

Frank J. Thomas (1929-2023), slugger and collector from Pittsburgh



Thomas signed photos showing Eddie Mathews, Hank Aaron, Joe Adcock and the 6'3" Thomas right after they set a record by hitting successive home runs on June 8, 1961.

By George Vrechek

Former MLB player Frank Thomas passed away at age 93 on January 16, 2023. I count myself among the many collectors who had the opportunity to talk with him. He played in the majors for 16 years and retained detailed memories of his baseball experiences. Fans described him as approachable and happy to share his stories. He was also a baseball card collector and was still adding to his collection until selling it a few years ago.

SCD featured Thomas in an article by David Moriah in the July 16, 2016 issue, and others have interviewed him in recent years as well. My turn to talk to Thomas came in November 2021. We talked for over an hour. Thomas followed our conversations with letters and photos. He was talkative and friendly. By several accounts, he could also be argumentative and outspoken, reminding one of Clint Eastwood's character, a crusty retired auto worker, in the movie "Gran Torino."

A SUPER SENIOR PLAYER

My reason for calling Thomas was seeing if I could resurrect the idea, I once wrote about in *SCD*, of putting together a (theoretical) game between National and American League teams of the oldest living players, who had appeared on baseball cards.

He appreciated being selected for "my" National League squad and joked about playing until he was 100. He confessed that, although he had stayed in fairly good shape over the years, his lower legs had not been cooperating lately; he mentioned his eyesight and arthritis weren't exactly assets either.

COLLECTED AS A KID

Thomas was born June 11, 1929, the son of Bronaslaus Tumas, who had immigrated from Lithuania and had lost an arm in a work accident. As a kid growing up in the Depression, Thomas collected baseball cards and enjoyed playing sports. He thought he might become a priest and went into the seminary for high school - Mount Carmel College. However, sports and family life won out over the priesthood.

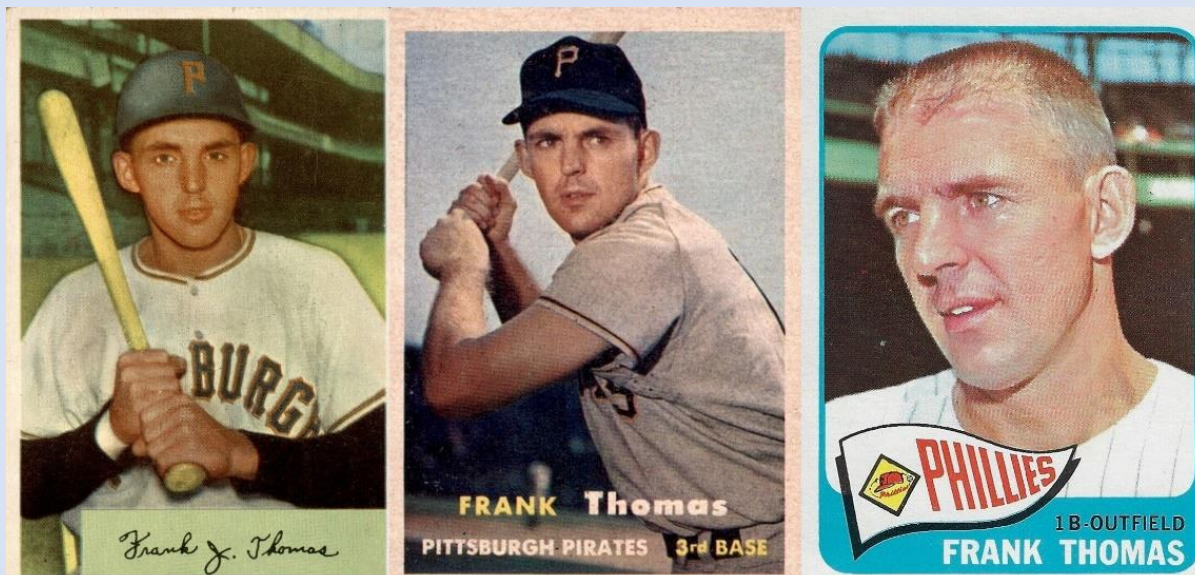
GETTING TO THE MAJORS

Thomas was signed by Pittsburgh in July 1947. He played for Tallahassee in Class D baseball in 1948, batting .295 with 132 RBIs. He recalled getting paid \$150 per month for each of the five months of the season, a \$750 haul for the year. However, players didn't have many opportunities to spend money. One year in the minors he remembered having \$900 saved up from the season. Thomas had a good recollection of numbers and never threw his money around.

In 1950 and 1951 he played with Double-A New Orleans, started to hit the long ball, made the league All-Star teams and was called up to Pittsburgh for 39 games in 1951 and 6 in 1952. He married Dolores Wozniak in 1951. In 1953 he was in the majors to stay and hit 30 homers and 102 RBIs as the centerfielder for the Pirates. The Pirates paid him \$6,000 for the 1953 season. After the season, like most players at the time, he personally negotiated with "management" (Thomas didn't want me to even mention the name Branch Rickey) to get his salary bumped all the way up to \$15,000 per year. He had to settle for \$12,500.

SIGNING WITH BOWMAN

Bowman signed players to appear on trading cards. Thomas didn't know exactly when it happened but recalled signing with Bowman, probably in 1950 or 1951 spring training, before Topps got into the picture. He appeared on Bowman cards in 1954 and 1955 until Topps took over in 1956. He recalled the option of getting cash each year (like \$125) or taking a gift. He would opt for the lawn furniture shown in the Topps catalog. He met Topps' marketing and licensing guru Sy Berger and stayed in touch with him. He would also ask for Topps cards and sets each year from Topps. He continued adding to his baseball card collection that he had kept since he was a kid. He would also add autographed baseballs and other memorabilia.



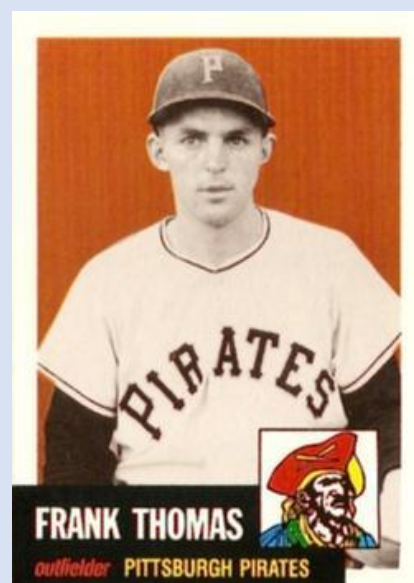
Thomas' 1954 Bowman rookie card, in his prime on the 1957 Topps card and his last regular card in 1965

CARD APPEARANCES

In his first full year in the majors of 1953, Thomas was the centerfielder and the team slugger (following Ralph Kiner's June 4, 1953, trade to the Cubs). You would think that collectors would have been clamoring for his first card. However, Bowman had the rights to Thomas and Topps was dodging litigation with Bowman over signed players. Bowman's 1953 issues were only 224 cards spread over the black and white and color sets. Pittsburgh finished 55 games out of first in 1953 and had a firm grip on last place in the National League for most of the 1950s.

Thomas didn't get his rookie card with Bowman until 1954. Thereafter, though, he got into most of the assorted card issues through 1965. Topps fixed their missed opportunity with Thomas by including him in the 1953 Topps Archive set in 1991. He was happy to appear on cards and he could use lawn furniture, cash or the equivalent. He appeared on Dan-Dee, Red Man, Hires, Jay Publishing, Armour and Salada coins, Exhibit, Post, Jello, Kahn's, team issues and later in Topps, TCMA, Upper Deck and other retro issues.

Topps issued a 1953 archive set in 1991 and included Thomas in the extension cards. He was under contract to Bowman in 1953.



THE MAJORS

He vowed that, if he made the majors, he would always sign autographs for kids at the ballparks. He felt he "owed it to the fans, whether they booed him or clapped."

Thomas was a competitive player, had eight children and seemed to struggle with management most years to try to be paid what he felt he deserved. He spent eight years with the Pirates but then bumped around with six teams for the next eight years. He hit 286 homers, had 962 RBIs and had a .266 lifetime average.

After being released by the Cubs in 1966, Thomas considered playing in Japan, like many others from that era, but he said they wouldn't let him take his family along, and he dropped the idea. With eight kids and no gravy train after his playing years, Thomas had to keep an eye on any money coming in or going out.

AFTER BASEBALL

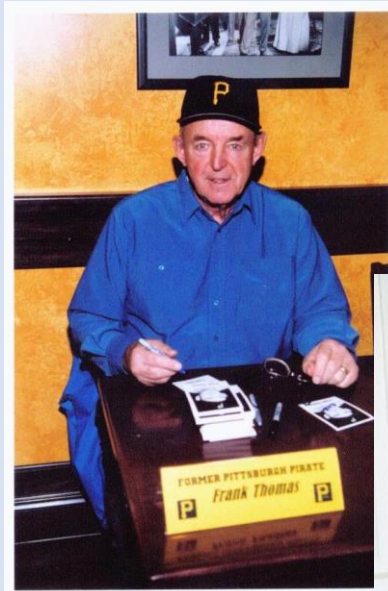
Thomas said he contacted 25 major league teams to look for work in baseball as a scout or coach without any luck. Steelers announcer Joe Tucker gave him a good lead, though, which was the ICM School of Business. He was hired by ICM as a liaison with area high schools. He spent the next 18 years making visits each year to talk to students and faculty at over 300 of the area schools. He felt they appreciated his honest approach.

After retiring in 1984, Thomas continued to be active in charity golf tournaments, old-timers' games and card show appearances. He recalled his first card show as being in New York, where he played from 1962 to 1964 and was remembered for being a slugger on the original Mets. He continued to collect cards, autographs and signed baseballs.

TOPPS COLLECTION, REDO

Thomas stored his card collection under his bed. A house fire in 1992 destroyed the collection as well as about half of his house. However, to his surprise, many collectors, including *SCD* readers, contacted him to help rebuild his collection card by card working off a list of his needs.

He contacted Sy Berger at Topps who helped him pick up some of the more recent sets. He eventually put together complete sets again from 1952 on except for eight 1952 high numbers, which he could rattle off from memory.



Frank Thomas (left) signing autographs at one of the many charity events he supported, photo Anson Whaley



Frank Thomas right being interviewed by KDKA-CBS Radio a charity golf tournament, photo Anson Whaley

COLLECTORS' MEMORIES



Frank Thomas (left) met with TJ Valacak, who was among those who helped Thomas rebuild his collection.

I contacted a few of the people who had been involved in helping Thomas rebuild his collection.

Collector and fellow hobby writer Anson Whaley recalled, "I first met Frank at a charity golf tournament, and when I heard of his want list, I managed to dig up a few cards for him. I mentioned that I was starting to collect autographs a little. It was a very, off-the-cuff remark that you wouldn't expect anyone to really remember. A few weeks after that, there's this large, padded envelope in the mailbox from him that was full of over 200 autographed cuts and index cards of various players across the 1960s and 1970s. That's the kind of guy he was -- overly generous and thoughtful.

"He loved interaction. A short call would turn into a longer one. I never really discovered why he collected -- only that he did. If you knew Frank, you knew you should never say anything unless you actually meant it. I convinced him to get involved with our other big fundraiser -- a sports memorabilia auction where we had some guys come and sign free autographs.

Anytime he was available he'd be there -- waiting long after the autograph period was over and just hanging out with people. He loved just meeting fans and raising money for his charities."

Neal Thomas: "I was able to send him a number of hits to his wantlists. I was not looking for anything in return, but he sent me a number of autographed cards, and we started a correspondence. It ended up with signed cards for my three sons, and an invitation to visit him to try and determine if we were long lost relatives, truly a great guy, with tons of great stories."

Mark Talbot: "I had many interactions over the years. Frank always wrote back with a handwritten note that got harder and harder to read over time, but he continued to send the notes. I recall pulling 1952 high numbers from my collection to send to Frank; he was gracious as usual and sent back some autographs for my collection. Frank wrote me about baseball, of course, but was just as open about family, work, his faith and just about anything we were writing about. I will miss him."

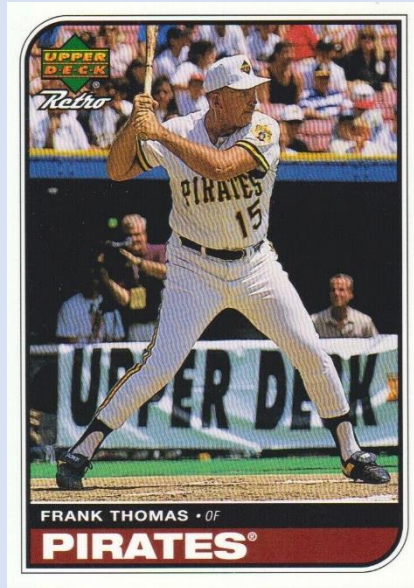
Mike Rich: "I attended the Robert Morris show in Pittsburgh about six years ago. Frank was set up autographing for a donation to a charity. Unfortunately, the show did not promote him being there, and I was able to pull up a chair and have a conversation with him. A true gentleman. He felt it was important to help others, hence his signing for charity. He got nothing for his appearance, and it actually cost him to have someone drive him there. One of the most pleasant autographs I ever received."

TJ Valacak: "My family and I were driving out east to Delaware in 2016. We stopped in the Pittsburgh area for the night and were able to meet Frank for dinner. Frank was such a nice person. We talked about our families a lot. He was interested in hearing my kids talk about their sports and school. He brought autographed cards for the kids and shared many stories of his playing days."

OTHER PLAYERS

During our conversation, Thomas mentioned several teammates who he had stayed in touch with including Dick Groat, Roy Face, Jim Maloney and Hank Foiles. Face had a 18-1 season in 1959, a year after Thomas left the Pirates. Thomas said, "Face didn't nibble away at batters. He figured that he should let the fielders behind him get some work as well." Thomas was aware that he was on several lists of oldest living former major leaguers and joked, "That it is a list you can only go up on, never down." He was photographed with the "other" Frank Thomas, who played from 1990 to 2008, and was amazed at his size.

A 1998 Upper Deck Retro card captured Thomas getting ready to drill the ball in an old-timers' game when he was in his 60s. He could still hit it hard.



YOU'VE GOT MAIL

In 2012, his wife Dolores ("Dodo") died, and shortly thereafter he sold his collection. Due to the pandemic, there weren't too many card show opportunities for Thomas in the last few years, and he no longer drove. He said he donated money he received from autographs and photo sales to Camp Happy Days - Kids Kickin' Cancer and Courageous Kidz. His mailman at his 110-unit retirement complex told him he got more mail each day than the rest of the people in the building combined.

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