



Lost Your Marbles?

Marble maker got his start finding them

By B. Marie Jarreau-Danner

Today, drawing a line in the sand may conjure thoughts of aggressive ultimatums. But for some, that phrase brings back memories of young boys hunched over a line in the sand playing marbles.

Colorful marbles accented the line, like little round soldiers awaiting their next command.

Artist John Stinnett of Burns makes marbles resembling those simple toys of yesteryear, when boys carried several in their pockets and “shooting marbles” was treasured as a daily activity.

“We played marbles at recess when I was in elementary school,” says John. “Playing for keeps (keep-sies) was not allowed because it was considered gambling. I would love to mine the dirt hills of the schoolyard for old marbles.”

John says many marbles were flung from slingshots.

While tilling the garden in Burns with his kids, John found one undamaged marble and pieces of others crushed by the tiller. Later, when a friend came to visit, John showed him the garden find.

“Doug Linn had been a marble collector since his youth,” says John. “He was able to estimate that the marble we’d found was worth about \$20. I was shocked. I hadn’t thought of marbles as being valuable collectibles.”

Some seemingly ugly antique marbles may carry greater value than those in perfect condition.

The more John considered the



beauty of marbles, their traditional appeal to youngsters and their appeal as objects of nostalgic reflection for older people, the more his interest grew.

John studied how marbles were made. He felt he could follow those techniques and decided to give it a try. He is now creating marbles of his own design and reproductions of those from long ago.

“Doug has a collection of the first marbles I made,” says John. “As my own marble collection grew, my main interest was in imported handmade marbles. Most of them came from Germany in the early 1850s. Many of them are so rare most collectors never get to see them.”

John works as an information technologist for Harney District Hospital. Since his time is spent working with computers, he was

looking for something different to balance out that world of electronics.

He tried his hand at painting a few years ago, but working with glass and creating near-perfect colorful orbs gives him great pleasure and helps him relax.

“My personal technique is in the finish of the marble,” says John. “If one examines the marbles I make, you can find similarities that follow all my marble styles.”

Another unique accent is John now signs all of his creations with a platinum-tipped pen.

Among the tools used are oxygen, a propane torch, graphite molds, cherry-wood molds and stainless steel punties to hold the hot glass. The puntie, or pontil, is a dab of hot glass that holds the hot marble material onto a metal rod during construction. Later, the pontil mark is smoothed away.

“I heat a certain amount of colored-glass rods into a football shape, add patterns and style and round it into a ball. The glass is held and manipulated by sticking onto it with the puntie,” John says.

The final step is the annealing process—tempering, fusing the colors and removing internal stress from the glass—by placing it into a small kiln at about 850 degrees for about 15 minutes for each quarter-inch of glass.

With each completed marble John’s fascination and appreciation increases for the interesting shapes and bubbles revealed inside by the light, and for the way colors move and dance within the glass.



Above, John Stinnett creates marbles in various sizes and styles. Opposite page, John has been a featured artist and loves to share his knowledge of marbles with others.

John has made more than 400 marbles so far. Most of them have been given as gifts.

John also enjoys learning about the history of marbles, games and the varied materials used to create them.

Ceramic marbles first appeared in the 1840s. Earlier marbles were made of stone or unfired clay, metal or glass. Recorded history of marbles dates to the Romans and ancient Egypt. They were not always mere childrens' toys. Adults used them for games and as counting tools.

Examining the best ways to present his marbles to the public is an ongoing effort for John. He shares his love of marbles and games with young people, organizing marble games through his church's youth groups. One day an activity for kids was needed when plans were altered due to weather.

"I ran down to the local store and bought enough marbles for a tournament," says John. "Most of the kids had never played marbles before, and it was fun for me to teach them."

John was the featured artist in June at Designs by Linda's Art Studio and Gift Shop. He offered displays of his work and a demonstration of marble making during the first Gathering of Artists there.

People have told John stories about their own memories of marbles, collections and games, and he shares information about marbles they have brought to show him.

Terry Keim brought her collection of marbles she has found while digging in gardens of places she has lived throughout the west.

"I've always found marbles and even found a couple at campsites," she says. "I consider each one a small

gift. John's contributions to the world of marbles raise them from tiny treasures to timeless pieces of art."

Ten-year-old Aspen Nelson of Burns has found an exciting collection of his own in the yard and the walls of an older home his family purchased several years ago. He has found about 30 marbles in the house, some dating to the 1920s to 1950s. Others were buried in the cement sidewalk for decades.

Agates, oxbloods, sharp shooters, pee-wees, tiger's eyes, bowlers, corkscrews, baked clay, stone or wooden marbles probably can be found anywhere children have played, throughout history. ■

For information about viewing or purchasing John Stinnett's handmade marbles, call John at (541) 573-3051 or Linda Whiting at (541) 573-1733.