

# ISLAND LIFE

Dr. Fitness, D7  
Coffeebreak, D2  
Relating, D3

Art: A warm spell  
inside Honolulu's  
galleries, D5

The Honolulu Advertiser

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Island Life Editor: Wanda A. Adams, 525-8034

*Beachcombers' haul grows more precious by the year  
as glass fishing floats are replaced by plastic*

D8 Sunday February 25, 1996 The Honolulu Advertiser

## Fishing floats:

From Page D1

There's no market for the plastic ones. "They're terrible, horrible, despicable," said beachcomber Randy Pratt of Kailua, who last found a glass float 10 years ago. "I wouldn't have a plastic one on my premises."

Every now and then, a glass float will still wash up. Nobody knows for sure how many are still riding the currents — hundreds, thousands, millions?

"I haven't heard of anybody finding a good one for a while," Marks said. "I probably gave away hundreds as gifts. Took them on vacation and gave them as souvenirs to friends. They appreciated it so much more than we did."

Marks is hanging on to the 50 he has left. "I'm keeping them for my kids," Marks said.

### Finders, keepers

Finding a float isn't hopeless. In 1977, a California tourist strolling down Bellows Beach discovered a rare "binary," sort of like a Siamese twin float. It was the first float he ever found.

Part of their mystique lies in their history. And they're virtually impossible to trace.

Many people associate floats with Japanese fishermen wandering the vast Pacific. But they actually originated in Norway in 1844 for commercial cod fishing. Japan started using them in 1911 to buoy their heavy, deep-sea nets and hooks.

Other countries soon adopted them: China, Korea, Russia, England and Belgium. Some were manufactured — such as the clear Duraglass models from Owens-Illinois Co. in California — but most were hand-blown.

Pinpointing their origin is easier if the float has a trademark.

Japanese glass-blowers often etched their floats with a certain symbol, from geometric shapes to letters and numbers. Russia used a hammer and sickle; China a star. England simply stamped "British Made" in the seal.

If you solve that riddle, then try figuring out how long the float has roamed



Advertiser graphic

quickly decreasing

# The ocean's precio



Cory Lum/The Honolulu Advertiser

Floyd Otani of Ahi Fishing Company Ltd. holds the latest in fishing floats: inflatable, left, and manufactured plastic models. They are cheaper to make, don't break and are easier to handle, Otani said.

the Pacific. Most get caught in the relentless Kuroshio Current (see map), said Seattle oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer.

It takes at least six years for a float to complete the journey, Ebbesmeyer said. "But they could stay out there for decades before something spins them out."

Floats covered with barnacles and seaweed probably have made several trips around the Pacific, he said. "People are still finding those in fair numbers," he said. "But the supply is

The first documented finding in Hawaii was in February 1932. According to a newspaper article, deep-sea fishermen found two balls floating in the ocean and brought them back to Honolulu.

Police investigated the spheres, the article says, and speculated they were an "ingenious device in some opium smuggling scheme." Windward sailors corrected the story the next day.

## New-fangled gadgets

Down at Kewalo Basin near Fisherman's Wharf, Floyd Otani shows off the latest step in the evolution of fishing balls — inflatable, vinyl orange floats. Cheaper to make, more durable, easier to handle, he explained.

The Hokuyo Glass Manufacturing Co. in

## us cargo



Bruce Asato/The Honolulu Advertiser

Few floats contain water, forced through the microscopic pores on their seal at lower depths, trapped forever inside. One out of every 150 floats has this rare feature highly valued by collectors.

Aomori, Japan, has been selling these for years, said department head Sooi Tanzaki. But from 1949 to 1977, they were the king of glass floats, turning out more than 50 million.

Now they make flowerpots, plates and lighting fixtures. Glass floats were phased out because they broke, were dangerous and expensive, Tanzaki said. Still, if somebody put in a large order, he said, "We'll make it."

One small company still does.

Yooji Asahara, 62, may be the last maker of glass balls. Every year, he and 10 other workers hand-blow 2,100 floats at his small factory in Oturi, Japan. They produce 20 different sizes, all round, all blue-green.

"The color of the sea," he said.

His father did it, and his father before him.

Since the turn of the century.

It is more than pride, Asahara said. More than a tradition. His family has been chosen for this job. He needs no trademark or insignia. "I'm the only one making them out of glass, so I know they're mine."

Perhaps someday, a big catch or a strong storm will tear an Asahara float from its nets. It will ride the restless surf, waiting for the right combination of winds and waves, waiting to become somebody's treasure.

*Advertiser Staff Writer Eric Gregory's turn finally came on Dec. 18, 1995. A glass ball, covered in barnacles and seaweed, floated up next to him at Lanikai Beach. He rolled the treasure in his towel and went straight home, knowing the day*

# BEACHES BAILS

**By Eric Gregory**  
Advertiser Staff Writer

**T**hey've been Christmas tree ornaments, lamp bases, garden decor and the center of conversation.

Not long ago, there were so many glass fishing floats, people wondered what to do with them all. They were fairly common on Windward and North Shore beaches, especially after storms, mixed with the sea's other rejects.

But they soon became treasures, not trash. There are tales of men taking off their pants and knotting the legs to carry the day's bounty. Collectors swept the coast with flashlights before dawn, or scoured the surf with binoculars.

Lanais were full of them, amassed in huge nets, clinking with the trade winds. "People would come over and ask to take one home," said Brad Adams. "We'd say, 'Don't take one. Take three.'"

Then beachcombers started finding plastic and foam floats instead of glass. These cheap, machine-made models lacked the character of their ancestors: no handwoven nets, no rainbow of colors, no personality.

Soon, processed plastic had all but replaced the classy glass.

"I guess we started seeing the drop-off around 1985," said Richard Marks of Kalaupapa, a peninsula that juts out of Molokai's north end, trapping balls that blow in on the northeast trade

quick if you're ever going to find one."

Fishermen scoop them up at sea. "They can probably make as much money on the floats as they do fishing," said Maurice Kaya, owner of Kaya Fishing Supplies in Chinatown.

They bring them to Kaya, who weaves authentic nets for \$5 to \$18, depending on the size.

But they don't hang the nets outside anymore, in fear the floats will be stolen. Marks had two square ones — almost unheard of in the tight network of collectors — disappear from his yard years ago.

But antique stores have seen their supplies dwindle in the last year.

"(Collectors will) stop you in the parking lot if you've got one to sell," said Marti Phillips of Kailua's Heritage Antiques. "It will never make it through the front door."

Windward Antiques' Adams gets a half dozen people each week asking for floats. "I wish I knew what happened to the 200 on my auntie's lanai," he said. "No telling what they'd be worth."

At The Hunter next door, Dorothy Garliepp flipped through business cards with notes scribbled on the back. "Here's a guy who wants us to call him if we get a lavender one," she said with a laugh. "I haven't seen one of those in years."

**See Fishing floats, Page D8**

winds. "Plastic's all we see anymore. We make flower pots out of them.

"It's a real thrill if we ever find a glass one nowadays."

## Blessing/course

Because glass ones have become scarce, connoisseurs' collections are worth more. "They ain't going nowhere but up in price," said Paul Wroblewski, who runs a Kahuku curio shop called The Only Show in Town in the Tanaka Plantation Store. (See story, Page D8.)

Ordinary balls that once sold for a buck now cost \$6. Rollers start at \$18 and volleyball-size ones are worth at least \$45 — without the net. Want a color besides blue-green? Good luck, or get out the checkbook.

Tough competition makes even the average ones impossible to find. Hard-core hunters speed down beaches in all-terrain vehicles to get there first. People search all hours of the night.

"Take a light bulb, stuff it in the sand and watch two little old ladies run 60 miles an hour to check it out," Wroblewski said. "You've got to be



Bruce Asato/The Honolulu Advertiser

Paul Wroblewski, a North Shore collector, has hundreds of glass floats, but he's only happened upon two in 15 years. "I buy because I know you can't find them anymore," he said. At the right is his World War II-era Japanese buoy that someone found washed up on the shores of Kauai.

## Know your fishing floats

Glass fishing floats come in several shapes and sizes — some as small as a golf ball, a precious few bigger than a basketball. Most are round, but rarer ones look like rolling pins, sausages or pears. The average float is blue-green in color like a Coke bottle. But impurities in the glass and the intense Pacific sun can change them to pink, blue, green, red, purple or turquoise.

Your chances are slim for finding one.

Amos Wood — whose book "Beachcombing for Japanese Glass Floats" is the collector's bible — calculated odds by studying collections, compared with the number of beach trips to find even one float.

Any oddity — size, shape, color, water inside — increases the value, said collector Paul Wroblewski. "Only they don't come easy, they don't come cheap and they don't come quick."



### Rolling pins

Not all floats are round. These, called "rolling pins," are made by rolling the glass against a wooden form while it's still pliable. Notice the maker's insignia stamped on the side. One out of every 35 floats is a "roller."



### External sand abrasion

Some floats are rough to the touch from years of rolling on the sand with each lapping wave. The outline of a net long gone has been sand-blasted into this ball. Odds of finding one like this are 1 in 300.



### Binary

This dual float is very scarce: 1 for 2,000 odds in finding one. It's made when the sealed ends are pressed together to make one float. Beachcombers sometimes find these with one side broken.



### Sausage-shaped

Rare "sausage" floats also are rolled against a form while hot and sealed at one end. Odds of finding one are 1 in 700. Only one size has ever been reported: 4 inches long by 2 inches in diameter.



### Internal spindle

This is one of the rarest oddities — an "internal spindle." The hair-thin filament inside is caused by an excess of glass during the blowing or sealing process. Chances of finding one of these is 1 in 1,500.

## A Beachcomber's Tale

# Glass floats now more elusive than ever

WAIMANALO — Walter Ramsey has a dozen glass floats strung around his window like Christmas lights.

Fifty more, large and small, fill a wicker basket next to the sofa. One bigger than a basketball sits atop a hubcap, like a prize jewel ready to be admired.

"I used to find a lot of them," this 94-year-old beachcomber said. "Sometimes I'd get lucky, find several in one day, depending on the tide. But very few these last years."

That saddens Ramsey, who has been strolling Hawaii's beaches since 1927. He moved to Waimanalo in 1950.

A morning walk back then would quickly turn into a treasure hunt. Glass floats dotted the Windward shore like driftwood. There was enough for everybody.

"Used to be one old guy had thousands of them," Ramsey said. "Not anymore."

Now, people patrol the beach at daybreak with all-terrain vehicles. They race to a coconut floating in the water, thinking it might be a



Ramsey

float. "They'll knock you down if you don't watch out," Ramsey said.

He doesn't beachcomb anymore for that reason. At his age, he said, it isn't worth risking. It's a rare day that you find a float anyway — his last came two years ago — so why take a chance?

But he misses the thrill. And he wishes he could walk his infant great-grandson, Puna, to the beach someday, watch his eyes grow wide as a big one floats up, its net covered with barnacles and seaweed.

These days, though, it would probably be made of hard orange plastic.

"I used to love taking my grandkids to the beach," Ramsey said. "They'd yell, 'I see a ball' and go racing after it, get into a squabble over who saw it first."

"They'd all have a fit if I offered to sell these. No, I'll keep them and enjoy them and pass them down. You just don't find them like you did in the old days."

— Eric Gregory

### Get his drift

Seattle oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer is writing a book about things that drift in the ocean. Part of the book will feature glass fishing floats. In particular, he's looking for ones found in the early 1900s. If you have an old float or an unusual beachcombing story to tell, write Ebbesmeyer at 6306 21st Ave. NE, Seattle, WA 98115.



An ordinary glass float like this one costs about \$5.

# FLOATING GEMS

By Eric Gregory  
Advertiser Staff Writer

**T**hey start off as nothing more than a common float, a hand-blown bubble of glass used to buoy fishing nets.

Then a big catch or a strong storm tears them away, launching them into the endless Pacific currents. They can drift for decades before the right combination of winds and waves casts them upon Hawaii's shores.

Suddenly they are a chance treasure, a piece of old Hawaii that is becoming more elusive with every tide. The winter storms that once drove them here now only bring plastic imitations.

"It's sheer luck if you find a glass float anymore," said Paul Wroblewski, a North Shore collector.

Whether you grew up in the Islands and plucked them from the restless surf before dawn, or just discovered them in a curio shop hanging from frayed nets, their mystery grabs you like a riptide.

How long and far have they journeyed? What stories could they tell?

Their worth is measured in ways other than money, even though the larger ones now bring \$150 and up. For many people they have become a nostalgic symbol of good luck and survival, tossed about the sea among the rocks and reefs.

## IN ISLAND LIFE



This rare colored float — the size of a basketball — is among the exotic glass balls coveted by collectors. A special report in Island Life, D1.

Photographs by Bruce Asato /  
The Honolulu Advertiser

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# Curio store owner falls under the spell

KAHUKU — In his 15 years of scouring Hawaii's beaches, Paul Wroblewski has found only two glass floats.

Yet his collection numbers in the hundreds and is filled with the rarest, most colorful treasures that beachcombers are lucky to find in a lifetime.

"I buy because I know you can't find them anymore," Wroblewski said at his North Shore curio store, The Only Show in Town. "It gets to be an obsession."

Wroblewski has been buying floats since the early 1970s, when his store was on Kauai. There was a box full of colored ones in an estate he bought, so he put them out for sale.

They were gone in a day.

"What in the world's going on here?" Wroblewski thought. "I had no idea they were rare, and here I was, selling them for 50 cents apiece."

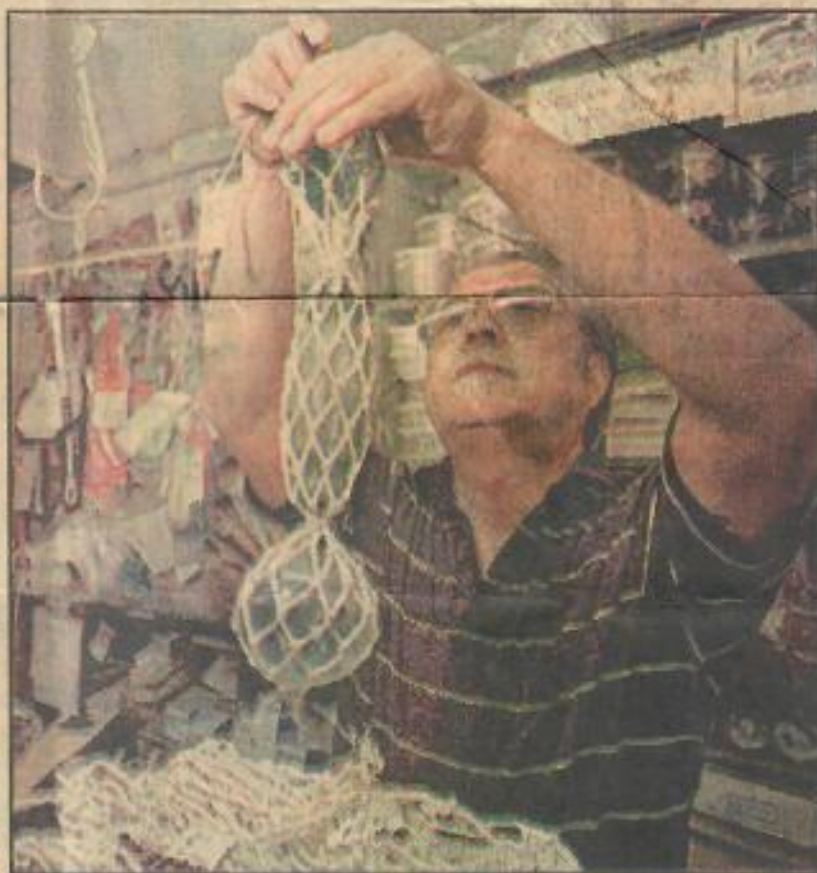
He became fascinated with their story and started tracking down the more unusual ones: a green "rolling pin" 15 inches long and 6 inches in diameter from Maui. A double ball, called a "binary" by collectors.

He's even got a World War II-era Japanese buoy — a ball suspended in a net, just below its blinking light — that someone found washed up ashore on Kauai.

Then there's the purple one, its color so deep it looks black. "The odds," he said, shaking his head. "You are not likely to ever find one at all. It cost me an arm and a leg, but I had to have it."

He doesn't know how much he's spent on floats over the years, but his collection is priceless. "It's a hobby," he said. "The money doesn't matter anymore. It's the exuberance of getting a new float."

Wroblewski moved to Oahu three years ago after Hurricane Iniki ravaged Kauai; here he's found more competition. His store has washtubs full of "average" floats, as he calls them — blue-green beauties for sale, some with the company's trademark still etched in their crude seal.



Cory Lum/The Honolulu Advertiser

Maurice Kaya, third-generation owner of Kaya Fishing Supply in Chinatown, weaves nets for people who bring in their glass fishing floats. The ball and roller here make up a decoration in his house.

He's well-known for buying entire collections, so he puts the ordinary ones out to sell. "I keep them around to sell because it's a piece of history, and people have to be educated to it," he said.

The collector smiles as a tourist picks through the bunch, oohing and aahing at the frosted outline of a net long gone, blasted into the glass by the sand.

"People are mesmerized by them," he said, as the customer handed over \$9 for her souvenir. "This will probably make her trip.

"Another collector is born."

— Eric Gregory