Across My Desk
By Brian Butko, editor

One of the best parts of my job is the variety of neat things that come my direction. Just today, a letter arrived which began, “I’ve got an old water heater….”! I route most of these leads to the folks in our Museum Division or Library & Archives, but sometimes staff members send things my way.

And so a few months ago, Naomi Horner in Library & Archives forwarded the research they’d done on a Pittsburgh cigar company. Not too out of the ordinary, but the impetus behind it was someone had a Hans “Honus” Wagner baseball card from that firm. If you’ve heard of the sky-high prices commanded by another rare Wagner card, also produced by a tobacco company, you see why this quest was so important.

Soon I was in constant touch via e-mail with Lanny Sherer, who is positive the Wagner card he found at a flea market is genuine. But therein lies his dilemma: if you’ve got something extremely rare, what do you compare it to? If it’s so precious as to be undocumented, how do you prove its legitimacy?

Lanny wouldn’t let go of his card to have it checked, but he sent microscopic level scans to experts around the world. In the middle of all this, an identical card surfaced on eBay. Bob Batz from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette got involved, and soon, Dawnne Tkach brought that card to the History Center.

The image appeared to be authentic, as did the cardboard. But I’m no expert: it could be century-old printing, or the output from a modern color photocopier. In a second article, that’s just what Batz’s consultants determined. A repro sign maker even claimed he’d created the image a few years ago, so this had to be a copy of his work. Meanwhile, Lanny keeps forwarding e-mails from his experts, people who know more than you can imagine about baseball, lithography, and cigar history. All say his card is real — and very valuable.

This promises to go on for a while. But the real story — and we’re faced with it all the time in the history field — is what is provable? In researching my books, old postcards repeatedly have led me to unshakable conclusions … only to find an old ad or photo that reveals the “real” truth. When can we be sure that we’ve got all the facts? And now that our postmodern economy has made a big business out of nostalgia, especially sports memorabilia, the distinctions are even more blurred. Companies regularly manipulate history to suit their most recent ad campaigns.

Heady stuff for a $4 baseball card. And a fun journey that began with some cigar company research that came across my desk.

Didja know?
A few quick facts from History Center exhibits.

The History Center occupies the former warehouse of the Chautauqua Lake Ice Company. That company’s original building, on the same site, was only six years old when an explosion and fire destroyed it in 1898.

Before steel manufacturing dominated the region, glass was its leading industry. In 1880, Pittsburgh boasted 51 glass factories, one-fourth the nation’s total; surrounding counties had another 10 plants.

When the Beatles arrived for their 1964 concert, 4,000 fans were waiting at Greater Pittsburgh Airport. The 12,600 attending the concert was said to be the city’s biggest indoor paid audience at the time.