The guide I wrote in 1975 was my attempt at an enhanced but different version of Gar Miller's guide which I had purchased a few years before. Nothing else existed in the way of a collectors' guide (that I was aware of) when I wrote the guide, and it was not easy to get information for most new collectors. My guide focused on the process of collecting rather than prices. The portion of the guide that discussed prices consisted of saying 1933 Goudeys sold for \$2 and star cards sold for maybe double, etc."

Upon re-reading his own guide, Escue observed, "My guide is a masterpiece of misspelling and poor sentence structure. If you could get an award for bad grammar I would have had high honors." However, his 20-page booklet touched on just about everything he had learned from the hobby, including mistakes that turned into learning experiences.

## FOR SALE

IT'S FINALLY HERE, THE.....

"BASEBALL CARD COLLECTORS GUIDE"

CONTAINS ALL OF THE FOLLOWING:

History of cards; How to acquire them; Deciding on what to collect; Storing your cards properly; Bidding in auctions; Grading; Non-sports; Autographs; Programs; Value guides on the most collected sets and much more.

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JEFF: Please rush \_\_\_\_\_ copies of your book priced at \$2.00 each postpaid.

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ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

.Escue's May 1976 TTS ad for his guide mentions the history of cards, how to acquire them, what to collect, grading, values and other lessons learned by the teenage collector.

The cover of Escue's guide complete with a DiMaggio autograph – likely by Joe's sister

This June 1975 TTS ad included Escue's and his friend's childhood collections for which he realized perhaps \$90.



# BASEBALL CARD COLLECTORS

## GUIDE



BY  
JEFF ESCUE

### FOR SALE

1959 TOPPS BASEBALL- complete set- excellent condition..  
1960 TOPPS BASEBALL- complete set- excellent condition..

### AUCTION

BIDDING ENDS JUNE 7. 1

1. 1936 S&S GAME- this is the original complete game, in cards, rule cards, 104 greenback playing cards (2 decl gem mint. Box included, has slight corner wear but is excellent. Minimum bid is \$100.00.
2. R314 CANADIAN SUBSET  
Wide Pens  
a Averill- ex  
b Blanton- vg  
c DiMaggio- gd  
d Doerr- g-vg  
e Dykes- vg  
f Feller- g-vg  
g Fletcher- g-vg  
h Fox- ex  
i Galan- vg-ex  
j Hartnett- vg  
k Higgins- g-vg  
l Hubbell- gd  
m Newsom- vg  
n Solters- ex  
o Vosmik- ex  
p Whitehead- ex
3. R320 HIGH #S  
a #74 Boken- g  
b #74 Boken- vg/ink marks  
c #85 Comorosky- vg-ex  
d #92 Larkin- vg-ex  
e #95 Hoag- f  
f #96 Deshong- vg
4. R330 DOUBLE-PLAY  
a 25/26 Danning/Melton- gd  
b 75/76 Travis/Case- gd  
c 85/86 Greenberg/Ruffing- vg  
d 87/88 Trosky/Case- vg-ex  
e 127/128 Babich/Siebert- gd  
f 137/138 Rucker/Adams- gd
5. 1952 TOPPS BASEBALL  
a 40 different- gd  
b 7 different- gd  
c 8 semi-high #s- vg
6. 1950 TOPPS COLLEGE FB  
Topps 1st FB issue  
a Bailey- gd/ph  
b Carey- gd  
c Campbell- ex  
d Ceconi- f  
e Chauncey- f  
f Dueber- vg  
g Fuchs- g-vg  
h Galiffa- vg  
i Hester- gd  
j Kuhn- vg/cr  
k Leach- gd  
l Lyle- gd/ph  
m Mataya- vg-ex  
n Mouser- vg-ex  
o Murphy- gd-vg  
p Sawle- gd  
q Sendell- vg/ph  
r Stanley- vg  
s Stevenson- p  
t Viracola- g/ph  
u D.Walker- vg  
v Wagner- vg  
w Wiener- gd-vg  
x Weiss- gd/ph  
y Wilson- vg  
z Wren- vg-ex
7. TIP TOP BREAD  
a Fannin- StL AL- gd  
b Potter- StL AL- vg  
c Stephens- StL AL- vg  
d Zarilla- StL AL- f  
e Brazle- StL NL- ex  
f Kurowski- StL NL- ex
8. DAN DEE  
a Avila- very poor  
b Bauer- f/ph  
c Garcia- vg  
d Hodges- gd  
e Houtteman- vg-ex  
f Mitchell- vg  
g Schoendienst- trimmed/ph  
h Snider- gd  
i Strickland- f/cr  
j Wynn- vg/cr
9. WILSON WEINERS  
a Erskine- vg-ex
10. GLENDALE MEATS  
a Hitchcock- gd/slt ink
11. MISC ITEMS  
a R316 Roush- gd/auto  
b R311 Dykes- trimmed  
c R303 Simmons- p  
d R322 Derringer- vg  
e R334- 15 different- gd  
f R336- 10 different- gd  
g 7 different Leaf- ex-mt  
h 9 different Leaf- gd-vg  
i 8 diff Red Man w/tabs- gd-vg  
j Johnston Cookies #2- gd  
k 1,200 asst 66-67 Topps- g  
l 1,200 asst 1968 Topps- g  
m 1,900 asst 1969 Topps- g  
n 1,100 asst 1970 Topps- g  
o Mantle auto '64 Giant- mt  
p '48 Who's Who in ML- vg  
q '46 Who's Who in BB- gd  
r '49 Who's Who in BB- gd  
s '46 Famous Slugger- vg

SEND BIDS & ORDERS TO:

JEFF ESCUE  
314 NICHOLSON STREET  
JOLIET, ILLINOIS 60435

His ads for the guide included testimonials: Famous Chicago-area collector Rich Egan says, "Just what the hobby needs" and nationally-known collector Don Schlaff says, "Every beginner should have a copy."

"I had a few hundred copies left when I got out of the hobby and gave them to Roger Marth when he opened his card shop in New Lenox, and he sold or gave away the rest of them. Roger is a good guy. I saw Roger a few years ago. We remembered his first forays into the hobby including relaying the story of his childhood collection having glued some '52 Topps, as I recall, to his wall in his house. That is what happened to cards before the hobby emerged."

### **DiMaggio's autograph, but the wrong DiMaggio?**

"The cover had an autographed 1939 Play Ball Joe DiMaggio card. Some twenty years later, Dave Mediema mentioned in an *SCD* article that someone sold a guide which featured a fake autograph of DiMaggio on the cover. That must have been me! Dave was a good guy, and if he recalled it was my guide, he probably would not have mentioned it. I got the card from someone who had sent it to DiMaggio. Likely it was DiMaggio's sister who signed it."

### **Other guides**

Bert Sugar first published *The Sport Collectors Bible* in 1975 and it included descriptions and some pricing, but Escue was not aware of it, nor had he seen Jefferson Burdick's *American Card Catalog*. Escue felt that the hobby's use of Burdick's nomenclature of T, E and R categories to describe sets created a bit of mystery and confusion with the many new collectors entering the hobby.

Several other collectors or dealers made attempts at price guides as well as hobby publications during this period. Without the Internet around, there was a virtual explosion of pulp in the 1970s. *SCD* started in 1973, *TTS* in 1968. The average age of the four major hobby publishers in 1975 was 31 years old.

"Jim Beckett so wisely provided the hobby a few years later with great guides which were focused on individual card pricing," said Escue. "Jim's intelligent and honest approach to the hobby allowed collectors buying his early guides to have confidence in the information. Jim's guides took the hobby to another whole level."

### **Card show deals**

"To a large degree in the early 1970s, it was not socially acceptable for anyone over the age of 13 to collect cards, at least where I lived. Adults collecting baseball cards carried a very strong negative stigma. You had to keep your mouth shut, or you were thought of as very strange, collecting children's' stuff. By the mid-70s, card collecting became much more socially acceptable."

"At some shows I had my greatest success, because I was 15, and people off the street, possibly with a bit of larceny in their hearts, sold to the youngest guy in the room figuring they were getting rid of old fairly worthless stuff to a dummy. Big mistake. By the time I did shows, I knew more about card values than most of the sellers in the room, thanks to picking Keasler's and Steinbach's brains."

### **A nice box**

"One guy had a box of about 700 1936-41 era cards and premiums and a box of magazines from the same era. He wisely walked around the show. He noticed hardly anyone had any

magazines for sale especially from that era, yet probably 20% of the tables had cards like he had, so he erroneously concluded the mags were the gold.... oops. He wanted \$200 for the cards and that's what I paid. This was the biggest find, likely ever of the R314 cream colored Canadian style premiums (Type 4). I had at least three sets, and most major advanced collectors only had at best a few of these cards. This set had DiMaggio, Feller, Hubbell, Greenberg, Appling, Averill, Doerr and Gehringer. These were extremely popular with advanced collectors."

"Also the box included lots of '39 and '40 Play Ball high numbers, all VG to MT. Years later Roger Marth bought my '39 set. From that same box I sold a '41 set at a later show for \$200 after failing to get \$225 for it at a major convention. There was no money available at these shows relative to what cash was in the hobby only 10 years later. A MINT 1952 Topps set was auctioned for \$950 at one show. Chicago had only one show a year the first year I was involved, and it then went to two shows a year, not two major shows, two shows period.

"I would bring home \$1,000 extra cash from sales and more cards than I started with at most shows I attended. I was very good at buying stuff that walked in off the street. I was also very good at trading and obtained more value and cards than when I started a trade."

### **Walk-ins**

"I picked up some great buys from people walking into shows with a box of cards, and I would call over to my table anyone carrying anything, bag, box, etc. that might be cards - paper sacks were a common container. Some shows started getting complaints that the show organizers were poaching everything at the front admission desk so they started directing all walk-ins to auction their cards to appease the sellers setting up.

"I also would watch for people walking around who were only looking at cards, not buying. I guessed they might have cards to sell and were trying to understand pricing. I collared them as they walked past my table and asked if they had anything for sale. This worked very well and I never saw anyone else doing this.

"In Cincy, for instance, a guy said yes, I have a box of cards in my car. He wanted to finish looking over what sellers were selling similar cards for, then he would stop back and let me see what cards he had and let me know what he wanted for them. Besides 1950s Topps and Bowmans, he had a near set of Dan Dee Potato Chip cards including Smith and Cooper, the two rare ones. So yes, it paid to be innovative and observant.

"When buying cards, if the seller would not set the price and forced me to make an offer, I would add up the value of the superstar cards and pay that price. The commons were free and represented the future profits before other expenses. Invariably the commons with their vastly greater quantity were worth about the same total amount as the superstars at that point in time. That gives you some perspective of the relationship of values of star cards to commons. In other words, I would offer 50 cents on the dollar. You would do fine buying that way and that is how many people assessed how much to pay for purchased collections. Using this method I do not remember ever being surprised, either up or down in value later with what I got. This was a short cut for when you did not have time to dawdle at a show or during a hotel buying trip. You just had to get it done and move on, hoping something else would walk through the door five minutes later."

### **Advertising results**

"I simultaneously advertised in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun Times* that I wanted to buy pre-'58 baseball cards, almost no response. I spent about \$100 in ads then finally got one lady from Michigan who had a near set of '53 Topps which she wanted \$30 for. I happily paid that and when the cards arrived she had included maybe 15 or 20 Dixie Cup lids which were very in demand at that time.

"I had a guy from Aurora call me with 1,000 '50-'53 Bowmans. He wanted a penny each but they were a bit damp at one time and very musty smelling he said. Since I would have to drive 30 miles and pay a penny each and did not know how bad the cards really were, I passed."

### **Floating the cards**

"If you got cards that were glued into a scrapbook, not that uncommon for 1930s-era cards for some reason, you would toss the pages of cards in a sink or bathtub and soak them. They usually were glued with something like Elmer's glue which would come loose with very little soaking and often little or no damage. You just had to press the cards to keep them flat as they dried."

### **Memories versus reality**

"A friend moved in 1970 and gave me about 1,500 cards from '65-70. Many years later he evidently gets on eBay and sees a '68 PSA 10 common sell for \$500 and a PSA 9 Nolan Ryan sell for big bucks, and of course he is sure that is exactly what he gave me, not a chance. But everyone thinks they had gem perfect 10s. In hindsight, he is sure his cards, which were worth about \$25 dollars when he gave them to me in 1970, were worth a fortune in 1970.

"I see that I auctioned these along with my childhood card collection in the 6/75 *The Trader Speaks* issue. I probably got \$90 for his and my childhood collection. The reality is virtually every kid handled and played with their cards, like they are supposed to. Most cards like mine and my friend's would be graded PSA 3 - 6 at best today. We kept them in rubber band stacks. Yikes!

"Since, for the most part, I dropped out of the hobby in 1977, my memories from that era are not tainted with many of the gradual changes that occurred and registered in people's brains who were constantly in the hobby from say 1970 onward. Very few people walked away from the hobby just before the hobby really took off. I run into some of the collectors from that era and they mix the '80s and '90s with the '70s memories since they never left the hobby. Their brain blurs the lines of reality, not intentionally but as a normal occurrence."

### **Beckett saw the stars**

"Jim Beckett was a nice guy and very bright. He was a statistics professor and probably thought about the hobby in those terms. But what he got from that era, that most everyone missed, was the popular players, i.e. Mantle, Mays, Aaron etc., would be the truly great cards in the future, much more so than the commons. He really understood the future in terms of psychology of the masses wanting to identify with the heroes of their past, not the commons so to speak.

"He explained this to me to some degree, but I was focused on the fact that for the most part as many Mantle cards were printed as Horace Clark, so why would Mickey's late '60s cards be worth way more than a common Horace Clark? As a result, I did hear what he said, we all saw the demand for star cards from the masses at the shows, especially from new collectors, but it never really sank in with me at the time. Lots of people observed the star card phenomenon, but

we had no idea how much it would steamroll. Once again, I focused on supply, not demand. Jim understood demand. This is so obvious now, but not as many people understood this back then, as Jim did.”

### **Others in the hobby**

“Mike Cramer, our wives and I had a very nice visit at Mike’s house a few years back. He was a really bright guy and one of the few who treated me really nice back in the 1970s. Mike worked the Alaska fishing boats back in the 1970s i.e. very dangerous and demanding and very high paying job. Mike put that money into cards and eventually launched the Pacific Trading Card Company to print licensed sports card sets.

“Cramer bought a ton of retailer or wholesaler returns of Topps cards and warehoused them for a few years before selling them into the hobby - same thing Larry Fritsch did. Not many people stockpiled the current stuff. This was before stores, and only a few people had mail order businesses.

“People I remember from the Chicago, Cincy, and Indy shows were Ed Nassiff, Dick Ruess, Orlando Iten, John Stirling, George Husby, Jack Urban, Dick Millerd, Rich Binder and Tom Koppa.” Sellers would bring regionals from their areas.

### **Regionals and premiums**

“Most of us correctly observed that regionals, i.e. Wilson Franks, Rodeo Meats, Glendale Meats etc. were exponentially rarer than the Topps and Bowman sets. Likewise the Goudey premiums were massively rarer than the Goudey cards. Many of the advanced collectors were happy to put their money in regionals and premiums which are largely forgotten today relative to the main Topps, Goudey and T-206 sets.”



*The R312 Color Premiums 50-card set was one of Escue’s favorites.*

### **“Recent” commons and what to hang onto**

“Keasler told me (in 1973) not to mess with ‘65 Topps and forward since they made so many of them relative to how many collectors there were. Here again, look at the lesson Mike learned from all of his buying adventures. He would not even buy them unless something else came with them. They told the people to keep them, maybe they would be collectible later.”

“This was very logical, if you had come from the prior 20 or so years in the hobby with such slow growth. He saw the volume of cards available because of hotel buying trips and made a reasonable assumption the demand would continue as it had in the ‘60s, very slow. Instead the increased volume of cards and exposure of the hobby to the general public that resulted from these hotel buying trips actually massively increased the demand and quickly expanded the number of collectors. By focusing on the experience of the prior 20 years, many major collectors totally missed what was about to happen. We understood supply and did not anticipate the soon to be explosive demand.”

“Bottom line, if I had kept anything, it would have been the Goudey premiums, regionals and a few other sets based on incorrect ideas relative to current values as I see on eBay. Also I might have put the cards I kept into the early plastic pages. Besides dinging the corners as I slid them in, I would have woke up 10 years later to find the oil had leached from the early plastic pages and been mighty ticked off. So, I am glad I sold out back then.”

### Condition

“Keasler was very keen on condition and would sit with each new card that he got, (if it was in obviously great condition), and compare it to his existing sets to upgrade, and he had awesome stuff. Keasler sold some of his stuff to Alan Rosen. He was the only true condition freak I saw. I never knew anyone who looked at gloss or printer marks except Mike back in the 1974 era.

“Jim Beckett was also very cognizant of condition, but I never saw his collection. Others looked to improve their cards, but it was not an all-encompassing activity like it is today.”

*Escue’s April 1976 SCD ad moved those Dixie Lids at \$4.50 each. Cards from the 1950s ranged from 7 cents to 28 cents each.*

### Selling by mail order

“To understand how little importance was given to condition in the mid ‘70s compared to today, my April 1976 SCD ad mentions – ‘I have at least two of each lot.’ It was very common to wait to sell through the hobby publications until you had multiples of the same items. If I had three DiMaggios from the R314 cream colored Canadian Goudey Wide Pen Premium set (which I did), and they were VG, VG/EX, and EX respectively, I would list the card as VG in the auction. That way, if I got seven bids I would usually fill the top three bids giving the EX condition card to the highest bidder. This is because the advertisement cost was more than the monetary difference we could receive from focusing on the different condition of the card in many cases. In 1976 TTS was \$40 for a full page ad (\$167 in today’s dollars) and \$11.50 for a quarter page. Selling this way was common from my experience talking with other sellers.

## For Sale Baseball Cards

1. Dixie Lid Kiner Chi. Aug. \$4.50
2. Dixie Lid Minoso Chi. Aug. \$4.50
3. Dixie Lid Ashburn Phil. Aug. \$4.50
4. Dixie Lid Hoeft Det. Aug. \$4.50
5. Dixie Lid Slaughter St. L. Aug. \$4.50
6. Dixie Lid McDougald N.Y. Aug. \$4.50
7. Dixie Lid Irvin N.Y. Aug. \$4.50
8. Dixie Lid Shoendienst St. L. Aug. \$4.50
9. 1962 Topps 100 asst. vg-mt \$5
10. 1961 Topps 100 diff. ex-mt \$8
11. 1961 Topps 100 asst. vg-mt \$7
12. 1959 Topps 100 diff. vg-mt \$7.50
13. 1958 Topps 100 diff. vg-mt \$9
14. 1957 Topps 100 diff. ex-mt \$11
15. 1956 Topps 100 asst. vg-mt \$14
16. 1955 Topps 100 asst. vg-mt \$18
17. 1954 Topps 50 diff. g-mt \$10
18. 1953 Topps 50 diff. g-mt \$12.50
19. 1952 Topps 25 asst. ag-g \$7
20. 1955 Bowman 100 diff. ex-mt \$20
21. 1954 Bowman 100 diff. ex-mt \$22.50
22. 1953 Bowman Color 25 diff. vg-mt \$12
23. 1957 Topps rare series 20 diff. ex-mt \$9
24. 1955 Topps high #'s 10 diff. ex-mt \$4.50
25. 1953 Topps high #'s 10 diff. vg-mt \$5
26. 1955 Bowman high #'s 20 diff. ex-mt \$9
27. 1955 Bowman Umpires 10 diff. ex-mt \$8
28. 1954 1954 Topps H. Aaron vg-ex \$9
29. 1954 Topps T. Williams #1 vg-ex \$5
30. 1953 Topps M. Mantle vg-ex \$7

- 1) Please add appropriate postage.
- 2) I have at least 2 of each lot.
- 3) Most of the cards are at least EX unless stated otherwise.

## Jeff Escue

314 Nicholson Street  
Joliet, Illinois 60435

"When you won an auction, you were notified by mail: here is what you won, send me this amount. The whole process took about three months from the time you hand-typed your ad, mailed it in, the ad showed up the next issue which was monthly. Then you waited about two weeks after the ad ran to make sure all bids showed up, notified the winners, many were very slow paying because they did not have the money to pay (no exaggeration), then you mailed them the cards first class mail in an envelope with minor cardboard. This further emphasizes that condition was not that important, getting the missing number to complete your set was what was important.

"Long distance calling was quite expensive relative to the value of the cards. I remember visiting my grandmother who was very old school and taking along a copy of TTS to read. I saw a guy had some Rodeo Meats that I wanted, and he listed a phone number out of state. I called the guy 4 or 5 times and his wife always answered; he was never home. He would not return a long distance call. Finally I had to give up. My grandmother yelled at me for quite a while running up her phone bill to the tune of like \$4 for those calls."

*This December 1974 TTS ad included 1952 Topps high numbers and cards from the 1930s. Escue listed just one R314 DiMaggio in VG, even though he had three available and the others were in better condition.*

## AUCTION

DEADLINE IS DECEMBER 7. Winners pay postage.

<p>1. <u>1952 TOPPS BASEBALL</u>  a #261 Mays- vg  b #337 Hearn- f  c #351 Dark- vg</p> <p>2. <u>R330 DOUBLE PLAY</u>  a 7/8 Derringer/Walters- mt  b 13/14 Kampouris/Wyatt- vg  c 33/34 Handley/Vaughn- vg  d 41/42 Cooney/Sisti- ex  e 53/54 McCosky/Gehringer- vg  f 75/76 Travis/Case- g  g 85/86 Greenberg/Ruffing- vg  h 87/88 Trosky/Case- ex  i 109/110 Priddy/Murphy- vg  j 123/124 Etten/Rizzo- vg  k 127/128 Babich/Siebert- vg  l 135/136 Walker/Having- vg  m 137/138 Rucker/Adams- vg</p> <p>3. <u>R322 1936 GOUDEY B&amp;W</u>  a Derringer- ex  b Dykes- vg  c Martin- vg-ex  d Waner- vg  e Werber- ex</p> <p>4. <u>R324 1941 BLANK BACK</u>  a # 4 Rosar- vg-ex</p> <p>5. <u>R319 1933 GOUDEY</u>  a # 2 Vance- f-g  b # 14 Johnson- g  c # 32 Clancy- g  d # 39 Koenig- f  e #119 Hornsby- vg/ph  f #120 Reynolds- g  g #121 Stewart- f  h #140 Hadley- vg  i #147 Durocher- vg  j #173 Holm- vg  k #184 Berry- g  l #187 Manush- vg-ex  m #190 Schulte- vg  n #191 Chapman- vg  o #198 Burns- vg  p #229 Vaughn- vg</p> <p>6. <u>R312 NATIONAL CHICLE</u>  a Bill Dickey- f  b Hoag/Gomez- f</p> <p>7. <u>R448 LEAF</u>  a # 27 Harris- vg</p>	<p>b # 31 Brissie- vg  c # 47 Vico- g</p> <p>8. <u>R314 CANADIAN WIDE PENS</u>  (all are cream colored)  a L.Appling- ex-mt  b E.Averill- ex-mt  c C.Blanton- ex  d Z.Bonura- ex  e T.Bridges- vg  f J.DiMaggio- vg  g B.Doerr- ex  h J.Dykes- vg  i B.Feller- ex-mt  j E.Fletcher- ex  k P.Fox- vg  l A.Galan- ex  m C.Gehringer- vg  n H.Greenberg- ex-mt  o M.Harder- vg  p G.Hartnett- vg  q P.Higgins- vg-ex  r C.Hubbell- vg-ex  s W.Moses- vg  t L.Newscum- ex-mt  u S.Rowe- vg  v J.Solters- ex-mt  w H.Trosky- ex-mt  x J.Vosmik- ex  y J.Whitehead- ex</p> <p>9. <u>R314 REGULAR WIDE PENS</u>  a F.Crosetti- g  b B.Dickey- f-g  c M.Hoag- vg  d D.Medwick- vg</p> <p>10. <u>1954 JOHNSON COOKIES</u>  a # 1 Crandall- g  b # 4 O'Connell- vg  c #15 Corin- vg  d #33 Burdette- g  e #35 Keely- vg-ex</p> <p>11. <u>1949 REMAR BREAD</u>  a M.Candini- ex-mt</p> <p>12. <u>1950 REMAR BREAD</u>  a G.Bamberger- ex-mt  b H.Behrman- ex  c C.Dressen- ex  d E.Harrist- ex  e B.Hofman- ex</p>	<p>f G.Metkovich- vg  g L.Tost- vg  h A.Wilson- ex  i R.Zimmerman- ex-mt</p> <p>13. <u>R334 1939 PLAY BALL</u>  a # 5 Sewell- vg  b # 15 Derringer- vg  c # 71 Pearson- ex  d # 80 Fox- ex  e # 92 Williams- vg-ex  f # 97 Johnson- vg  g #114 Travis- vg</p> <p>14. <u>R335 1940 PLAY BALL</u>  a 20 different- g-vg  b #237 Keeler- vg  c #212 Young- vg  d #203 Hale- vg  e #190 Berry- vg  f #186 Wright- vg  g #177 Baker- vg-ex  h #142 Kelly- vg  i #126 Solters- vg-ex  j #107 Vaughn- vg  k # 88 Ott- g-vg  l # 78 Riggs- vg  m # 73 Walters- ex  n # 50 Trosky- vg-ex  o # 48 Sewall- vg  p # 46 Averill- vg-ex  q # 41 Gehringer- vg  r # 40 Greenberg- vg  s # 27 Williams- vg  t # 11 Powell- vg  u # 10 Ruffing- vg  v # 9 Keller- vg-ex  w # 8 Selkirk- vg  x # 7 Dickey- ex  y # 6 Gomez- vg  z # 4 Henrich- vg</p> <p>15. <u>MISC CARDS</u>  a 8 assorted R319- f-g  b 15 assorted Mantle's- g  c 10 assorted Mays'- g  d 12 assorted Aaron's- g  e 15 assorted Clemente's- g  f 25 diff 1963 Post- vg  g 30 diff 1962 Post- vg  h 20 diff 1961 Post- vg</p>
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JEFF ESCUE, 314 NICHOLSON STREET, JOLIET, ILLINOIS 60435

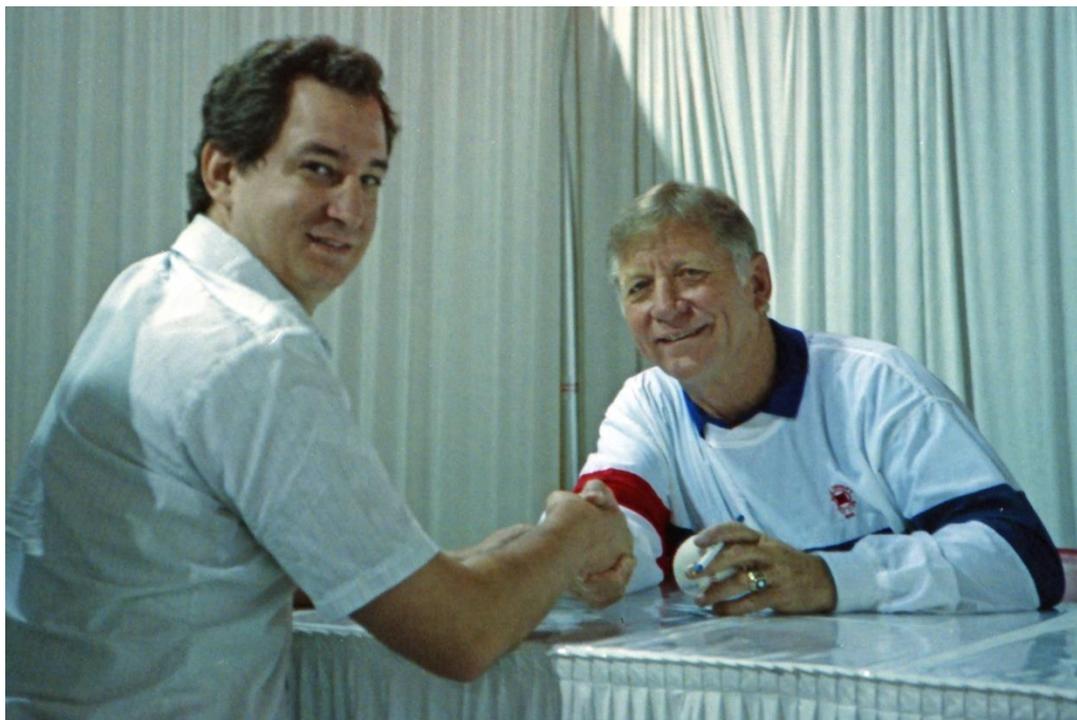
## Autographs

Escue remembered: "Autographs were another thing that is different today. Many advanced collectors bought Jack Smalling's address guide. The list had thousands of former players' addresses. Steinbach and Keasler had areas in their houses set aside to send out autographs, a little work station so to speak, and would work in their spare time to write a request, stamp envelopes and SASE, and send out hundreds of requests each month. Often the card was sent with two 3x5 index cards to act as stiffeners to help avoid card damage and get two more autographs on the index cards. This highlights once again how condition was not that big a deal.

"Who would send out a mint 25-year old star rookie card now to a player, even if they would sign for free? The main focus then for autographs was HOF and former players from the '20s -'50s. I sent off a color pic of Lefty Gomez and got that autographed, but that was about it. This is one of the few things I kept.

"Years later, I met Mickey Mantle at a show in Illinois and got a baseball autographed, shook hands and got a picture with him. I remember at one of the early 1970s Chicago shows they had Bob Feller as a guest signer. What a concept, a genuine all-time great signing autographs at a card show. I recall the show promoters paid Bob a flat fee. Then Bob signed for collectors for free. The media ate it up. That is obvious and common now, but once again this was ground breaking in the early '70s.

"I had a 1933 baseball players' guide book with a hard cover. It had most of the major league players. Inside it had a great picture of the player, his stats and, most amazing, it showed the player's current home address. Think about that for a minute, Lou Gehrig's home address (and everyone else's) in a guide book that you could have bought at a book store in 1933."



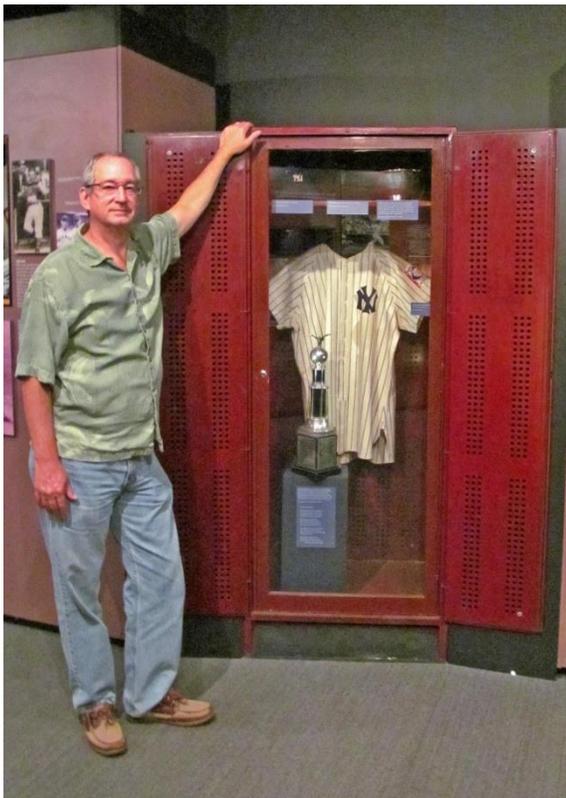
*Escue meeting Mickey Mantle in 1990 at a Chicago-area show, photo J. Escue*

## College fund

“For a while I rolled my baseball card profits back into more cards, so when I finished a set I held onto the set for a short while. I read the backs and held the cards and got a kick out of the history. Then I sold the set and chased another set, always churning. When I entered college, I sold everything to pay for college. When I grew up we did not know a single adult who had ever gone to college except for our school teachers and physicians. College was an exotic concept where I came from.

“My buying adventures resulted in my acquiring lots of 1933-41 and 1952-61 cards which are all gone now, but it was sure fun to have owned at one time. It would be nice to have focused on being a collector exclusively and to have kept the cards, however I did not have the luxury of keeping my capital tied up in a hobby. Selling the cards was a way to move forward. I got to own some great cards and sets and that is more than most people had the opportunity to do.”

While Escue may not have sold out anywhere near the peak, his timing was fortunate. A few years later his parents’ home flooded. The basement where he would have kept his cards took on five feet of water. Escue had cashed in on all his cards before the flood.



*Escue visited the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2013 and posed next to Lou Gehrig’s locker, photo J. Escue*

## Looking back

Escue concluded, “The McDonald’s football cards lured me back into the hobby briefly in the late 1980s, but my early and mid-1970s experience remains ‘frozen in time’ and brings back many fond memories. The lessons I learned in the ‘70s about supply and demand, marketing, and general business served me well later in life as I was fortunate to have a very successful career in business and now am focused on gaining spiritual wisdom. Life is good.”

Escue is happy to now own just some reprint sets of the vintage cards he once had. He can read them and not worry about bending them. Every so often he’ll drop in at a show or pick up and read an auction catalog to stay in touch with the hobby that he enjoyed. It is often the players he enjoys recalling rather than the cards themselves.

Jeff and his wife retired a few years ago and moved to the Northwest. If you are an old acquaintance and would like to share memories, or if you have copies of his old ads in your back issues of *SCD* and *TTS*, he can be contacted at [jsq2@yahoo.com](mailto:jsq2@yahoo.com).

*George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at [vrechek@ameritech.net](mailto:vrechek@ameritech.net).*

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