

### *Collecting the way it should be.*

Dateline: Friday May 16, 1964 – Norwood, OH.

It was 3:30 in the afternoon and school had been out for 20 minutes as Mark was racing down Floral Avenue on his new Huffy toward Tim's house. It was Friday and they were headed to St. Mathew's ball field for the weekly Catholic League game. The nine year olds dreamed of one day playing for the High School team but they had other things on their mind as well. Upon reaching Tim's house the boys fashioned a wooden crate across the handlebars of Tim's Schwinn with some bailing twine found in the fruit cellar underneath Tim's house that would be perfect for their "mission".

By the time the two boys arrived the ball game was already in the third inning but it was perfect for the boys plan, they headed right for the home bleachers along the first base line. Parking the bikes quickly the boys went right to work climbing under the bleachers and gathering every discarded soda pop bottle they could find. There were about 200 people in the stands and that could translate to a big pay day, the crate on Tim's bike would certainly be filled today. After just 15 minutes Mark and Tim had stuffed 23 bottles into the crate and Mark took off for the trash can behind the backstop and netted another 6 bottles there. The boys rode the bikes to the third base side and collected another 8 bottles from the visitor's bleachers and were ready to cash in with a haul of 37 bottles total.

Carefully they made their way four blocks away to C&I Market, a small local delicatessen with groceries and beer & wine. Tim grabbed a shopping cart and rolled it out to the bike rack outside the market and the boys filled it with the treasure they had collected at the ball field. Russ DiCicco the owner of the market hollered up from behind the deli counter "how many ya got this time fellas?" and excitedly Mark replied "we have 37 bottles to trade in Mr. DiCicco". Russ said "go ahead and stack the bottles in the soda crates in the back and grab 16". Russ knew that at 2 cents a piece the boys had 74 cents worth of bottle returns and were a cent shy of 15 packs of baseball cards that went for 5 cents each. He knew better than to send the boys off with an odd amount as the week before the boys split a pack of cards and nearly knocked the handrail off the store steps fighting each other over who would get the John Tsitouris card from their beloved Cincinnati Reds. So both Tim and Mark made their way behind the store counter and grabbed 8 packs a piece and it was off to the store steps to see what they would get.

Opening the packs had its own rhythm and ritual; the 1964 baseball card packs had a stick of gum on one side of 5 enclosed cards and a metal all star coin on the other. As the pack was ripped open the gum was slapped right into the mouth for immediate sickly sweet chewing, the coin was quickly stuffed into the pant pocket and the cards were sifted through with the ceremonious "need it, need it, got it, need it, got it" after each card. This continued until all packs were open and the two boys had such a chaw of gum in their mouths they could pretend to be Nellie Fox, Jerry Lumpe, Bubba Phillips or any number of ball players who were regularly pictured with a bulging cheek of chewing tobacco in their mouths. Cards were stuffed into the back pocket except a checklist that

Mark pulled that got clipped to the bike frame with a clothes pin so that the card would go clickity-clack in the bike spokes as the boys rode their bikes to Mark's house to continue the weekly practice.

By the time Mark and Tim had arrived at Mark's house they were met by Peter and Paul who were a few years older and lived next door to Mark. They had their own cards and were interested to see what new cards Mark and Tim would have this week. Cards were spread around the front porch and the group of boys were talking about and proposing trades as they went along. Eventually a flipping game would evolve or coin pitching and cards and all star coins would exchange hands that way.

It was a weekly custom to get new baseball cards and spend hours with friends looking them over and playing with them. We threw them in a box or drawer, stuffed them in our pockets and pinned them to the wall when we were done. The value of the cards was in the way it allowed us to learn more about the game, collect pictures of our favorite players and spend time with friends. It was not at all uncommon to see a trade like Mickey Mantle for a Joey Jay card, after all Joey was a hometown hero and Mantle was in the American League. No one would even think to consider the condition or centering of the card as a measure of value, it was who was on the card. So any Reds card was a GREAT card to have and therefore valuable.

Now let's fast forward to 2012 and check in on Tom and Marty, nine year olds that are also interested in collecting baseball cards. They caught a ride up to the local Target with Tom's Mom because kids don't ride their bikes around much anymore. Not to mention that Marty's bike wheel was stolen recently while locked up at local playground. While Tom's Mom shops the boys hit the toy aisle and check out Transformers, then they make their way to the electronics department and check out the latest video games, I-pods and MP3 players. Finally, they get to the area where the baseball cards are and look over the various products and brands that are available and try to decide what to choose. One product promises a gold foil autograph card in every 10 packs, another claims to have game used shoelaces in every box and every product has one sort of short printed gimmick or another.

The boys pick a couple of packs each because they can't afford more than that and they begin to open them up when they get back into the car. They are very careful when opening the packs because they do not want to ding a corner, fray an edge or do anything to decrease the value of the card. There was no gum to chew and great disappointment when there was no extra special gimmick card to be found. When they get home out comes the recent price guide, top loaders and calculator as they figure out just what cards are the highest priced in the guide. The cards are placed into the top loaders where they will stay forever to preserve them for posterity. Flipping games and trades are not likely, in fact the cards were now going to be placed in a box where they might be pulled out and looked at but they needed to be safeguarded to protect their value.

The same story cannot be written for nine year olds of yesterday and today. The 1960's were a much simpler time with pastimes that involved far more interaction than today. So what happened to baseball card collecting, why does it seem to be different and what is the future of a hobby. A recent report on Good Morning America voiced the end of the hobby of baseball card collecting and cited that young people are simply not interested in them anymore. I think the explanation is far deeper and points to corporate greed and a value system that is far more mercantile than it ever was in the past. Boys now a day do not trade without a Beckett price guide in their hands and every piece of cardboard has a monetary value that is set not by them but the market place. And the market place has priced the hobby out of the reach of the young collector today.

Let's look at the simple economics – in the 1960's cards cost a penny a piece, today they cost 20 cents or more. In soda pop bottles, 5 bottles would land you 10 cards in 1964 – the same 10 cards today need 20 or more bottles and what kid is going to drag 20 bottles to the store for a single pack of cards today, not too likely to happen. Kids today have a lot more stuff to spend money on and baseball cards simply do not have the same allure that they did in the past, not to mention it was a lot easier. In 1964 there was one game in town – Topps; it was simple unlike the marketplace today which is flush so many choices that no kid could ever collect them all or afford to.

So is the hobby dead? Only if we can't get collecting back to what it should be. What is that you ask - A kid's pastime that has nothing to do with investment, collectibility, short prints and price guides. Today's youth have been ripped off; they do not have the opportunity of the past to enjoy a hobby that was innocent and untainted by the almighty dollar. As hobbyist we should do what we can to preserve collecting the way it should be, the way it was in a simpler time.

*Mark S. Talbot*