

Rolley Hole Marbles

by Robert J. Fulcher

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In early spring the ground in Clay County, Tennessee is too wet to plow, and too wet to play marbles. In late fall the frosty nights are too cold for the game, and besides, tobacco is in need of stripping. But on warm, dry evenings between those seasons you will find men, young and old, surrounding the marble yards scattered through the woods and fields of this region. Their wives and children may be present, but they are only spectators. Should they wish to learn how to play, it is understood that they must wait until late in the night, when the men have finished.

The folk marble game of rolley hole comes with many such mutual understandings and traditions: there are no referees, even in money tournaments — “fudging” is kept in check by peer pressure or barbs leveled at suspect behavior; there are no written rules, which may vary from yard to yard — you play by the rules of the man who owns the yard; there are no specifications for the size or condition of the playing area — “it’s as fair for one as it is the other,” is the adage invoked by players faced with a rough, unkempt marble yard. This relaxed attitude prevails because the game is a social event for families and neighbors — people who live and work together, sharing a common history and value system outside the context of the game. In no way, however, does it suggest that the game is considered frivolous. In fact, many of the children who take it up will devote a large portion of their lives to learning its strategies and skills.

Clay County makes up a small section of Tennessee’s northern border, midway between Knoxville and Nashville. From the air it looks like a green maze of hills and hollows, cut in half by the broad Cumberland River. The county is situated on Tennessee’s Eastern Highland Rim, a ring of limestone hills surrounding the Nashville Basin, resistant to erosional forces because of their chert-rich layers. Chert, commonly known as flint, often occurs in round nodules that weather out of road cuts and stream banks. For more than a century in Clay County, this flint has been collected as the ideal material for making marbles.

Rolley hole players use only locally-crafted flint marbles in their games. Commercially-produced glass varieties would quickly be shattered by powerful shots, and steel ball-bearings are too heavy to handle properly. At one time, limestone and baked clay marbles were not uncommon, but they have always been considered inferior to the flint varieties. The problem of producing perfect spheres from this tough material has been solved in a number of ways. Before gas and electric motors were available the most common method utilized water power. After roughly shaping a chunk of flint with a file, the marble-maker placed the piece on a basin of abrasive rock and hemmed it beneath a small waterfall in a creek. After weeks of turn-



ing, a rounded marble was formed. This method, however, was sometimes frustrating. Noted one maker who followed this technique: "If it come a rain overnight while he's asleep, that marble got washed out. Sometimes he'd never find it, and he'd have to make another one and start all over again. It'd take them two or three years to make one!"

In the late 1940s Bud Garrett, of Free Hill, created his marble-making machine, based on the same principles as his father's traditional water-powered method. Bud's marbles, beautiful orbs of red, white, black, grey or yellow, are the most popular in the region and come with a lifetime guarantee: if an internal flaw results in a marble's breaking, Bud will replace it upon receipt of the fragments.

Rolley hole marble players recognize quality in their game pieces, and good marbles often become heirlooms, passed down from older players whose health forces them to quit the game. Players are equally particular about the quality of the court on which games take place. "Marble yards," the term for the playing areas, were once found beside every schoolhouse, as well as inside barns, on old roadbeds, woodlots and fields, adjacent to country stores, and even on the courthouse square in Celina, Tennessee. The ideal yard is constructed of compacted loam soil. It must be absolutely gravel-free, and players will pull an old automobile tire rim, weighted down with blocks, across the surface of the yard to smooth it before an evening's game. Small imperfections are scraped down with the edge of a board. Some yards have even been sifted to remove all bits of rock and debris. Ultimately, the yard should appear as level and unblemished as the top of a pool table.

Rolley hole marble yard, Clay County.
Photos by Robert Fulcher, Tennessee
Department of Conservation



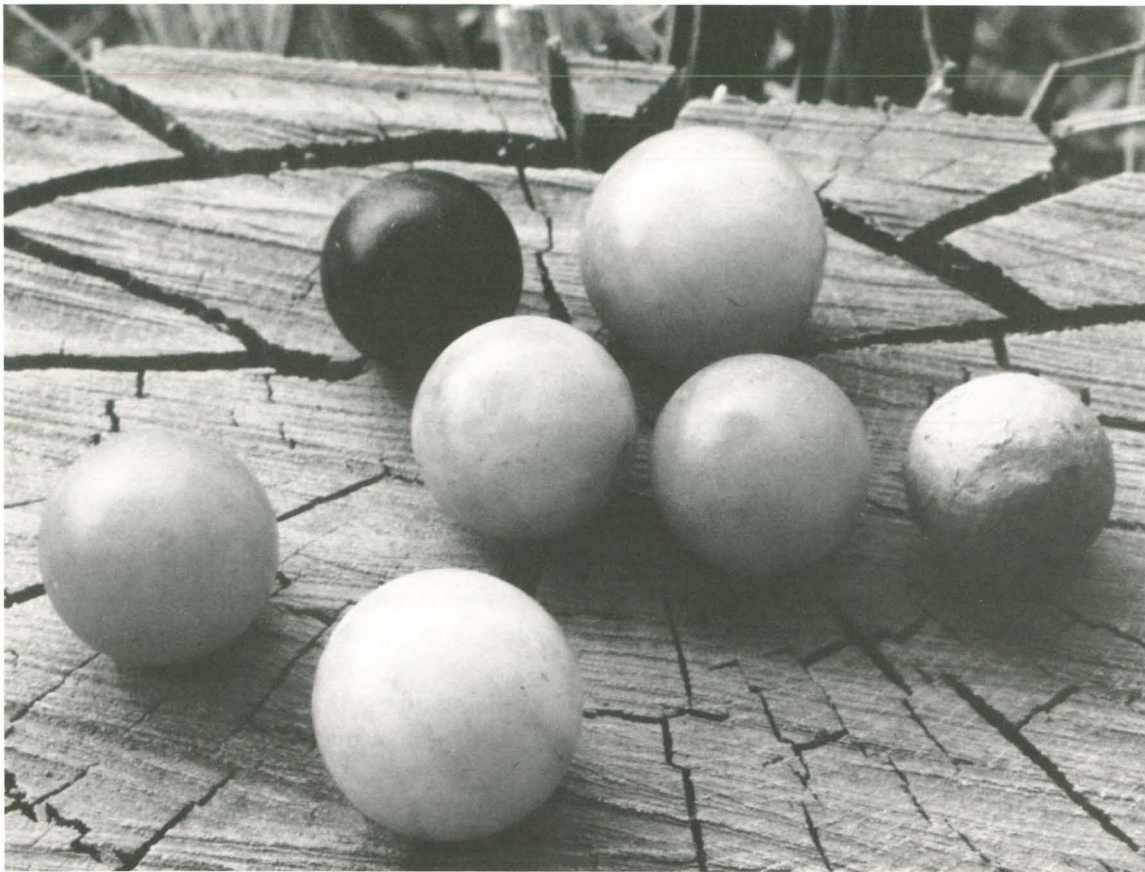
Rolley hole marble in shooting position.

Players attempt to control soil moisture by sprinkling the yard a few hours before their games with just enough water, so that a thin layer of dust, as fine as flour, appears on the surface. The dust controls the speed and bounce of a marble, and before each shot, with a circular sweep, a player will apply a thorough coating of it to his shooting hand. Just as chalk prepares a pool cue the dust will allow the marble to slip out of his fingers smoothly.

The sport of rolley hole requires technical shooting skills as well as thoughtful strategy. It shares features in common with golf, pool, and croquet. A centuries-old phenomenon, numerous variants of rolley hole have been documented worldwide. Shakespeare mentioned the game of Cherry Pit, which involved rolling a marble into a hole. Modern Tennessee variants, called “Poison” and “Granny Hole” are played using from one to six holes. Within Clay County, though the game has been known by many other names—rolley holey, three holes, holes, or just plain marbles (pronounced locally as “marvels”)—the basic rules and arrangement of the hole has apparently remained constant for a hundred years.

The Game

In a rolley hole match two teams oppose each other. A team consists of two players, each using one marble. The object of the game is for both players on a team to travel up and down the three hole course *three times* by “making” the holes. They must prevent their opponents from making the holes by shooting their marbles away. When both teammates have made the 12 holes in the course, they



Locally made flint and clay marbles for rolley hole.

win the game. The holes must be made in a certain order, and players use special terms to tell each other the next hole they “are for” (need to make):

1. the first hole (middle hole);
2. the second hole (top hole);
3. third hole or rover one (middle hole);
4. taylor or first round (bottom hole);
5. first one up two’s (middle hole);
6. top hole two’s (top hole);
7. rover two’s (middle hole);
8. two rounds (bottom hole);
9. first one up outs, or going up rover (middle hole);
10. top hole outs (top hole);
11. rover hole, or rover out (middle hole);
12. out hole (bottom hole).

A player “makes” a hole by rolling or “spanning” his marble into it. A “span” is measured by each player as the distance from his thumb, placed at the spot where his marble lays, to the end of his farthest outstretched finger. Before each shot a player may move his marble one “span” from the spot at which his marble lays. When a player makes a hole he is “for,” he can take another shot. When a player rolls into a “dead hole” (a hole he is “not for”) he does not win an extra shot. When a player hits an opponent’s marble he may shoot again, but if he hits the same marble twice, the player becomes “dead” and his turn is over. Finally, a player may choose to “lay,” or give up his turn.

Teammates must use cohesive strategy to be successful. Usually one member is recognized as the “manager” and will direct his partner’s shots through brief conferences or gestures. In this way older players tutor younger ones in the art of the game. Partnerships commonly last for decades, though some players never develop strong allegiances. Numerous accepted strategies of a formulaic nature are employed by players. For example, most will not advance more than three holes ahead of their partner. If one is ahead, he will try to help his partner by “laying” in a hole to defend it or attacking his opponents. The ability to estimate an opponent’s shooting skill is essential, for often a player will roll his marble close enough to an opponent’s marble so that opponent will shoot at him, but far enough away so that he may miss. One player tells of winning a game without ever hitting an opponent’s marble — his proof that, when good players are on the yard, “managing is what wins games.”

Because there are no movie theaters in Clay County, nor skating rinks, bowling alleys or dance halls, those involved in the sport of rolley hole recognize its value as an institution binding together families and communities. Still, the game has had periodic declines in popularity over the years. The most serious of these occurred in the late 1960s, when schoolchildren dropped the game as a recess activity, and most adults put their marbles aside as well. By 1983 only one active marble yard remained in Tennessee and the Monroe County Fair offered the only annual tournament, but just across the state line in Kentucky. Recently the Standing Stone State Park constructed a marble yard, and, along with “Honest Abe” Log Homes of Moss, Tennessee, began to cosponsor the National Rolley Hole Marbles Championships each August. Such actions have provided the impetus to bring interest back to full strength. Since the organization of that event, 20 new yards have been constructed, including one at the Celina High School, and the Celina newspaper now provides full coverage of numerous rolley hole tournaments. This revival may lead to some standardization of the rules, vocabulary, and structure of the game, but it has also initiated a new generation of players into the language, history, ritual, and lore of this engaging traditional sport.

Suggested reading

Allen, Shirley “Windy.” *The Game of Marbles*. Paden City, West Virginia: Marble King, Inc., 1974.

Ferretti, Fred. *The Great American Marble Book*. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1973.

Morse, Becky. “Rolly-Holey: A Regional Marble Game.” *Kentucky Folklore Record* 23(2)(1977):41-44.

Peterson, Elizabeth. “American Sports and Folklore.” *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1983.

Stapleton, Constance. “Flintrock Marbles: Robert ‘Bud’ Garrett.” *Folk Crafts in America*. New York: Harper and Row (forthcoming).

Suggested videotapes

Mack Prichard and Bobby Fulcher on “Portfolio,” by WDCN, Nashville, Tennessee. 15 minute color video. Tennessee Department of Conservation, Nashville, Tennessee.

1985 National Rolley Hole Marbles Championships, by Joe Davis. 50 minute color video. Dragon Productions, Livingston, Tennessee.