

# A HISTORY OF TOBACCO TRADING CARDS

## From 1880s Bathing Beauties to 1990s Satire

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In the mid-nineteenth century, colorful paper trading cards were given away for the first time by French tradesmen to customers or potential clients as a means of advertising. Aristide Boucicault, founder of the Parisian department store Au Bon Marche, is credited with having introduced the first collectible set of picture cards in 1853. Manufacturers of chocolate, coffee, soap, and patent medicines began issuing trading cards, and by 1880 several American tobacco companies were including cards in cigarette packs, the most popular of which depicted buxom women in bathing attire. It was hoped that such sensuous images would build brand loyalty as smokers collected the entire series. (An additional purpose of the cards was to keep the cigarettes from being mashed.)

By the turn of the century, tobacco cards bearing the pictures of sports heroes were collected by young and old alike. The most celebrated of these cards is that of baseball star Honus Wagner of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Wagner abhorred smoking and succeeded in having his card withdrawn. Each of the handful of his cards that slipped into general circulation has an estimated value of \$500,000.

The British were by far the largest producers and collectors of tobacco trading cards. In the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of series were issued on subjects ranging from orchids to chess problems, and Shakespearean characters to military battles. Schoolchildren became avid collectors of tobacco trading cards, and a tradition arose of waiting outside tobacco shops to ask the adult customers for their cigarette cards.

Many of the tobacco trading card series have proven to be unintentionally ironic, in view of the devastating health consequences of smoking that increasingly appeared in ensuing decades. For example, a series celebrating the 1936 Olympic Games featured the top medal-winner Jesse Owens, who died of lung cancer. Several tobacco series commemorated the British Royal Family, the last three male monarchs of which died of tobacco-caused diseases. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides were frequent subjects of tobacco cards. Other series with a health-related theme included "Keep Fit," "First Aid," "Firefighters," "Home Exercises," and "Safety First." World War I inspired various life-saving oriented tobacco cards,

including a series educating the public on artificial respiration and the proper use of gas masks during air raids.

The heyday of tobacco-sponsored trading cards ended after World War II, as bubble-gum manufacturers entered the field. Today the hobby of card-collecting is more popular than ever. The average convenience store displays dozens of varieties of cards, numerous collectors magazines are published each month, and card shows draw thousands of collectors. Although the vast majority of today's card series are related to sports, countless other series are available. Examples of series issued in 1994 include Liftoff (about astronauts and space), Canada Steam Locomotives, East Coast Lighthouses, Mustang 30th Anniversary Collection, and World War II 50th Anniversary. The most popular series are those of action figures such as Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Spiderman, and Marvel Masterpieces Superheroes. There is also a host of irreverent series based on offbeat cartoon characters, including The Simpsons, Ren & Stimpy, and Beavis and Butthead, which have attracted a wide teenage following.

Tobacco has maintained a pernicious presence even in cards clearly aimed at young collectors. In 1993, David Blum, age 9, of Houston, Texas, found a baseball card of the popular American player Dave Winfield, in which he was posed in front of a stadium billboard advertising Winston cigarettes. David began collecting examples of baseball cards featuring players with cheeks full of chewing tobacco and one card with a billboard advertising Marlboro cigarettes. Cards produced by the magazine Sports Illustrated for Kids have included cards with Virginia Slims and Marlboro logotypes. Numerous auto racing card series abound with tobacco logos and billboards. In 1994 RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company issued its own set of Winston auto racing cards. Since the 1980s, another tobacco company, Liggett, has produced the official National Football League (NFL) trading cards.

After David and his brother Sammy, age 7, found five cards out of a series of 100 Marvel Masterpieces in which Superheroes were shown smoking, Sammy wrote a letter to The New England Journal of Medicine, in which he asked, "Why do they make cards for kids that show people smoking?" The embarrassed trading card company, part of the major conglomerate Marvel Entertainment Group, agreed to keep smoking materials out of future trading-card collections.

A few attempts have been made to capitalize on the popularity of trading cards among children by producing cards with health-related or other socially responsible themes. The NFL issued a card with a football player urging students to "Stay in School." The American Cancer Society produced a few different cards featuring baseball players and the slogan "Strike Out Tobacco!"

In 1993, the health promotion group DOC, with the support of the Thrasher Foundation, sought to create a series of cards that would appeal to the irreverent, often scatological sense of humor of adolescents for the purpose of encouraging ridicule of the tobacco industry and its popular cigarette brands. The result is "DOC's Deck-O-Butts—Fakes, Facts, and Farts," a series of 21 cards that are aimed at changing attitudes and undermining brand names. Behind the gross humor (the titles of two of the cards are "Phlegm Hackers" and "The Sound of Mucus") is a strategy designed to familiarize teenagers with the names of the tobacco companies ("Cancer's 7 Warning Signs"), the ingredients of cigarettes, tobacco-sponsored sports, tobacco-caused diseases and cosmetic problems, and the techniques used to target women and minority groups. Preliminary results of surveys of middle-school students who have traded the cards suggest that this uninhibited approach is giving adolescents permission to laugh at the real authority figures in their lives, namely tobacco promoters.

All too many efforts to educate young people about tobacco have relied on pamphlets, posters, or preaching. In the future, as is being illustrated by DOC's Deck-O-Butts trading cards (which were developed in part through discussions with groups of teenagers), other strategies will require listening to young people and learning from them about the important issues in their world.