

Cowboys and movie stars come flying out of 1953 arcade machine



By George Vrechek

Old amusement parks bring back memories of roller coasters, water rides and side shows. Some collectors will also remember the arcades and their games of chance. A few machines might offer exhibit cards. For a penny, or maybe as much as a nickel, a card came flying out of the machine. Subjects available included fortunes, athletes, pretty girls, movie stars, movie cowboys and more pretty girls.



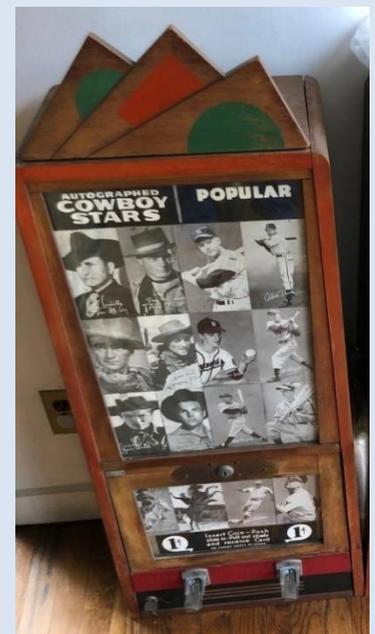
Actors and cowboys in Wolfin's machines: top left: Spencer Tracy, Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck, second row: Ronald Reagan, John Wayne (2), bottom row: Mickey Rooney, Roddy McDowall, Danny Kaye, all photos by Wolfin

As with any unopened pack of cards, you didn't have much of a clue as to who you would get which added to the allure. Wouldn't it be fun to be able to put in a few pennies again and get some of those old cards in mint condition as they emerged from the machines?

A very large, unopened pack

That is exactly what Rich Wolfin was able to do recently. Wolfin of Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, has been collecting, restoring and occasionally selling arcade machines. This year he received a call from an elderly couple who decided to sell some arcade machines which they inherited. The machines had been used in the early 1950s at Harry's Arcade on Coney Island. The arcade closed years ago and two Exhibit Supply Co. card machines had been untouched since apparently 1953.

One of the ESCO arcade card machines purchased by Wolfin



Wolfen bought the two machines advertising cowboys and athletes, but with no information as to whether cards were still inside or not. Wolfen was “flabbergasted” to find 428 mint arcade cards inside the two machines. The cards included baseball players, boxers, movie stars and cowboys. Of interest to non-sports collectors would be the 278 cards of movie stars and cowboys emerging from at least two different Exhibit Supply Co. (ESCO) sets. John Wayne, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Gary Cooper, Ronald Reagan and Spencer Tracy were among the subjects found on cards which had not seen the light of day since they were loaded into a machine 66 years ago.



Rich Wolfen with some of his vintage arcade machines

Dating and identifying the cards

Collectors of exhibits have scrutinized the various printing notes used by ESCO as clues to identify the age of a card. When first designed, cards would usually include print notations such as MADE IN U.S.A., Made in U.S.A., PRINTED IN U.S.A. or Printed in USA. The notation would be in the lower right or lower left corner of the card and the font size and length of the printing would also change. Popular subjects might continue year after year with the same original printing notations. New subjects added might have completely different notations, making for a hodgepodge of print information on one 32-card sheet. Printing notations on two of the movie star cards found had a long dash in front of the MADE IN U.S.A. printing notations.

Based on dating the 110 baseball subjects in the machines (which included Mantles, Mayses, Yankee and Dodger 1952 World Series team cards and other stars), the cards in Wolfen’s find were printed in 1953 or slightly before. “Autographed Cowboy Stars” (Salutation Cowboys) is the title describing the cards on the front of one machine. They are indeed signed, likely by ESCO employees.

Organizing exhibits

Confusing printing information, lack of card numbers, blank backs and the plethora of issues has apparently caused many collectors to throw up their hands in futility trying to organize the exhibit sets and prepare checklists. Jefferson Burdick and friends in their 1960 American Card Catalog lumped together movie stars from many eras under the catalog identification of W401, Movie Stars. Western stars got a similar catch-all treatment with categories



W411 through W418. *Penny Arcade* (1989-1992) newsletter editor Bob Schulhof, Steve Reeves and Sheldon Goldberg broke down these classifications 30 years ago to try to organize issues by sets. For example, they came up with W412-12A for Salutation Cowboys.



From top left: Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Vincent Price and Ronald Reagan
Bottom row: Bobbie Blake, Hopalong Cassidy, Gregory Peck and Roddy McDowall

To my knowledge, there is still no published catalog which identifies every non-sport exhibit card issue by year and by subject within a set. Nor did I find checklists for the sets involving the cards in the find. Wolfin's find includes 76 different poses for cowboys and 16 for movie stars printed in gray or slate and should help someone checklist a few sets.

One of the ESCO machines has been sold. Wolfin intends to sell the sport and non-sport exhibit cards and the remaining machine and is considering his options. Prices for non-sport exhibits are typically modest. However, not many PSA graded exhibit cards just came out of the machines.

Wolfin can be reached at antiquemachines@aol.com. George Vrechek can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net. This article appeared in *The Wrapper* #321 July 7-August 28, 2019. Thanks to Les Davis and *The Wrapper* for allowing us to reprint George's article here on the OBC site.