

# How a Baseball Card Reached the Big Leagues

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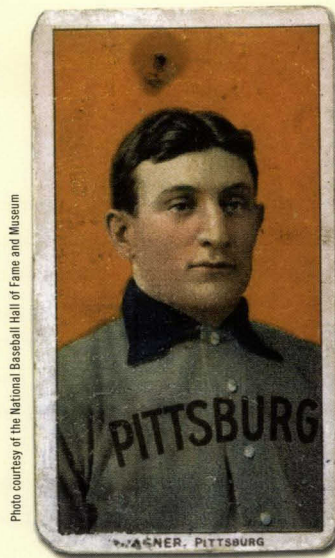


Photo courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

One of the famous and valuable T206 cards. A professionally graded example (PSA 8, near-mint to mint) sold on eBay in 2000 for a record \$1.1 million plus a 15 percent buyer's premium.

**O**n July 17, 2000, a baseball card sold at auction for \$1.265 million. The small card, produced in 1909, pictured Pittsburgh Pirate Honus Wagner. This particular card, one of at most 60 known to exist, has a fabled history, first surfacing in the hobby in 1985 and exchanging hands at ever-increasing sale prices to various collectors, including hockey great Wayne Gretzky. Wal-Mart exhibited it in a nationwide promotional tour in 1995 after which the card was given away and subsequently resold. The card's history tells intriguing stories about the history of sports celebrity, tobacco advertising, and the birth of the trading card and sports memorabilia industry. The subject of the mystique is of course Wagner, a Pittsburgh native, beloved Pirate favorite, and one of the best to ever play the game.



Johanes Peter Wagner was born the fourth of six surviving siblings to German immigrants on February 24, 1874, in Chartiers (later Carnegie), Pa. At a young age, John (or Hans or Honus, as his family called him) and his brothers enjoyed baseball. Al (or “Butts”) even played in the majors in 1898, but Honus wanted to be a barber like his older brother Charley.

Some of the first baseball cards were created in 1887 by Goodwin and Company to advertise Old Judge Cigarettes. Wagner was then still mining coal and occasionally working in a steel mill. In the late 1800s, trade cards were used to advertise a wide variety of business ventures, from portrait studios to tobacco to men’s clothing stores. Advances in photography and printing made pictures and illustrations more available. Photographs and prints had previously been rare and expensive, but now families were able to afford pictures to hang in their homes and family portrait albums became treasured heirlooms. The visual nature of advertising included the growing popularity of picture postcards, which the U.S. Postal Service first permitted to be mailed in 1898.

Wagner was picked up by the Louisville Colonels in 1897 to begin his major league career. In 1900, team owner Barney Dreyfuss arranged the purchase of a large minority share in the Pittsburgh franchise and moved 14 of his Colonels here, including Wagner and player/manager Fred Clarke. The Pirates appeared in two World Series during Wagner’s career, losing 5 games to 4 in the 1903 World Series against the Boston Pilgrims but winning 4 games to 3 in 1909 against the Detroit Tigers. The 1909 series was a classic duel featuring the two best players in the game at the time, Wagner and Ty Cobb. The gritty Cobb defiantly conceded afterwards, “The goddamned Dutchman is the only man I can’t scare.” For Wagner, a World Series victory, achieved during Forbes Field’s first season, made him a celebrity. It was during this year that Buck Duke’s American Tobacco Company requested permission to use his image; it would be part of the company’s largest set to date (known as the “White Borders” set), featuring 523 major and minor league baseball players in vivid, full-color illustrations.

The Wagner card has been described as “The Mona Lisa” or “The Holy Grail” of baseball card collecting. Jefferson Burdick, the

“Father of Collectors,” first documented the rarity of the card in his 1939 *American Card Catalog*, valuing the card at \$50 while most other cards in the set were priced at 35 cents. Burdick catalogued sets and compiled checklists decades before there was any form of an organized baseball card hobby. Burdick designated the Wagner card as T206: the “T” stood for an early-20th century tobacco card, and the 206 from a chronological order of the major tobacco advertising sets. Burdick had great difficulty locating an example of the Wagner

card and thus understood its rarity; he would be amazed at the interest which has grown since.

Duke’s company pulled its tobacco cards after an ingenious marketing ploy by Camel Cigarettes brought an abrupt end to the era of such inserts. Camel printed a statement on its packages, “Don’t look for premiums or coupons, as the cost of the tobaccos blended in Camel Cigarettes prohibits the use of them.” Duke did not want to compromise the perceived quality of his company’s tobacco, and so trading cards inserts were halted. Camel continued its slogan for decades until reversing its policy with the controversial Camel Dollars program that many accused of promoting underage smoking.

The T206 Wagner card itself is tiny; roughly 2-5/8" x 1-1/2"; it had to be that small to fit into packs of cigarettes. Advertising different brands on the card backs, companies printed cards to attempt to foster brand loyalty and encourage smokers to collect the entire printed set. The cards themselves were originally inserted not only as a collectible bonus but also as a practical way to prevent crushing of the packs during shipment. The 1909 T206 features a portrait of Wagner against a light orange background; printed beneath is “Wagner Pittsburg,” the city’s name was at that time spelled without the final ‘h’. The image was taken from a photograph shot by Carl Horner of Boston in 1904 to commemorate the Pirates championship the year before. This particular image was used, sometimes with different coloring or a reverse negative, on several later issues of cards mostly sold with candy but never again with tobacco. Two of the surviving copies have Piedmont-brand backings while the others advertise Sweet Caporal cigarettes. Although the card had been pulled early in production, there are still several rarer cards, even some other Wagners such as a pre-1900

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Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Room, B572

Honus Wagner on the job.

Henry Reccius card advertising cigars featuring Wagner in his Louisville Colonels uniform.

For years, the accepted reason Wagner had the card's production stopped was his expressed desire not to have his name associated with smoking and to discourage young children from the habit. Wagner probably held this belief, but there were probably other contributing factors. This repudiation first surfaced in a 1912 *Sporting News* article and his granddaughter Leslie "Honey" Blair also believed this to be Wagner's reasoning. At the time, Pennsylvania was discussing legislation, which passed in 1910, to prohibit the sale of cigarettes to anyone under 21. Wagner had at times thought of a political career and had even run for sheriff in 1925. Was he politically motivated in lending his support of a newfound policy against underage smoking?

Wagner biographer Dennis DeValeria outlines several other possible reasons why the ballplayer stopped his card's production. Before the 1908 season, Wagner announced one of several "retirements" which were common at the end of his career and which may have possibly been negotiating ploys to bolster his salary. Again in 1909, he held out and eventually agreed to a \$10,000 salary. Clichéd as it may sound, Wagner simply loved to play baseball and was not regarded as selfish. Maybe he did not accept the American Tobacco Company's compensation to use his image as adequate, although earlier in the century – decades before sports agents – players were rarely asked permission to use their image in endorsements. Wagner's image had been commonplace on previous tobacco packaging and the Hillerich and Bradsby company even branded his signature onto its first signed

Louisville Slugger model in 1905. Wagner would go on to become involved in a myriad of business interests, mostly after his playing career had ended.

The American Tobacco Company commissioned local sportswriter and Pirates' scorekeeper John Gruber to obtain Wagner's consent for the card but Wagner instead matched Gruber's commission by giving him a check for \$10 so that he would not lose out by Wagner's refusal. Dennis DeValeria, in his definitive biography, *Honus Wagner*, quotes the ballplayer as saying, "Tobacco may shorten a man's life and interfere with his baseball career," but he also had to admit, "I have noticed that where a player starts to quit hitting, it will shorten his career a good deal quicker than tobacco."

The cigar-smoking Wagner may seem a bit hypocritical if one believes the idea he simply did not want his name associated with cigarettes. DeValeria points out, though, that before World War I, smoking cigars was seen as "a symbol of self-assured manhood" while cigarette smoking was less accepted. Wagner indeed enjoyed cigars and chewing tobacco but credited player/manager Fred Clarke as helping him stop smoking "coffin nails." Wagner's likeness can be seen on several pre-1909 tobacco cards, cigar boxes and labels, and in newspaper tobacco advertisements. His 1948 Leaf gum card as a Pirates coach, which Wagner probably did not approve, actually shows him raising a wad of chewing tobacco to his denture-less mouth.

Upon his retirement in 1917 at the age of 43, Wagner was regarded by some, including legendary Giants manager John McGraw, as the



greatest player ever. He had retired as the all-time National League leader in hits, runs scored, runs batted in, doubles, triples, and stolen bases. From 1900 – 1909, Wagner led the National League in home runs, amassing 101, a testament to Wagner's power over a career mostly played during the "deadball" era before cork-centered baseballs were introduced in 1910. Batting titles were held in higher regard than home run titles until Babe Ruth was to change the game in the 1920s. Many argue that Wagner was the best Pirate player ever, even the best shortstop ever; he was certainly one of the most personable, modest, and well-liked in the sport during his 21-year playing career and 19-year coaching tenure. In 1939, he was part of the inaugural group inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame along with Walter Johnson, Christy Mathewson, Cobb, and Ruth. Modest and good-natured as a coach and into retirement, he became more accustomed to public speaking and was known to embellish a good story about his playing days for a laugh.

Baseball card collecting has changed drastically from the days when young boys would ask their fathers for the cigarette cards of their idols. The hobby is now a multi-billion dollar business seeking to capture disposable income uncommon to past generations of collectors. Many now see the investment potential in collecting and some may say that childhood innocence seems to have been stamped out by dreams of dollar signs. Instead of flipping cards or placing them in bicycle spokes to make a cool sound, they are quickly housed in hard protective plastic sleeves. Wagner would probably scratch his head while having a good laugh over a beer, but never would he dream of coming up with an outlandish story about the commotion his 1909 cardboard image would stir. ☀

The Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum will feature a display of hundreds of Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cards from 1887 to the present in the third floor Champions Gallery.

## Sources

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