



Staff photo by ERIC WELCH

These marbles came from the archaeological dig behind the Pony Express Museum. They belong to the collection of Gloria Davis' grandfather. Davis gave a lecture at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum Wednesday.

3/3/92 News Press Old marbles are a rare find

Pony Express Stables dig yields gems

By PRESTON FILBERT
News-Press/Gazette Staff Writer

Johnny Fry may have played marbles.

OK, it's a longshot whether we'll ever know if the young Pony Express riders were good at knuckling down and shooting keeps for a milky. But in the past two years, archaeologists at the Pony Express Stables have dug up half a dozen marbles, including one in the bottom of a well that was probably used during the mail business' brief stint.

Michael Fisher, supervisor of

the dig, brought three of those antique marbles to the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art on Tuesday to be identified by Cathy Runyan, "The Marble Lady" of Kansas City.

Runyan picked the orbs up, rolled them in her palm and, finally, subjected them to the big test: knocking them against her teeth.

"This is stone," she said of the marble found at the bottom of the well. "It's very dense."

She figures it probably dates from the late 19th century, as does a yellow clay marble found elsewhere on the site. The third marble is glass, made in Germany sometime between 1850 and 1890.

Runyan — and her teeth — know marbles. She started studying the toys when she realized nine years ago that her children had no knowledge of the game

she knelt in the dust to play.

"I realized nine years ago that it was about ready to die out, and no one even cared," she told about 30 people gathered at the museum. "If you were born after 1954, you've probably never played marbles."

She blamed the demise of marbles on television, which kept children indoors, and on the advent of blacktop playgrounds, which present a poor, bumpy surface for shooting your aggies.

In the past nine years, Runyan has helped create marble exhibits for museums and has written a book of marble games.

And now marble playing is coming back with a new generation, inspired by artists creating beautiful new designs, and by children who find the simplicity

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of the game appealing, she added.

Also, grandparents with leisure time are teaching their children's children the old rules and techniques, just the way Runyan learned to play.

Gloria Davis, who brought a bag of her grandfather's marbles for Runyan's inspection, is one woman who has kept the faith: She's teaching her seven-year-old daughter how to play.

"I grew up with all big brothers and boy cousins," Davis said. "Marbles were the only thing I could do well, even if I was skinny and scrawny."

She and her daughter do their shooting on the carpet, and Runyan concedes it's possible that indoor carpeting is contributing to the return of the game. If so, it's coming back in a less dirty but still time-honored form: Ancient Persians played marbles, she said, using the big medallion patterns in their fancy carpets for the marble ring.