

# Pigeon Ball Takes Wing

## Medium-priced balls head South, but the top-of-the-line Items remain high flyers

By Ralph Finch

A major, two-part sale of target balls, held by Jeff Wichmann's American Bottle Auctions last July, was both a winner AND a loser at the same time. The two auctions sold off 63 target balls from the collection of Pittsburgh businessman Peter Frobouck who — from about 2006 to 2008, attempted to amass a major collection.

He had the drive, determination — and money — to be a major player in the eight 2006-08 auctions that saw the distribution of the collection of the late Alex Kerr of California. Then came the collapse of the Bush economy and the hard times that have caused major shock waves across America, and that has resulted in many collectors taking a hard look of what they can — and can't — afford to purchase.

In the Kerr sale, the record-setting lot was an amber ball, weakly embossed "AGNEW & BROWN CORNER OF 27TH & SMALLMAN STS. PITTSBURGH PA." There are five Pittsburgh balls known, and all are rare, so that alone would garner its share of attention, but it was the other side of the ball that created all the excitement: an intricately embossed pigeon in flight!

In May of 2007, the then Kerr ball — one of two known — set a record, flying to \$25,000 — with buyer's premium, that's \$28,000!

At the time, Frobouck, whose business was located at 25th and Smallman, said firmly: "This ball was going to be mine and I had no limit to what I would bid."

Then came the business downturn. In early 2009, Peter lamented: "With the economy, my business stinks, and so does my cash flow" — with the resulting two-part Frobouck target ball sale, held this past April 5 and July 22.

"Peter bought at the peak, and he is selling in a valley; I'm worried for him," said one concerned collector. "But this could be a great opportunity for new collectors."

There was reason to worry: Most of Frobouck's balls that could be traced back to the Kerr sales sold for 10 percent to 30 percent less than what Peter paid for them. In fact, it appears that he made money on only two lots.

One example on the not-so-great lots was the deep purple ball embossed FROM J.H. JOHNSTON GREAT

WESTERN GUNWORKS 169  
SMITHFIELD STREET PITTSBURGH  
PA RIFLES SHOT GUNS REVOLVERS  
AMMUNITION FISHING TACKLE  
CHOKE BORING REPAIRING & C.  
WRITE FOR PRICE LIST. Rare in any  
color, but collectors with purple passion ran  
the Kerr ball to \$17,000 plus a 12 percent  
buyer's premium, pushing it to \$19,040;  
Peter Frobouck was high bidder. However,  
in Peter's July, 2010 sale, it garnered only  
\$13,000 (plus a \$1,560 premium).



But while the Johnston ball got a lot of attention, the pigeon ball ruffled the most feathers in the Frobouck sale, and once again proved what many say: Top-of-the-line glass will bring the top money. The pigeon ball was described by Wichmann as "maybe the best ball I'd ever seen. Once again, when you take into account the provenance and condition, not to mention having an embossed bird on it, price is really a secondary issue. That's easy to say, I guess, if you have the money."

In the July sale, the pigeon flew even higher than it did in the Kerr sale, soaring to \$26,000 (with buyer's premium, \$29,120), setting a new record.

Wichmann also said of the ball, "this one gives the advanced collectors just about everything they are looking for. With the embossed name and address, an embossed pigeon and overall about perfect condition ... a nice medium amber, here's a chance to own one of the rarest and most desirable balls ever made." (The rarest ball is the one known "Louisville ball," which sold in March of 2009 for \$21,850.)

And who bought that ball? Some crazed, financially irresponsible collector in Michigan — the same one who bought the Louisville ball! (Actually, it was his new wife, who firmly told him: "If you don't bid higher, I AM going to buy the pigeon ball!" Boy, is she mean!)

What is interesting about the ball — downright curious, in fact — is the mold. The side with the embossed words is rather weak, indicating a worn mold, the result of producing untold thousands of balls. However, about six Agnew & Brown balls are known to exist (and only two with pigeons).

But the other side of the ball only deepens the mystery: The pigeon is one of the finest examples of a mold-maker's skill that I have seen. With a sharp eye you can count hundreds of tiny feathers on the bird's body. The pristine bird half of the ball had to have been done at a later time — and by a different mold maker — than the address side. But why? And why remake only half a ball?

WHAT'S OLD: eBay idiots (perhaps I'm being too subtle). One recently sold a ball "in good shape," but with a "slight imperfection." The imperfection? A hole in the side! Another eBay seller sold a badly cracked amber Bogardus; despite the huge crack, it went for an astounding \$545, with 10 bids from five bidders, who themselves have to be cracked!

WHAT'S NEW: A few minor variants such as an English shooter ball in blue, with a slightly different image (fatter) of the shooter, and in an unusual two-piece mold. Most exciting on eBay are great examples of balls from the collection of the late Mike O'Malley.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: Auction news, eBay reports, even a bit of gossip!

Drop a note if you have a ball question: 34007 Hillside Ct., Farmington Hills, MI 48335-2513, or give me a call (8 a.m.-11 p.m.) at 248-476-4893. Better yet, e-mail rfinch@twmi.rr.com. For an in-depth look at 'em, go to [www.targetballs.com](http://www.targetballs.com). For a subscription to On Target!, the 68-page, three-times-a-year journal for collectors of glass balls, send \$40 to the above address.