

COVER ESSAY

Cigarette cards – irony in propaganda

Alan Blum

In the mid 19th century, French tradesmen began giving away colourful paper cards, imprinted with an attractive scene and the address of their business, to customers and potential clients as a means of advertising. Aristide Boucicault, the founder of the Parisian department store Au Bon Marché, is credited with introducing the first collectible set of picture cards in 1853. Manufacturers of chocolate, coffee, soap, meat extract, and patent medicines soon began issuing their own trade cards. By 1880 several American tobacco companies were including cards in cigarette packs, the most popular of which depicted buxom women in revealing (just-below-the-knee) bathing attire. Such sensuous images were intended to build brand loyalty as smoking customers collected the entire series. (An additional purpose of the cards – also known as “stiffeners” – was to prevent the cigarettes being crushed.)

By the turn of the century, tobacco cards bearing the pictures of sports heroes were collected by young and old alike. In the US, the most celebrated of these cards is that of

Honus Wagner, shortstop for the Pittsburgh Pirates and one of the first five men elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame (figure 2). Wagner abhorred smoking and succeeded in having his 1909 card withdrawn. But a handful of the cards slipped into general circulation, and today each has an estimated value of US\$500 000. A Honus Wagner card forms the cornerstone of a permanent exhibition of cigarette cards at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The British have been by far the greatest producers and collectors of cigarette cards. In the first half of the 20th century, thousands of series were issued by dozens of tobacco manufacturers on subjects ranging from orchids to chess problems, and Shakespearean characters to military battles.

Schoolchildren became avid traders of cards and would wait outside tobacconists – or appear almost anywhere (figure 1) to ask adults for cigarette cards.

Many of the cigarette card series have proven to be unintentionally ironic, in view of the devastating consequences of smoking that emerged in ensuing decades. For example, a series in 1936 celebrating the Berlin Olympic Games featured medal winner Jesse Owens, who would die of lung cancer in 1980.

Several cigarette card series commemorated the British Royal Family (figure 2), the last three male monarchs of which died of tobacco-caused diseases. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides (known as Girl Scouts in some countries) were frequent subjects of cigarette cards. Other series with health-related themes included “Keep Fit”, “First Aid”, “Firefighters”, “Home Exercises”, and “Safety First”. World War I inspired tobacco companies to issue various cigarette cards oriented towards life saving, including one series that educated the smoking customer on resuscitation techniques and another on the proper use of gas masks during air raids (cover and figures 2 and 3).

The heyday of tobacco-sponsored trading cards ended after World War II, as chewing gum manufacturers entered the field and cigarette advertisers turned to television. But although the hobby of card collecting is now more popular than ever, especially among



Figure 1 A humorous postcard illustrating the ubiquity of young cigarette card collectors.

Doctors Ought to
Care (DOC)
Department of
Family Medicine,
Baylor College of
Medicine,
5510 Greenbriar,
Houston, Texas 77005
USA
A Blum

Adapted from a presentation at the Ninth World Conference on Tobacco and Health, Paris, 12 October 1994: An illustrated history of tobacco trading cards – from 1880s bathing beauties to 1990s satire.



Figure 2 Selected cigarette cards featuring the Royal Family (King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose) and Prince Henry of Wales (W.D. & W.H. Wills/Imperial Tobacco Company); the "Standard Bearer" boy scout (Ogden's/Imperial Tobacco); the "National Fire-Escape in Use, 1846" (John Player & Sons/Imperial Tobacco); and Pittsburgh Pirates baseball star, Honus Wagner.



Figure 3 The front and back of a Lambert & Butler cigarette card issued by the Imperial Tobacco Company, demonstrating "spinal exercise".

children, the presence of tobacco can still be felt, as will be shown in the cover essay of the next issue of *Tobacco Control*.

References

Murray M. *The story of cigarette cards*. London: Murray Cards (International), 1987; 5-24.

Among the many dealers in cigarette cards are:

- The London Cigarette Card Company Ltd, Sutton Road, Somerton, Somerset TA11 6QP, UK (publishers of *Cigarette Card News* and *Trade Card Chronicle*).
- Murray Cards (International) Ltd, 51 Watford Way, Hendon Central, London NW4 3JH, UK.