

Losing My Marbles

by Lynne Belluscio

In my ongoing research about games for the new exhibit at LeRoy House, I think I'm losing my marbles! If I thought last year's research about porcelain insulators was a challenge, it pales in comparison to identifying marbles. But I've learned a lot and hope sometime this summer you stop by LeRoy House to take a look at the exhibit.

I assumed that marbles were popular in the early 1800s, when Thomas and Augustus LeRoy were growing up. But marbles weren't common. In fact they were pretty scarce. The marbles that are described in the "Boy's Own Book" written in 1829 mention "Dutch" or variegated clay marbles. There were yellow "stone" marbles with circles of black or brown. These were made of limestone or agate. The best marbles were called "taws" and were usually larger than the regular marbles. Taws were described as pink marble with dark veins. They were called "Blood Allies." The word Allie was a reference to a stone known as alabaster.

The LeRoy boys probably had clay "Dutch" marbles and a few taws of stone. They might have had some "china" marbles that were made of hard white clay, instead of the soft red clay. Some of the china marbles were decorated with lines. Some of the soft red clay marbles were glazed. Today they are called "Bennies" because the glaze looks like the glaze of the Bennington Pottery in Vermont. But none of these were glass marbles. From what I've read, there were some glass marbles, but they would have been hand made and probably so expensive that not many kids would have ever seen one.

In the 1800s most of the marbles were made in Germany. However, at the end of the 1800s, there were a couple of innovative men in Ohio, who developed machines to mass produce marbles. Martin Christensen adapted a machine that made steel ball bearings and started producing millions of glass marbles. (The Marble Museum is located in Akron, Ohio.)

Once I started looking at glass marbles, I guess you could say my eyes started to glass over. There's just too many designs, colors and varieties to learn. But it's easy to understand why boys played



marbles, especially if they could win someone's favorite cat's eye or sulphide.

When William Clarke wrote the "Boy's Own Book" in 1829, he only listed a few marble games and said: "the games of marbles are not very numerous: the following pages contain descriptions of all that have come to our knowledge". The games that he listed were "spans and snops," "bost about," "holes," "knock-out," "ring-taw," "increase-pound," and "pyramid".

Clarke didn't think much of the game of "conqueror" which allowed players to literally destroy each other's marbles. He also listed "arch-board" which was a wooden board with nine arches in it. The object was to pitch the marbles through the arches and gather points. Players also used round bullets instead of marbles.

World War I dealt a devastating

blow to the German toy industry and marble production. American marble production went into high gear and boys in every neighborhood played their favorite marble games. There was "boss-out," "chasies," "poison," "black snake," "Newark killer," "off the wall," "pugs," "skelly," "fort," "dropsies," "cherry pit," "hundreds," and the popular "ringer."

Before beginning a game, everyone had to agree on the rules and whether they would "play for keeps" (winners could take opponents marbles – thus you lost all your marbles) or you could "play for fair." Marble players were called "mibsters." Players would "knuckle down" to play marbles and any marble that was an easy target was called a "dead duck." If you changed the rules you were accused of "fudging."

The only antique marbles that we have in the collection are

several colored clay marbles that were made by hand at Morganville Pottery. I have a small collection of marbles that belonged to my uncle that I will bring in for the exhibit, but if any of you have some marbles that you could loan us, we will return them in the fall when we close the exhibit. And I'm looking for an old Erector set – or parts of one. (I only need to borrow it).

The exhibit will open on Sunday, May 4 which is also the Historical Society's annual meeting. It begins at 3 pm and anyone is invited to attend. Some light refreshments will be served. The short meeting includes the election of members of the Board of Trustees. The nominees for this year include, Scott Ripley, Anne Fox, Sam Leadley, Sue MacQuillen, for a three-year term; Dan Diskin for a second three-year term; and Michelle Panepento for a two-year term.

