

Deal Me In...With Bicycle!

“Our long, rich history began when A. O. Russell, Robert J. Morgan, James M. Armstrong and John F. Robinson Jr. formed a partnership and purchased from the proprietors of The Cincinnati Enquirer what was then known as the Enquirer Job Printing Rooms. The spaces occupied the first and second stories of the building at 20 College Street in Cincinnati, Ohio. The firm commenced business as Russell, Morgan & Co., referring to the two printers in the partnership.

While on College Street, the firm printed theatrical and circus posters, placards and labels. By 1872, the business had increased so much, it was forced to seek larger quarters, and in November 1872, it moved into a new, four-story building on nearby Race Street in downtown Cincinnati.

Mr. Russell proposed to his partners that they embark upon the manufacture of playing cards, an industry monopolized by several East Coast companies. The partners agreed and arrangements were made to add two additional stories to their building, making it six stories high. Many new machines were designed and built expressly for Russell, Morgan & Co. The first deck of playing cards was completed on June 28, 1881. About 20 employees manufactured 1600 packs per day.

The Joker is an American invention dating from about 1865 and has made different appearances in the Bicycle® card line. The first type represented a man on a high-wheeled bike. The bicycle later acquired two wheels of normal size. Then followed a series of playing card kings on bikes. These cyclists wheel past a milestone marked "808." Contrary to some opinions, this number has no mystical meaning. It is merely a reference number distinguishing this brand from others (such as "606") by the same company.

The Ace of Spades carries another code, identifying the year in which the deck was printed. This Ace features, within the suit sign, a woman who rests her right hand on a sword and shield while she holds an olive branch in her left. The image was inspired by Thomas Crawford's sculpture, "Statue of Freedom," which, in 1865, had been placed atop the Capitol Building in Washington, DC.

During World War II, the company [now *The United States Playing Card Company*] secretly worked with the U. S. government in fabricating special decks to send as gifts for American prisoners of war in German camps. When these cards were moistened, they peeled apart to reveal sections of a map indicating precise escape routes. Also during the war, The United States Playing Card Company provided "spotter" cards, which illustrated the characteristic shapes of tanks, ships and aircraft from the more powerful countries. The company further assisted by sewing parachutes for anti-personnel fragmentation bombs.

By the way, there are certainly collectors of Bicycle card varieties, and especially vintage decks.

In 2010, the company celebrated the 125th Anniversary of Bicycle® Playing Cards!

