

Menko Corner Prize Menko

by Ryan Laughton

Paper menko were produced roughly from the 1880s to 1960s and there were several methods of distribution and selling to kids: sheets, boxes, magazines, taba packs and lotteries. However, it wasn't until the early 1950s, when boxes and taba packs were the common method of distribution, that prize menko and cards became popular as a way to entice kids to buy more menko. In this 7th article on the different kinds of sumo menko we'll be talking about prize menko and cards associated with M-series and BB-series/BC-series sets and the uniqueness of each series.

M-series menko came almost exclusively in boxes and very early in the 1950s random menko started coming with winner stamps on the back. Typically there would be about seven menko per box with this special winner stamp. Most boxes contained several hundred menko and all these menko were bundled in packs of 4-5 and sold for less than a yen per pack. Four or so of the menko in the box would have a 3rd Level winner stamp, two or so of the menko would have a 2nd Level winner stamp and one menko would have a 1st Level winner stamp.

For M-series menko, these stamps corresponded to the level of prize kids would with a 1st Level stamp being a really good prize and 3rd Level being the very basic prize. More often than not, though, for M-series sets the prize menko were no more than uncut sheets of menko from the set. 1st Level prizes would contain 7-8 menko per sheet, 2nd Level prizes around

4-6 menko, 3rd Level would be only 2-3 menko per sheet and these sheets would be included with the menko box when purchased by the store owner. In some sets, the prize sheets would look like the regular issue, but some would have special gold ink or a special gloss coating to give the sheets a premium quality.

These sheets would then be removed by the owner and typically displayed in the store so kids could see what prizes they could win. Most stores had dozens of these prize sheets hanging up to display different sets on sale and entice kids to buy more menko. Kagome was by far the most creative company of the time and they would include special toy prizes with the menko such as small wooden gunbai.

They also included entire R-series sets as prize cards for winner stamps in their M-series sets like the R551, 1955 Kagome Rikishi 10 Set which are actually the winner cards for the M558 - 1955 Kagome Sensou Trump 8-9 Set. The following scans are examples of how the winner menko/stamps and prize sheets worked for the 1958 Dash 7-8 set:

Picture 1- Fronts:



Winner menko



1st level prize



2nd level prize



3rd level prize

Picture 2- Backs:



Winner menko with 1st, 2nd and 3rd Level winner stamps



1st level prize



2nd level prize



3rd level prize

BB-series and BC-series menko also had prize menko and cards associated with different sets. Similarly to M-series sets, the BB and BC-series sets started having prize sheets and premium cards very early in the 1950s. These series of menko were issued in taba bundles and kids could buy one pack, which contained one card, for a very small sum of a few sen. Most taba packs had 100 cards individually wrapped in newspaper with around 10-20 1st, 2nd and 3rd level winner cards per bundle. See picture 3 and 4 below:



Picture 3: BC-series Marukami taba bundle with individually wrapped cards in newspaper



Picture 4: 1st, 2nd and 3rd level winner stamps on a BC-series menko set

The manufacturer would issue the prize sheet along with the taba bundle and the store owner would hang the prize sheet in a conspicuous place to tempt kids into buying more packs. However, the big difference from

M-series menko sets is that many prize cards associated with winner stamps on BB and BC-series were special large sized cards. Additionally, these cards varied in size depending on the 1st, 2nd or 3rd level winner stamps. A large card would be given out for the 1st level prize and progressively smaller cards would be issued for 2nd and 3rd level prizes.

Almost all prize cards today have glue residue on the back where the card was attached to the prize sheet. Often times, remnants of the prize sheets are still attached to the cards themselves!



Picture 5: Marukami prize sheet with 1st, 2nd and 3rd level prize cards



Picture 6: Marusan prize sheet with empty 1st, 2nd and 3rd level prize spaces. Note the unattached 2nd level prize menko off to the right

BB and BC-series prize sheets also contained actual sheets of the menko themselves. Typically a 1st level prize would be a sheet of 16 uncut menko, a 2nd level prize would be 4 uncut menko and a 3rd level prize would be 2 uncut menko. Picture 6 below shows a Marusan prize sheet with sample 2nd level uncut prize cards along the right side.

Unfortunately, because BB and BC-series prize sheets were displayed, used and thrown away after all the prizes were claimed, it is extremely difficult to discern which prize cards were issued with which sets. Even with a fully intact sheet like the one displayed in Picture 5, it is nearly impossible to tell which set they were issued with. Fortunately, almost all prize sheets have the manufacturing mark printed on them so that narrows down the mystery to one

company. Additionally, the year of issue can be fairly accurately narrowed down from the rikishi shown on the sheet.

Prize cards were only issued with M, BB and BC series menko because by the time this “gambling feature” became popular in the early 1950s, these were the only series almost exclusively being produced. Prize sheets are a rare find in any auction and ones with all the original cards still attached are even harder to find. Expect to pay a premium for a full sheet of prize cards.

In the next SFM article, I am going to open a pack of M-series menko and detail a little more how it felt to be a Japanese kid in the 1950s spending his sen collecting menko and trying to grab an elusive winner card!