

ANTIQUE COLLECTIBLES

by Dale Seymour & Ken Craig

"He who knows only his own generation always remains a child." ... Plato

This is the first article of what is planned to be a regular feature of the *Casino Chip and Token News*. Although the major interest in this magazine appears to be modern casino chips and new commemorative chips, there are several collectors who subscribe that are quite interested in knowing about all kinds of gaming chips and counters. Even if one does not collect a certain category of chip, it is frequently beneficial to know the rarity and value of chips that they discover from time to time. A profitable find can help finance acquisitions in one's own special interest area.

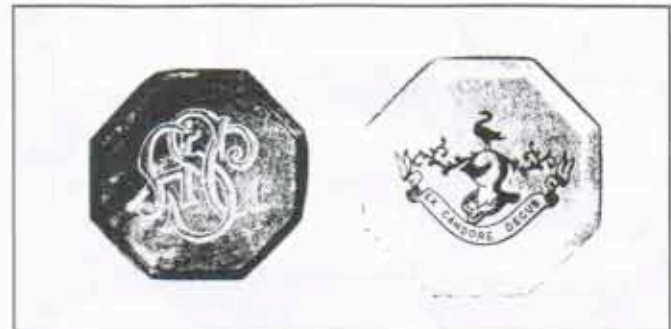
The use of game counters, as they were called in earlier days, goes back hundreds of years. Counters were used in a variety of games throughout the world and they were created from nearly every type of material that you can imagine. These include: metals of all types, bone, ivory, jade, mother-of-pearl, porcelain, wood, clay, paper, Bakelite, leather, celluloid, coal, woven straw, and plastic.

In Europe, during the 16th through the 19th centuries, bone and metal counters were most commonly used. Games such as *Quadrille*, *Pope Joan*, *Loo* and *Ombre* required counters for "melding" or betting. Actual currency or coins were frequently used, but often was inconvenient for a number of reasons. The game of *Poker* was derived from the English game of *Bragg* and the French game of *Poque* in the New Orleans area in about 1835. Both poker and the more popular game of *Faro* required numerous game counters or checks to play the game efficiently.

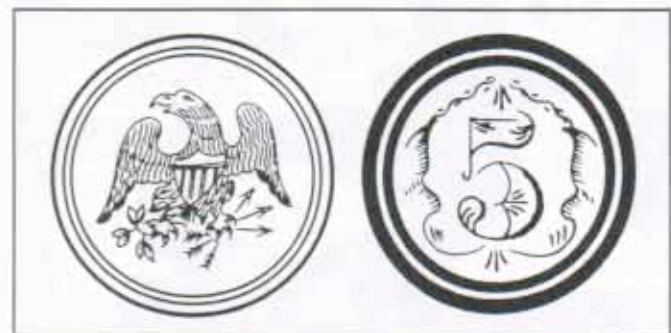
This need for game pieces inspired some enterprising business types to actually manufacture sets of chips to be sold to the public. Most early European chips sets were housed in a box about 9 inches by 12 inches. This larger box contained four smaller boxes of counters and often a deck or two of playing cards. The four smaller boxes usually each contained counters of a distinct color or design. It seems that this "set" provided four players each with their own box of counters.



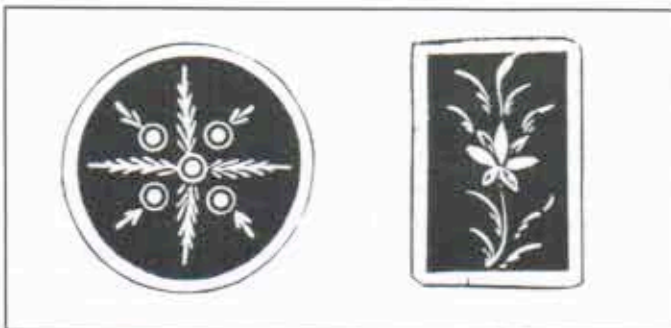
English Style Mother-of-Pearl (1720-1840)



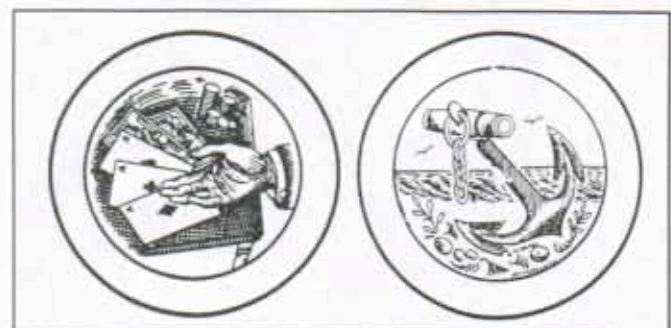
French Style Mother-of-Pearl (1830-1930)



American Style Ivory (1840-1900)



Bone Counters (1600-1900)



American Style Clay (1880-1940)

ANTIQUE COLLECTIBLES (Continued)

As is the case with home poker sets today, after the game, the counters remained with their owner. Sometimes money exchanged hands as the counters represented various monetary values and other times the play was "just for fun."

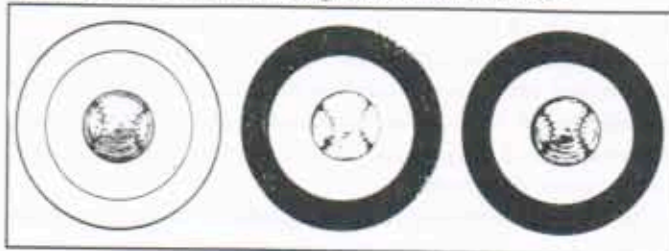
Worldwide, the most common type of counters were made from bone. It was plentiful and inexpensive. A "high end" set of bone counters might be intricately carved. Its "low end" counterpart might be dyed in four different colors or sometime not even dyed at all. A typical bone set would be made up of three different shapes: a square, a rectangle and a circle. Although counters for certain games and in certain countries were somewhat uniform in shape and color, counter shapes and sizes varied greatly as shown in the illustrations below.



Examples of counter shapes (reduced in size)

Although some very early counters were made from ivory in European countries, large elaborately-engraved sets were not typical until the mid-1800s. Ivory poker chip and faro sets were probably first manufactured in the 1840s in America. Collectors have very few examples of thick ivory gambling chips from Europe. Most ivory chips are American and were manufactured in the New York City area. Of the more than 1400 different known designs, more than 90% are American.

A set of ivory chips could range in size from 100 to 700 chips. Often the chips would be sold in elaborate wooden holders which might represent one-fourth to one-fifth the value of the chips. Most commonly a set would contain three or four different chip designs. Two types of sets were 1) design sets and 2) numeral sets. Design sets contained chips having the same design but different colored borders. Numeral chips contained chips with one design and other numerals.



American Ivory Chip Design Set (reduced 30%).



American Ivory Chip Numeral Set (reduced 30%).

The design set, as opposed to the numeral set, allowed players to determine the value of each chip. Most commonly, chip values were set as follows: white rim - 1 unit, red rim - 5 units, blue rim - 25 units, and gold rim 50 or 100 units. The numeral set usually contains unit chips engraved in some geometric design, numeral chips with a 5 (usually with a red rim) engraved in the center, and numeral chips with a 25 (usually with a blue, green or gold rim) engraved in the center. Sometimes a set would contain a few 50s or 100s. In general, ivory chips measure about 1 1/2" in diameter, but some sets contain larger 25s, 50s and 100s. Higher denomination chips such as 50s and 100s are rare and consequently have a much higher price tag. Ones, tens and twenties are uncommon.

In future columns we will address specific details of various types of antique counters and chips. New finds and new code numbers assigned to them will be given. For more details on old chips refer to *Antique Gambling Chips* by Seymour, et. al. Past Pleasures, PO Box 50863, Palo Alto, CA 94303. phone: (650) 948-0949; fax: (650) 941-3695.