Boston’s Goudey Gum Co. and

the Silver Age of Baseball Cards

52 Everett Street, Allston, Massachusetts; an address which, when typed into Google Maps Street View shows an aging building with boarded up first floor windows. This address is not listed in any register of historic places; however, it is the site of a building that reestablished a cherished all-American childhood hobby that has now turned into a multimillion dollar industry that continues to thrive to this day. 52 Everett Street, from 1924 until the company ended operations in 1962, housed Goudey Gum Company. The words “Goudey Gum Co.” can now be found on pieces of cardboard measuring only 2 3/8" by 2 7/8" but worth over thousands of dollars. Goudey Gum is responsible for establishing what would become known as the Silver Age of baseball cards, a renaissance of the hobby, and for doing so in a way revolutionized the cards and reinvigorated a pastime.

The appearance of athletes on cardboard had long been a staple of the tobacco industry since the late 1880s. Originally the cardboard was used as pack stiffeners to protect the main product, the cigarettes, from bending and breaking. Companies, such as Allen & Ginter and Goodwin & Co. had all quickly learned that by placing images on might attract additional customers to purchase their brand of cigarettes. The production of baseball cards cumulated in 1909 when 18 brands of cigarette companies produced a baseball player exclusive series totaling 524 different players, setting the record for largest set for decades to come. After the final printing of the set in 1911 several American companies had merged and foreign companies (mainly Turkish) that entered the market began to falter and fail. As competition decreased the tobacco firms decided to save some money and discontinue the increasingly costly premium that was the baseball card.

Shortly thereafter America’s attention was focused on the war effort in Europe. Even if the tobacco industry wanted to produce baseball cards, due to the paper and printing rationings for the war, the companies could not. After the war and into the “Roaring Twenties” despite a revival in baseball’s popularity the production of baseball cards did not pick up where it left off. However, there are two smaller but notable sets produced during the twenties. Into the 1930s, two decades since the fabled, monstrous “T206” set of 1909-1911, baseball cards could have slipped into oblivion. The neat little ‘carte de visite’ French for “photographs mounted on cardboard”, could have been the ephemera of a bygone era were it not for the marketing minds working at a few key companies.

At age 70, historians believe that company founder Enos Goudey sold the company to one of his relatives, yet Enos stayed on with the company as a consultant until his death in 1946. At the height of the Great Depression in 1933 gum producer Goudey along with fellow Boston gum manufacturer DeLong entered the baseball card industry. U.S. Caramel, another Boston candy producer, was the premier card maker of the 1920s and had proven that including baseball cards with their product was a successful sales strategy. U.S. Caramel had produced only a token set of 32 cards for 1933, but collectors need not worry for the Silver Age of baseball cards was about to begin.

The two Boston gum manufacturers took two different approaches to the idea of how baseball players should be depicted on the card. Delong produced a set of 24 cards and used an action black and white photograph shot with a colorful generic stadium background as the design for the front. The Delong cards, although shorter than modern cards, looked more rectangular than the Delong and Goudey square-like cards. The square-ish card dimensions are not the only stylistic idea Goudey borrowed from U.S. Caramel; Goudey’s iconic player color images and bright, colorful background are what made Goudey a highly desired and collectable set. Delong did not make any more baseball cards after 1933, the market had spoken and Goudey was the winner.

The Goudey set had three key aspects that made it great in the eyes of collectors. Firstly, the color it was bright and eye-catching while the pictures were attractive and fitting for the style. Secondly, the card’s construction, the card is bigger than the tobacco cards that came before them but still small enough to be able to fit conveniently in places where young collectors might place them such as pockets. In addition the card was produced on one of the thickest stocks yet, a stock size still used by baseball cards today. However, the greatest factor in making Goudey the more popular set was the checklist size. The checklist boasted 239 cards, including over 40 Hall of Fame players, more Hall of Fame players than players in Delong’s entire set. The set size at the time was second only to legendary T206 set, not to be surpassed until the major baseball card companies opened their doors.

Goudey was a company that cared about their customers and put thought into the artfully created cards. Every card Goudey produced had an anecdote lasting few sentences or more that outlined the player’s career. For some players Goudey went as far as to include the player’s birthday, height and the player’s preferred batting and fielding hand. Goudey was the first set to have such an exhaustive player biography on the back. The only biographical data the renowned T206 set had was the player’s last name and team’s location and league. Although Goudey was not the first to have a few words of the player’s career on the back, it was one of the first (and definitely the largest) to have the biography in conjunction with other aspects that collectors loved. These over aspects were card numbers simple but innovative little idea that allowed collectors to better their collection and know which cards they did possess and which cards were eluding their set.

The timing of the Goudey’s production also worked to its advantage. In 1933 stadium attendance was at the lowest any of the players could remember, not a single game sold out. The Goudey Gum Company’s flagship brand Big League Chewing Gum (no relation to the widespread Big League Chew gum produced today by Wrigley) cost only one cent. The gum and cards were a way for fans to connect to baseball when they could not afford to go to games. In 1932 (without baseball cards) total sales were $335,000, the next year with the addition of baseball cards totals sales exploded to $1.5 million in the absolute worst economy in American history. Original Goudey collector Norm Brauer places a large amount of Goudey’s success on the price point, a penny or two tops is what a child could spend. “A nickel”, Brauer said, “was virtually unheard of.”

An additional business idea Goudey would change in the industry was redemptions. It as a common practice for the gum and other candy producers to include promotions, such as offering five wrappers for an oversized photograph as a redemption. The redemptions would be sent in by mail, yet Goudey change that. Instead of mailing them in which would include the cost of postage for both ways Goudey decided to offer the redemptions in store. In addition to the postage savings, by having the customers need to return to the store it increased the likelihood they would make another purchase. Goudey was the industry leader that baseball cards needed to resurrect interest in the hobby and promote cards into a pastime.

The Goudey factory in Allston literally manufactured history, producing the tales of famous baseball players like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Jimmie Foxx as their career continued to rewrite baseball history. Goudey was able to do this in a way that was accessible for children to enjoy even with the Great Depression in full swing. Baseball cards were easy for children to collect, share and trade with their friends when many were often too poor to do much else. In the worst year, at least economically, for America Goudey was able take America’s pastime and glorify life in America.

The Goudey brand, after effectively being forced to close due to rationing in World War Two never reached the same level of success it had enjoyed before the war. Much stiffer post-war competition from Bowman (founded 1939, baseball card producer starting in 1948), Topps (founded 1938, baseball card producer starting in 1952) and Wrigley (The major gum producer of today) impacted Goudey’s revenue. Bowman Gum Company is the first company to produce exclusively baseball cards. Topps is the only Major League Baseball authorized baseball card producer today. For a few years in the late 2000s Upper Deck, Topps’ largest competitor, revived the Goudey brand and produced a couple of sets under that name. A 1933 Goudey Napoleon Lajoie (R319 #106) once sold at auction at the time as the second most expensive baseball card, for $92,500. The 1933 Goudey Babe Ruth (R319 #181) is likely the third most classic card behind only the multimillion 1909 T206 Honus Wagner and the 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle ‘rookie card’ (#311).

Today, the price of a single pack of baseball cards ranges from $2 to over $200. The total number of baseball card collectors is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands or more. Baseball card collecting is an all-American pastime forever fostering a love of the game in children. However, many children learned even more math and statistics from the information on the back; even some American history is also told. Children could track history as expansion teams joined the MLB, in line with the nation’s growth or as the all Anglo-American teams took on African-American players to the stars of today often from the Caribbean or Japan in the struggle for race equality. When the entrepreneurial Enos Goudey moved to Massachusetts from Canada, he recognized America as a place where fortunes could be made if one worked hard enough. Goudey’s long since boarded up factory in Allston is responsible for reviving, at the time what was a small scale childhood hobby, and turning it into one of the largest and most American of pastimes and churning out gum and history along the way.

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