

# Arcade cards provided cheap thrills

By George Vrechek



Arcade cards bring back memories of penny arcades. However, the number of people with memories of penny arcades decline each year, and arcade cards don't usually come to mind when you think of valuable cards. However, they can be fun to collect.

## Pennies from players

Arcade cards were inexpensive attractions to coax a few pennies from each "player" starting in the early 1900s. Arcades were frequently associated with amusement parks and were filled with games of chance and card dispensers, designed to continually attract customers and requiring minimal labor to operate and maintain.

J. Frank Meyer was a young man in the printing business in Chicago, who understood the arcade market and set out to fill the needs. By 1910 Meyer took control of the Exhibit Supply Company in Chicago (ESCO). While there were always competitors, ESCO became the number one issuer of arcade cards, which are often just called "exhibits." To understand the cards, it helps to look at the business model and history of ESCO.

## Passing those censors

Most of the ESCO cards were non-sports subjects designed to interest young patrons thinking of romance and amused by fortune or joke cards. For some reason pictures of pretty girls always helped sales. Whether you were selling cigarette packs or arcade cards, you couldn't go too wrong. ESCO sales

literature assured operators that, "Our latest Art Model stereo views never fail to get top money when shown. Every set of views we publish are passed by the New York censors."



*Cards of young ladies were good sellers throughout ESCO's history. Charles Lindberg, Indians, cowboys and airplanes were other subjects.*

### **Keep it cheap**

A key ingredient was to keep the card price affordable. A penny in 1913 had the same purchasing power as a quarter today, not much, but enough to add up to a profit, if ESCO kept the costs down and volume up. Art models might get you two cents!

ESCO had to sell a card for about 4/10ths of one cent to allow the arcade operator enough margin to make money selling cards for a penny or two. ESCO did just that for many years and was profitable producing cards that cost ESCO even less than \$4 per thousand.

ESCO sold card machines, parts and cards. Their machines (collectables now themselves) required large cards with exact specifications, exactly those produced by ESCO. ESCO bought photo rights from photographers, avoided royalties to persons depicted and created their own cards with images or drawings that could be copyrighted. The earliest ESCO copyright date found has been 1919.

### **Sets were tweaked rather than retired**

Amusement parks and arcade operators needed new attractions each year. ESCO kept tweaking the cards to retain good sellers and add in a few new subjects, always staying with the formula of cheap card stock, cheap printing and seldom anything on the reverse. Cards of baseball players and boxers were added to the sets starting in 1921. In the 1930s, four card images were frequently made into one new card. A 1961 ESCO catalog for arcade operators featured 45 sets of cards of which only three were sports sets.

ESCO would not produce a complete lineup of new cards each year. They tweaked and dusted off cards that sold well with a veneer of something new throughout the year and adjusted to customer orders. It was more profitable for everyone that way. A set of cards produced on sheets of 32 might have only a few minor changes from year to year and only to the few cards that were tweaked.

## Variations galore

Printing information, such as Made in USA or Printed in USA, would change, but usually only on the cards altered. The print information helped ESCO figure out when they had last tweaked a card, but it was impossible to figure out when each card was printed. Some cards were issued with no significant changes for 40 years. The same card images might be printed in sepia, dark brown, black and white, two-toned, colorized or something in-between.

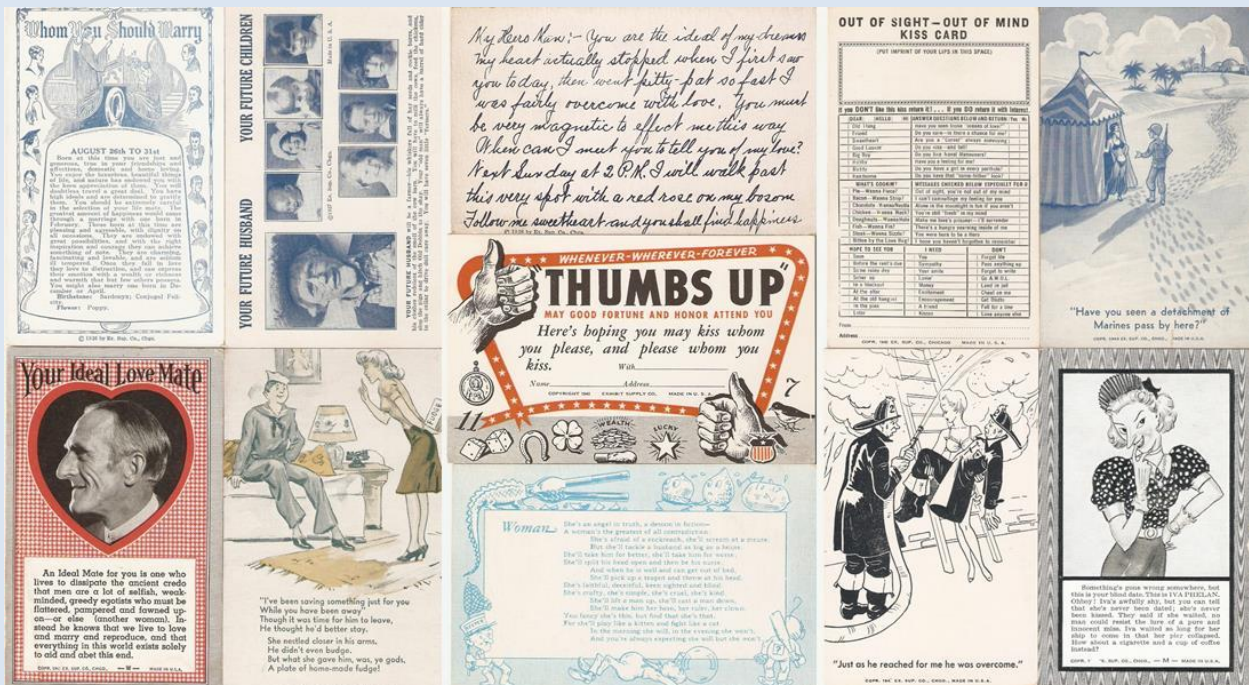
While there were about 400 baseball cards issued between 1939 and 1966, the variations in print info, print location, font size, print colors, salutations, cropping and airbrushing provide at least another 100 variations, and that's if you are not too fussy. The non-sports cards are likely loaded with variations as well.

## ESCO 1900 to 1985

During WWII, ESCO also got into military parts and employed 285 workers in their Chicago plant. Meyer died in 1948, and the arcade division was eventually purchased by long-time plant manager Chester Gore. ESCO outlasted competitors like Mutoscope (known for their pin-up art) and Eastern Exhibit. Cards issued after 1968 were run on white stock rather than the typical gray. The retail price for the cards gradually soared from one cent to two cents to a nickel. However the demand for arcade cards finally petered out in 1979.

Interestingly, arcades with fancy electronic games at fancy prices have survived. There are even modern versions of the profitable digger or claw machines. The only cards around though seem to be used to pay for more games.

Collector/dealer Paul Marchant bought what was left of ESCO and dissolved the company in 1985 after issuing a few more sets of baseball players and reprinting a fortune teller set for Disneyland. Marchant (eBay seller marchantcards) is still selling a few sets printed by ESCO in the 1970s. According to Marchant, "Chester (Gore) basically did whatever he wanted at any time in regards to who was in the set and when it was made." Some unlicensed, unidentified arcade reprints have emerged since then using lighter or darker card stock and/or poorer photo quality.



ESCO used novelty cards for fortunes and off-color humor. Some cards were issued unchanged for 40 years, if they sold well.

### Categories of sets

Cards can be divided into categories such as art models, actors and actresses, cowboys and Indians, fortunes, jokes, sports cars, novelties, airplanes and sports figures. Film stars and athletes printed on sheets of 32 might have a few cards added and subtracted each year. However some novelty sets created by ESCO's art department would go for years with no significant changes. You didn't have to worry about movie stars past their prime or athletes retiring. Set names included Gypsy Queen Card Reader, Palm Fortune, Blind Dates, Your Ideal Love Mate, Future Partner and Family, True Love Letters and New License Bureau. Gore was printing some of these sets for old customers into the 1960s, still showing ESCO copyright dates from the 1920s, according to Marchant.

### Cataloging the sets, an endless endeavor

Even Jefferson Burdick, the Father of Card Collecting, had difficulty organizing all the arcade cards when he started cataloging cards in the late 1930s. Arcade card collectors were still refining Burdick's categorization into the 1990s. From 1989 to 1996 Bob Schulhof (1942-2015) published the *Penny Arcade* newsletter which had 100 subscribers and included articles to further catalog the plethora of issues. Sometimes it was hard to tell if ESCO or a competitor issued a set. A competitor might be taken over by ESCO and the brand of the acquired company maintained.

### Postcard dealers

ESCO cards can be found at postcard shows buried in boxes hauled around by dealers and organized by subject. Sometimes they are nicely segregated into a section called arcade or amusement cards. While ESCO initially produced cards that could be used as postcards in the early 1900s, most of their cards issued after the 1920s had no printing on the back, although in ESCO's final years, they did print some with descriptions on the back.

Postcard collectors look at arcade cards as an offshoot; they are not really postcards. Non-sports card collectors likely do the same since the cards are large, unnumbered and with limited text. The good news about arcade cards is that they were inexpensive to start with and remain so today. They also present a significant challenge to collect sets with variations and with cards only printed for a short time. Non-sports arcade card prices can be \$1 or \$2 per card, sometimes more, occasionally less.

*Movie, radio and recording stars were adjusted to suit the times. Cowboy cards were popular*



It is impossible to describe arcade cards in a brief article, however the images included herein depict what you can buy if you get those pennies together.

George Vrechek is a Chicago collector who bought arcade cards at Riverview Amusement Park in the 1950s. He cut the baseball cards to fit in a box with his 1956 Topps baseball cards. He collects vintage sports cards and has written for Sports Collectors Digest for 30 years. With encouragement from Bill Christensen and Les Davis and the camaraderie found in issues of The Wrapper, he has slowly ventured into the non-sports world. He can be contacted at [vrechek@ameritech.net](mailto:vrechek@ameritech.net) and welcomes any feedback or additional information.

This article appeared in The Wrapper #312, March 24-May 15, 2018. Thanks to Les Davis and The Wrapper for allowing us to reprint George's article here on the OBC site.

A page from ESCO's 1961 catalog for arcade operators

**A FREE SIGN WITH EACH INITIAL ORDER OF A SINGLE CARD SERIES WHEN REQUESTED**  
**ADDITIONAL SIGNS LESS THAN COST ONLY 50¢ EACH**

## HOW TO INCREASE YOUR CARD SALES

To increase your card sales—be sure to keep new clean signs in all your card vending machines—they always attract the players. Combine your selection of picture card series, 2 series in each machine as suggested in illustration of cards. Orders on all fast selling cards placed far in advance will ultimately prevent any unexpected shortage. It's wise to keep an adequate supply of Exhibit Cards on hand at all times. The enormous selection and consistent new releases of Exhibit Cards is an essential contributing factor to prove a safe investment for steady profits from all your Exhibit Card Vending Machines.

### ATTRACTIVE DISPLAY SIGNS ARE YOUR SALESMEN



**NOTICE! The machines pictured below are no longer available — they are shown only to help identify your model card vender when ordering display signs. Please specify 1c, 2c, 5c or 2 for 5c sellers.**



**TYPE No. 1 SPEEDOMATIC**  
 Full Transparent Sign. Size: 12½" x 24¾". Machine Size: 3'11" High, 18¾" wide, 10½" deep.



**TYPE No. 2 STREAMLINE and 1951 Silent Salesman**  
 Transparent top sign 12½" x 18¾". Lower Sign cardboard 8½" x 12½". Machine Size: 6'4" high, 21" wide, 12" deep.



**TYPE No. 3 MODEL "D"**  
 Full Cardboard Sign 12½" x 26¾". Machine Size: 6' high, 20" wide, 11" deep.



**TYPE No. 4 DELUXE MODEL**  
 Two Cardboard Signs. Top Sign, 12½" x 18¾". Lower Sign, 8½" x 12½". Machine Size: 38" high, 17" wide, 8" deep.



**TYPE No. 5 MODEL "E"**  
 Two Cardboard Signs. Top Sign, 12" x 15". Lower Sign, 8" x 12". Machine Size: 30" high, 18" wide, 11" deep.



**TYPE No. 6 "IDEAL" MODEL and 2c Silent Salesman, Jr.**  
 Cardboard Sign. Size: 6½" x 6¾". Free upon request. Machine Size: 11" high, 9" wide, 9" deep.

We maintain a special Art Department to provide a full supply of clean attractive display signs for immediate shipment. All display signs with illustrations are expertly hand colored. Signs for the light-up Speedomatic and Streamline Card Venders are printed on a special transparent paper. Previous model venders, "D", "E" and DeLuxe are printed on cardboard and also hand colored. When ordering a "DeLuxe size" sign, specify either "cardboard" or "transparent". Please use our new Order Form.