

Marble King Carries Reputation for Colors, Service

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Full text: PADEN CITY - Beri Fox, the "marble queen," at Marble King in Paden City said she still gets surprised at the ways customers use her marbles in sculptures, projects and games.

Kids don't shoot marbles like they used to, but they could be using marbles without even knowing it - a Pokemon card game uses marbles from Marble King and so did Hungry Hungry Hippos and Kerplunk.

A children's hospital in Cleveland has decorated columns with Marble King marbles, and Steven Spielberg featured a bag of Marble King marbles in his 1985 film "The Goonies."

Marbles of the shooting kind are generally the only thing that comes to mind when thinking of marbles, but Marble King marbles are the shakers in some cans of spray paint, the color in vases for floral designs and they even make up shimmering grapes on a wire wine holder in Marble King's newly opened gift shop across the street from the factory. Marble King won Creative Child Magazine toy of the year award for 2006, assuring its place in today's toy world.

Fox is the president of Marble King, continuing the post her father, Roger Howdyshell rose to and passed along to his five children. Fox's daughter works as a special events coordinator for Marble King.

"As kids, we got to see him work his way up, from office manager to business manager, to general manager, to vice president to president," Fox said. "We've all taken our turns working here, some longer than others."

Marble King started in St. Marys in 1949 with Berry Pink and Sellers Peltier. Pink, a businessman, loved interacting with children and had Peltier Glass manufacture his marbles. Pink traveled the country hosting marble tournaments, giving away marbles, garnering the nickname of the marble king. Marble King has been the sponsor of The National Marbles Tournament since 1968.

A fire destroyed the St. Marys facility in 1958 and Howdyshell, who was manager at the time, moved the company to Paden City. Howdyshell led the company to create the first American-made Cat's Eye marble.

Fox said Marble King's location along the Ohio River at the bottom of the Northern Panhandle was advantageous when the company began because plentiful sand, gas reserves and the oil boom in Sistersville provided everything they needed for glass.

West Virginia has seen 240 glass manufacturers shrink to only seven, which Fox said caused prices to go up, since the supplies are less plentiful.

"The changes over the past 20 years, since I've been here ... they keep you on your toes," Fox said. "It's been a huge period of change. You have to keep with it and be very innovative and think of new ways for your product to be used."

Fox described the marble making process simply, saying glass is melted in a furnace at 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, and then it is cut into the desired size and dropped 5 feet into a forming machine.

Marble King employs 38 people in manufacturing, packaging, shipping and glass chemistry, which guides the proper temperature and color mix for the process. Fox said crafting the perfect marble is just like creating a good recipe.

Marble King began recycling glass in the late 1970s and now processes 4.5 tons of recycled glass each day, putting out one million marbles every day.

Huge piles of recycled glass glisten outside the factory, sorted by color, from white and clear to blue and even a pile of brown beer bottles. Fox said the Industries of the Future program has worked with the company to modify its manufacturing for a reduction in energy consumption.

Fox said Marble King is known among the glass and marble scenes worldwide as the "Cadillac of the industry," and their colors and designs set them apart. Marble King is known for high quality marbles, dedication to customers and spoton color matching.

"I think in today's market, thanks to the changes technology can provide, it's not so much where re you're located as how you an market your company," Fox said.

Fox said she has no plans to move. Marble King marbles are in a NASA exhibit and a walkway at Plum Island Resort in North Carolina.

"I think West Virginia's going, things are changing," she said. "I've seen good things in the past few years, and I'm just hopeful they'll continue. I think it'll come."

The gift shop is located in what was Paden City's first restaurant, which was built in the 1800s. Fox said they had so many visitors stopping in the factory, a separate gift shop almost had to be created to serve them. The small store includes wooden toys, locally made crafts such as purses and home decor and of course, marbles. Fox said she has plans for a museum-type learning center for children.

"We're certainly out-of-the-box thinkers," she said. "It's helped us remain competitive in a changing market."

Marble King will be featured at 9 p.m. March 6 on the Travel Channel in John Ratzenberger's "Made in America" show. Ratzenberger chose Marble King because of its contribution to the local community and the American toy culture.

The show will highlight Paden City landmarks.

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