

The Exploding World of Target Balls

New B&E column takes aim at those little glass shooting orbs with the colorful past

By Ralph Finch

Welcome to the first of many reports on the rapidly expanding world of target balls. True, they aren't the equal of a cobalt firecracker flask — the most paid for a target ball is \$28,000 — but even in difficult economic times, ball prices continue to impress.

But let's back up a step and explain to those few collectors who remain in the dark:

A: There were no WMDs in Iraq, and

B: Target balls were introduced ca. 1876, designed to "replace the living bird" (according to one ad) in the world of pigeon shooting. Immediately, seeing thousands of pieces of glass shards out in the field, the smart money went to work devising what we today call "clay pigeons." That was around 1880. But even after the switch to clays, glass continued to be blasted to bits by Wild West show shooters Buffalo Bill Cody, Annie Oakley, Adam Bogardus and scores of others. Every town, large or small, had a gun club where "local cracks" attempted to outshoot (and out-brag) other club members (and shooters from other clubs). (In fact, my latest report of a glass-ball match is April 14, 1928, in Omaha.)

While Wild West shows traveled the world, introducing literally millions to glass ball shooting, small-time shooters often traveled from town to town along with troupes of singers, acrobats and dancers. (Champion shot Ira Paine started out as a "clog dancer.")

*A disclaimer. There are few hard facts relating to the evolving world of glass balls. Bragging, claims and counter-claims were part of the shooting society, and at the top, Wild West shows had press agents who could spin "facts" faster than today's politicians. Most glass companies never mentioned making target balls; a few, thankfully, did: In early 1878, New York City's Bohemian Glass Works claimed that 1,250,000 "have been sold since August, and our moulds are now running night and day filling our constantly increasing orders." Hagerty Bros. & Co., also of New York City, claimed "103,250 of Bogardus' Patent Glass Balls sold and shipped in one week in April, 1879."

While the late Alex Kerr may have been the godfather of target ball collecting (am I the god-child?), shooter Adam Bogardus of Illinois, from 1876-78, is considered the driving force

behind the growth of glass balls: He patented and promoted his ball (each embossed with his name), developed an efficient, practical, sturdy and inexpensive ball thrower, wrote his own rules for ball shooting, and traveled the world with Cody's Wild West shows.

Bogardus didn't invent target balls. After years of research I have (as of now) given the Brits that honor. A May 25, 1867 article in "Bell's Life and Sporting Chronicle" credits James Harding as the inventor of glass target balls — it also describes them being thrown with a sling of India rubber. Specifically, the article stated: "At the Royal Oak Park, Manchester, on May 20, Mr J. Harding of the Lea Brook Grounds, Wednesbury, introduced his novel invention, by which small blue glass globes are fired at instead of pigeons, but it will be a long time, we imagine, before he causes experienced 'shots' to prefer aiming at glass rather than at the feathered tribe. However, Mr Harding deserves credit for his ingenuity, the globes being cheaper than birds ..."

OK, that's the past. How's the hobby doing now? Here's a quick peek:

WHAT'S HOT: Pictures of old (and strange looking) Wild West show shooters.

WHAT'S NOT: Ball prices are off from the heady days of the sale of Alex Kerr's vast collection: In an auction last April at California's American Bottle Auctions (ABA), a deep purple ball "From JH Johnston Great Western Gunworks" was pulled at \$13,500 when it failed to meet its reserve. Consignor Peter Frobouck paid \$19,040 for the ball in the Aug. 8, '07 Kerr sale.

WHAT'S HOT and COLD: An engraved, gold-plated Smith & Wesson 38 once owned by Ira Paine was sold May 1 by Rock Island Auction for \$8,050. (Yet Paine's gold-plated 22 pistol with three barrels — and appearing similar to the gun in the poster above, where Paine is shooting a Walnut off his wife's head — did not reach its \$100,000 minimum last fall in a James Julia sale.



WHAT'S OLD: eBay sellers who know nothing, won't bother doing five minutes of research, yet claim to be experts in an area where, in reality, they are idiots (perhaps I'm being too subtle).

WHAT'S NEW (relatively speaking): Two rare balls, from Sweden ("Sandviks Glasbr. Hofmantorp") and Norway ("Bøssmager H. Larsens Vaabenudsalg Kristiania") "H. Larsen was a gunmaker."

WHAT'S ON EBAY: Early this year, a beautiful amber ball embossed "From Bogardus & Co. Shooting Gallery, 158 South Clark St. Chicago / Bogardus Glass

Ball Patd Apr 10, 77" sold for \$7,100. ABA sold a similar ball in the '06 Kerr auction for \$17,050.

I know of maybe six of the rare, cobalt "Ira Paine" balls. One from Burton Spiller's collection was sold by Glass Works Auctions (GWA) for \$5,376 in May, 2000, and I paid \$4,400 for my example some six years ago. But earlier this year a beautiful cobalt Paine sold for \$2,392. The eBay seller added that the ball had set 25 years "on top of a house plant; it's a miracle the kids didn't break it." And two months later, GWA sold another blue Paine for \$2,530!

FYI: "Target balls" is a term used today, but when they were first made they generally were referred to as "glass balls," or "glass balls for shooting." The 1867 Bell's Life reference, as noted, was to "glass globes." A circa 1878 box of English balls stated "E Barton & Son's(sic) / Stourbridge / Purveyors of Fine Glass Shooting Targets." However, the Carver firm of Greenville, Pa., in May of 1879, touted "composition target ball." In 1880, the Whitney Brothers of Glassboro, N.J., advertised "practice balls."

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. 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.