

Three Rare Playing Card Back Designs

by Rod Starling

This article is offered to augment information presently to be found under the World of Playing Cards website listed under “Norwood”. Primarily, my interest in playing cards centers on the design of the court cards. Many collectors, however, find great interest in the back designs of cards and to be sure, there are many and varied interesting examples. Souvenir decks of nearly every State in America, of many countries and the logos of colleges and universities have all been featured as subjects of playing card back designs. In addition, the backs of playing cards have been used for advertising countless products and services. The field is endless. Even works of art have been used on occasion.

It is two such works of art that were used as the back designs for a particularly rare American deck known as the Norwood 85, a deck made by the United States Playing Card Company (USPC) c.1909, of which it is believed that there are only nine copies known to exist. Because I am fortunate in having a copy of that deck in my collection¹, I have in the past attempted to discover the reason why the deck, which is considered to be the most beautiful deck ever created by USPC, should be so rare. My findings were published in “Clear the Decks”, the quarterly newsletter of the playing card collectors club “52 Plus Joker”, but for the sake of this article I will now briefly summarize them.

The exact year when the deck was made is not known for sure but the presence of tax stamps on some of the existing copies gives a consistent approximation of when the deck was set up for sale although, as will be shown below, for some unknown reason the deck never was actually released for general sale. I had contact with the late Dick Race who was a quality control manager for USPC for over thirty years and who was also, at the end of his life, curator of the company’s playing card museum and he informed me of his opinion that the few existing copies of the Norwood 85 deck were salesmen’s samples that were never returned to the company after it was decided not to distribute the deck for public sale.

What makes the idea that the deck was never issued for general sale difficult to understand is the fact that it has been found with two different back designs and that some of the existing examples of the deck are gold edged and some are not. It seems counter intuitive that the deck would be made with such variables as two different back designs, gold edged and plain edged and yet never released for sale. At the same time, with one exception that I

¹ <http://www.wopc.co.uk/usa/uspcc/norwood-85>

know of, the existing decks have been found only in a generic style box without any brand of style name on it. Apparently, no box was ever produced specially for the Norwood 85 deck. The exception to the generic box for Norwood 85 is the copy in my own collection which is in a box designed for the Bijou No.1 brand of cards and which displays one of the two known back designs found for the Norwood 85 deck, namely “The Storm” (Fig.1).



Figure 1. Blue Bijou No.1 box with The Storm (un-named).

My research revealed that there is one copy each of the Norwood 85 deck in the New York Historical Society, the Library of Columbia University in New York, the Yale University Library, the now closed museum of the USPC and five copies in the hands of collectors, myself included. That makes a total of just nine known copies of Norwood 85.

The two back designs found on the Norwood 85 deck are taken from works of fine art. One is from a painting by Pierre Cot done in 1860 titled “The Storm” the original of which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Fig.2). To repeat, my copy of the deck has “The Storm” back design. The other back design is taken from a painting done by William Bouguereau titled “Psyche et L’Amour” sometimes known as

“Psyche et Cupid” (Fig.3). That painting was done in 1889 but I do not know where the original is today.

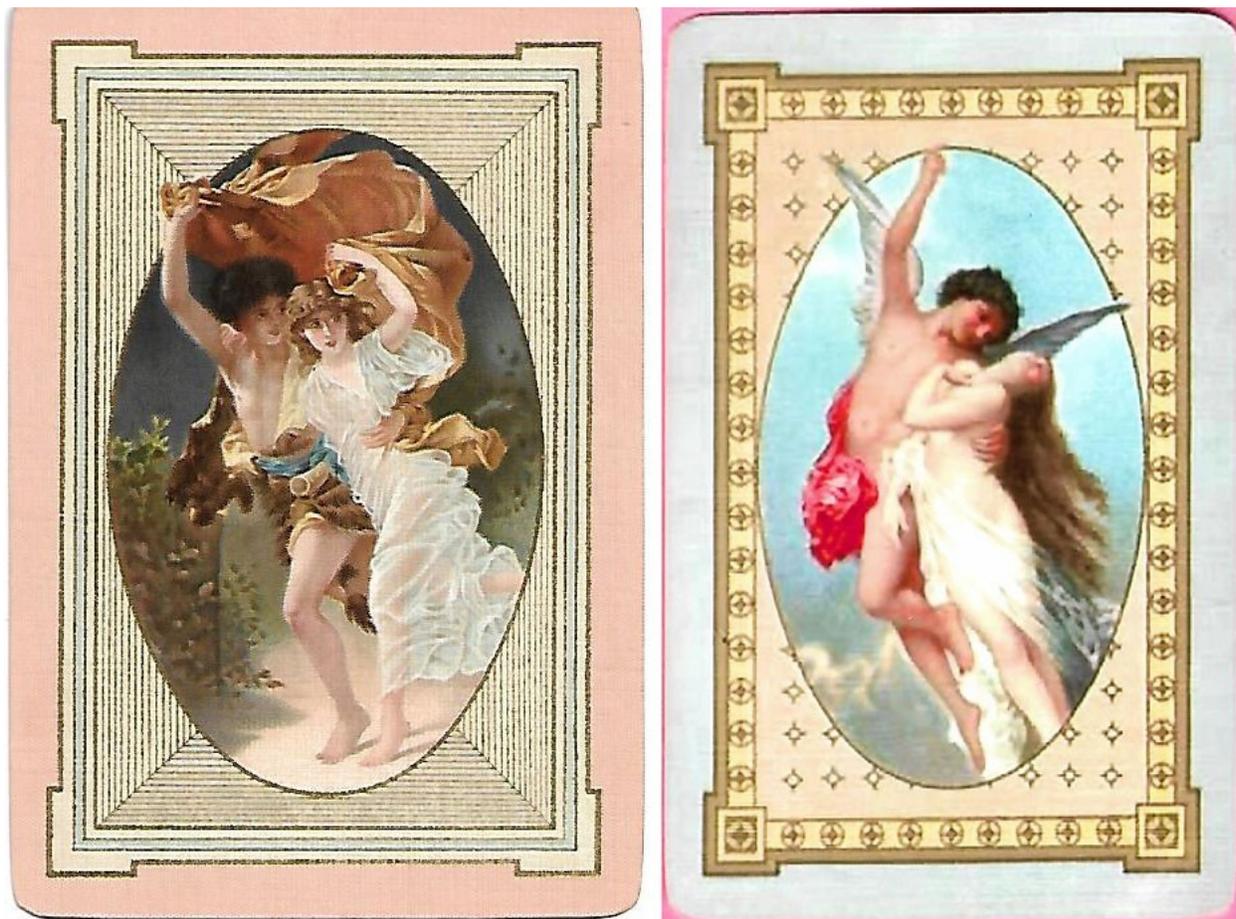


Figure 2: Single Norwood 85 card with The Storm (un-named). Fig 3: Single Norwood 85 card with Psyche & Cupid (un-named).

Adding a little to the mystery of the Norwood 85 deck is its close association with the Bijou No.1 deck. As I mentioned above, my copy of the Norwood 85 deck is housed in a Bijou No.1 box that displays the un-named “Storm” back design (Fig.1). However, I also have a Bijou No.1 500 deck in its own box which, confusingly, also displays and has the named back design of “The Storm” (Fig.4).

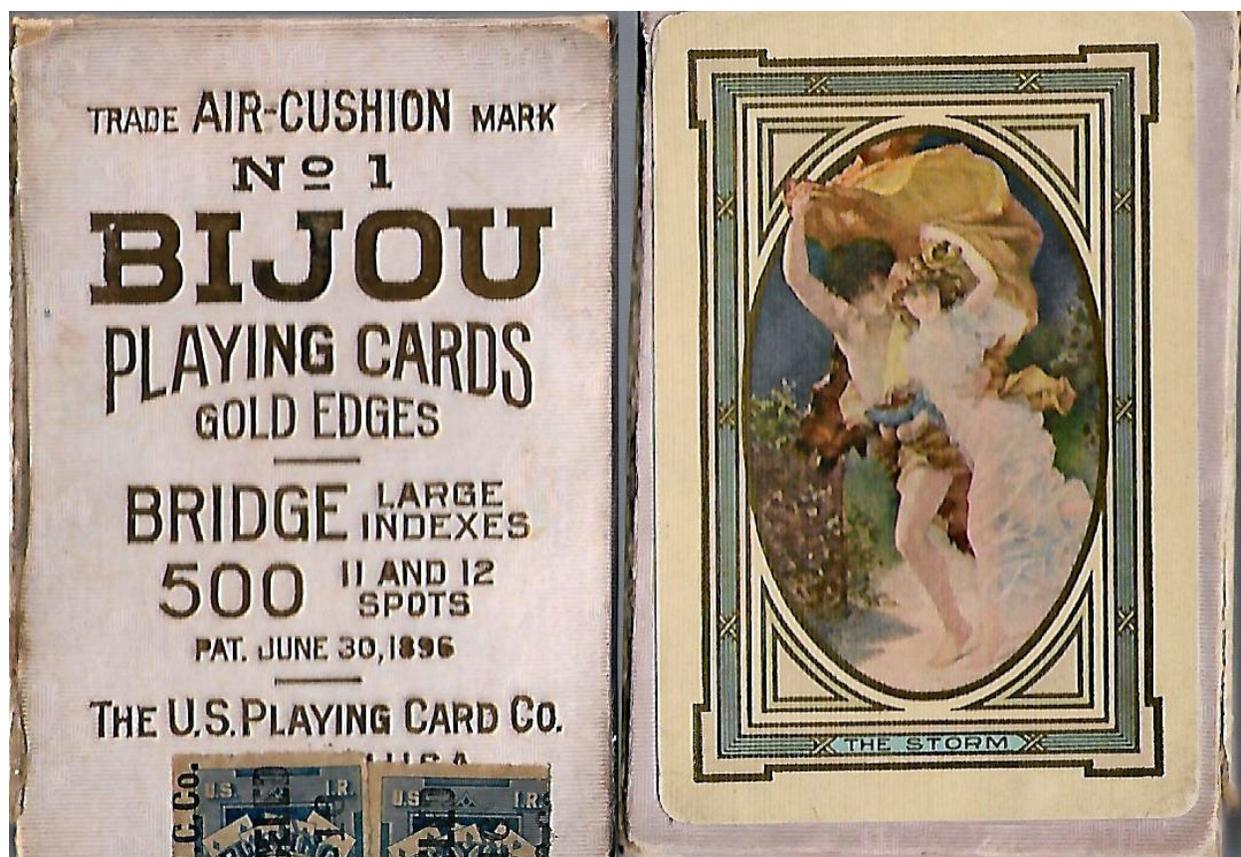


Figure 4. Bijou No.1 500 box with The Storm (named).

Oddly, “The Storm” on the Norwood 85 deck is un-named while it is named on the Bijou No1 500 deck and the margins around the back designs of each deck are slightly different. I also have a Bijou No.1 deck that features a back design taken from a work of fine art titled “The Awakening” (Fig.5). I do not know who the artist was, when it was painted or where the original is today.



Figure 5. Bijou No.1 deck featuring a back design taken from a work of fine art titled “The Awakening”.

Following the passing of Dick Race, I made the acquaintance of his successor curator of the USPCC playing card museum and enlisted her assistance in trying to unravel the Norwood 85 mystery and she came up with a very interesting piece of documentary evidence in support of the theory that the deck was never released for general sale.

What she found was an old ledger book with a page reflecting activity in the years 1908, 1909 and 1910 (Fig.6). The page includes an entry in 1909 referring to Norwood 85 that shows under the column headed “Packs / Ordered/Issued” that none were ordered or issued! Beneath that entry and for the year 1910, there is an entry for the Bijou No 1. deck indicating that 80,000 decks were ordered and that 96,000 decks were issued. In the absence of anything to the contrary, I consider the ledger entry in regard to the Norwood 85 deck to be conclusive evidence that it was in fact never released for general sale. Unfortunately, we still do not know why.

PLAYING CARDS.									
NO.	ORDER		PAPER ORDER		QUANTITY	PACKS		ITEM	
	RECEIVED	ISSUED	NO.	GRADE	LIBS.	ORDERED	ISSUED		
2445	4-9	4-27	C62X	8000g		20.000	24.000	65X	Stage
2461	12-12	10-6	413C	1500 "		10.000	15.000	1	Bijou New U.S. Whist
2478	1-27	7-27	"	"		18.000	27.000	1	Plaids
	1908	1908							
2465	4-12	4-12	52.3	8000g				85	Norwood
	1910	1910							
2452	7-1	7-18	¹³⁵ 91X	8000g L.W.		80.000	96.000	1	Bijou U.S. Whist

Figure 6. USPC ledger page 1908-1910.

Since I have previously provided scans of the Norwood 85 deck to the WOPC website, it is not necessary to again provide them. However, I do recommend them to your attention. Simply search that site for Norwood. The two Norwood 85 back designs have also been previously provided but I am including them again for ready reference. I should point out for the benefit of back collectors that the Bijou No.1 brand was issued with six plaid back designs and the two fine art designs already discussed namely, "The Awakening" and "The Storm". Accordingly, one should not jump at a Bijou No.1 deck with "The Storm" back design in the hope of getting a Norwood 85 without checking first. Once more a caution: if a Bijou No. 1 deck is found with "The Storm" back design on the outside of the box, it will probably not be a Norwood 85 deck. If it is, you hit the jackpot!

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