

The Topps Vault is still open, an interview with Mike Jaspersen



by George Vrechek

True or False? Topps opened their vault in 1989 and auctioned all the goodies that would interest collectors. The introduction by Guernsey's in the Topps auction catalog from 1989 states, "Topps has one archive to offer and this is it. Take part in what will clearly rank as one of the most interesting auctions of all time." We will see that the auction was interesting and that they auctioned goodies, but certainly not "all" of them.

Sellers don't fall in love with the cardboard

Not many businesses have an archive location, where material of historical importance is segregated, protected and organized. Most companies are too busy creating, producing and selling, perhaps worried about the future but not dwelling too much on the past.

Mike Jaspersen is the owner of Jaspy's Hobbyland in Redondo Beach, California, and is the son of hobby pioneer Bob Jaspersen featured in *SCD* 5/12/17. Jaspersen has good memories of his years at Topps from 2001 to 2014. His job was to sell Topps archive material. Based on interviews with Jaspersen, Topps did a reasonable job of retaining important work product, but they weren't collectors. They were sellers. Well after the 1989 auction, Topps archives continue to be assembled for eventual sale.

Mike Jaspersen spent 14 years working with Topps archives, photo G. Vrechek



Topps major manufacturing facility in the United States is this 400,000 square foot plant in Duryea, Pennsylvania.



Duryea plant shown in a Topps annual report

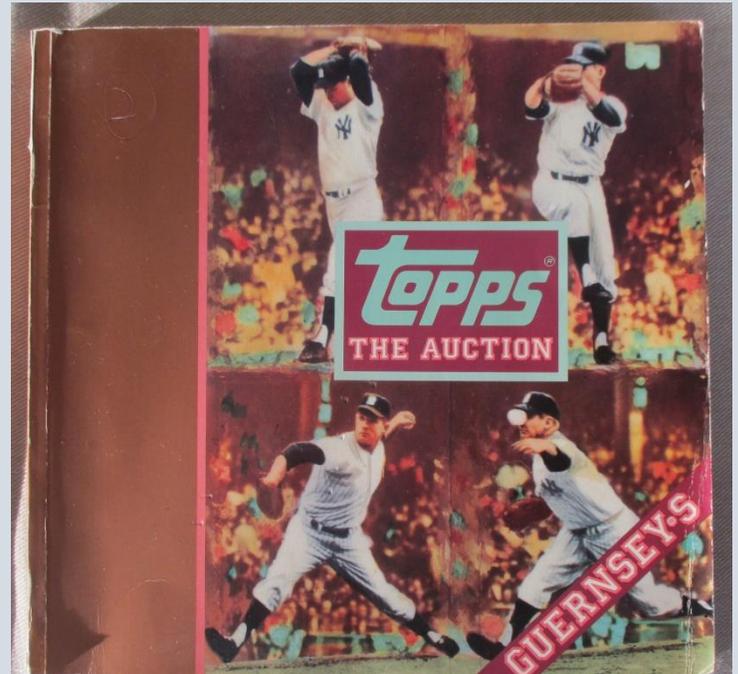
Topps locations

Starting in 1938 when four Shorin brothers took the family business from tobacco into gum, Topps offices and gum production were in Brooklyn. Cards were printed by independent printers including Lord Baltimore Printing in Baltimore and then Zabel Brothers in Philadelphia. By 1965 Topps had their own printing operation 130 miles northwest of Brooklyn in Duryea, Pennsylvania, and moved their gum and candy production from Brooklyn to Duryea as well. Corporate offices and the creative staff remained in Brooklyn. However, as Topps and the Shorin family (twice) changed from a private company to a publicly traded company, they decided to move their offices to Manhattan in 1994. They also began outsourcing their gum and candy production and their printing, and they continually reduced their space in the Duryea plant starting in the 1990s.

House cleaning

The prospect of downsizing and the eventual move to Manhattan may have caused Topps to clean house and think about selling some of their old work product. A sale wouldn't hurt the bottom line either. Card profits took a hit in the late 1980s due to competition and overproduction.

The pre-digital work product at Topps involved mockups, design alternatives, artwork, photos, negatives, transparencies, flexichromes, proof sheets, color separations and uncut sheets - a host of sometimes confusing intermediate steps to get to a card. There were players' contracts, canceled checks and correspondence. There were Topps' redemption prizes - unredeemed. Finally, there were a few, but not many, trading cards lying around.



Catalog from the 1989 auction

Guernsey's 1989 auction

Topps invited auctioneer Guernsey's to go through the Topps offices and identified over 3,000 lots to be auctioned in August 1989. *Sports Illustrated* interviewed Topps spokesman Norman Liss after the long, two-day auction. Liss reported proceeds of around \$1.6 million. Additional sales were made from 14 catalog pages describing non-sport items that were mail-only auctions which remained open until year end. Collector Keith Olbermann attended the auction and described it to *Sports Illustrated*, "It's like an archaeological dig."

Gaps

Plenty of material was sold, but there were also significant gaps. For example, original paintings for the 1953 Topps cards of Mantle, Mays, Ford, Feller, Jackie Robinson and Campanella were sold for \$372,300 versus a catalog estimate of \$22-30,000. However, only those six 1953 paintings were sold. Many sheets from the 1980s were in the auction but nothing prior to 1969. Some signed player contracts were offered, but there were thousands more where those came from. Topps kept alphabetical files on each player under contract, whether or not they ever appeared in the major leagues or on a card.

Surprisingly, the auction included 4" by 6" paintings used to create the Bowman 1952 football set, acquired when Topps bought Bowman in 1956.

CARDS

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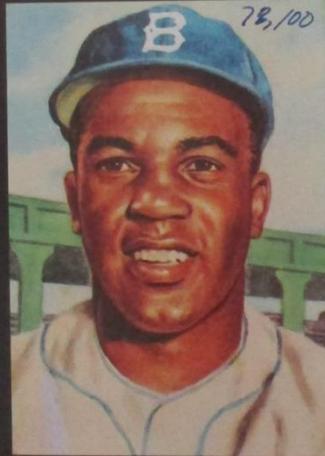
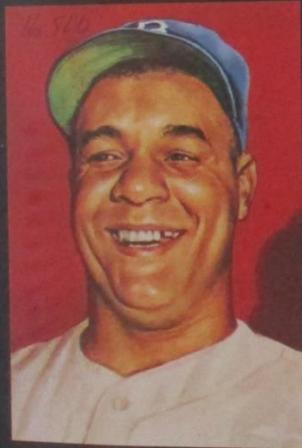
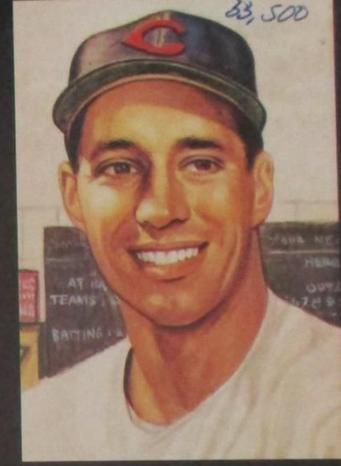
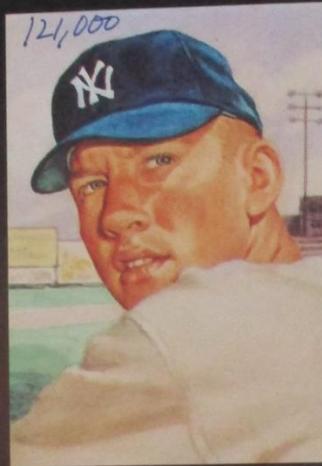
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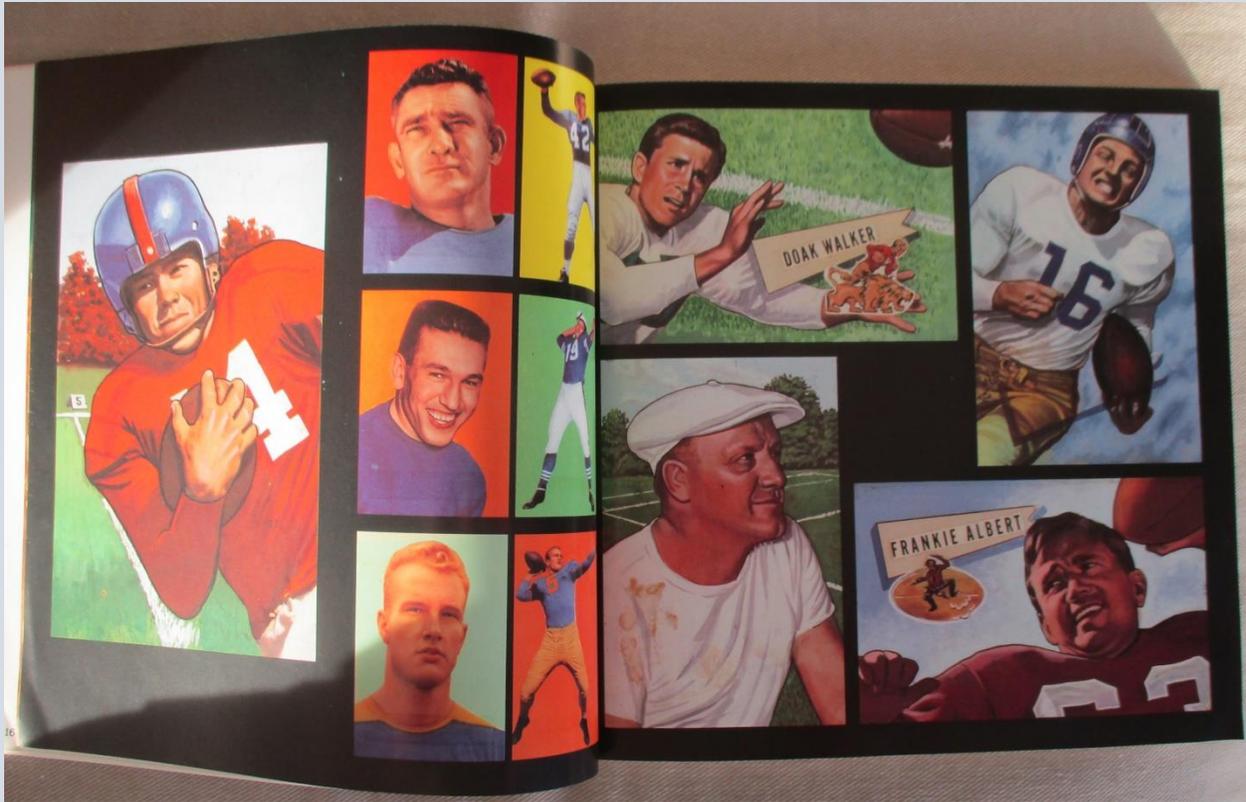
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Six paintings used to create the 1953 set went for \$372,300, auction catalog

Art was acquired in the purchase of Bowman, auction catalog



Boxes in Duryea

Where was the other stuff? Topps had been filling boxes that were about the size of an uncut card sheet and about 6 inches high. Jaspersen recalled that approximately 1,000 boxes were eventually stored in Duryea. The box contents were described (by outside help) and a binder prepared listing each box. Boxes might include original art work, proof sheets and transparencies for sports and non-sports cards.

Non-sport art

Artwork at Topps was heavy on the non-sport card side. While there were cartoons on the backs of sports cards and occasional paintings, considerable artwork was used in non-sport sets. The Guernsey's auction included dramatic paintings of Topps Wacky Packs/Packages, which went for only about \$300 to \$400 for two pieces of art, versus the big bucks they command today. Non-sport creators like art director Woody Gelman (1915-1978) valued their artwork, as former Topps employee Len Brown recalled in a 2015 *SCD* interview. You can imagine that they were not especially anxious to see their efforts put on the auction block. If artwork squirreled away in Topps offices was not thrown into one big auction, it might survive for another day.

The creative staff seemed to be a fun group to hang around with. Jaspersen described them as "just nuts," but as a compliment. They came up with many irreverent ideas which appealed to kids like Garbage Pail Kids, Nasty Valentines and Wacky Packages.

"Line art" used on card backs, auction catalog



Non-sport art was dramatic and has continued to escalate in value, auction catalog



117 more 1953 Topps paintings were auctioned in 2010, Robert Edward Auctions

Material that went elsewhere

Printing scrap went into dumpsters in Brooklyn, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Duryea. They weren't printing \$20 bills. Some scrap was rescued by local dumpster-diving collectors. Uncut sheets and cards also came out of printers' back doors or were just left abandoned to be found when plants closed. Uncut sheets were used as covering to protect other uncut bundled sheets. Such scraps have been subsequently described by some sellers as "rare blank-backed proofs."

Some art, photos, cards, printing sheets and records were likely considered of minimal value at the time and were "abandoned" at Topps and rescued by Topps employees for their own safekeeping before hitting the dumpsters.

Some long-time employees retained items. In 2010 REA Robert Edward Auctions auctioned 117 more of the 1953 Topps paintings consigned by Topps VP Sy Berger, including paintings of a few players not included in the set. Woody Gelman and Bill Haber of Topps retained items. Gelman and his father-in-law, Sam Rosen, operated Card Collectors Co. selling Topps products at retail which Topps didn't want to bother with. For a time, Topps had their own in-house store.

Topps material went to a lot of places other than an archive room

Jaspersen joins Topps

After 25 years in the hobby business mostly as a shop owner, Mike Jaspersen found himself in White Plains, New York, working for ThePit.com, a dot-com start-up by entrepreneur Marc Lore that wanted to be a stock market for the online buying and selling of trading cards. Lore went on to become president and chief executive officer of Walmart eCommerce U.S. Topps bought ThePit.com in 2001, and Topps VP of Sports and Entertainment Warren Friss invited Jaspersen to join them, not in the eTopps virtual card and stock market group, but to identify and sell Topps archive material, which they had just recently labeled The Topps Vault. After the 1989 auction, Topps archive material continued to accumulate, but had not been gone anywhere except for a few eBay sales in 2001.

Jaspersen spent his first months at Topps acquainting himself with the files. With introductions from then CEO Art Shorin (whose mother threw out his baseball cards), Jaspersen looked inside hundreds of file drawers in the Manhattan offices. One can imagine that employees were not always thrilled to see Jaspersen going through "their" stuff. Even if photos or artwork had been produced by independent contractors rather than employees, it was all likely works for hire and Topps property.

Dusty Duryea

After a few months, Jaspersen decided he needed to see what was in all the big boxes sent to Duryea over the years. Jaspersen drove 130 miles from his home in Westchester, New York, to the 400,000-square foot building with the large Topps sign in Duryea to make the first of some 40 trips there during his 14 years with Topps.

Armed with binders of box contents, Jaspersen started crawling around in the Topps plant lined with perhaps 500 pallets of stuff including the 1,000 large, dusty boxes stacked 4 or 5 high. Topps had sold the building but was leasing back space which they periodically further downsized.

What's in the box?

Jaspersen soon found that the box descriptions might not always reveal the true value of what was inside. For example, Jaspersen said, "A box content described as uncut sheets of Wacky Packs might include original artwork by Topps' Norm Sauders used to create the uncut sheets." You can imagine what it was like opening each box and discovering what might be of value. It was like an archaeological dig that Olbermann described in 1989.

Getting it organized

The first trip to Duryea, helped Jaspersen understand the magnitude of the project and how best to get sales rolling. They needed to consider how material could be presented, shipped and parceled so that the market would have time to digest what was available. He didn't know then that his involvement in the process would take the next 14 years.

Jaspersen set up a small office with a few Topps employees in Mt. Kisco, New York, where they could assemble archive material, The Topps Vault. Rare items came out of closets and drawers in Manhattan and out of dusty boxes in Duryea to Mt. Kisco where they were photographed, described, identified with a hologram and letter of authenticity, auctioned through eBay (seller – thetoppsvault) and shipped.

Maximizing marketability

While a sheet used to photograph a non-sport set might be neat with glued down artwork, it would be difficult to ship, display and would bring less money than if the individual pieces were removed from the sheet and sold. Uncut sheets were parceled out to avoid flooding the market with multiples of the same or similar product.

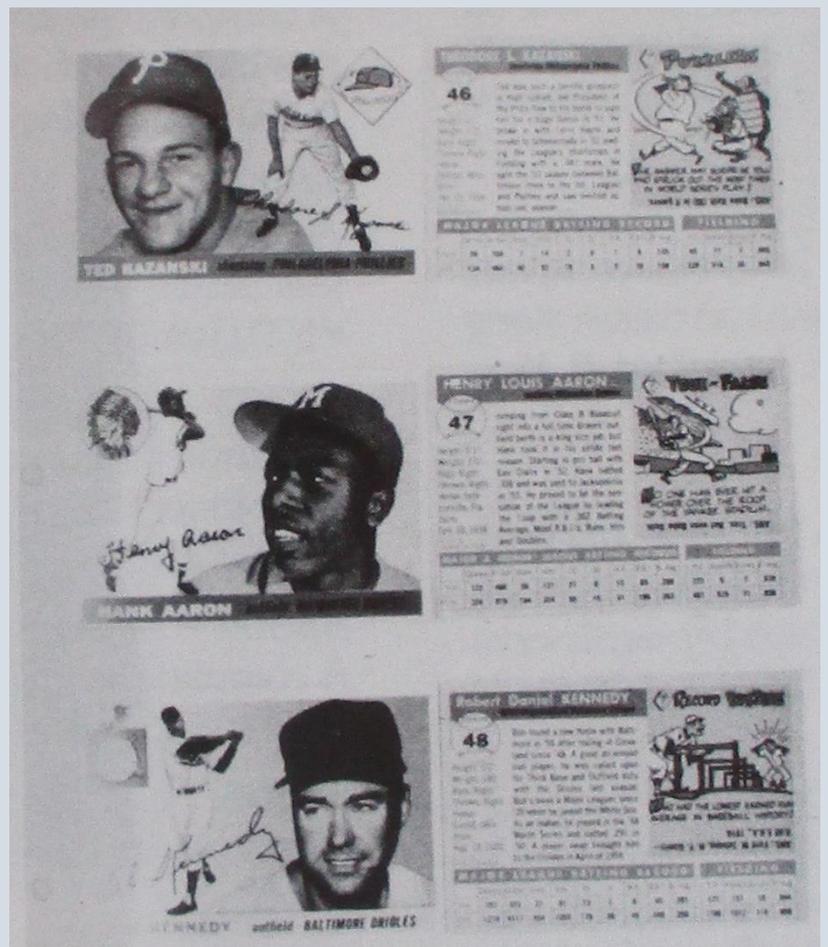
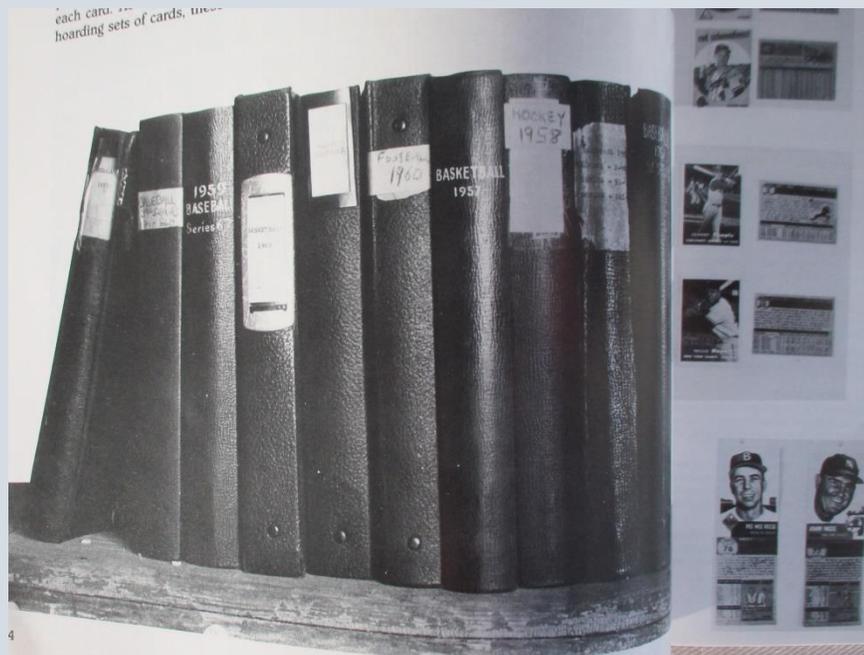
The same process went behind how to best sell the "Gelman catalogs." The art department documented each set by placing them in albums in numeric order by series. Two cards would be used, and the back and front of each card would be displayed by gluing the reverse side to the binder pages. Remember Jefferson Burdick glued his cards into scrapbooks as well. Cards from 1953 through 1966 were sold in the Guernsey's auction by offering a complete catalog of a series of 60 or 80 cards. Jaspersen sold individual pages of the remaining catalogs by enclosing them in holders and certifying their authenticity as coming from the one-of-a-kind Topps internal catalogs, glue and all.

Items were sold by Topps with the proviso that buyers got the item but not the right to reproduce which is still a right owned by Topps.

Binders documented each set with two cards of each player glued front and back, auction catalog

250,000 more items

In the 14 years Jaspersen spent at Topps they found transparencies, uncut sheets, color separations, line art, match photos, slides, proof sheets, proof wrappers, canceled checks, contracts and many one-of-a-kind archive items, enough to come up with 250,000 more items to sell. Jaspersen said, "I would estimate that a third of the items were non-sport and that the sports items were predominately baseball followed by football, basketball and hockey. Maybe 90% of the items came from Duryea, but the items from the Manhattan offices were generally more valuable." Each item sold was accompanied by a letter of authenticity referencing a number on a hologram placed on the archive item.





Garbage Pail Kid Adam Bomb, Wacky Pack Band-Ache and the logo from the Duryea parking lot

Jaspersen identified original art used on Wacky Packs that have become part of pop art. Art for the 1967 Topps Wacky Pack card of “Band-Ache” Jaspersen called, “the Mona Lisa of Topps non-sport art.” The image of tearing flesh off with the bandage removal got the kids’ attention. Apparently, Topps still has the original artwork. The 1985 art for the Garbage Pail Kids card of Adam Bomb (also used for Blasted Billy) was a big-ticket item.

Jaspersen even salvaged two of the big metal Topps logo signs that were in their Duryea parking lot.



Typical Topps Vault sale item: color proofs, hologram, envelope and COA, photos courtesy of The Topps Company, Inc.

Topps material not in “the vault”

While the words “Topps Vault” are trademarks of Topps, you will find many items for sale that mention Topps and then vault or archive elsewhere. An eBay seller recently listed 1,221 items for buy it now purchases. The items are primarily photos of baseball and football players in several poses taken apparently by Topps photographers on their annual shoots in the 1980s and 1990s. Photo listings are described as, “This comes from a large collection of a former Topps employee. This stuff is 100% authentic and original in every way. It doesn't have the ‘Topps Vault’ sticker on it, since I am not affiliated with Topps Vault.”

History continues

Topps continues to sell archive items on eBay and on their own. There are more issues in recent years and more of an incentive to hang onto pre-production material, thus the supply of unique

items from Topps continues. Collector Lonnie Cummins attended the Guernsey's auction and has followed Topps archive sales since. Cummins commented, "The major difference between the Guernsey's auction and Topps eBay sales was the (subsequent) inclusion of pre-production material such as proofs and uncut sheets. Those items have given the hobby very valuable information and in some cases, proof that some rumored issues were actually tested or released."

Topps now sells several products directly including a set called 2017 Topps Archives Snapshots. Francis Miceli of Topps handles The Topps Vault sales now and stays in touch with Jaspersen.

Categories of Topps archive sales

If you search for items bearing the description "Topps Vault" or "Topps Archives" you will find a variety of items:

- 1) Archives sold directly by Topps or through eBay since 2001 with holograms
- 2) Archives from the 1989 Guernsey's auction with COAs or stamped certificate at the option of buyer, if they waited in line to get them
- 3) Archives purchased from Topps being resold by the buyers with or without COAs, stamping or holograms
- 4) Archives retained by former employees
- 5) Scrap that leaked out of printing plants
- 6) There may be Items created by others (without consent) using Topps products

Printing plates?

One thing you won't see are old Topps printing plates, at least those used at Zabel Brothers. Doug Hall, grandson of a Zabel Brothers president, posted to Dave Hornish's wonderful *Topps Archive* blog that he worked the summer of 1962 in the Zabel plant basement sending old Topps and Bowman plates to a scrap dealer. Hall wrote, "We didn't have any inkling that the value of the cards would increase over time, we just assumed old cards were worthless and kids would only want the current year's players. Not much foresight." To top it off, Hall's mother threw out all his cards as well.

Vintage card prices owe a lot to all those mothers who helped reduce the population counts years ago.

Mike Jaspersen has gone from the old to the new and now works with his son, Nick, doing live case and box breaks of new cards. He can be contacted at mikejaspersen@gmail.com.

Jaspersen appears on a hard-to-find Topps card

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