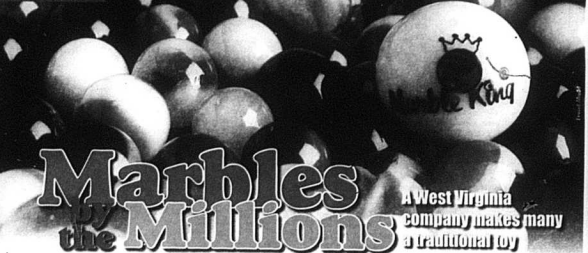


COVER STORY



Marbles the Millions

A West Virginia company makes many a traditional way

Kevin Thompson digs his shovel into a pile of empty perfume bottles, broken flower vases and discarded auto headlights, sifting the clinking, glimmering glass into a large metal container on the bright morning sun. Around him, shimmering piles of red, pink, blue, purple, green and amber glass line the gravel courtyard near the entrance to the Marble King factory in Packer City, W.Va. (pp. 2, 68)

"I used to get into trouble as a kid for breaking windows, and now it's part of my job," says Thompson, 41, after filling the container with shards of clear glass.

Marble King Inc. got its start in 1949 when glassmakers Berry Pink and Sellers Pitker opened a factory in St. Marys, W.Va. After a fire destroyed the factory in 1958, manager Roger Howdyshell moved the operation to Packer City, and in 1985 he bought the business. When Howdyshell died in 1991, his children, including the company president, Bert Fox, 52, inherited the business, carrying on the family's tradition of making high-quality marbles.

"When Marble King produces a product, it's not just something somebody made," Fox says. "There's a commitment to live up to my father's expectations." Inside the one-way lock factory, workers dump

a container full of recycled glass into a 2,350-degree gas-fired furnace every 20 minutes, producing a continuous stream of molten glass. Propelled by gravity, the red-hot liquid flows through a channel inside the furnace and is cut into sections that are formed into smooth, spherical shapes.

After cooling and hardening for 24 hours, the marbles are sorted by hand, with workers discarding misshapen or broken pieces that will be recycled once again. Finally, the glass balls are packaged in boxes and bags and shipped to customers around the world.

One of Marble King's customers is Channel Craft, a toy maker in Chertsey, Pa., that has purchased Marble King marbles for more than 20 years, incorporating them into Chinese checkers sets and other board games.

"I like the fact that they're made in the U.S.," says Dean Helfer, Channel Craft's president. "They've been around forever, and I can always be assured of their quality."

Many of Marble King's marbles also find their way into spray paint cans, water filtration systems, and other

industrial applications that require small, hard, precisely sized spheres of glass.

Others get up with collectors, like Howard Powell, 62, president of the West Virginia Marble Collectors' Club. Powell owns thousands of marbles, about a quarter of which were made by Marble King. Some of his favorite Marble King marbles were manufactured in the 1950s and feature a "bumble bee" pattern.

"They're distinctive," he says of the black and white-striped marbles, which he displays in a glass globe lamp in his Parkersburg, W.Va., home.

"There are millions of them out there, but I like them anyway." Roused in West Virginia's glass industry, Marble King, which employs 38 people, is one of only two companies—along with Parkersburg, W.Va.-based Jabco Inc.—that make marbles in the United States. Every day,

Marble King uses more than 4 tons of mostly recycled glass to produce about a million marbles in 300 different sizes, types, and colors—everything from crystal green cat's eyes to periwinkle marine crystal marbles.

Nearly half of Marble King's business is producing "germs"—flat-sided marbles that are used in home



Stacking stacks of glass at the Marble King factory.



Playing a traditional game of marbles at the Packer City, W.Va., plant.



Millions of Marble King marbles are incorporated into games, decorating, jewelry making and landscaping. Depending on the size, style and quantity ordered, Marble King germs and marbles cost from 1 cent to 25 cents each.



Playing a traditional game of marbles at the Packer City, W.Va., plant.

Jeanne grew up with marbles, playing in bins of marbles and competing in marble tournaments around the country. She's worked for the family-owned business since she was 16, starting in the packing room, and she plans to carry on the marble-making tradition.

"I love it," she says. "As a kid, you think everyone has marbles. Then you realize that it's kind of a special thing."

Story by Vivian Wagner of News Central Online. Visit americanprofile.com and click on this story for a link to Marble King's website.



Marble King President Bert Fox with daughter, Jeanne.

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