

Agates, 1871

There were agates, plain agates, fluted agates, bronze agates, pearl agates and more.

The word brings to mind many things, a mineral, a kind of playing marbles, mottled enamel kitchenware and to some collectors ceramic buttons. There has been confusion among button collectors. Especially will old-time collectors remember grandmother called the little china buttons agates. Some new collectors use the term "agate" for the enamel buttons in mottled colors of blue, green, brown, black with white — usually these enamels are on copper with wire shanks and the tops resembling the mottled kitchenware.

There is no attempt being made here to change the well known term "Small Chinas". This term was coined by button collectors for the family of calicoes, pie crusts, saw tooth, ringers, deep wells, and the other small china or porcelain cuties. It is probably best at this late date to just know the favorite "Small Chinas" were once sold as "Agates."

Into Just Buttons Museum, came a huge daily account book from a wholesale Dry Goods establishment in Boston, Massachusetts, dated from July 3, 1871 to April 5, 1872. It is very evident when the buttons were being sold to retail stores our popular "Small Chinas" were called "Agates." Why, it may never be known. The manufacturer seemed al-

ways to use the terms, china and porcelain. "Cole's Encyclopedia of Dry Goods" (England, 19th Century) put these buttons under the heading "Agate". And, by that name the Dry Goods wholesalers, retailers and customers advertised and knew our "Small Chinas".

As the sales were studied in this account book, it is only a guess which might have been calicoes, ringers, deep well, inkwell, gaiters, etc. And, for bird cages and igloos, well, no manner of imagination finds them among the thousands of agate buttons sold in this Boston wholesale house. Down through the columns of seven hundred pages, thousands of buttons are listed and most of them are agates. Fortunately the handwriting in this book is very plain and although the ink has turned brown, it is clear.

Now and then, buttons of other materials are mentioned, pearl, rubber, jet, metallic, black jet, crochet, rep, velvet, gilt, horn, steel are listed. Perhaps the most expensive of all are the crocheted buttons, suggesting they may have been hand crocheted. Pearl buttons were next highest in price. The listed ivory buttons may have been the vegetable ivory buttons.

Among the listings "sew through" and "shanked" were seen frequently, especially among the agates. There were catalog numbers which are no

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clue to present readers. Sometimes size was included. Shank'd agates seem to be as many as sew through and yet we do not find as many today. Brown agates were listed often and they can be found easily, especially in the four hole style. However, the two hole kinds were mentioned more often.

Such buttons as common agates, col'd agates, plain agates, fancy agates, fluted agates, bronze agates, pearl agates had been sold. Among the colors blue and brown were reported often, no mention of pink, lavender or orange.

Other than agates, the company sold pearl, fancy and plain gilts, black and white crochet buttons, horn and French horn, steel balls, cut steel, rubber, ivory, red ivory.

Common agates sold for five cents to eighteen cents a gross; colored agates, seventy-five cents a gross; pearls, a dollar and a quarter to two dollars and fifty cents a gross.

Boot buttons, black, wood and fancy sleeve buttons, short and collar buttons were among the many kinds.

Late in the fall and winter of 1871-1872, more button moulds were sold, dome and convex. Dressmak-

ers were probably covering buttons with the dress material, especially for the heavy winter garments.

By spring of 1872, the company was selling the same buttons as the summer of 1871 but less of them. More often hooks and eyes were in the orders. This may indicate less buttons were being worn.

This very interesting daily account book was given to Just Buttons Museum by Mrs. R. F. Cadwell. Visitors to the Museum may have the privilege of reviewing the book. Except for covers, it is in very good condition. Other interesting studies may be made. This company sold all kinds of "Notions". Around Christmas time, they also sold toys.

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