

In honoring Burdick and other legends, we remember who we are

Published: Tuesday, April 17, 2012, 8:35 PM Updated: Wednesday, April 18, 2012, 12:10 AM



Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard
By

I was in New York City over the weekend for **an event honoring Jefferson Burdick** at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. **Burdick**, a Syracuse guy, used his time away from a factory job at Cooper Crouse-Hinds to amass one of the greatest collections of cards — including baseball cards — in American history.

In the early 1960s, while dying from a chronic autoimmune disease, Burdick raced to catalog his collection, which he'd handed over to the Met. The hundreds of thousands of cards in that donation include **a rare Honus Wagner baseball card** from 1909, known as a "T206." To understand the magnitude of the gift, a similar card has sold for almost \$3 million at auction.

Not quite 50 years after Burdick's death, he's remembered as the father of modern baseball card collecting. The Met, which rotates the items in its Burdick display, has unveiled a new exhibit featuring the cards of Jackie Robinson and fellow major league black pioneers. The museum celebrated that initiative Friday with a panel discussion that included Sharon Robinson, Jackie's daughter, followed by a concert by **The Baseball Project** — a rock "supergroup" devoted to baseball.

Burdick is clearly a big deal at one of the world's great museums, which leads to an obvious question:

Why don't we celebrate him here?

One way to do it would be for the Everson Museum of Art or the Onondaga Historical Association to contact the Met about temporarily displaying a portion of the Burdick collection. It's been done before, in Toledo, where an exhibit of Burdick's cards at a downtown gallery was tied to opening day in 2002 for the Toledo Mud Hens of the International League.

Yet there is also a permanent way of honoring Burdick and other idiosyncratic contributors to cultural history in



Photo courtesy of Eric Meola

Clarence Clemons and Bruce Springsteen, in an immortal rock photograph captured by Syracuse-born photographer Eric Meola: Why not make an epic version of this image that would cover the side of a building in downtown Syracuse?

Syracuse. The perfect example is Armory Square's **24-second shot clock monument**, built by a donor who chooses anonymity. The electronic clock eternally counts down from 24, above a plaque informing visitors that Syracuse was the birthplace of the game-changing innovation — thus giving our city a pivotal role in basketball history.

The result? Every time the NCAA holds tournament games in Syracuse, you'll find dozens of tourists snapping photographs at the clock. It's a lighthearted monument that reflects a deeper reality: This is a town of extraordinary heritage, and there ought to be reminders that capture the imagination of visitors, not to mention our own children.



The Post-Standard

Jefferson Burdick in 1955: The great Syracuse card collector has more of a presence the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City than he does in his hometown.

Here are a few easy possibilities for honoring Burdick and other luminaries:

- The most valuable card in Burdick's collection is the Honus Wagner. Why not put up an exact replica of the card at some busy point downtown, a replica built to human scale with an empty space where Wagner's head should be — thus allowing children to pose as the "face" of the most valuable baseball card on the planet?
- The album cover photograph for Bruce Springsteen's classic "Born to Run" — an iconic rock image portraying Springsteen and the late, great saxophonist Clarence Clemons — was taken by Eric Meola, a renowned photographer raised in Syracuse. Why not use the blank wall of some

downtown building to present that photograph in epic scale, so that any rock fan who passes through Syracuse would make a point of stopping by to see it?

- The **Brannock device**, the familiar contraption used to measure feet in shoe stores around the world, was invented in Syracuse by Charles Brannock, a merchant who loved downtown. The device is now manufactured in Salina. Why not build a vertical Brannock device in the city — maybe outside the Milton J. Rubenstein Museum of Science & Technology — that could be used by children for measuring their height?
- John Lennon and Yoko Ono, during their 1971 sojourn in Syracuse for an art exhibit at the Everson, took part in a famous radio conversation. Why not erect a statue that portrays the couple at a table, doing that interview, alongside an empty seat — thus giving visitors the chance to be photographed next to John and Yoko?

While the Burdick event at the Met celebrated the profound achievements of a quiet man, it also reminded me of a simple truth about Syracuse: Despite all those who say we need to "reinvent" ourselves, our greatest hope still lies in remembering who we are.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with *The Post-Standard*

© 2012 syracuse.com. All rights reserved.