

Hobby History

Bags of money, Chico, and Topps cards in Venezuela



Bob Schmierer, Bobby Avila, Chico Carrasquel and Pat Quinn, undated photo Pat Quinn



Pat Quinn remembers card-buying trips to Venezuela

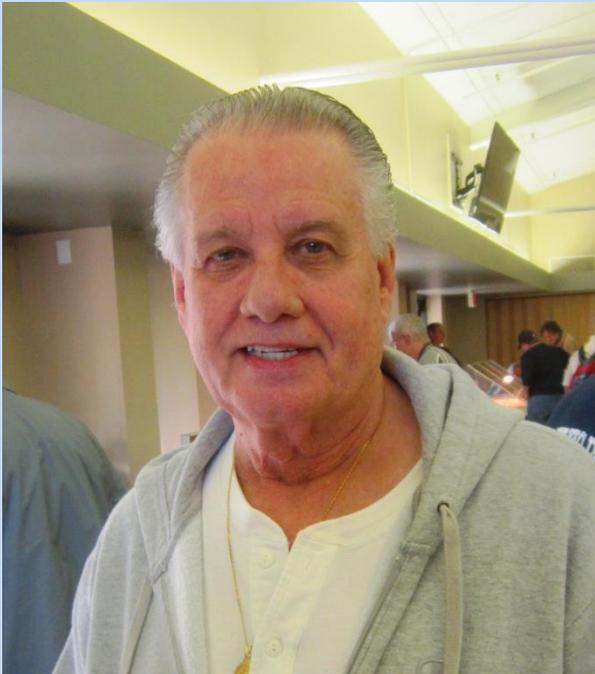
By George Vrechek

Starting in the 1970s there were many dealers who made buying trips traversing the United States. Pat Quinn was one of those dealers and remembers being on the road 51 out of 52 weeks one year, running ads in newspapers, and buying cards and other memorabilia from locals who would bring them to hotel rooms. Sometimes turf wars were so heated that there were scuffles with locals and other dealers, Quinn recalled. By 1989, these bulk buyers were running out of fresh locations.

Quinn and the Sports Collector Store

Quinn grew up in a rough neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. As a kid, he had been a White Sox fan and soon moved from collector to dealer. He was one of the founders of the Sports Collectors Store which opened in Chicago in 1976 and had a huge inventory of vintage cards bolstered by a million-card purchase from The Trading Card Company of Detroit and later another million-card purchase from Richard Gelman of New York. The store was one the first and largest full-time retail card stores in the

country. In the 1980s owners Quinn, Don Steinbach and Roger Marth moved the store to La Grange, Illinois.



*Pat Quinn,
2015, photo by
George
Vrechek and
Pat Quinn,
1973, Photo:
Sports
Collectors
Digest*

A blind date to Venezuela

In 1989, Quinn was thinking outside the box to find cards: why not go to Venezuela on a buying trip? There were baseball teams in Venezuela, and several of their players had made the majors. Venezuelans were avid baseball fans and probably had some memorabilia that might be collectible. That Quinn knew nothing about Venezuela, knew no one there, didn't know what kind of memorabilia he would find and spoke no Spanish didn't seem to be a problem. He had encountered obstacles trying to buy cards in obscure U.S. locations. He joined with Bill Mastro and made a trip to Caracas, hoping for the best. Quinn described the experience like going on a "first date," or maybe it was more like a blind date.

The road to Caracas

Quinn remembered, "We picked out a hotel in Caracas, Venezuela, to rent a room for a weekend (Hotel Tamanaco). We called a local newspaper and told them in English what we wanted to say in an ad. The newspaper handled putting it into Spanish, and it was a pretty big and expensive ad. We flew in late at night and got a cab to the hotel. Everyone there seemed to be dressed up, like in tuxedos. We were in jeans. It was a nice place." The ad was similar to those he had run in the U.S., telling people to bring their old sports cards or memorabilia to the hotel starting at 9 AM on Saturday and leave with cash.

Get out of our hotel!

Early Saturday morning he knew there was a problem. The ad was a big hit. People were lined up two-abreast in a long line down and around the block in front of the hotel well before the time described. The potential sellers were regular working people, farmers in work clothes and not guys in tuxedos. Quinn got a phone call from the hotel front desk, "They wanted us out of there. They didn't want all these people lined up in front of their hotel. We had to get our stuff and go out on the sidewalk to meet with the people."



Collectors lined up in front of the fancy Hotel Tamanaco to the dismay of the staff. Photo: By Guillermo Ramos Flamerich under the Creative Commons Attribution

Cards you could sit on

People brought baseball cards that were usually pasted into albums designed for the cards. The cards were Topps cards but on noticeably different cardboard, darker print colors and no gloss. Quinn and Mastro had landed in a sea of old baseball cards printed in Venezuela. The cards and Topps' involvement had not been common knowledge in the U.S. Topps apparently sent their first few print sheets initially to Benco, a printer in Venezuela. A stick of gum was sold along with four cards. Cards were produced irregularly in the 1960s and evolved into stickers in the early 1970s since the collectors there liked to put their cards into albums anyway. Hobby pioneer Buck Barker probably dabbled in cards from Venezuela, but they were not generally known in the U.S. hobby. Of course, collectors in Venezuela didn't know that they were being "discovered."

Quinn recalled the last guy in line on that trip. "He had driven something like 200 miles on a motorcycle to get there. He had only one card which was Luis Aparicio. It had been in his back pocket and had more creases in it that I had ever seen on a card. He was disappointed we didn't really want the card, but we reimbursed him for his gas money."

Venezuelan cards

Ninety-five percent of the cards that turned up on this trip were Topps cards printed in Venezuela. The typical purchase was maybe \$20 with some collections being a few hundred dollars. Quinn and Mastro divided the costs and the cards and headed home. Quinn remembers the customs inspectors looking at the bundles of old cards that represented most of their luggage and laughing. There was no problem bringing the cards back other than the effort to lug them all home.

Bolivars weren't handy

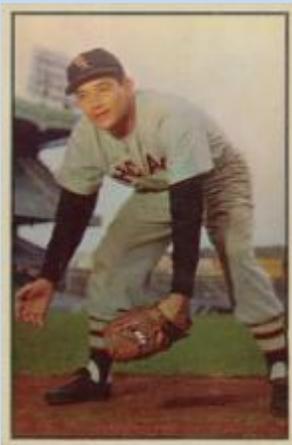
The trip was a success, but it was cumbersome trying to make deals without understanding Spanish. Buying cards with U.S. dollars was also a problem. Some sellers wanted Venezuelan money, and you needed lots of currency (bolivars) to make a small deal. When Quinn made his first trip, the exchange rate was something like 35 bolivars to one dollar and inflation was significant. By the end of Quinn's trips, you needed about 500 (old) bolivars to equal a dollar. There were pegged rates, "crawling" pegs, "managed float" and black market rates. The largest paper currency was only 1,000 bolivars which didn't buy much. You needed bundles of paper currency or sacks of coins. At one point the metal in the coins was worth more than their currency value.

New cards for collectors

The cards were not usually in very good shape, but they were new to collectors back home and included some cards that differed from the normal Topps cards. Superstar collectors, of players like Aaron and Koufax, were interested in adding cards from Venezuela to their collections. Quinn felt, "They had something cool with the Venezuelan cards. Nobody else had them. It was saleable right away. Once the cards were listed in the price guides around 1991, everyone wanted them. Some cards would sell for \$50 or \$100."

Obstacles

Quinn's partner, Don Steinbach, made the next trip to Venezuela along with Detroit hobby veteran John Rumierz and an interpreter. This time they rented a conference room in a Hilton Hotel business center for meeting with sellers. Their trip was successful, but ran into some of the same obstacles. Also on two other occasions, either the U.S. or Venezuelan air carriers completely lost their luggage consisting of their purchased baseball cards. Quinn eventually settled a claim with one airline for \$2,500, which was not enough. Other buyers heard about some of the difficulties and decided that they were better off buying the cards from Quinn rather than heading off to Venezuela themselves. I visited the Sports Collectors Store shortly after one of Quinn's trips and bought type cards of each issue they had uncovered. I should have bought more.



Chico Carrasquel returns to Comiskey

Quinn was a season ticket holder for White Sox games and had met equipment managers and players who were sources for autographs, photos and other memorabilia. One game Quinn attended honored former Sox stars including former shortstop Chico Carrasquel (1926-2005), a four-time All-Star for the White Sox between 1950 and 1955. Carrasquel was the first Venezuelan to star in the majors and the first in a long line of fabulous-fielding Venezuelan shortstops. He was replaced in Chicago by another Venezuelan legend, Luis Aparicio.

Chico Carrasquel's 1953 Bowman

A proposal or two

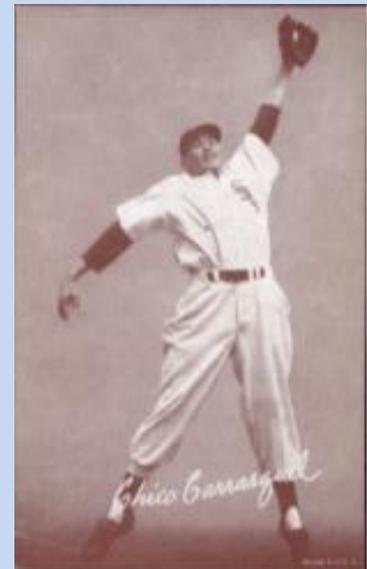
Quinn saw Carrasquel and had an idea. He hustled down from his seat in the upper deck to try to meet him. With the help of a clubhouse guy he knew, Quinn wound up following Carrasquel out of the park and began describing what he had in mind. He wanted to have him sign photos and would pay \$5 for each autograph. Carrasquel's English was about as good as Quinn's Spanish, and he couldn't figure out why someone would pay him for his autograph. Quinn left Carrasquel with his business card.

The next day Quinn got a call from Carrasquel's wife who spoke English fluently and came to the rescue. She explained the proposition to Carrasquel and he agreed. Quinn and his wife soon became friends with the Carrasquels. A second light bulb went off. Carrasquel made annual winter trips from Chicago back to Venezuela; Quinn suggested that he would pay for Carrasquel's transportation in exchange for Carrasquel coming along with them on the next buying trip. Carrasquel could be the interpreter and people would have a chance to meet him. Carrasquel agreed.

Carrasquel and Quinn on the road to Caracas

Quinn was not prepared for what happened when Carrasquel came with him on the next trip. Quinn recalled, "He was like the Babe Ruth of baseball there. Hundreds of people would show up. They brought their cards, but they wanted the opportunity to meet Chico." Carrasquel had continued to live and play winter ball in Venezuela while he was in the majors and until he was 41 years old. People brought cards, talked to Carrasquel and sold what they had to Quinn. The customs guys just smiled again and waved to the "baseball guys" with their suitcases of old cards. The newspaper people knew exactly what kind of ads to run for Quinn. The sellers loved talking to Carrasquel, and he enjoyed talking to them. Everyone was happy.

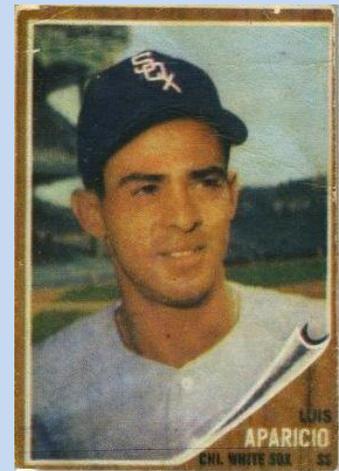
*Chico Carrasquel,
Exhibit Supply
Company*



Let's go see the other Carrasquels and Louie

Carrasquel is a common name in Venezuela and soon Quinn was meeting Carrasquels all over the place thanks to Chico, who also wanted them to see Luis Aparicio who was living in Venezuela, but not exactly across town. Quinn journeyed with Carrasquel for the meeting with Aparicio. Quinn recalled Aparicio's home town being "the hottest place in the world. You were sweating like someone had poured water over your head." Carrasquel was the goodwill ambassador wherever they went.

Aparicio's 1962 card renumbered as #200 for the Venezuelan Topps set



Cleveland and Chicago remembered Chico

Carrasquel was also popular in Cleveland where he played only from 1956 to 1958. Quinn went with him to an old-timers' reunion in Cleveland and remembered fans giving him at least as big a hand as they gave to stars like Feller, Lemon and Garcia. Carrasquel worked as a color commentator for the White Sox Spanish language broadcasts for several years in the 1990s.

The last trip and bags of money

The market had been picked pretty clean by Quinn's final visit in 1997. Former partner Jay Barry made the trip as well. The only real seller they found was a fellow who had lived in New York and had moved back to Venezuela. He had a 1951 Bowman set and wanted \$1,500 in bolivars. Since this was the only deal to make, Quinn agreed, but had considerable difficulty converting dollars to bolivars.

It was Friday, which was pay day. The banks rationed how much money they could distribute to one person. Quinn waited in long lines at two banks with no luck before finally being directed to an exchange

room at the airport. Quinn and Barry were sent to a very small room with a Dutch door in the back of the airport where he found two guards armed with machine guns guarding the door. They were able to exchange their money. The \$1,500 worth of bolivars “weighed something like 700 lbs,” Quinn joked. They put the bundles of currency in suitcases and hauled them back out of the airport to the seller.

Photo ops not taken

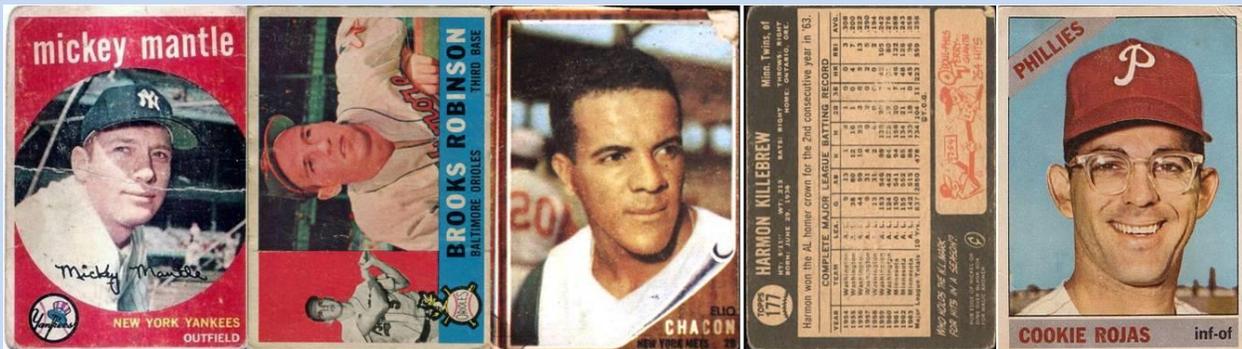
Of course, no one seemed to think it was noteworthy to bring along a camera on any of these trips, and Quinn couldn't remember having any photos from these trips. They would spend all day buying and all evening sorting out what they had purchased. He recalled, “You thought this type of thing would last forever, and never thought that this might be it.”

Quinn closed the Sports Collectors Store in 1996 and sold the last of his Venezuelan cards in 2005 about the same time that Chico Carrasquel died. All that is left are great memories.

- Topps cards were printed in Venezuela in 1959, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966, and 1968. In 1967, there were cards in Spanish of Venezuelan League players, retired MLB players, and current major leaguers in the same numbered set. The exact extent of Topps' involvement in this set as well as their involvement in printing and distribution of the other sets remains mysterious.
- From roughly 1972 to 1977 stickers or stamps were produced instead of cards. The 1977 stickers utilize about 50 Topps card images and layouts.
- Copyright and printing information on the cards and the color of the backs are confusing, which has caused problems in identifying Venezuelan cards in later years.
- There is an online Venezuela Topps Baseball Card Forum that has some detailed information, correcting errors in recent price guides.
- The 1962 cards were in Spanish, except for the series on Babe Ruth. The last two cards were added: Luis Aparicio (#200) and Elio Chacon (#199) and replaced #s 197 and 198.
- Commons are relatively affordable since they are usually found in the “sat-on” condition of Quinn's motorcyclist. However cards of Mantle, Aaron, Rose, Clemente, Koufax, Ruth, Gehrig and others have robust asking prices, especially if they are in decent shape.
- The 50-card 1967 Retirado series includes Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, Jackie Robinson, Koufax, Minoza, Connie Marrero, Bobby Avila and two Carrasquels.
- Some cards are found as much as 1/8 inch shorter than regular Topps cards.
- Because completed sheets were sent to Venezuela for printing, there are not the “standard” variations in the Venezuelan cards. However, there are a few new variations anyway due to the typical production and numbering snafus.
- Quinn remembered that they would buy anything collectible on these trips, but there were almost no “new” cards at the time. Everything was from the '60s and '70s.

Year	Set name	# in set	Players	Printing Info	Text	Description
1959	Venezuelan Topps	198	MLB	Topps and Benco	English	First two Topps print runs
1960	Venezuelan Topps	198	MLB	Topps or none	English	First two Topps print runs
1962	Venezuelan Topps	198	MLB	none	Spanish	First two Topps print runs, cards 199 and 200 added and 197 and 198 dropped
1964	Venezuelan Topps	370	MLB	Topps	English	First three Topps print runs, black ink on backs, first year for an album, 4 numbering errors
1966	Venezuelan Topps	370	MLB	Topps (1-283), none 284-370	English	First three Topps print runs
1967	Venezuelan Topps Winter League	138	Venezuelan + MLB	none	Spanish	#1- #138 cards of winter league players unlike Topps set
1967	Venezuelan Topps Retirado	50	Retired MLBers	none	Spanish	#139-188 cards of 50 retired players
1967	Venezuelan "Topps"	150	MLB	none	Spanish	#189-338 Topps cards taken from various print runs
1968	Venezuelan Topps	370	MLB	Litoven	English	First three Topps print runs
1970-1	Ovenca	300	Venezuelan + MLB	none	Spanish	Produced by Sport Grafico for Ovenca. Checklist recently updated for the last 8 missing numbers.
1972	Winter League Stamps	242	Venezuelan + MLB	none		Used many, but not all, of the same Topps photos
Stickers						
1972	Venezuelan League	249	Venezuelan + MLB	none		
1973	Venezuelan League	275	Venezuelan + MLB	none		Checklist not complete
1974	Venezuelan League	275	Venezuelan + MLB	none		
1976	Venezuelan League	330	Venezuelan + MLB	none		Many puzzle pieces used as stickers
1977	Venezuelan League	402	Venezuelan + MLB	none		50 numbers use Topps card layouts. Many puzzle pieces.
	Total	4,115				

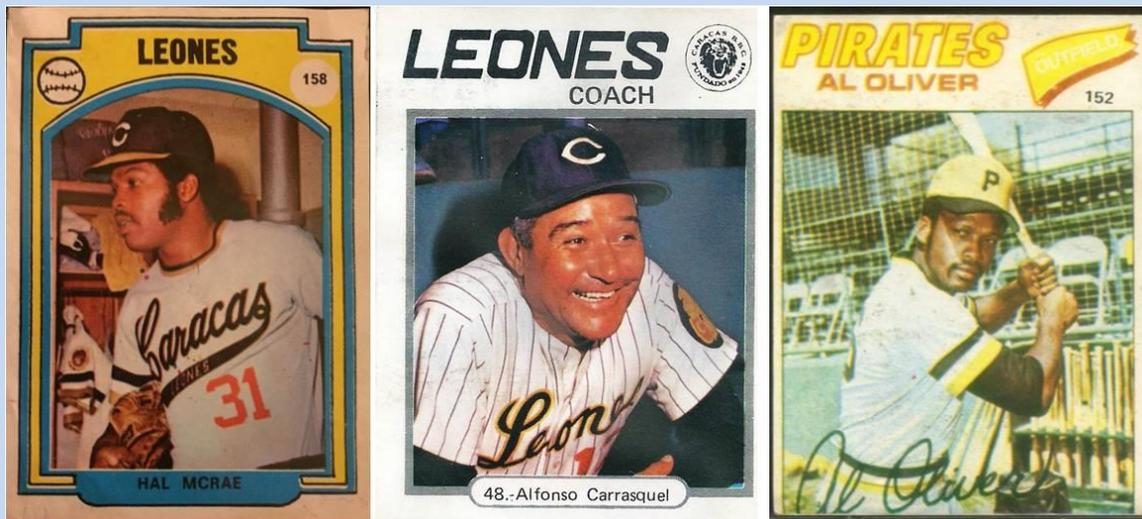
1959, 1960, 1962, 1964 and 1966 Topps Venezuelan cards



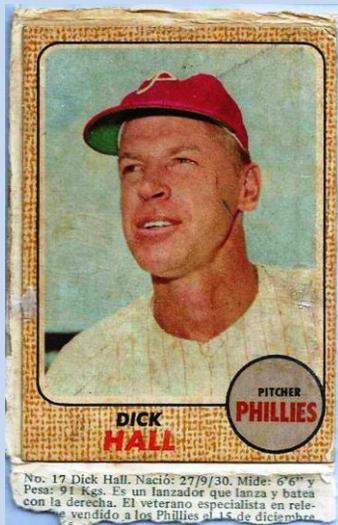
Mantle appeared in 1959, 1962, 1964 and 1966. Chacon's card #199 was created just for the 1962 Venezuelan set to replace card #196. The 1964 cards had black borders on the back and no scratch-off quiz.



The mysterious 1967 set had three series: Venezuelan League players which included Aparicio as a coach, Retirado (retired) players like Koufax, and regular 1967 Topps poses like Leon Wagner's. The backs were in Spanish and not in the Topps format. Tommy John's 1968 card has the typically muted colors.

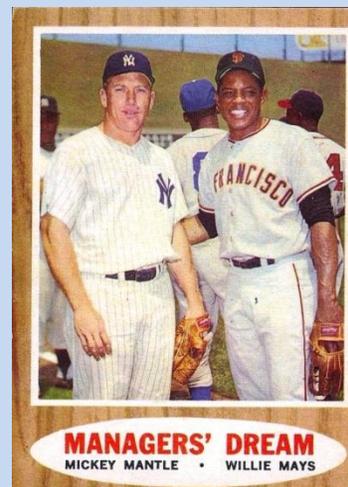


1972 Hal McRae and 1977 Chico Carrasquel and Al Oliver stickers - starting in 1972 the Venezuelan issues were primarily stickers which utilized Topps photography and layouts, occasionally.



The albums had bio information in Spanish to appeal to Venezuelan collectors. Photo from Rick Lyons

Mantle and Mays in the Venezuelan sets can be pricey.



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