



What are target balls? I'm glad you asked...

By Ralph Finch

What are target balls?

Nowadays, hardly anyone knows what they are, but more than 100 years ago millions of people knew. From across the United States, throughout England, Germany, Italy and other European nations and on down to Australia, people young and old saw target balls in use. Common people to heads of state — U.S. presidents, Queen Victoria, the German Kaiser, to name a few — saw target balls fly through the sky.

So, again, what are target balls?

You are probably familiar with trap shooting — the firing with a shotgun at round, clay disks thrown into the air — and perhaps you have even done it.

But while clay shooting has been around for more than a hundred years, what came before it?

The No. 1 answer is live bird shooting, where thousands and thousands of birds, particularly pigeons (which is why those



Medium yellow amber with three sizes of embossed circles around entire ball, often referred to as the 'nickle dime quarter' ball.



Cobalt blue, embossed in center band, 'Bogardus' Glass Ball Patd. April 10, 1877'



Deep emerald green, 'Bogardus' Glass Ball Patd. April 10, 1877' around center band.



'Bogardus' Glass Ball Patd Apr 10 1877' around center band, often called the 'hobnail Bogardus.'



Yellow with amber and olive tone, 'Bogardus' Glass Ball Patd. April 10, 1877' around center band.



Embossed "FBH," this target ball was made by Fredric Bolton Hughes, owner of the South Australian Glass Bottle Company from 1896-1913.



Yellow olive, 'Ira Paine's Filled Ball Pat. Oct. 23, 1877' embossed around center.



English: (motif of man shooting on both sides), medium amethyst



Medium yellow amber sometimes called the 'stars and bars' ball.



English: teal green color, star, fern and pinwheel patten all around ball.



Yellow amber, 'Ira Paine's Filled Ball Pat. Oct. 23, 1877' embossed around center.



'Charlottenburg Glashutten F.W. Otte Jun'



Australian.



N.B. Glass Works Perth.



N.B. Glass Works Perth.



English.

clay disks are still called "clay pigeons") were flung from traps and blown to bits. But from around 1877 to 1885, because of a decline in the availability of live birds as well as changing social attitudes, glass balls often were the target of choice, particularly in exhibition, circus and Wild West Show shooting.

These balls, similar in size and appearance to today's glass Christmas tree ornaments, were the "only substitute ever invented for the living bird," something that Annie Oakley is said to have had silk streamers stuffed inside, something that in one summer the Bohemian Glass Works (in New York City) was making at the rate of 1,250,000 over six months' time, something Buffalo Bill Cody chased after on horseback, "old ladies" darned socks on and babies allegedly cut their teeth on — all

according to an 1878 ad!

In their heyday, target balls sold for a little over a penny each; today one has sold for as much as \$14,850, although "common" balls, generally in amber or blue, can be found for around \$100.

These glass orbs, once shot at by the hundreds and hundreds of thousands, are now hunted by collectors for their rarity and their link to a colorful era long past.

As a collectible, the diversity of patterns, colors and countries of origin, as well as the constantly increasing value, combine to make target balls a hobby that can't miss.

Need more information?

I admit that I have no idea how or why target balls took over my life, but one has to accept one's fate! I am a collector who not only publishes a three-times-a-year, 40-

page newsletter, "On Target!" for target ball collectors (\$35), but I am also three-fifths of the way through a 600-page book detailing the history and value of target balls and exhibition shooting in the 1870s-1880s.

I'll be happy to talk target balls or attempt to answer your questions; please write to me at: 34007 Hillside Court, Farmington Hills, MI 48335-2513, or call me from early morning to late evening at (248) 476-4893.

If I don't answer, please leave your phone number and a message and I will call you back. Also, I can be e-mailed at rfinch@twmi.rr.com.

I also buy and, occasionally, sell target balls. Plus, I am interested in buying target ball throwers, such as the ones shown at below.

