

# Marbles Make U.S. Toy History

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Think back to your care-free days of youth: Do you recall playing marbles with friends? If so, you have two brothers and the city of Akron, Ohio to thank, explains Antique Trader guest contributor Ingrid Floyd.

*By Ingrid Floyd*

Once upon a time, toys came from the imagination and materials around the house. Back then, toys located in a store were only for the wealthy and royalty. The rest were handmade or hand-me-downs.

Marbles changed all that.

## Marbles and Akron

*Inexpensive clay marbles like these paved the way for Akron, Ohio's, rise as a mass-produced toy leader in the United States.*



Michael Cohill, director of the [American Toy Marble Museum](#) in Akron, Ohio, says that in the late 1800s when marbles were first mass-produced out of Akron, there was no significant toy industry to speak of, except in Germany. He says, “They made dolls, marbles, and ornaments in the country. Most children played with rope or a stick. They could do a lot with that.”

Cohill explains that in Germany, because there was still a feudal system, the poor would work 18 hours a day making the few toys by hand. U.S. retailers, with their great exchange rate with Germany, could buy the toys cheaply. Yet because many of the toys had to be packaged well for transport on ships, only a few could be sent, and, once again, only the wealthy and rising merchant class could afford them. Even the German-crafted glass marbles and the hand-decorated marbles cost too much for the average family.

Samuel Dyke, an American newspaper owner, publisher, and editor in Akron, saw an opportunity. He went to England and came back with a brilliant idea. His plan was to start a business with his brother, Actaeon L., the salesman at the newspaper, to mass-produce clay marbles, later called “commies.”

He knew that if children could afford a simple game they could buy themselves, they would play it all the time. Marbles were the answer. Mass-producing them was the key. It could be done cheaply and profitably. Dyke developed a board with scalloped rows to roll little balls of clay quickly.

## Tale of Businessmen Brothers

The brothers went to Merrill Pottery next door to test their idea, rented some space, bought some clay, and before they knew it, they were selling their product. But siblings do not always get along; such was the case here. Sam Dyke, the better businessman, left and got investors interested in his idea. He formed the S.C. Dyke and Co. He bought a piece of a lumber yard – the present-day [Akron Main Library](#) – built some kilns and a

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wooden house for workers, and got some machinery. At the time, Akron was the world's largest producer of ceramic goods.

Before completion of S.C. Dyke and Co., there had never been such a toy-producing business. Up and running, the company was manufacturing 1 million marbles a day. Cohill says, "They didn't mass-produce 1 million of anything in those days. Imagine, 1 million is four train loads of marbles. Dyke would have his workers put them in different sizes of wooden barrels, like the barrels they had for whiskey. They would stack them two or three high and fill the train car. A shopkeeper would buy a barrel and scoop out a handful at a time."

Cohill says it was so cheap because "Labor cost two-and-a-half pennies an hour. The U.S. going wage in the 1880s was about two pennies an hour. An individual could make 1,000 marbles an hour. Working 10 hours, six days a week, one person could make 60,000 marbles in a week.

"Think about it," he continues, "it was a massive profit. You got five marbles for a penny. It was so successful of a business that others went into it. There were 34 marble factories in Akron soon."

## Rise of Toy Makers



The M. F. Christensen & Son Company produced "High-Grade American Toy Marbles." (From the collection of The American Toy Marble Museum, Akron, Ohio.)

Dyke's company grew so well that once again he joined with Actaeon and a man named James E. Leighton, a famous glass master, and founded The American Marble and Toy Manufacturing Company in Akron on Loch 3 Park. It became the largest toy company to operate in the U.S. during the 19th century. At this time it employed approximately 350 people. It also produced miniature replicas of jugs, pots, boots, shoes, and cats and dogs – items children were familiar with in their everyday lives. Most importantly, the company made a three-dimensional Blue Santa in the late 1880s, the oldest of its kind in the world today.

But in 1904, sadly, the business burned down. Children scrambled for the toys, but police shooed them away out of concern for their safety. New buildings were built over the lot.

It was not until the 1980s that Dyke's toys emerged from the ashes. Still Cohill says that collectors are not interested in the "commies" or miniature toys anymore because they are not pretty like the later glass marbles that were mass-produced in the early 1900s, mostly in West Virginia.

Cohill finds it sad that collectors are not interested in the commie marbles because they are by far the better marble to use in the game because ceramic is the superior material.

## **Toys Draw Attention of Rubber Companies**

Despite the loss of Dyke's factory, mass production of marbles and other toys was flourishing in the Akron area. Rubber companies wanted "in" on the huge profits. B.F. Goodrich and Goodyear were two of the companies that were not going to let this opportunity slip. Demand for rubber was great because it was cheap. They produced balloons, balls, dollies, and duckies.

"From the 1890s to the 1990s," Cohill says, "there were roughly 200 rubber and plastic toy companies in greater Akron. Plastic came after World War II."

The first rubber toy made is thought to be a snake by Goodrich. The first character toy was a Brownie doll from a newspaper cartoon of the time, also by Goodrich. Cohill says, "The Brownie might have been the oldest licensed toy I know of."

Even tin toys and wind-up toys were developing their own technology to become mass-produced. But when the Depression hit, many companies collapsed, just at the time they could have prospered.

## **Technology Helps Propel Marble Production**

Glass "electric" marbles that Brian Graham has made on the old glass marble-making machine. Graham's one-of-a-kind, hand-gathered marbles are available for purchase at [www.landofmarbles.com/brian-graham.html](http://www.landofmarbles.com/brian-graham.html). (From the collection of The American Toy Marble Museum, Akron, Ohio.)

However, marble-making and rubber companies with technology that made the products even cheaper survived, making their owners quite rich.

Akron was the perfect place to be the originator of mass-produced toys. Cohill explains, "Akron had an extraordinary sensitivity to children. The pioneers ran away from the East to here from the abusive government there and churches. Public education with trained teachers and books and hospitals for children formed. It was a natural to have a toy industry here."

Another reason Dyke's business thrived was because he was a genius at marketing in the 1880s, and would have been superb at social media today. He invited reporters to everything, and was constantly crafting press releases. The rubber companies had excellent marketing in their distribution of toys and advertisement worldwide with their tire advertisement.

To showcase its marble industry history, for many years Akron was home to the American Toy Marble Museum since 1990 – closing some years, and then reopening at a different location in 2002-2015 at Loch 3 Park. The museum enjoyed more than 40,000 visitors a year, but staffing was voluntary and funding was limited.

## American Toy Marble Museum Future

Now grants are allowing it to come forth – hopefully in Spring 2018 – with a sculpture garden with marble activities adjacent to the Akron Main Library and café. Cohill wants a museum again for the marbles produced in Akron, but he finds many of the collectors are disappointed that they cannot buy the collectible marbles.

Marbles are now mostly mass-produced elsewhere than the U.S., but Cohill said that it is still the most played game in the world because it is the cheapest. It's particularly popular in poorer countries.

It is often said one person can, by throwing a stone in the sea, cause a whole ripple in the water. Who would have thought it would be such with a marble for the toy industry?

Perhaps the collector in collecting the glass marble is collecting the wrong marble. After all, it was Dyke and the commie that made play such a good business.

### Brief Akro Colored Clay History

Thanks for sharing Don Miller. Samuel Dyke, an American newspaper owner, publisher, and editor in Akron, Ohio and his brother, Actaeon, started a company to mass-produce clay marbles, later called “commies.” Sam Dyke, the better businessman, left and got investors interested in his idea. He formed the Actaeon, started a company to mass-produce clay marbles, later called “commies.” Before its completion there had never been such a toy-producing business. Up and running, the company was manufacturing 1 million marbles a day. Dyke's company grew so well that once again he joined with Actaeon and a man named James E. Leighton, a famous glass master, and founded The American Marble and Toy Manufacturing Company.

The colored clays were originally made by the newly founded company The Akron Toy Company, later renamed The American Marble and Toy Manufacturing Company.

Dyke's first Originally company was called "S.C. Dyke and Co", then Akron Toy Company and were making colored clay marbles in late 1880s, changed name when incorporated and changed company later renamed The American Marble and Toy Manufacturing Company.