

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors dig sand toys

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

This summer, as they have since time immemorial (or so it seems), children will trudge through the sand clutching their pails and shovels (or, if you come from some parts of the country, buckets and spades), eager to make mud pies, build castles and dig tunnels to China. There's an eternal, universally irresistible appeal of the feel of grains of sand and its ability to challenge the imagination. Generations of children have been engaged for hours using the simplest and most basic of beach toys, vintage examples of which have become increasingly collectible.

The earliest pails found on American beaches were European imports, most of them simply decorated, in general applied via a japanning technique or a French method in which a varnish and paint mixture was burned on, then baked to impart a thin, translucent finish. By the late 1880s, there were several toy manufacturers centered in Winchendon, Mass., with one of them, Morton Converse, producing well over a million tin pails and shovels.

New printing techniques permitted lithographs to be applied in tin sheets, allowing for precise detail and a wider range of colors. The Sand Toy Co. of Pittsburgh patented and made the "Sandy Andy" range beginning in 1909. The company was later bought by the Wolverine Supply and Manufacturing Co., continuing to produce variations of this toy through the late 1970s.

Among the most important makers of tin sand toys was J. Chein & Co., a New Jersey firm formed around the turn of the last century. It was best known for beautifully lithographed wind-up, friction, mechanical and other toys, including trucks and roly-polys it made during the 1930s, '40s and into the '50s. It produced sand pails and sets with Disney characters and a wide variety of other themes, such as kids with balloons, on amusement rides and trains, zoo animals, beach and circus scenes, fish, pirate coins and such nursery icons as Simple Simon and Red Riding Hood - all in vibrant, cheerful graphics.

One of the more elaborate Chein productions is a brightly colored 11-inch sand mill with a top chute and red, white and blue wheels that spin as the sand pours through.

There are several other firms that made equally attractive sand toys, including T. Cohn Inc., whose wares included children swimming and playing with animals, and also advertising examples; Morton Converse; Kirchoff Patent Co.; Marx Toy Co., featuring Donald Duck with Huey, Dewey and Louis, Mickey, Minnie, Goofy and Pluto and other Disney themes; Ohio Art Co., which used such motifs as cowboys and Indians, children playing with puppies, Mexican and calypso bands and children picking strawberries; U.S. Metal Toy Manufacturing Co., with Treasure Island pirates, Dutch children at play and nursery rhymes; Chad Valley, as well as some smaller companies who didn't identify their wares.

There are British-made items as well, such as the Happynak sand pail featuring particularly large and

eye-catching Disney characters. Most companies made sets consisting of pails, shovels, sifters and molds, as well as just buckets and spades. There were also more elaborate dump truck-like vehicles made specifically for beach play.

Anyone starting a collection of sand toys could concentrate on pails and shovels, mechanical beach toys, colorful early molds, unusual sizes or shapes, or a particular theme, such as Disney, children or the West, or a single maker - Chein, Ohio Art or one of the others. Condition is key - rust, dents and scratches have a dire effect on value.

Prices for good vintage examples are well into the three-figure range: The most recent edition of "Schroeder's Collectible Toys" lists a 1930s Ohio Art Co. pail showing Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Horace Horsecollar and Clarabell Cow valued at \$825.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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