

Hobby History

When did card shows become 'national' events?

By George Vrechek



Collectors posed at Jim Nowell's house on Saturday August 22, 1970.

Front row kneeling, left to right: Jay Ludwig, Allan Kaye, Rusty Moshier, Jeff Johnson, Ken Baker, Steve Black, Paul Wright and Steve Brazell.

Second Row, leaning forward: Pat Connealy, Harry Hoffman, Keith Jackson, Steve Marshall, Lionel Carter and Joe Dupries.

Back row, standing: Mike Jaspersen, Jim McConnell, Bob Jaspersen, David Meiners, Irv Lerner, John Thom, Ray Hess, Dale Brittain, Ray Medeiros, Matt Matushefski and Jim Nowell. Photo - Nowell/Sport Fan, not pictured but attending on Sunday - Goodie Goldfaden

If your local airport has one flight a day to Windsor, Canada, does that make it an "international" airport?

If you have a card show and someone comes from out of town and stays overnight, does that make it a "national" card show? What if two out-of-towners come? What about four guys from Philadelphia and one from Chicago coming to Los Angeles?

These are exceedingly difficult questions. Collectors interested in hobby history may be interested in the national card show question.

The National Sports Collectors Convention traces its roots back to a 1980 show promoted by Gavin Riley with Mike Berkus and Steve Brunner. The show was held in a ballroom at the Los Angeles International Airport Marriott. The group sponsoring the show morphed a bit in the early years, but the annual event, save the coronavirus cancellation, has been a pilgrimage for collectors ever since. Was the 1980 event the first “national” show?

Collecting before the shows

Adult collectors before the late 1960s collected by buying cards in stores as they were issued or by finding a few other collectors, writing to them and sending wantlists back and forth. If collectors could not work out a trade, they would send money, checks or unused postage stamps through the mail. Expensive phone calls and personal visits were rare, unless another collector lived in the same town.

Not that many serious collectors had discovered one another. Even in most large cities, there were only a handful of such collectors until the 1950s. When *Card Collector's Bulletin* editor Jefferson Burdick traveled, he would visit subscribers in each town. It didn't take him too long.

A few dealers offered to buy and sell through the mail or in antique stores. A collector might run a newspaper want ad looking to buy cards. A few kid collectors continued as teenagers and did much the same thing as the adults at the time.

Hobby publications reported on, the mostly failed, efforts by collectors to assemble in any significant numbers. Pioneer collectors Buck Barker of St. Louis and Charles Bray of East Bangor, Pa., visited Lionel Carter in September 1958. Carter invited fellow-Chicagoan Bob Solon. Four collectors in one kitchen seemed like a monumental meeting to Solon. Among other things, they talked about the triple-printed Stan Musial Topps All-Star card that had just been issued.



Bray, Barker, Carter and Solon – the 1958 kitchen show attendees, photos: CCB, Barker, Sport Fan, Sports Collectors Digest

Carter was disappointed that a larger gathering planned by John Sullivan for downtown Chicago might involve people thumbing through his cards and bending them with reckless abandon. He dropped the whole idea. The show did not happen.

Early shows

However, card shows began sprouting up in all kinds of places in the 1970s. Shows in Detroit, New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, Philadelphia and St. Louis usually grew out of local clubs or groups of collectors who would rent a space and publicize the event locally. Addicted collectors turned into dealers trying to support their habits with buying trips and newspaper ads.

Some of these shows were held on weekends with hotel space and rooms available. The shows might include seminars on collecting, auctions, meetings of hobby editors or early dealers. Collectors and table holders might even travel hundreds of miles to attend. Someone from Windsor might have even been there!

Who was on first?

Hobby history enthusiast, David Kathman, has posted information about many of these early shows on Net54 from his research of old hobby publications. The question has been raised: When was the first such show, which might arguably be called the first “national” convention, to attract collectors from across the country for a weekend of thumbing through cards without bending them?

Hobby publisher Bob Jaspersen might argue that it was either the 1969 or 1970 West Coast Sports Collectors Convention held in Brea, Ca., at Jim Nowell’s house that started it all. Gavin Riley said as much in a 1980 letter to Lionel Carter.

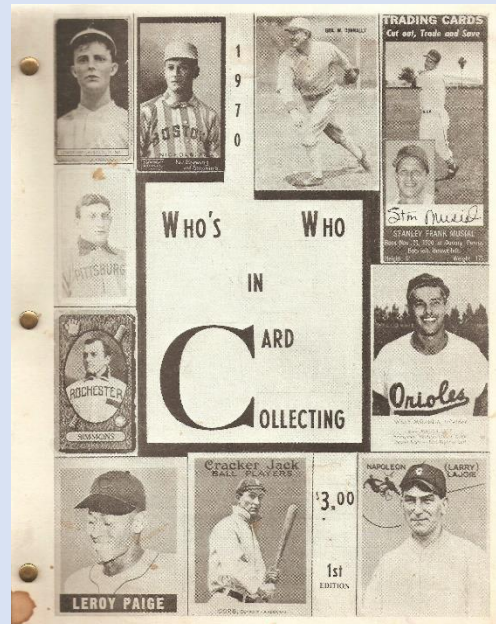
Jaspersen had been involved in the hobby since the 1940s and published his *Sport Fan* newsletter starting in 1951. He was part of the second wave of collectors like Buck Barker who got involved in sports card collecting after Jefferson Burdick’s burst of energy starting in 1935.

Jim Nowell

Fortunately, Jim Nowell, 77, still follows the hobby and still lives near Disneyland. Nowell shared his memories with me in the process of downsizing his considerable collection of publications and cards. While the number of people who could fit in Nowell’s house was limited, the attendees were among the “Who’s Who” of collectors at the time. I have interviewed and written about many of them over the years – Goodie Goldfaden, Lionel Carter, Irv Lerner, Bob and Mike Jaspersen, Ray Medeiros, John England, Ray Hess, David Meiners and Jim McConnell.

Let’s look at the foundation work for the 1970 gathering, what went on, and how attendees stayed involved in the hobby.

1970 attendee, Irv Lerner, published “Who’s Who in Card Collecting” in 1970 and 1971.





Participants posed on the Saturday morning of the 1969 gathering at Jim Nowell's house. Front row left to right: Dale Brittain, Carlos Hernandez, Bill Klink, Ray Medeiros and Ed Broder. Standing: Bill Johnson, J.J. Smith, John Thom, Don Ortolani, Dennis Graye, John England, Jim McConnell and Jim Nowell. Photo Nowell.

Let's have a card show

In 1969, there was no history of what would be needed or appropriate for a card show that would attract a national audience. There were plenty of questions.

- Who should organize the event?
- How would it be publicized?
- How much space was needed?
- Would people be bringing many cards to sell?
- Should there be an auction?
- Should there be educational sessions?
- Were adult collectors the market, or should there be equal appeal to kids?
- What was it going to cost, and how would costs be covered?

Jim Nowell, Ed Broder and Jim McConnell were all young baseball card collectors. McConnell started writing for *The Trader Speaks* in 1965. Through *TTS* he met Broder of Whittier, Ca., and through Broder he met Nowell. In 1969 Broder and Nowell decided to gather at Nowell's house in Brea to have a card show. Broder was the youngest of the group and hoped to promote a large gathering. McConnell offered to help.

Nowell recalled, "When our first two national get togethers were held at my home, everybody easily fit in. We then set up tables outside and inside for trading/buying. When you look at the program, this was secondary as we had discussions on major hobby issues. Quite different than now." The goal was to share information and to improve the still fledgling hobby.

13 collectors attend in 1969

Back in 1969 Nowell, writing for *The Ball Card Collector*, reported that the weekend of August 23, 1969, was picked because that was the date that collector Dennis Graye of Detroit was going to be in town. The mailing list of West Coast subscribers to Richard Burns' *Sports Trader* was used to promote the event, and ads ran in *Sports Collectors News* and *The Trader Speaks* as well. Nowell put together a program for the event and still has a few copies left.

John England from Fort Smith, Ark., attended as did McConnell, Don Ortolani, Bill Klink, Ray Medeiros and John Smith. Eighteen collectors were expected, but only 13 showed, ranging in age from 14 to their mid-40s. Most were in their 20s. Collectors brought along cards and discussed the hobby. Some specialized in programs, publications, postcards or autographs.

"The feature of that meeting," according to Medeiros, "was the opportunity to listen to each attendee get up in front of the group and talk about what he collected and how he got started. There was a live auction which brought smiles to everyone's face as they won material they liked and, in some cases, had never seen before." The 90-minute auction was followed by a trading session which went until about 9 p.m. on the first night.

McConnell shares his thoughts

In corresponding recently with McConnell, he also recalled the 1969 weekend and the auction, "The two-day event included an auction (no one in the room had much money so it didn't really generate much excitement). Highlight of the auction were some Topps complete sets from the 1960s and a complete set of the Coca-Cola 1967 full-color issue. Winning bids probably didn't total \$100." They were actually \$111.35, per the always-detail-minded Nowell.



Jim McConnell, Bob Jaspersen, Ray Hess and Ray Medeiros at the first National Sports Collectors Convention held in Los Angeles in 1980, Photo M Jaspersen, photo Jaspersen

Planning for 1970

McConnell commented: "A fun weekend, but not exactly what Ed Broder had envisioned. Over the next few months Ed, Jim and I had several discussions about holding a true convention in 1970. It was agreed actual invitations would be sent to a number of veteran collectors, and this time the convention would be publicized to the extent possible. That task fell on me since Jim was working full-time at Hunt Foods and Ed was still going to college full-time.

"Give credit to the late Dan Dischley, who graciously loaned his extensive mailing list to us so we could send out invites to a wide range of collectors. In many ways, it was a group effort, and something that in retrospect I am proud to have helped along.

"Meanwhile, in a meeting a couple weeks before the convention Ed pulled out, leaving me to take his place. My little project at that point was getting Goodie Goldfaden, Ray Medeiros and Ray Hess to attend. All were reluctant to commit, but in the end, all attended along with a group from Philly and Lionel Carter, who was supposed to be our guest speaker."

That '70 show

Attendance doubled for the 1970 event from 13 to 26. The show attracted several key out-of-towners: Bob Jaspersen, Mike Jaspersen, Jay Ludwig and Irv Lerner from Philadelphia and Lionel Carter from Evanston, Ill. Dave Meiners and Rusty Moshier came from Fresno. Given the difficulty of getting around metropolitan Los Angeles, some attendees from Southern California were as far as 100 miles away from Brea, which is 30 miles east of LAX. It made for some long commutes and brief appearances. Goldfaden came from Sherman Oaks, Joe Dupries from Riverside, McConnell from Pomona, Medeiros from Lancaster, Hess from Palmdale, John Thom from Englewood and Allen Kaye from Redondo Beach.

McConnell noted, "The 1970 auction had far stronger material, a lot of it supplied by Irv Lerner. Among the top items were a couple complete sets of Bowmans which were absolutely mint. The 1955 set, which I won, was amazing, Irv said it was a proof set ... may be.

Bob Jaspersen and Irv Lerner made it to the West Coast in 1970, photo by Mike Jaspersen



Carter didn't rock

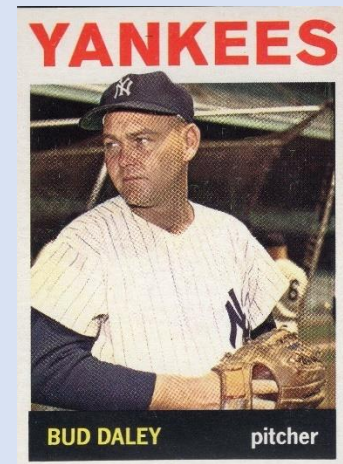
"Speaking of conditions," McConnell remembered, "Lionel Carter was not in the greatest of moods, in part owing to the faux pas of having him sit in front of the group in a rocking chair. He did not stay long."

It seems strange that Carter would come all the way to Los Angeles and not stay. However, Carter could be a little fussy. Carter had been involved in the hobby as early as 1935 when he began getting articles published about baseball card collecting. By the 1950s, he had corresponded with and met Jefferson Burdick, Buck Barker, Charles Bray and many of the early collectors. By 1969, he had nearly complete baseball sets of everything starting with the T206s. Knowing Carter, he likely felt that many of the

attendees were too young to appreciate what had come before. He was the only one wearing a tie for the photo that day.

Daley – the first athlete?

McConnell continued, “Jim arranged a guest speaker, Bud Daley, the former Yankee pitcher. Bud was very gracious but could not understand why grown-ups would collect baseball cards.” The 36-year-old Daley lived in Garden Grove. Daley likely has the distinction of being the first athlete to appear at a card show. Medeiros asked Daley what it was like to pitch to Ted Williams, his answer was, “Never enjoyable.”



“With all the defections the second day was a tad chaotic,” McConnell remembered. “I missed most of it as I was upstairs trying to make the auction balance. There was some dispute over winning bids and the Philly guys wanted their money now, so we wound up short by about \$50. Lesson learned - avoid dealing with finances. Anyway, the convention broke up early. Bob Jaspersen (who was not there most of the second day) gave us a nice writeup in *Sport Fan*.”

Goldfaden’s goodies

McConnell: “I remember Goodie did not stay long, but he was there, and not surprisingly he knew virtually all the older collectors. He did supply a door prize. We all drew numbers and the winning number was held by one of the younger collectors. The prize? A 1933 Goudey Babe Ruth in excellent condition. Cannot remember which of the kids won it, but remember he was absolutely stunned. Goodie was delighted that the kid won, knowing Goodie I would not be surprised if he somehow rigged the numbers.”

When I met Goldfaden years later, when he was over 90, I was amazed by his detailed and accurate memory. When I called again two years later, he remembered what hobby publications interested me and asked about my son-in-law.



Medeiros had the same experience, noting, “In December 1959 , the last time I visited his store on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, I spotted some old sepia tone posters sold by the original *Baseball Magazine* that I liked but didn't have enough money on me to pay for them. Goodie generously handed them to me and told me to send him a little at a time when I could.

“What's amazing about Goodie was his absolutely photographic memory because the next time I saw him, eight years later, the moment I walked into his store his first words after hello were, ‘Are you still collecting those old sepia tones put out by the *Baseball Magazine*?’”

Goodie Goldfaden and George Vrechek 2010

Mike Jaspersen remembered, "It was my first cross country flight, very excited. I carried one of those old-style briefcases filled with cards. I brought duplicates that I thought would be popular, Bowman, Topps, 50s-60s. Bulk was star cards. Goodie Goldfaden had gifts for all attendees. I remember going to jai alai in Tijuana with my dad, Ray (Medeiros), and a few others, it was great time."

According to Bob Jaspersen's report of the event, Goldfaden gave away Johnston Cookies cards, Remars, Mothers Cookies, Crackerjack, Ramley, Obak and a 1948 Leaf short print of George Kell's rookie card.

In the same 1970 *Sport Fan* issue, Jaspersen ran an article by Mark Jordan on the July 3 and 4, 1970, "First National Sports Collectors Convention" held in St. Petersburg attended by 12 people, all named in the story. An April 1970 Middle Atlantic Sports Collectors' Convention in Cambridge, Maryland, drew a robust 14 collectors.

Aftermath

McConnell continued, "Anyway, I was disappointed, Ed Broder was disappointed. But thanks to the good notices in the hobby pubs a group in Michigan decided to hold a convention of their own. So, on Labor Day weekend (1970), it was held at a hotel in Michigan (at the advice of Ed and me) and we were both in attendance along with approximately 50 other collectors. Lloyd Toerpe was the driving force behind these, although others including Jay Barry and Dick Reuss also pitched in. That show really kicked the idea into full motion, and they have been around ever since."

The second Detroit show in 1971 drew close to 500 people. They came from all over and included Nowell-event attendees Broder, Hess, England, Lerner and Thom. Chicagoan Pat Quinn, who has been a dealer at every official National, remembered attending with Don Steinbach, "That show really opened my eyes. A lot of collectors at the time were just interested in trading, and I didn't have that much to trade, but here you could buy and sell. Someone would have a table with cards on it and not even be sitting there. You'd wait for the person to come back, and they'd say they wanted something like \$7.50 for the cards you picked out. I would try to buy their whole table."

Takeaways

According to McConnell, "The biggest takeaway for me from the Nowell 'conventions' was that they became a springboard for the real thing. From 1970 onward, card conventions were here to stay. It seems like yesterday but it's now 50 years."

Medeiros attended both the 1969 and 1970 gatherings and commented, "What was special was the establishment of new and lasting friendships when collectors met and liked each other. I still am in frequent contact with a few of them after all these years. Jim Nowell deserves credit for showing



collectors around the country that it was possible to bring collectors together from all over the country and after his second 'show' the hobby has enjoyed the gatherings we now call conventions."

Despite the possible letdown from the modest attendance and significant work, the organizers had managed to get the attention of many serious collectors throughout the country. While many obviously took a wait-and-see approach or did not want to travel that far, collectors started talking and writing more about larger gatherings.

Collectors at the 1969 show griped a bit about dealers making big profits off them or selling items that had been given out for free, but it wasn't long at all before such crass commercialism became accepted as part of the by-product when people are attracted to a hobby.

Who were these guys?

With photos from around 1970 and later in their hobby careers, if available

Jim Nowell (b.1943)

Nowell was a business school grad from UCLA. McConnell recalled, "Nowell had a fabulous collection. He was one of only a handful of collectors nationally who had all three Post Cereal and all three Stahl-Meyer Hot Dogs sets complete. Jim's specialty was cards issued with food products and as such he had some amazing cards. He also specialized in errors and variations and was among the first to report many of the Topps variations. He and Bill Haber were friends."



Ed Broder (b.1950)

Broder quickly got involved in promoting the hobby. He promoted a few shows and later tried his hand at issuing cards, commonly called "Broders."

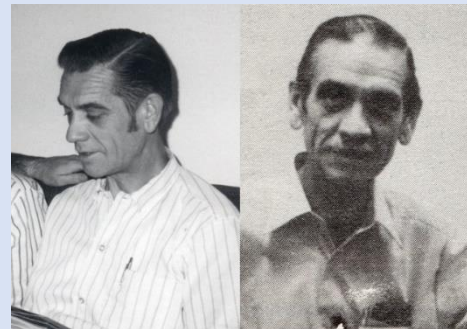
Jim McConnell (b.1948)

Jim McConnell of Covina, Ca., has shared an interest in the profiles of hobby pioneers. He wrote for *SCD* and *TTS* and had a long career as a sportswriter for several Southern California newspapers. He authored a biography of longtime pitcher Bobo Newsom. For years, McConnell co-published (with Keith Gadbury) a sked newsletter which continues to be published online by others. His special knack was getting along well with Goodie Goldfaden.



Bob Jaspersen (1920-1982)

A sportswriter in Minneapolis and Philadelphia, Bob started *Sport Fan* as a hobby publication in 1950 and resurrected it again in the 1970s. Ray Medeiros wrote of his friend, "Bob had no axe to grind for his objective was to use *Sport Fan* to inform and in so doing he made friends all over the U.S. In Bob you had everything you would want in a person: everlasting genuine friendship. My memories of visiting back and forth with him are precious."



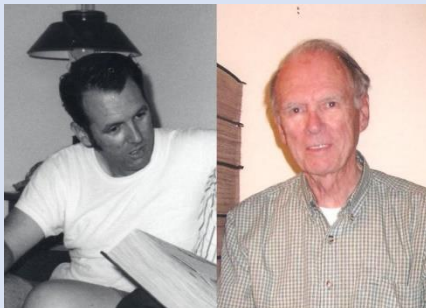
Mike Jaspersen (b.1955)

Mike was a high schooler when he attended the Nowell show with his dad. Mike has spent most of his career in the hobby with his own card stores as well working for Topps and Beckett. He and son Nick have a hobby store in Hermosa Beach, Ca., Jaspys Sports Cards & Collectibles.



Irv Lerner (1936-2020)

Lerner collected cards from his father's Philadelphia cigar store. He got back into the hobby in 1959 and made contacts with Zabel Brothers and Topps. He published a Who's Who guide in 1970. Lerner was a C.P.A. and part-time dealer active in the Philadelphia area and each National.

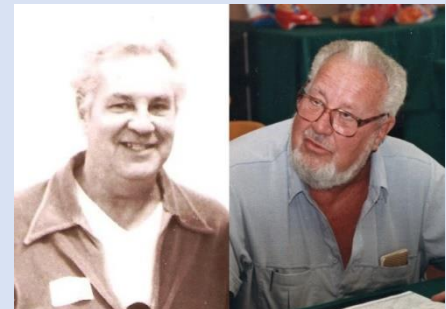


Ray Medeiros (b.1934)

Medeiros started collecting in 1941. He put together huge scrapbooks on Ted Williams and the Red Sox and was an avid collector of baseball stadium postcards. He contributed information to several authors writing about old ballparks. I first met him as the helpful owner of a sports card shop in Torrance, California. Medeiros has kept in touch with many friends from the hobby.

Ray Hess (1921-2013)

Hess attended Babe Ruth's last MLB game, collected in the 1930s and dealt with most of the early hobby pioneers. He liked the Bell Brand cards after moving to California in 1941.



Goodie Goldfaden (1914-2012)

Goodie and his brother Jack started selling programs and pennants outside Cleveland's Legion Park in 1925. By the 1930s he was advertising to buy sports books and cards in *Hobbies* magazine and other publications. He was likely the first full-time dealer exclusively in the sports hobby, opening a store in Los Angeles shortly after his arrival in 1947. He was still selling sports books in 2012. McConnell described him as a "dynamo."

McConnell recalled, "Oddly enough, Jim (Nowell) never dealt with Goldfaden. Always said his prices were too high (which they probably were). However, I was the go-between on a couple major deals between the two (involving Bell Brand Dodgers cards and Post Cereal cards) so that was a lot of fun. Very exciting driving back from Goodie's shop in LA to Jim's house in Brea with 10 cigar boxes filled with Bell Brand cards (possibly as many as 2,500 cards) and then helping Jim sort them 'til 2 in the morning. Jim allowed me to pick out a set of all three years of the color cards as a reward. Cards were mint, right out of cellophane wrapper, so that was a highlight of my otherwise humble collection."



Lionel Carter (1918-2008)

Carter began collecting the DeLongs in 1933 in Colfax, Ill., and connected with Burdick in 1937. He assembled a pristine collection of baseball cards and continued writing about the hobby. He could be particular, especially when it came to baseball card condition and pricing. I visited him several times in Evanston, Ill., and reviewed his collection, correspondence files and publications.



John England (1940-2016)

England graduated from the University of Arkansas majoring in English and Social Studies. He started collecting in 1952 and by 1970, he had 35,000 cards. He was a serious enough collector to drive all the way from Arkansas to the 1969 show. He reportedly traded three complete sets from the 1950s to Bill Klink that weekend. He also made it to the September 1970 show in Detroit.

England continued to teach English and social studies in Fort Smith and was a well-known card collector, especially of the St. Louis Cardinals. He had a bookshop and hobby store until 1996. He also bought cards from Charles Bray and Wirt Gammon. He sold his extensive collection in 1984 to Larry Fritsch. At the time, it was one of the biggest single sales of a collection. When I last talked to him in 2012, he still had 250,000 cards left.

David John Meiners (1946-2016)

Meiners grew up in Delano, Ca., and was active in the 1970s hobby. He was listed as the "Sports Advocate" for *Sports Collectors Digest* starting in 1974. Meiners wrote detailed articles for *SCD* about the increase in prices for cards. He was a Reds fan and Reds card collector.

Other "Who's Who" attendees

The enterprising Irv Lerner encouraged several attendees to list themselves in his "Who's Who in Card Collecting" book published in 1970 and 1971 which listed 388 collectors throughout the country. Biographical information as it appeared in Lerner's book and some recollections by McConnell follow.

Steve Brazell – a 16-year-old from Burbank, with 4,000 cards who considered the 1970 show "the most significant experience in his collecting career" at the time

Dennis Graye a 19-year-old from Detroit working for NCR started collecting in 1958

Harry Hoffman – a 29-year-old machinist from Anaheim with 6,500 cards, including a complete set of 1933 Goudeys (minus Lajoie) that his father collected

Bill Klink – a 20-year-old student at San Jose State who also switched from publications to cards after attending both shows

Jay Ludwig – a 14-year-old who flew in from Oreland, Pa., with his parents and collected exhibits and Red Man cards

Rusty Moshier – a 16-year-old from Fresno who collected Giants cards. Moshier later wrote for hobby publications and went into broadcasting in the Fresno market.

Don Ortolani – a 30-year-old in the Navy at Coronado who started collecting in 1956 and kept at it. Thirty years later, when Ray Hess decided to sell his card collection, it went to his long-time friend Ortolani who carted away 27 apple boxes full of Hess' baseball cards.

John Thom – a 29-year-old USC grad, a writer and photographer from Inglewood. He switched from collecting publications to cards. He later worked for Union Oil’s publicity department and put together a ballpark postcard collection. He attended Ray Medeiros’ Stadiapex shows.

Paul Wright – a 15-year-old from Canoga Park who subscribed to *TTS*

Others attending:

Joe Dupries, Riverside, Ca., in the US Air Force. After his discharge, he moved back to his native Michigan. He collected a bit of everything, with a specialty of Detroit Tigers. In the 1980s he discovered a cache of the Dietsche Detroit Tigers postcards. He organized and hosted the first “Skedcon” (a gathering of schedule collectors) at Plymouth, Michigan, in 1985.

John J. Smith, Diamond Bar, Ca. Smith was a banker according to the Classic Corner, which also reported on the event. He “had been collecting autographs since 1939 and had amassed well over 100,000 signatures including 101 different Baseball Hall of Famers and 27 different U.S. Presidents. Smith published an *Autograph Club* monthly newsletter that was mailed to 200 collectors.”

1969 and 1970 attendee: Dale Brittain

In 1969: Carlos Hernandez and Bill Johnson

In 1970: Ken Baker, Steve Black, Pat Connealy, Keith Jackson, Jeff Johnson, Allan Kaye, Steve Marshall and Matt Matushefski

Finally, not attending – George Vrechek, then and now



Photo credits

Nowell – SCD, Broder – Sport Fan, McConnell – Jaspersen/McConnell, Bob and Mike Jaspersen – Jaspersen, Lerner – M.Jaspersen/Vrechek, Medeiros – Jaspersen/Medeiros, Hess – SCD/Medeiros, Goldfaden – Jaspersen/Vrechek, Carter – SCD/Vrechek

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