

1933 Goudey

Spectacular full-color paintings with vivid backgrounds, plus four Babe Ruths!

By T.S. O'Connell

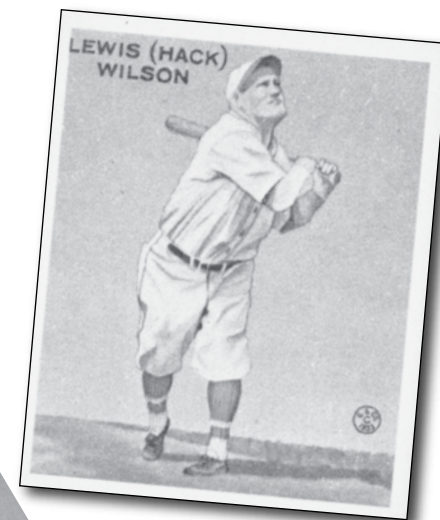
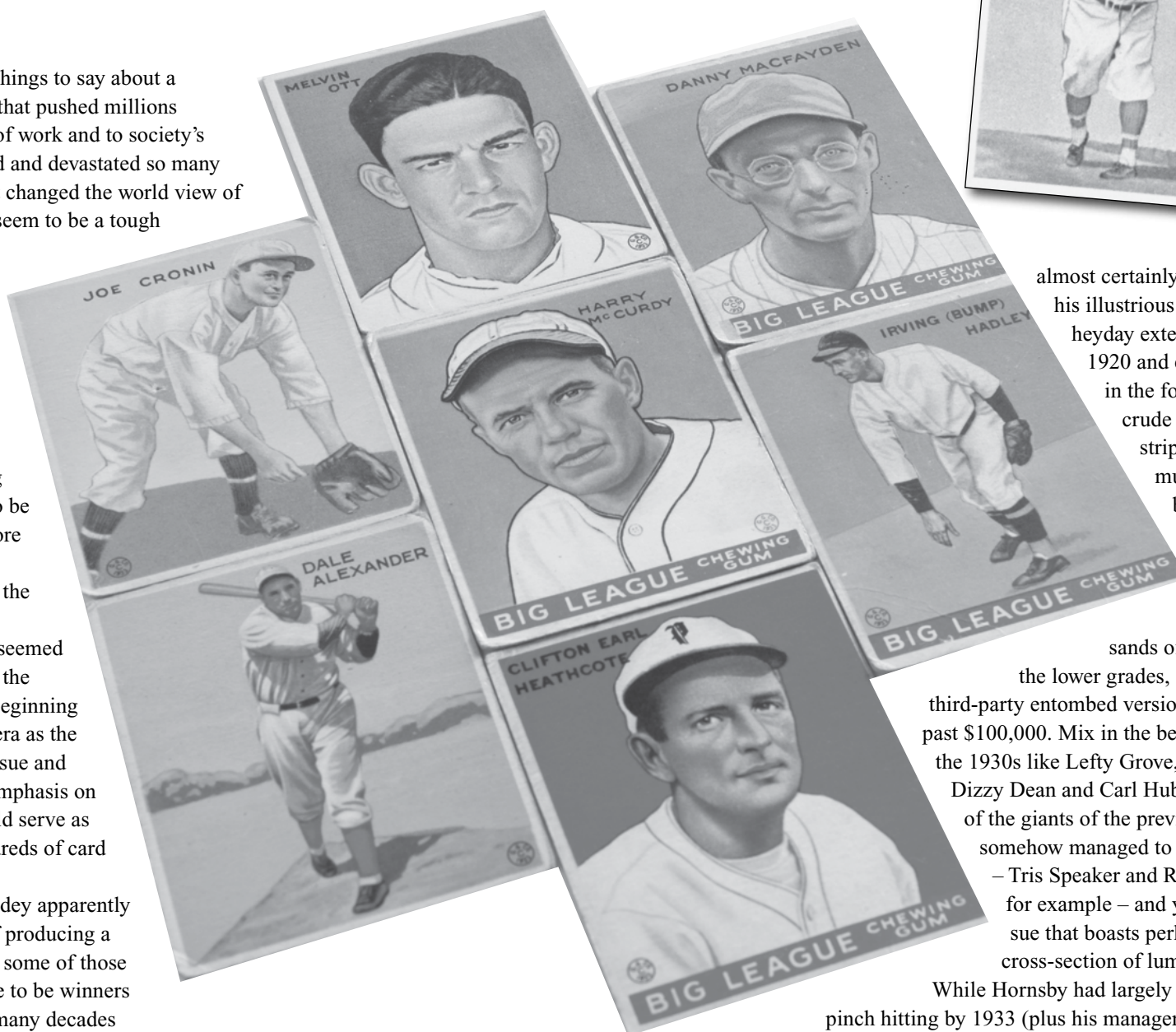
Trying to find nice things to say about a global depression that pushed millions of Americans out of work and to society's fringes and beyond and devastated so many in such stark fashion that it changed the world view of a whole generation would seem to be a tough chore. So we'll try anyway.

Smack dab in the middle of the Great Depression, the Goudey Gum Co. of Boston, Mass., produced its first sports card issue of 239 baseball players. They called their gum "Big League Chewing Gum" and the set proved to be a hit upon release and – more germane to our purposes – a half century later when the sports card hobby took off.

Though it may not have seemed it at the time, the arrival of the Goudey issue marked the beginning of the modern sports card era as the first modern bubble gum issue and the design and concerted emphasis on colorful presentations would serve as lynchpins for literally hundreds of card sets to come.

From the beginning, Goudey apparently understood the elements of producing a popular set for the kiddies; some of those same elements would prove to be winners for well-heeled collectors many decades later, but that presumably wasn't what the designers were going for in 1933.

They included four Babe Ruths, for one thing, and two Lou Gehrigs for another. The popularity of the two Yankee stars was perfectly timed for Goudey, since Ruth was in decline and would be gone from New York by 1935. The Ruth cards are



almost certainly the best cards of his illustrious career, since his heyday extended through the 1920 and early 1930s, and in the former decade the crude but collectible strip cards represented much of his card-board legacy from the period.

The 1933 Goudey Ruths command thousands of dollars even in the lower grades, and the high-end, third-party entombed versions can push well past \$100,000. Mix in the bevy of stars from the 1930s like Lefty Grove, Jimmie Foxx, Dizzy Dean and Carl Hubbell with some of the giants of the previous decade who somehow managed to sneak into the set – Tris Speaker and Rogers Hornsby, for example – and you have a card issue that boasts perhaps the broadest cross-section of luminaries ever.

While Hornsby had largely been reduced to pinch hitting by 1933 (plus his managerial duties, for which he was reportedly ill suited), Speaker wasn't anywhere to be found at the MLB level, but there he is in a nifty card.

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A lot of odd people showed up in this issue – Speaker, Hornsby, or superspy Moe Berg – but the most famous was the one who turned up a year later

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It even has a card of the most famous spy to ever put on shinguards, the ultimate Renaissance Man Moe Berg, the brainy Washington Senators catcher. Berg's No. 158 card points out that he was a graduate of Princeton and studied law at Columbia; he would tour Japan as part of baseball's historic venture there in 1934, and that familiarity and his language skills ultimately sent him back to the Far East years later on clandestine assignments for Uncle Sam as war loomed.

But perhaps the oddest thing they engineered was to reach back in time a bit and produce a card of a player who had long been retired by 1933: Nap Lajoie.

For serious hobbyists, this is practically the Rosetta Stone of the card-collecting world. How cool would it be to have a transcript of what took place when Goudey officials decided to issue 239 cards that year instead of the 240 that was promised to youngsters on the back of the card!

Hobby lore has it that the Goudey guys did this on purpose to have the youngsters chasing a card that didn't exist. If so, it's a pretty depressing business practice, coming as it did in the middle of the Depression, and what with Goudey cards being sold in penny packs of one card each. That sounds cheap in 2009, but it wasn't in 1933. Heck, Topps was still selling penny packs into the 1950s when a shiny penny didn't go nearly as far.

And, of course, the Lajoie card wasn't even issued in 1933: one of the most famous uncut sheets in the hobby reveals that the No. 106 Lajoie card ostensibly from 1933 Goudey was actually printed on a 1934 sheet. The story goes that youngsters wrote in to the company complaining about the missing No. 106 that Goudey would send out the cards by mail. Unlike the Honus Wagner card, where experts are willing to speculate that perhaps five or six dozen are known to exist, you don't hear a lot of numbers, speculative or otherwise, tossed around about the number of Lajoies out there, but it's tough enough that for most collectors it's not technically necessary to own one in order to complete the set.

And what about completing the set? No less of an authority than Wayne Varner of Shoebox Cards in Harmony, Pa., weighs in on the topic with a familiarity dating back to the 1970s even before the hobby became trendy. "You still see people working on completing 1933 Goudey sets," said the veteran dealer, who with Bill Zimpleman has attended shows across the country and handled literally thousands of Goudeys over



three-plus decades.

"These are really pretty cards, and it's the most popular set of the era, with the four Ruth cards and the two Gehrigs," he continued. "The 1934s are not as attractive to me," he added, noting that despite that observation, he tends to see a lot more of the 1933 Goudeys than he does of 1934.

"The 1934s seem to be much scarcer than the 1933s. I still don't see that many of the 1934s," Varner said.

The 1933 Goudeys that they encounter often display the kind of honest wear that used to be a hobby hallmark before things got fussy in the 1980s. "If we see Goudeys in VG-EX, that's still a pretty decent set," Varner explained, noting that the soft, thick cardboard seems to attract dirt, along with fostering a tendency for the corners to round more than a little bit. "I would say that 95 percent of the cards we see are VG or VG-EX or worse."

If those sound like discouraging words, they aren't. It's still one of the great modern issues. The 1933 Goudey issue is so popular with collectors that it has been extensively reprinted over the last 30 years, both in whole and in parts. The Goudey Gum Co. went out of business in 1962, but the set was reprinted within the hobby as a complete set, plus any number of the more prominent cards were reproduced by a number of outlets, including Dover Publishing, which produced cool punch-out books in the 1970s-80s that gave the hobby wide exposure at a critical time in its growth.

Having the reprints available is nice for collectors who otherwise couldn't even undertake putting together a lower-grade set, and the reprints are so dramatically different from the originals that it shouldn't be a concern about misrepresentation, but the Internet makes all kind of cowboy stuff possible. And, of course, if it's possible,

it happens. For the record, the reprints are printed on much, much thinner and grayer card stock, often with a glossy front surface that's nowhere to be found on a real Goudey.

Still, it's a lot more fun to have the real thing, but they just won't be as shiny or with the same sharp corners. ♦

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The launch of recycling

The hobby has long taken note of the charming yet pervasive element of recycling, particularly Topps, which reused photographs shamelessly in the 1950s, and then turned that inclination toward its various designs many decades later. Still, a nod goes to the Goudey folks, who didn't invent the concept but used it to good effect in taking many of the paintings from the 1933 set and reusing them in other formats – think the Four-in-One 1935 issue – for a number of other Goudey issues in the decade.