

July 2011 Featured Glass of the Month: ST. CLAIR



While making several business trips to north-central Indiana in the 1990's, I was able to spend some time with Joe Rice at The House of Glass in the small town of Elwood. Joe is

the last in the line of the famous glassmakers of the St. Clair family. He is the nephew of the five St. Clair brothers and grandson of John (Pop) St. Clair who founded the company. He told me a lot about his family, and I eventually began collecting Joe Rice glass and St. Clair glass. I bought a lot of his paperweights to sell at the Scott Antique Market and on eBay. The information below is based on out-of-print literature and on conversations with Joe Rice.

St. Clair glass was produced from 1941 to 1987. It was made in both built-up items formed on a punty-rod such as paperweights, glass fruit, animals, vases, penholders, perfume bottles, and candleholders, and in pressed glass novelties like toothpick holders, goblets, salt dips, creamer/sugars, and other pieces. The family started in the U.S. with John St. Clair, a glassmaker in France, who came here in 1890. He settled in Elwood, Indiana to work for the McBeth Evans Glass Company, but he never made glass of his own for sale. His son, also called John, eventually worked for McBeth Evans too. He had a large family, and was later known to everyone as Pop. His wife Ellen and all his children became involved in the

future family glass business that became so well known. The boys were Ed, Johnny, Joe, Paul, and Bob; the girls were Rosella, Marie, Jane-Ann, Dorothy, and Margaret.

Between 1903 and the mid-1930's, glass factories in Indiana closed due to the exhaustion of natural gas. Pop, Ellen, and Johnny, Ed, and Bob moved to Dunbar, West Virginia to work at Dunbar Glass. Joe and Paul stayed in Elwood. In 1938, Joe built a small glass shop in the backyard of the family home on N. 5th St., and started making paperweights for family and friends, and for sale. In 1941 Mom and Pop, with Johnny, Ed, and Bob, returned to Elwood and formally established



Toothpick Holders

the St. Clair Glass Works with Joe and Paul. Part of the house on 5th street was used as a gift shop and packing room. The women in the family worked various jobs, from packing, shipping, selling in the gift shop, marketing to department stores, bookkeeping, and accounting. During WWII, the demand for St. Clair glass was strong. Bob, Ed, and Johnny enlisted in the service, so Pop, Joe, and Paul

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kept the company going. At the end of the war the three sons returned. They all made paperweights, candleholders, bells, ashtrays, ring holders, pin trays, penholders, doorstops, bookends, birds, turtles, glass fruit, etc. The firm sold their items through their gift shop and to department stores and other outlets. They were one of the finest small glass houses in America. Pop died in 1958, and his son Joe assumed control of the factory and expanded into pressed glass novelties such as toothpick holders, covered animal dishes, goblets, tumblers, pitchers, salt dips, and creamers and sugars. In 1971, Bob and his wife Maude built their own glass factory and gift shop on



the outskirts of Elwood on State Road 28, and began making many of the same products as the other St. Clair Glass Works. Bob's brothers Ed and Paul worked at this factory, as well as Maude's son, Jack Hutchenson, and Jane Ann's son, Joe Rice. Bob died in 1986.

In 1978 Joe St. Clair decided to stop making pressed glass, and concentrated on paperweight-type glass only. Joe's most

special paperweight was a single rose, which was extremely difficult to make. They are extremely rare, and seldom come on the market. He only made approximately 1,000 of them; they currently sell for \$800 to \$900. I was lucky to find one at the Scott Antique Market in 1995. Unfortunately, Joe died in 1987 of a heart attack while removing paperweights from the cool-down belt, and this ended the era of St. Clair glass.

Pop's daughter Jane-Ann married Paul Rice. Their son Joe, born in 1950, became interested in glassmaking at an early age and eventually worked for his uncle, Joe St. Clair, and later for his other uncle, Bob. By 1987, after the five St. Clair brothers had all passed away, Joe Rice bought the family glassmaking equipment, along with the factory and gift shop formerly owned by Bob and Maude, and established his own business as the House of Glass on State Road 28 in Elwood. Joe is a highly skilled glassmaker, making all the same type of glass that the St. Clairs made.

Several different hot-stamped marks were used on the bottom of St. Clair paperweights over the years. And, for much production, gold and black oval paper labels were used instead of a hot-stamp mark. These paperweights were made with a coarse ground bottom. The collector has no trouble identifying these as St. Clair glass. The reason so many of their paperweights are found today with no mark is because the paper labels were removed or washed off. They are still highly collectible; you don't need to worry about the lack of a mark, because you will recognize the St. Clair quality after you have handled a few.

- Submitted by Roy Webber