

Contemporary Collectibles: The lure of Arbogast fishing lures

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

Fishing lures are among the most colorful categories of sporting collectibles, and none are more so than those produced by Fred Arbogast. From 1928 on, his company created a wide variety of catchy-named metal and plastic lures, whose gleaming rainbow hues and metallic sheen continue to capture the attention of collectors as well as their aquatic targets, some individual examples commanding up to four-figure prices.

Arbogast had a lifelong obsession with fishing, dating back to boyhood excursions in Ohio with his dad in the early years of the 20th century. Soon after graduating from high school in 1913, he began to set records for distance casting, was a champion fly caster and a top competitor in accuracy competitions. He spent all his spare time developing and refining lure designs in his basement, then testing his latest creations on weekends.

In the late 1920s, he had his first success, which he christened the Tin Liz, an all-metal, minnow-shaped lure with a single upright hook, real glass eyes and a shiny, hinged, fluted metal tail. When it began to generate considerable attention - and orders - he quit his day job at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. and devoted his full attention to establishing a fishing lure company in Akron, Ohio. The first lure produced by the company was the cast-tin Spin-Tail Kicker, but it was the Tin Liz that put him on the map. He hired an advertising agency and launched a massive ad campaign, most of them featuring anglers with their catches and testimonials.

In addition to several variations of the Tin Liz and the Spin-Tail Kicker, Arbogast created and marketed a number of other unique lures. Early on, the product line expanded to include the Hawaiian Wiggler, the Jitterbug and the Hula Dancer, all names that successfully conveyed the kinetic qualities of his inventions. The 1936 Hawaiian Wiggler features one of Arbogast's key innovations, the rubber hula skirt - strips of soft rubber that would cover the hook at the back of the lure so that it would float in the water, the slightest movement making it look alive. The Jitterbug is probably the most famous model, selling an average of 2 1/2 million specimens annually over a 50-year period. The Hula Dancer has been described as small but deadly.

A sea change occurred with America's entrance into World War II in 1941. Since metal was needed for the war effort, supplies for nonmilitary products were limited. Many new plastics were developed in their place, and these were incorporated into Arbogast lures for the duration. By 1947, Fred had designed 11 different lures, each created to address a particular fishing challenge. That year, he collapsed while ice skating and died, but his firm continued to make exceptional fishing lures.

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE

The recently published "The Fred Arbogast Story: A Fishing Lure Collector's Guide" by Scott Heston (Collector Books) provides a complete manual to this category of collectibles. In addition to the

knowledgeable text and copious number of color illustrations and evaluated examples, the book is particularly strong in its historical photographs of Arbogast and other fisherman depicted with their impressive quarry caught with the help of Jitterbugs and Hula Poppers; a company history accompanied by photos of the staff at work; vintage ads and publicity; patent drawings; and other memorabilia. Here are a few of the most-sought-after examples, with prices cited by Heston:

- Very rare Tin Liz Snake: \$500-\$1,000.

- The Cock-Tail Kicker version of the Spin-Tail Kicker, on original card: \$150-\$300.

- Weedless Kicker, metal lure with glass eyes: \$100-\$200.

- Tin Liz, circa 1928-1930: \$100-\$150.

- Tin Liz Sunfish with fluttering tail and glass eyes: \$100-\$200.

- Early two-hook Musky Jitterbug: \$200 plus.

- Advertising lure made for the DeKalb Company: \$75-\$150.

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