

Unopened arcade machines yield 428 mint cards from 1953



By George Vrechek

Rich Wolfin of Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, has been collecting coin-

operated machines for some 35 years. He has purchased, traded, restored, and collected machines, many of which came from amusement park arcades. Wolfin contacted me recently to get information on exhibit cards as described in my SCD articles of October 2017.

Wolfin wrote: "I get calls about a wide array of antique coin operated machines from all over the country. Recently, I was contacted by a couple in their 80s in the New York area where I live. The husband is the son of the late owner/operator of Harry's Arcade which was on the boardwalk in Coney Island from the 1920s thru the 1950s. Many of the old time operator/owners of these arcades would often keep some machines they liked or were simply pulling out of the arcade rotation because they were being replaced by machines that took in more money. That is the case with the card machines I purchased.



"When I opened up the two machines, I was flabbergasted to discover they contained over 400 cards of cowboys, movie stars, boxers and I'm happy to say, baseball players. They are new/ old stock having not been touched since they were placed in the Exhibit Supply arcade machines in 1953 or 1954 some 65 years ago."



The arcade machines came from Harry's Arcade at Coney Island. Coney Island Boardwalk 2003, photo by Kris Arnold, published under Creative Commons, Billy Hathorn at English Wikipedia

Exciting time capsule

I was equally excited to talk to Wolfin about his find. Finding cards still in an arcade machine, in itself, is not surprising. Arcade operators would certainly take the money out of their machines, but there wasn't much point in taking product out. The cards and the machine went together. Arcade cards cost the vendors as little as \$3.85 for 1,000 cards. The Exhibit Supply Company (ESCO) shipped machines to buyers already stocked with cards. I have talked with collectors who acquired machines years ago with cards still in them.

One machine had 110 baseball stars from 1953, all following photos by R. Wolfin





The cards and baseball and football checklists on one machine front are from 1950, although the cards inside were not.

While finding cards in a machine was not that unusual, it is unusual that these particular machines sat for 66 years before someone peeked inside. It was like a time capsule of untouched cardboard. The find included two Mantles, two Mayses, Yankee and Dodger team cards, and several other HOFers. The Mantle card is the version of him from the waist up with the “c” and “k” in his facsimile signature joined.

In the first machine, 110 baseball cards were paired with cowboys and movie stars, including Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Ronald Reagan and John Wayne. The “Autographed Cowboy Stars” are known as W-412 Salutation Cowboys.

The second machine’s front paper display piece, printed in black and white, showed baseball and football cards including Joe DiMaggio and Chuck Bednarik checklists for sets from 1950.

The ESCO card machines were likely manufactured in 1933.



As Wolfen recalls, there were no football players in the machine, but boxers instead, along with more movie stars and cowboys. The boxing cards consisted of 44 cards with 20 different boxers including Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Billy Conn, Rocky Graziano, Jake LaMotta, Willie Pep and Johnny Bratton. The two machines contained 274 movie stars and cowboys, likely from two sets – Salutation Cowboys and Movie Stars. From Wolfen’s experience with arcade operators, they might not get around to updating advertising pieces on the fronts of the machines. The second machine, minus the cards inside, has been sold.



*Top row: Joe Louis, (Sugar) Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta
Center: Rocky Graziano, Billy Conn and Jersey Joe Walcott
Bottom: Willie Pep, Ezzard Charles and Joey Maxim*

The back story and condition

You can tell if an exhibit card is authentic rather than a reprint by looking at the back of the card. Reprints are usually on white or dark gray stock. (Some reprints were actually printed by ESCO on white stock in the 1970s.) Authentic cards are on light gray/tan stock (you might describe as sepia toned) and show some edge discoloration from exposure to sunlight and handling. Wolfen’s cards have very light gray/tan backs but show no discoloration from sunlight or handling. They have been sitting in dark machines for most of their 66 years of existence. They are spotless with square corners.

ESCO’s cardboard stock was about as cheap as you could get, but the cards produced were thick so that they would work in the machines and they seem to hold up well. Also the border-less exhibit cards are cut well and you don’t see miscuts. Nonetheless, exhibit cards are not like Upper Deck cards right out of the box with gloss and razor-sharp edges. Some cards have minor corner fuzziness. There was some moisture damage to some of the non-



sport cards in the second machine. It will be interesting to see what grades result from submitting some of the key cards. I have been collecting exhibit cards for years and, taken as a whole, these are the nicest cards I have seen.

Machine memories

Wolfen has fond memories of arcade machines and amusement parks. He said, “My father was in the machine shop business and provided replacement parts for coin-operated machines to distributors in New York City from the 1950s thru the 1980s. Some 60 such distributors operated on and around 10th Avenue in New York City from the 1920s thru the 1980s.” As a little boy, Wolfen would often go along with his dad when he delivered spare parts to the distributors. Wolfen would get a few nickels and play the machines. Although he owns a successful Velcro product distribution business with his brother, Wolfen has always had a keen interest in collecting old arcade machines which he buys and sometimes sells through his website: SlotsEtc.com. He has not been a card collector, but has significant experience with all antique coin-operated machines, and is a quick learner. He intends to sell the exhibit cards and the remaining machine and is considering his options for doing so. Wolfen can be reached at antiquemachines@aol.com.



Rich Wolfen with one of his many vintage arcade machines, Basketball Champ, 1947 by Chicago Coin

Wolfen’s listing and Vrechek’s assumptions

As a bonus, for those of us who have scratched our heads as to how ESCO produced cards, Wolfen prepared a careful listing of the cards found in each machine.

It has been my position that ESCO designed cards periodically and then re-used those designs each time they printed a sheet of cards. ESCO might change the printing notations on newly-designed cards, but they wouldn’t necessarily bother changing notations on cards designed in prior years. Therefore, I felt that exhibit cards printed in one year would include a variety of printing notations such as MADE IN USA, Made in USA and Printed in USA. Salutation exhibit

cards and cards with the notation “An Exhibit Card” would also be printed on the same sheet of usually 32 cards.

While I am easily convinced of the correctness of my own assumptions, Wolfin’s find confirmed my theory. The baseball cards found in Wolfin’s Exhibit Supply card dispensing machine had printing notations consistent with those used in the prior decade or so. I counted six different styles.

There were 62 different player cards among the 110 baseball cards in the machine. There were three copies of some cards and just one of others. Two sheets of 32 cards were likely printed and then sold in bricks of (about) 500 or 1,000. If ESCO printed 64 cards 16 times it would result in 1,024 cards. The cards were then shuffled to try to produce a random order, so that collectors could put in 64 cents and would still not get a complete set of cards. I found that the distribution of 64 players among 110 cards using random number tables came pretty close to what Wolfin found in the machine which was 0 cards of 2 players, 1 card of 31 players, 2 cards of 15 players, 3 cards of 15 players, and 4 cards of one player.

Who was in the box

The style and printing information on the 62 players was all over the map. The following list shows the players found and the type of printing information on their cards. All cards were sepia-toned and the printing information was in the lower right corner of the card.

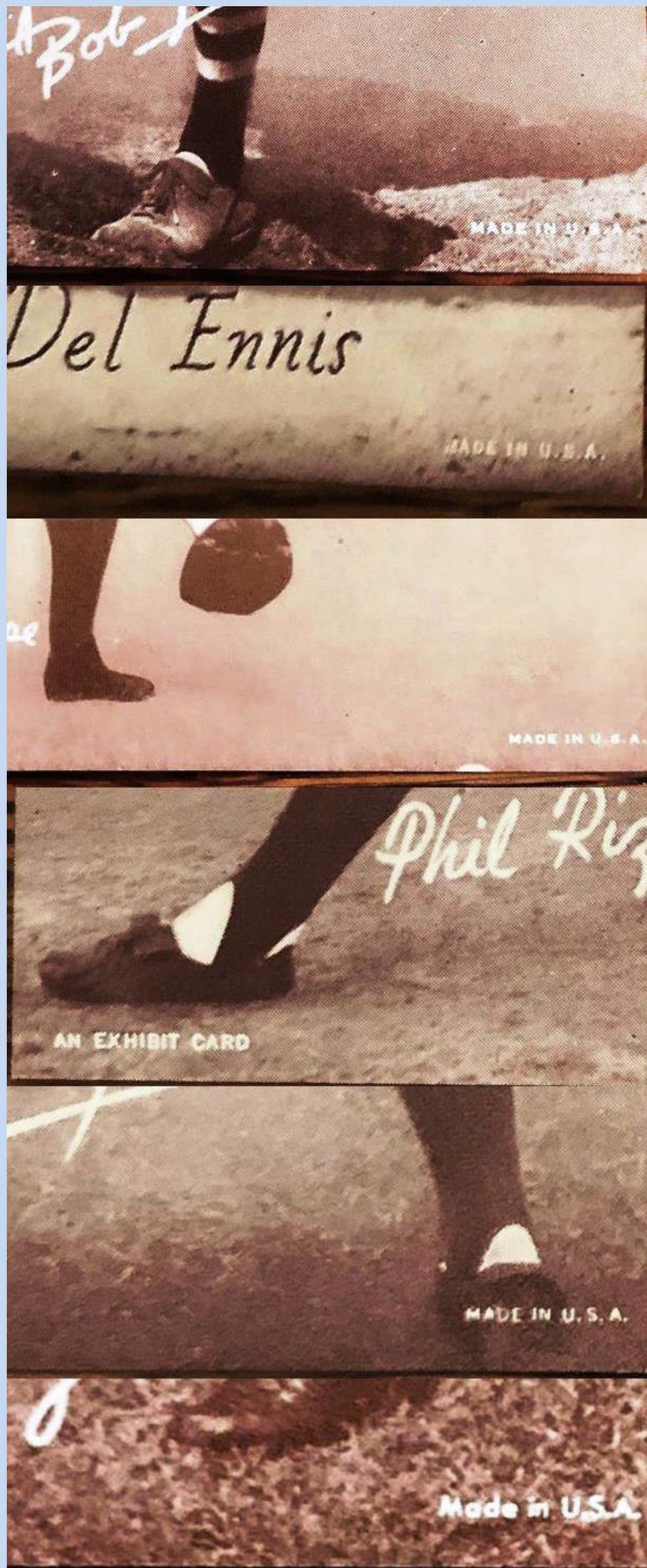
- Salutation exhibits with layouts designed in 1946 or 1947 with MADE IN U.S.A. 9/16” long – 3 cards: Elliott, Feller and Pafko
- Layouts designed in 1947 with MADE IN U.S.A. 8/16” long – 4 cards: DiMaggio, Ennis, Majeski and Slaughter. There is also a card of Walker Cooper with no printing. Cooper was first produced in 1947 with MADE IN U.S.A., but subsequent versions were cropped differently and the printing seems to have been lopped off.
- Layouts designed in 1948 with MADE IN U.S.A. 10/16” long – 6 cards: Evers, Kell, Reese, J. Robinson, Spahn and Torgeson
- Layouts designed in 1949 with MADE IN U.S.A. 8 or 10/16” long and “AN EXHIBIT CARD” printed in the lower left corner – 8 cards: Bearden, Berra, Branca, Brecheen, Doby, Mitchell, Rizzuto and Sain
- Layouts designed in 1950 with MADE IN U.S.A. 7/16” long – 12 cards: Ashburn, Campanella, Evans, Hatton, Hegan, Kellner, Kinder, Newcombe, Raschi, Roe, Sauer and Westlake
- Layouts designed in 1951, 1952 or 1953 with Made in U.S.A. (lower case) 8/16” long – all remaining 28 cards: Blackwell, Carrasquel, Church, Dark, Dropo, Easter, Fain, Goodman, Groth, Irvin, Jethroe, Konstanty, Lemon, Lockman, Lopat, Lowery (sic), Maglie, Mantle, Marion, Mays, McDougald, Minoso, E. Robinson, Sisler, Vernon, Wertz, 1952 Dodger team and 1952 Yankee team.
- A few exhibits are found with or without “burnt bottoms,” where it looks like ESCO tried to alter or partially delete the printing information. Wolfin’s find includes Campanella, Easter and Majeski with this feature. The Reese card is a variation with the ball that he is fielding partially visible.

From top to bottom, 6 different print styles on cards out of the same machine: 1) Salutation exhibit of Feller 2) Ennis from 1947 with MADE IN U.S.A. 8/16" long 3) Reese's card from 1948 with MADE IN U.S.A. 10/16" long and the ball partially visible 4) Rizzuto from 1949 with MADE IN U.S.A. and "AN EXHIBIT CARD" printed in the lower left corner 5) Campanella from 1950 with MADE IN U.S.A. 7/16" long 6) Maglie with Made in U.S.A. (lower case) 8/16" long

Who wasn't there?

I took a look at my own checklist for cards designed in 1951, 1952 and 1953 to see which two cards on the 64-card print run were not found in Wolfin's machine. The only missing player which fit the design was Ed Stanky. The final missing card must have been designed prior to 1951. Stan Musial and Ted Williams cards were designed prior to 1951. You would think one of them would have been the final missing player. Both Musial and Williams had started to push back on the use of their images. Might ESCO have pulled one of their cards from this run?

Could ESCO have printed all these player cards when they were first designed between 1946 and 1952, stored them for future use, united them with cards produced in 1953 and shipped them to Harry's Arcade in 1953? Knowing how cheaply ESCO produced cards and how likely it was that players would be cut or would retire in the next few years, it would have made no sense for ESCO to hang onto cards of guys like Hugh Mulcahy, Lefty Gomez, Johnny Rizzo or Gabby Hartnett who would soon be gone from the show. Hence, these boys are hard to find. ESCO didn't hang onto anything. They got the cardboard out the door as soon as they could. All of the cards in Wolfin's ESCO machine time capsule find had to be printed in 1953 regardless of the appearance of the card.





The 274 cowboys and movie stars in Wolfin's find is another story, which we will save for our non-sports friends at *The Wrapper*. Thanks to Rich Wolfin for sharing information about his find before the cards start heading out to new homes.

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net.

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