

# Baseball card of the month

**November 2011 presents 1909 Honus Wagner**

by **Kevin Johnstone**

"He was ahead of his time." This is an idiom we hear often when referring to a talented musician, inventor or even a social activist. It is unlikely the simple actions of a legendary baseball player in 1909 would be so credited.

Yet at a time when smoking was not only considered the social norm, but was actually encouraged at every turn, the legendary baseball player Honus Wagner refused to have his picture associated with the baseball cards of the day, simply because those cards were produced by tobacco companies.

Because of this decision, only a very few of his 1909 T-206 made it to the open market. His name will be forever synonymous with his refusal to bow to the wishes of corporate tobacco. Today, a century later, this card is considered the "Mona Lisa" or "Holy Grail" of baseball cards. There is no card ever produced in any era in any condition that is as valuable as this card. To the true (and rich!) investor, this is "the" card to have.

How did a simple tobacco card (or T-card) come to be the granddaddy of all cards? As with most legends and historic collectibles, the story is both varied and intriguing.

## **Tobacco marketing strategy from the 1870s**

The beginning of card collecting began as a corporate strategy to sell tobacco.

Using photos of sport heroes to sell tobacco was seen as a sound business investment. The first cards date as far back as the 1870s when smoking was just taking shape as smart and sophisticated. At first, women were featured as well - quite the novelty since they were still considered second class citizens by most of society.

Several card companies enjoyed healthy sales during subsequent decades. Both sport and non-sport cards were commonplace in homes of the tobacco-buying public. The cards' popularity grew as the US grew economically and industrially. Cards were targeted for adults, but much like today, the kids wanted cards of their heroes. In this context, one of the greatest baseball players ever made a decision that would forever change the card hobby.

In 1909, the American Tobacco Company produced the famous T-206 series of pro and minor league baseball players. It is considered by many to be the most popular tobacco card set ever produced - and the most expensive set ever to complete. Although thousands were originally produced, completing a well conditioned set is next to impossible, not to mention the prohibitive price tag.

## **How many million?!**

Added to this cost is the coveted Wagner card. Why is it so expensive and rare? While most cards of this set (if you can find any) can be found for a mere \$100 - 300 range, the Wagner card can fetch between \$350,000 to \$2.8 million as it did in an auction a few years ago. Needless to say this card must be rare indeed.

As the story goes, the card was pulled after limited production upon hearing that Wagner objected to his image being associated with tobacco. He did not believe endorsement of tobacco should be done

with children in mind. Since baseball cards were finding their way into the hands of kids, he would not, in good conscience, have his face selling tobacco.

This decision limited the print run of this card to as little as 50 or as much as 100 ever produced. And considering the age of the cards (over a century) and how cards were handled in that era, it is little wonder about the rarity of this card.

### **"The Flying Dutchman" - one of the "Fabulous Five"**

Who was Honus Wagner? True baseball fans regard him as the greatest shortstop in the history of baseball. Many regard him as only behind The Babe as the greatest players ever. He was nicknamed "The Flying Dutchman" and at the time of his retirement in 1917 he was the greatest player the National League ever produced. In 1936, The Baseball Hall Of Fame officially opened its doors with its initial inductees, the so-called "Fabulous Five" - Babe Ruth, Cobb, Walter Johnson, Christy Matthewson and Wagner! Not bad company at all.

That Wagner's 1909 card honours one of the greatest players ever to play baseball only adds to the card's reputation. In the 1930s, it was listed at a mere \$50, making it, by far, the most expensive card ever made to that time. In the ensuing decades, and as card collecting underwent vast changes, the card's legacy and true value emerged.

### **The Great One invests!**

By 1985, card collecting was regaining its status as a major hobby and more collectors saw their passion as an "investment" - a pristine Wagner card sold for a record \$25,000. Just two years later, as the card market was going bananas it hit \$110,000. As if that was not enough, the card was becoming legend.

In 1991, at a Southeby's auction, it sold for \$451,000, to none other than Wayne Gretzky! He along with the then-owner of the LA Kings Bruce McNall purchased it strictly for an investment. This of course made headlines across North America.

It was also at this time that an important part of today's hobby had its genesis. Cards, especially vintage ones, were under increased scrutiny for authenticity and quality. As a result, a new industry was born.

Card-grading companies authenticated the validity and condition of cards of all sports. This has become the true "grading" of the actual value of cards, particularly vintage ones. PSA (Professional Sports Authenticators) was born - it still thrives as leader in the grading industry. The Gretzky Wagner card was graded as their very first card. It received an 8 out of 10 or near mint condition. Minting a vintage card is next-to-impossible. This continues to be the highest grade ever given to a Wagner card.

### **Not for the weak of heart - or small pockets!**

Only four short years after the Great One purchased the Wagner card, he sold it to the largest corporate entity on the planet - Wal-Mart, for a mere \$500,000. Wal-Mart bought it to promote the sale of newer baseball cards and it succeeded several times over. And they took it on a travelling "card tour" - accompanied two armed guards! Clearly card collecting had become big business. . .

The following year, Wal-Mart gave the card away in a nationwide contest. Always looking for free publicity, they did this on the Larry King Show. Sadly the new owner could not afford the taxes on the card and it went up for auction yet again. This time the bidding settled in at \$640,000. By the start of the new millennium in 2000 the card sold on e-bay for a then record of \$1.265 million. In 2007, the

card saw another auction and its record windfall reached the highest peak ever, topping in at \$2.8 million, making it the most valuable card in history. Not bad for a 1.5 x 2.5" piece of cardboard!

As the value of the Wagner card grew over the past century, so have rumours, fakes, forgeries and charges of racism. Even Gretzky's card was questioned as to its legitimacy. As with all good stories, it has been written in a recent book, "The Card" by Michael O'Keefe. Perhaps a movie is not far behind.

As for the card hobby, the saga continues to unfold. Card prices have stabilized in the past few years, but the interest in vintage cards continues to grow. From time to time, a new "find" of T-cards appears and in turn, more copies of the Wagner card. Sadly, most are either fake or of poor quality at best. For many collectors, owning an authentic piece of Wagner history in any condition is the crowning achievement to their collection.

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