

IRV LERNER, HOBBY VETERAN FROM PHILADELPHIA



Irv and Eleanor Lerner

Longtime collector remembers finding the hobby and the early shows

By George Vrechek

When you dwell in the hobby past like I do, you run across names that keep popping up for years in publications and correspondence. The lesson is that once you are a collector, you are probably always a collector. One such name I kept running across was Irv Lerner's. In my search to find information on Jefferson Burdick, the "Father of Card Collecting," I found a 1970 publication *Who's Who in Card Collecting* published by Irving W. Lerner, Managing Editor, and Bob Jaspersen and Richard Reuss, Associate Editors. This first edition had, what I later found to be, a very concise, accurate bio of Jefferson Burdick. The first person listed in the "Card Collectors Hall of Fame" as described in the publication was Burdick in 1969 followed in 1970 by Walt Corson, Charles Bray, Preston Orem, E.C. Wharton-Tigar, and Robert Payne. In 1971 the second edition of the publication added Lionel Carter, John Wagner, and Buck Barker.



National and Philly Shows

I was pleased to find Irv Lerner very much active in the hobby when I first talked to him in 2002. He put me in touch with two other veteran collectors: John Rumierz of Detroit and the late Lionel Carter of Evanston, Illinois; both helped me continue my research on Burdick. It has taken a few years but I finally circled back to Irv – waiting

for him to pick up another six years' experience in the hobby. Irv was getting organized for his dealer's booth at this year's 29th Annual National Sports Collectors Convention in Rosemont. He has had a table at every National except number two. He was also organizing for his 100th straight appearance at the Philadelphia Sports Card and Memorabilia Show which began in 1975. To get a sense of Irv's vantage point I asked him if he was a dealer or a collector. Irv described himself as a long-time collector who supported his interests by setting up as a dealer at a few shows each year. I had the opportunity to meet Irv and his wife, Eleanor, at this year's National.

Irv's livelihood has been as an accountant serving for thirty-five years as a vice president of a life insurance company. As a C.P.A. he has also handled individual accounting and tax matters in his independent practice. His organization and attention to detail are evident in how he organizes his booth at shows. Being in the exciting world of accounting myself, I could relate to Irv's approach. His cards for sale are all in albums with stars on the top followed by commons, everything priced and in numeric order. Each book is placed on the tables in chronological order and the cards are in great shape. All cards are ungraded and they range from the early tobacco cards to 1980. He has baseball, football, basketball, hockey, other sports, and non-sport. He is very aware of variations and test issues and notes them accordingly in his albums.

The Cigar Store Start

How did Irv get such great cards in a seemingly endless supply? It helped to start collecting in 1948 and have a father who owned a cigar store. Like many American celebrities, Irv was born in Brooklyn in 1936. His family moved to Philadelphia in 1938 and Irv had to wait until the post-war era for cards to be issued. As a 12-year-old Irv knew the players and was particular about the condition of the cards. His dad's store sold cigars but lots of other handy items as well, like candy, gum, ice cream, canned goods, and, most importantly, baseball cards. He remembered getting the 1951 Topps Red Backs in 5 cent packs packaged with undated team cards and Connie Mack All-Stars. Irv later learned that the Blue Backs were issued in New Jersey and packaged with the dated team cards and 1951 Topps Major League All-Stars. The cigar store provided Irv the opportunity to gather many mint cards as they were issued. He collected everything including non-sports cards, put them in order, kept them out of flipping games, and then squirreled them away while he went to high school and college

Reentering the Hobby in 1959

Irv's collecting took a hiatus beginning in mid-1952. But the cards were still around and Irv got bit by the collecting bug a second time in 1959. Irv noticed some kids were throwing out baseball cards and volunteered to take them off their hands. Irv wanted to find other collectors but collectors weren't out in the open in those years. Irv persisted and later found an ad in a Cub Scout booklet advertising cards for sale through Woody Gelman's Card Collectors' Company of Franklin Square, New York. Irv quickly went from adding just a few youngster discards to his collection to going after everything in earnest. What a great time to get the old cards – when they weren't really very old!

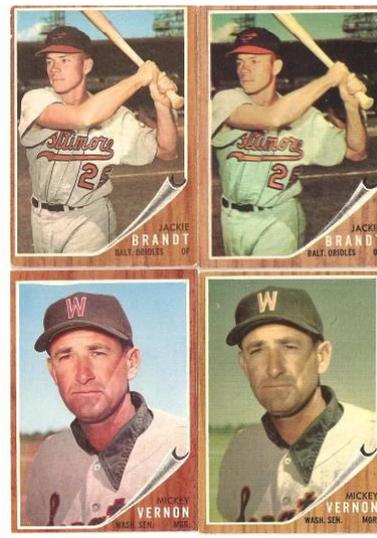
Bill White and Others

With additional initiative Irv contacted Bill White, a long-time collector from Norwood, Pennsylvania. Bill was only a year older than Irv but had been collecting almost continuously since 1945. Irv went over to see Bill and was astounded by Bill's cards and the infant hobby of card collecting. For example Irv learned that the 1948 Bowmans didn't consist of just the 36 cards he had collected from those arriving at the cigar store, but an additional run of 12 cards that White had collected. On Irv's first visit with Bill White he stayed until 1 A.M. White confirmed the feeling among collectors at the time that "there were so few of them and the market for cards was narrow. They didn't really know each other except through correspondence. People were often too embarrassed to let people know they collected cards." A long distance phone call was viewed as rather pricey among cost-conscious hobby pioneers. Irv's visit was a rarity for collectors. The now seventy-three year-old Bill White has stayed in touch with Irv for nearly 50 years as a friend and collector.

In the early 1960s Irv found Bruce Yeko, Goodie Goldfaden, and Larry Fritsch as early dealers who could help fill in his set needs. He also found other collectors such as condition-conscious Lionel Carter and started swapping quantities of mint, well-centered cards. To give you an idea of the prices, here is an excerpt from Card Collectors' Company, March 1963 pricelist preamble: "Many cards of recent years are now selling actively at over 50 cents a card....There's money in collecting and selling sports cards. One of the rarest of all cards is a card of Honus Wagner....Today one of the cards bearing his picture, which was issued around 1910, is worth \$250." (The '52 Topps high numbers were up to \$1 each in Gelman's pricelist. What highway robbery for an 11year-old card of old players!)

Local Knowledge

It didn't hurt Irv that Topps cards were printed in Philadelphia at the time. For example, Irv explained the origins of the 1962 Topps green tints based on his knowledge of Topps. Zabel Brothers of Philadelphia was printing the Topps cards in 1962. Topps felt that the demand for their second series cards would exceed the supply that Zabel had printed. However, Topps didn't want to reprint the cards and divert Zabel from printing the third series. In the past Topps had experienced the problems of late distribution, the advent of school and football, and the lack of sales of their high numbered series. To meet the demand and not slow Zabel's production, Topps contracted with another printer and sent the plates to upstate New York for a second printing of the second series of 1962 cards. The plates were damaged in shipment and several cards had to be redone, creating the variations in that series. The printing job was not the same quality as cards printed by Zabel resulting in the green tints. I had always assumed that Topps first



printed the green tints and then fixed them with a second run. According to Irv, it was the opposite. I'm still a bit mystified by the green tints in that they were also centered differently than the regular cards within the wood borders.

Irv was able to meet Bill Haber who did the comics and quizzes on the backs of the Topps cards. Irv recalled that Haber viewed it as one of the greatest jobs in the world "getting paid to play all day" working on creating baseball cards. Haber traded Irv uncut proof sheets and test issues from Topps. Topps would send proof sheets to: the Library of Congress for copyright purposes, Topps proofreaders, district salesmen for cut samples, and occasionally the sheets found their way into the hands of people like Irv Lerner. Haber was six years younger than Lerner and died several years ago.

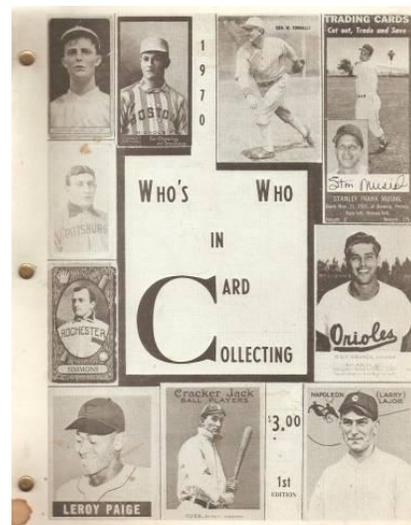
Errors and Variations

With his attention to detail and knowledge of the printing process, Irv got interested in errors and variations. An outlet for Irv's error and variation enthusiasm was *Ball Card Collector* magazine. Irv began his long-time career as a mostly unpaid contributor to the hobby publications. He wrote columns on errors and variations and reported on current issues. In addition to the 1962 Topps story, Irv told me about the 1942 Playballs. I thought, wait a minute, Irv, there was no such thing unless you are talking about some collector issues. I was wrong again, according to Irv. Irv said that the higher numbers of the "1941" set were actually printed in 1942 and the rest of the set was reprinted at the same time. If you look at the back bottom left corner of the Playballs some low numbered cards will have the copyright shown as © 1941 and others will be just ©. The © only versions are from the 1942 printing and include all the higher numbers. The highest number I found in my collection with the © 1941 version was number 42 of the 72 cards issued. Irv's cards for sale depicted a number of other "unlisted" color variations from the 1948-9 Leaf set and the 1949 Bowman issue.

The Who's Who Idea

Trading cards with other collectors in the 1960s was done almost entirely by mail. Irv remembered you would deal with people with no knowledge of their age or background. There were no shows at the time where collectors could get together. Irv thought it would be a good idea to put together some type of directory, hence the *Who's Who in Card Collecting* idea. Irv organized the process with the assistance of Bob Jasperson and Richard Reuss. Jasperson had authored a *Sport Fan Who's Who* directory in the 1950s. Subscription lists from the *The Ball Card Collector* and *The Trader Speaks* were used to do a mailing asking people to provide their addresses, age and collecting interests as a vehicle to encourage activity among collectors. An added

feature to the 100 plus page publication was the Collectors Hall of Fame idea. Irv sent some 300+ people a nomination form to elect Hall of Fame members. The votes were



tabulated and winners determined. The next step was getting information from the nominees and other collectors to put together bios. While the information about a collector may have come from others, it was Irv and his other editors who wrote the bios. The directory is still a useful source of information on most of the early collectors. In true Irv Lerner fashion, the publication is well organized with a Burdick-like foreword extolling the virtues of card collecting. Next is a thorough list of acknowledgments with thanks to Carter, Bray, Yeko, Nagy, Barker, Nowell, and Wirt Gammon. Collectors throughout the country could have their names, addresses, birth dates, professions, collecting interests, and bios included without charge. You could find bios on Bill Mastro and Keith Olbermann, ages 17 and 11, respectively, at the time, or go the other way and find John B. Wagner age 71 or Burdick collaborator, Fred Baum, age 65. Advertising space was sold to dealers and collectors to help defray the cost of the publication. Irv described at length the Hall of Fame selection process including a selection committee, voting by collectors, and rules and regulations for being involved in the process. “*Who's Who* was extremely well done and represented a major step forward in the hobby” according to veteran collector and writer Jim McConnell.

Irv at the First Shows

It wasn't too long though before collectors started to meet at shows which lessened the need for publications like Irv's *Who's Who*. When the shows started Irv was soon there attending the second such event in 1970 at the Brea, California, home of Jim Nowell. According to Jim McConnell, who attended the three Nowell shows, “the first gathering in 1969 was attended by 13 collectors. The only out of state collectors for that one were Dennis Graye from Detroit and John England from Fort Smith, Arkansas. Southern California attendees included Nowell, Ed Broder, Goodie Goldfaden, Ray Medeiros, Ray Hess and me, plus some younger collectors.” Thanks to assistance from people like Lerner and Dan Dischley of *The Trader Speaks*, Nowell contacted others and attendance at the second gathering was more wide-spread. Attendees included Lerner, Lionel Carter, Richard Egan, Bill Haber, Ray Medeiros, Bob and Mike Jaspersen, Lloyd Toerpe, Goodie Goldfaden, Ray Hess, Dick Dobbins and about a dozen others.

Shortly thereafter shows started to pop up in Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis. The first event in the Detroit area was inspired by Dennis Graye who attended the first Nowell show. The result was a gathering of 12 collectors at the home of Lloyd Toerpe in Flint. McConnell



Irv Lerner, Goody Goldfaden and Lloyd Toerpe looking over a scrapbook of Irv's treasures.



again remembers that the first real show in Detroit “was an outstanding event with a great turnout, a lot of fabulous walk-in material. Ernie Harwell attended. The Detroit show got great reviews.” At a third Dearborn, Michigan show Irv Lerner was in attendance. *Sports Collectors News* reported that Irv uncovered and halted the sale of counterfeit #68 of the 1959 Fleer Ted Williams set being offered in quantity by an unscrupulous dealer. Naturally Irv was there for the first “Philly Show” held in 1975 and has been at every show since, weathering moves to different locations around Philadelphia. Bill White made most of the Philly Shows along with Jerry Blank and Irv. Bill White remembers also attending Middle Atlantic Sports Collectors’ Association (MASCA) “shows” with Irv “consisting of collectors gathering in a hotel conference room.” At that time it was mostly collectors swapping with one another from their individual tables. Stars, rookies, commons, mint cards, low grade cards all seemed to fly around the room sometimes in bricks of cards. Eleanor Lerner and Bill White’s wife, Marlene, would accompany Irv and Bill to most of the Philly Shows and even traveled to early shows in Cincinnati. They would bring the kids, go to each other’s homes after the shows, and talk about collecting.

Fleer Corporation

The Philadelphia connection was again important for Irv in that Fleer Corporation was in Philadelphia at the time. Irv knew that Topps bought out Fleer’s 40 or 50 baseball contracts in 1966 for \$395,000 and Fleer entered into a 15 year non-compete agreement with Topps. Maury Wills was the most notable player under exclusive contract to Fleer. Fifteen years later, when Fleer reentered the baseball card market, Irv was directly involved as a market liaison representative for Fleer working for Dr. Peck, Fleer’s principal owner.

Wagner, Wilt and Rings

In addition to the sets from his youth, Irv completed most sport sets through the 1980s. He also went backward picking up tobacco cards by the bushel as a result of advertising in local papers in the 1960s. He accumulated many Old Judge’s and T206s including THE Wagner. He completed the T201, T202, T205, T206 and T207 sets including known variations at the time. He would also buy popular non-sports sets such as Dick Tracy, Hopalong Cassidy, Superman, Wings, the Beatles, and Caspar the Friendly Ghost.

Irv has also been involved in collecting championship rings, uniforms, and autographs. Just his collection of championship sports rings has been described as “legendary.” A fellow collector bestowed on Irv the name “The Ring Man,” although he could have also been described as the original “Gem Mint Man” as well. Irv has mixed emotions with autographs, at one time owning an autographed 1967 Philadelphia 76’ers jersey worn by Wilt Chamberlain in a championship game while being less than enthused about sloppy signatures and arrogant manners from some of baseball’s biggest stars from the past.

Irv has been the subject of considerable publicity over the years particularly when the hobby was emerging and it was news that there were collectors, dealers, and money

involved. At the suggestion of the people at Topps, Irv once did a show with Joe Garagiola, who had a regular Monday night TV program, "The Crazy World of Joe Garagiola." One of the shows was filmed at Irv's home and featured many valuable cards including the T206 Wagner. Irv also met Sy Berger of Topps in connection with this show.

Eleanor Lerner has been with her husband at most of the many shows he has attended. She knows the cards, prices, and people; she keeps track. Irv excels at engaging customers in stories about the products and collecting. It is hard to find any vintage card subject that is news to Irv. If you get to a Philadelphia show or a future National, make sure you stop to see Irv Lerner, "The Ring Man." Ask him if he knows anything about variations, print runs, Topps monopoly, rings, or meeting some of baseball's greats. You'll get a wealth of information in return.



Irv Lerner at the 2008 National

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