Got a Fag Card, Mister?

by FRED BASON

It's now over ten years since little boys and girls asked us for cigarette cards. Yet in the 1930s thousands upon thousands of people in all classes were cartophiliasts. This is the posh word for collectors of cards. It comes from the Greek *khartes philos*—a lover of cards, or rather, in this case, papyri leaves. Stamp-collectors get hoity-toity over Philately; so we have Cartophily. Fair's fair. Today there are still several thousand keen collectors, but with no new stock the numbers diminish each year.

Early in 1938 I wrote the very first book on this hobby. It was called *The Cigarette Card Collector's Handbook and Guide*. It was published at one shilling. It is now a collector's item, and I only possess one copy (not for sale). I started the hobby in 1920, when an uncle gave me 500 cards of various series that he'd collected in World War One. When World War Two began I owned 2,000,000 cards. Today I doubt if I have 50,000. In less than four minutes in 1940 one of Hitler's fire bombs made a huge gap in my collection. As the flames went up my passion for the hobby burnt itself out with them. From that day onwards I never purchased another card.

Perhaps you don't realize that cards have been in existence since 1880. I doubt if anyone will really know for sure how many sets were issued, for every week fresh discoveries are made. Some sets are still worth sixpence, some six pounds. In the early 1930s I was one of four dealers in cards, and we all had our own staffs, our catalogues, and at least 40,000 collectors to share amongst us.

It started like this. . . . The earliest cigarettes were packed in fragile paper packets. It was noticed after a time that the cigarettes got damaged in transport, so a piece of cardboard was placed inside the packet to stiffen it, and to protect the fags. This was at first a plain piece of pasteboard. In the year 1880 there was a Presidential election in America and a series of four cards of the rival candidates was issued. Where better to put them than into packets of cigarettes, as 'stiffeners'? This was done by a tobacco firm named Thomas.
H. Hall. So began the hobby of cartophily. In 1882 another firm named James issued a series of cards with a little coloured boy holding tobacco leaves, and, at the base, 'James Crop 1882.' The boy's trousers had a different colour on each of the set of six cards.

The words 'stiffeners' had from the very earliest times been used in the tobacco trade for cards, and still is.

Mark you, the idea of picture cards was new only to cigarettes in 1880, for they had been packed with trade commodities like soap, coffee, and patent medicines before them. Trade cards are quite another hobby, and a nice one. Another firm worth a mention is Kinney, which was famous for its pretty girl cards. But it was Duke's who started the real vogue when they issued nine albums of reproductions of the complete sets so that the customers could see what the whole series looked like. It was the best of all sales talk. Duke made a fortune. Duke University, endowed with over 78,000,000 dollars, is one of the by-products of cigarette pioneering in America. Amongst the pioneers we must also mention Allen and Ginter, who issued 44 sets, and 25 special albums to put them in, prior to 1891, and many more sets after that date. By 1888 at least seven firms in America were issuing series.

I don't believe there is a man in the whole world who can say with proof and authority which was the first English set. We know that in 1886 Messrs. Wills were issuing trade cards, roughly 156 by 103 millimeters in size. They had views of buildings on one side and adverts for Wills' brands of tobacco on the reverse. They were not stiffeners, but trade cards, as they were all the same and were intended for display on counters. By 1888 other firms were issuing cigarette trade cards in England. Around 1888 Wills issued a series of reproductions of their packet covers—hardly what we call cigarette cards, but much prized today by cartophiliasts. I have seen an 1888 American card with an advert for an English brand of cigarettes on the back, done with a rubber stamp. Obviously a firm bought cards from America with plain backs and stamped their own advertisement upon them. Ogdens was a pioneer firm for using American cards in this method, and did much around 1900 to make us card-conscious in England. Certain it is, however, Hall, Allen and Ginter, Kinney and Mayor started issuing real fag cards before anyone in Britain.

I think it is as well to record that the first maker of cigarettes in England was a man named Gloag, and he lived and had his firm in Walworth, where the author of this record was born and has lived all
his life. Perhaps that's why I became a pioneer dealer in cigarette cards. But Gloag never issued picture cards with his cigarettes.

Now for a little about the cash values of cards. I am going to list a few rare sets that are comparable in the world of cartophilph to the 'penny blacks' of the stamp collectors. In actual cash, in the year 1952, these sets are all worth over three pounds a set, in clean and sound condition.

*Ogden's* 'Lady Cricket and Football Teams.'
*T. E. Yeoman's* 'Beautiful Women.'
*Player's* 'A Gallery of Beauty' (see illustration).
*Player's* 'Castles and Abbeys' (20 to a set).
*Faulkner's* 'Puzzle Cards.'
*Muraus* 'World's Distinguished Personages' (unknown how many complete a set).
*Taddy's* 'Natives of the World.'
*Salmon and Gluckstein's* 'Heroes of the Transvaal War' (40 to set).
*South Wales Tobacco Co.'s* 'Views of London' (25 to the set).
*Wills'* 'Cricketers' (of 1896). The 'Cricketers' of 1901 are only worth about one pound for a set, but the issue of 1896 would be a bargain at three pounds a set of 50.
*Couden's* 'British Beauty Spots' (60 to the set. In 30 years of collecting I have never seen or heard of a complete set).
*Adkin's* 'Soldiers of the Queen.'

One can add, of course, the many sets that were printed in England for export to China and places Far East around 1905, and, of course, many dozens of early American cards of the 1888 vintage. But what would be the use? It's unlikely that you have them stored in your attic, along with the aspidistra. The sets I have listed above are gems that cartophilists all over the world want and will buy for good cash. Personally, I'd rather have those thirteen sets than fifty pounds. But there are thousands of modern sets that are only worth from one to fifty shillings a set in mint condition.

Don't think that only U.S.A. and Britain packed cards. They were issued in practically every country—the sauciest from Cuba and France, the prettiest from America, the most curious in Java.

Every time in the past twenty years I have written articles on cards for magazines I have been offered hundreds of Ogden's Guinea Gold and Tab cards. Now, although they were issued around 1901, there are still thousands of them about. But so far as is known there is only one complete set in existence, for you require over 6,000 different cards to make one set. Oddments are merely curiosities, and worth no more than a penny each. But I would say that a set would realize all of a thousand pounds.

In London there are two excellent clubs solely devoted to my hobby; the Cartophilic Society and the Cameric Club. The former meets at Caxton Hall, Westminster, at regular intervals throughout the year, and anyone interested in cards is very welcome. Both clubs hold auction sales where you can buy sets for a few pence or a few pounds. The reason for the few pence is that most of the members of both clubs are advanced collectors and, already have the common issues of the 1930 vintage. If you took along a clean set of 16 cards entitled 'The British Royal Family,' which were issued by firms named Charlesworth and Austin, and W. Faulkner, as well as four other firms, you would probably be astounded and delighted at the price they would realize under the hammer. In 1940 I saw a man pay eight pounds for these 16 cards.

We who love cards have had to withstand superior smiles from stamp collectors for many years. Yet you will not find anywhere else such accurate and concise information, in such a small space, and upon every subject under the sun. Just as errors and curiosities creep into stamps and first editions of books, so, of course, do they creep into cigarette cards, causing some extraordinary freak valuations. But when you think of the hundreds of millions of cards that have been printed it is amazing how few cards were printed with incorrect information or the picture wrong in some manner of detail. In collecting for over 30 years I have only discovered 90 error cards.

Probably the most famous card collector of today is King Farouk. He is also the most famous collector of matchbox labels. My last ambition in the world of cards is to exchange cigarette cards of the finest vintage with King Farouk.

I have sold cards to film stars and to dustmen; and to all it's the same price—ten shillings and sixpence for a nice mixed collection of over one hundred, all clean, and all different. I shall never change that price. As I look at my collection I recall some funny little trips I've had. I remember going to Cadiz in a little ship from Casablanca. A man was taking over food and cheap quality shoes, and I've an idea that he took over naughty things like guns as well. The Civil War was on, and the folks were not particularly civil when I went around asking for cigarette cards. They thought I was crackers, or that it was not quite 'the thing' to gather cigarette cards when folks were starving, sweating and dying. But it was not my blooming war, and I was offer-
ing good, high, and clean money for cards. In the four days I got about 250 genuine Spanish cards. Also I nearly got my little head knocked off for asking Ernest Hemingway if he’d gotta fag card. But I was in earnest.

I am a born collector. I do not for one moment regret it. I have collected practically everything but a wife (and, please, I am not in any way a sissy or a freak; all I am is a little particular. Only five women have come into my life. Two were utter—well, I won’t say it! I wrote about one in last year’s Saturday Book. The other robbed me and gave it to her lover. Another woman got religious mania and is now no use to anyone, not even herself.

Cigarette cards found me the woman who was the one joy of my life up to now. (Save for my very loyal and loving Lizzie, who, in case you are interested, happens to be a grandmother three times over, but has been my faithful landlady for 19 wonderful years.) The ‘joy’ was a German girl named Nalda. She was five feet seven, with golden hair, blue eyes, strong legs, and able to say ‘Yes’ and mean it.

It so happened that I went over to Germany about two weeks before the war with two purposes in mind. I wanted to swap cards with Hitler, and also invest my little capital in German cards before our boys went over and bombed both the cards and the cities to ashes. Would they take good English pound notes for good German cards? I got about a thousand. It was by no means enough. It would not cover my fares. I had very soon found how hopeless it was to try to exchange cards with Hitler. Suddenly I recalled a lad called Paul whom I had befriended on the boat going over. He’d given me his card. I sought him out. He was a bank clerk. It was impossible for him to travel through Germany with me as my interpreter, but he introduced me to his sister and he explained what I needed. Bless his human heart! It was all Sir Garnet from the word go.

Had the ruddy war held off, say, six months instead of a few hours when we parted I would have brought her home and married her. We travelled from Hamburg to Berlin, with many stops on the way. She did all the business, and I paid the bills. It was all summer. We were very much in love, and knew it—and cared not who knew it. Her English was not much, but just enough.

I brought back many thousands of top-grade cards from Germany, and the first German incendiary bomb that fell in my road fell upon my house and destroyed the lot of them. (And I never got fourpence compensation.) As I saw those cards ruined, my heart went out of the hobby. From that day onwards I never again bought cigarette cards for cash. All that I do now is exchange them for anything collectable. At the moment I am exchanging American novels . . . one good novel for 50 clean cards . . . 20 clean stamps for 30 clean cards . . . don’t matter which way round. It all leads to international good will and friendliness. That’s the good point about hobbies. You can’t do it if you collect blondes.

Yes, I have collected almost everything except a wife. Right at this moment, friends, I estimate that I own 15,000 postage stamps, 11,179 first-class autographs of notable folks, 600 top-grade matchbox labels, 400 foreign coins, 3,000 autographed photographs of famous stars of screen, stage and radio; a lovely collection of rare Christmas cards of the 1880 period, a couple of charming musical boxes, four perfect examples of ships in bottles, 2,000 pretty good books, many of which are autographed by their authors, several dozen odd volumes of the Saturday Book, so that anyone who lacks a volume to make their set of 12 complete has but to write to me and he or she gets it . . . at a price. Add to these some faded lilies given personally to me by Pavlova—and her ballet shoes. Add some 40,000 picture postcards, none of them dirty.

Looking at my cigarette cards I can recall high-class suppers with high-class company, paid for by me solely on the proceeds of the sale of a few sets of cards. I was quite a kid when I sent a set of clean cards to Albert, King of the Belgians, in exchange for his autograph. (Yes, I had the cheek of the devil even in those young days.) I will not send a set to King Farouk, as I already have his autograph. I swapped it for a signed photo of Jack Dempsey. Another interesting swap I made was the signature of Rouse, who was hung for murder. I mistook him for a famous organiser and got it about a year before he committed murder. There is in U.S.A. a man who only collects the autographs of murderers. Well, I did not want such a nasty signature, so I made a swap and got Tosti, who wrote ‘Good-bye.’

And now I’d better say ‘Good-bye’ myself. I’ve enjoyed going back to my old hobby, and thinking of all the friends it made. Maybe if you added together all the fag cards I’ve ever had they couldn’t buy a Van Dyck or a First Folio. But they’ve been worth much more to me. I don’t envy a soul in the world. I don’t want to be anyone else but Yours Sincerely, Fred Bason. I now wear a tidy ribby instead of me old cloth cap, since Fred Bason’s Second Diary, edited by L. A. G. Strong, is now published, and I’m told I’ve ‘arrived’ (I don’t know where). But the address is still the same: 152 Westmoreland Road, Walworth, London, S.E.17.