

Frank Brown and The Standard Toy Marble Company

By Michael Cohlil  
Submitted by Bill Koster

Frank J. Brown was a skilled potter (an artisan who was a master at hand-thrown and molded pottery), who got his start in marble making in 1892 as a foreman with Samuel C. Dyke at the Dyke Marble Company in Akron. Two years later, his experience working with Sam Dyke encouraged Brown to start his own marble works, The Standard Toy Marble Company.

Brown started a small ceramics workshop in his back yard in 1894, employing some of his many children as his work force. His fledgling company, The Standard Toy Marble Company, grew rapidly to 60 workers, manufacturing common clay and stoneware marbles. The mostly plain and unglazed ceramic marbles were reddish brown; although some marbles found later at the site were glazed...what collectors today call "Brown Bennington's."

Although one of the largest clay mines in the city was right next door to his marble works, Brown did not buy his clay from that source. That nearby mine belonged to the

By that time only one other marble works, the M.F. Christensen & Company, remained in Akron. Brown was able to continue operations competitively for so long despite the introduction of inexpensive glass toy marbles, because most of the marbles he manufactured were for industrial use and not toys.

When Frank J. Brown died, the Akron Times Press said, "Lots of men who grew up between the turn of the century and the war (World War I) called the little clay marbles they lost and won while playing for keeps 'brownies'. They were named after an Akron man, Frank J. Brown, who died yesterday".

Many good samples of Brown's marbles can still be found at the former site of the marble works, now the home of a small machine shop. The American Toy Marble Museum has obtained many valuable photographs of the old marble works and their employees making toy marbles. These historically significant images were generously donated by two of Frank J. Brown's many grand and great-grandchildren still living here in Akron, Ohio.

Michael Cohill owns Group Ideate, Inc., a company that manufactures the "Comet Cruiser" play ball (a rubber ball with long, multicolored Tails) and is the founder of the American Toy Marble Museum, a fledgling marble museum located in Akron's Spicertown. This article, republished with permission from Mr. Cohill, was condensed from the inaugural issue (December 1990) of *The American Agate News*, a newsletter published by The American Toy Marble Museum.

Robinson Clay Products company (now the site of a city park). I stead, Brown's sons dug clay at a small private mine on a farm near Springfield Lake. The mine was a full day's drive by mule and wagon. The boys dug the clay by hand, with picks and shovels. Sometimes they stayed too late at the mine, and slept out under the stars.

Frank Brown's marbles were produced using similar manufacturing methods to the S.C. Dyke & Company processes. Long "snakes" of clay were cut into small chunks with a ceramics saw, then placed on a board that had vertical grooves, covering the whole board. Then a second board was rolled over the top, shaping the chunks into spheres.

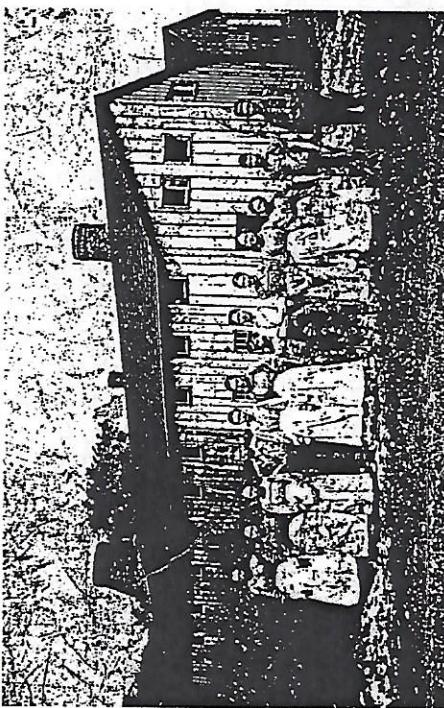
The marbles were fired into coal-burning kilns. They were measured by weight, put into cloth bags and the tops sewn shut by hand. The bags probably held at least 1,000 toy marbles each. It is not known how the bags were marked or labeled, if they were sold at all. They may have even sold some in boxes, as other companies did at the time.

In 1896, Frank J. Brown ran for city council in Akron. His opponent was a Prohibition candidate named Matthew Lang. Lang happened to open the third toy marble company in Akron, dubbed the East End Marble Company, which was in business from 1890 to 1892. The two marble moguls fought it out for a council seat, with Brown emerging as the victor and serving until 1904.

The company suffered two serious fires, each time destroying the works and temporarily laying off the work force. Brown was insured and was able to rebuild after each fire. Each time he rebuilt he enlarged his plant, and after the second fire the new building was of brick construction.

In 1907, the Standard Toy Marble Company received a contract to supply the City of Akron's Water Department with filtration marbles. This was the first time marbles had been used in the water purification process and it turned out to be a very successful technique. Brown's marble works eventually supplied marbles to water purification plants across the country.

Frank Brown's company stayed in business until 1916.



Frank Brown (at extreme right), and his employees (including several family members) posed in this 1890s view of his Standard Toy Marble Company factory building. The company, which manufactured marbles in Akron from 1894 to 1916, numbered 60 workers in its heyday. It is interesting to note that among these thirty-five