

GET ON BOARD!

Today, hardly anyone remembers the poetry of Sir John Suckling, a minor 17th-century English author.

In *Brief Lives*, a gossipy collection of biographical sketches, John Aubrey describes Suckling as “the greatest gallant of his time, and the greatest gamester.” He also mentions that the profligate poet invented the card game cribbage.

That’s right: cribbage. Even if you haven’t played in years, you probably still recognize the cribbage board. Whether it’s a simple block of wood or a chunk of plastic, rectangular or curiously shaped, the cribbage board is an eye-catching object.

Experts admit that players could just as easily keep score with a pencil and paper—and yet Suckling’s board has endured for roughly 400 years.

We think it’s because they’re just so darn cool, and plenty of people agree with us.

In fact, some folks like cribbage boards so much that they collect them. They even have their own organization, the Cribbage Board Collectors Society (CBCS), which was founded in 1991. Today, the CBCS has roughly 200 members, holds an annual convention, and publishes a quarterly newsletter called “Members of the Board.”

For beginners who can’t distinguish between a genuine ebony board and a Bakelite knock-off, Terry Coons is an excellent guide. Coons is the CBCS’s research director, a task she’s devoted serious time to since retiring from her 25-year stint as a DNA analyst with the Oregon State Police.

Coons began collecting cribbage boards in 2000 and has amassed 400 boards since then. As she cheerfully acknowledges, she’s always been a collector. Before cribbage boards, she collected dice, eggs, and skulls, among other things. What unites it all is the thrill of the hunt.

“When you get knowledgeable about something,” Coons explained by phone, “it’s the rush of finding something you haven’t seen before, or maybe that you always wanted to find.”

Although Coons learned to play cribbage during summer vacations with her grandparents, what piques her curiosity now is the cribbage boards themselves.

“I’m not that interested in your standard wood boards,” Coons said, “but if they’re made out of something unusual, if they’re different, if they’re pretty impressive, then I’m interested in them.”

According to Coons, many collectors focus on a particular niche like “advertising” boards. In the 1950s and ‘60s, for example, many beer companies made cribbage boards with their brand name and logo. Collectors who delve further into the past can turn up boards for patent medicines with quaint names like “Priest’s Indigestion Powder” and “Sour Sick Stomach.”

Coons likes cribbage boards as objects, especially when they’re made from interesting materials. “My niche is plastic,” she said. “So I have Bakelite, celluloid boards made to look like ivory, I have an abalone board, elephant ivory, whale baleen.” She once took two of her boards to

appraisers at *Antiques Roadshow*, who called them the best cribbage boards they’d seen. (Alas, they never made it onto the air.)

An exquisite, hand-carved ivory board will certainly cost you. Overall, however, collecting cribbage boards isn’t a terribly expensive hobby. “You don’t have to spend a lot of money, but you can,” Coons noted. Some collectors limit themselves to what they find at flea markets and garage sales; others monitor eBay. In her estimation, most of the boards beginning collectors encounter will range in price from \$10 to \$15.

But how do you tell whether that cribbage board you’ve carted home from the local yard sale is a relatively common Druke board from World War II or a rare, exotic treasure? One way is to check in with Coons, who welcomes inquiries. Jay Fulwider at the American Cribbage Congress is also happy to hear from collectors, or you could consult a detailed reference book.

When a person begins to get serious about collecting cribbage boards, it’s time to pony up for a copy of Bette Bemis’s 1999 book, *Cribbage Boards, 1863-1998*. Coons called the book an essential for any serious collector.

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely,” Coons replied when asked if the book is still valuable. “And you wouldn’t go off to a convention without your copy,” she added with a chuckle.

Bemis founded the CBCS and mentored many of its current members, including Coons. She was particularly interested in the historical aspect of collecting cribbage boards and had a certain knack for turning up hard-to-

find information. That was no mean feat back in the early 1990s.

“She was interested in them historically. And that was hard to do in those days, before the Internet,” Coons said with admiration.

Of course, there are collectors and then there are collectors. Take Peter Leach, a fellow CBCS member. Leach not only has an impressively large collection, he also wrote definitive pamphlets about collecting both W.C. Horn and C.W. Le Count boards.

And when the passion for collecting cribbage boards becomes an obsession, some pursue the ultimate board. “One that is the Holy Grail of cribbage boards is the John Gill,” Coons said. “It’s from the 1800s; it’s made of cast-iron; and it’s what is called a hedgehog board.” The board got its moniker because it uses pins that are pulled up to keep score rather than the typical pins that are placed in holes.

Perhaps the best thing about collecting cribbage boards is just how friendly and sociable fellow collectors are. They exchange tips, alert friends to potential finds, and enjoy showing off their collections.

In fact, this amiable bunch will be getting together again at the CBCS’s annual convention, held in Branson, Missouri, this coming September.

To learn more about this fascinating hobby, visit: www.cribbageboardcollectorsociety.org www.cribbage.org ■

—Raymond Simon

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRY COONS



GUINNESS SOUVENIR PLASTIC BOARD, ENGLAND



“ABACUS” STYLE BOARD, PATENTED IN 1885



QUADRUPLE SILVER PLATE BOARD, LATE 1800s



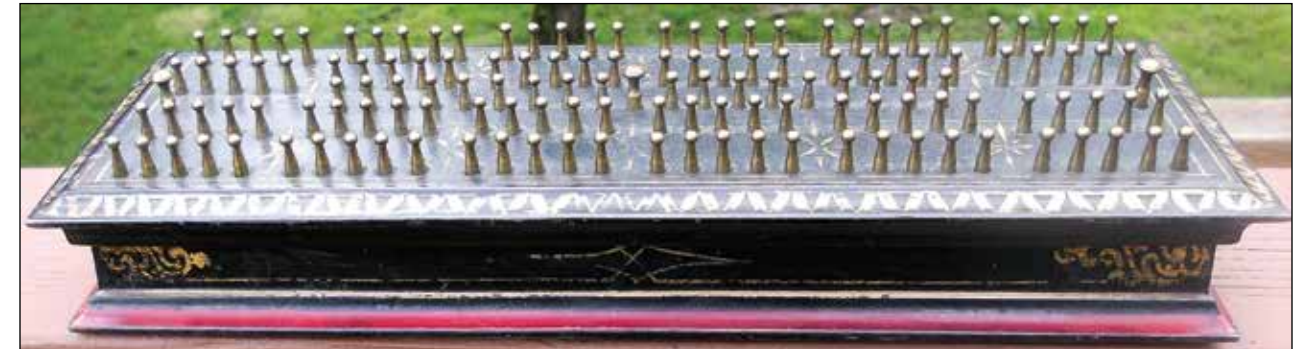
CARVED IVORY BOARD FROM HONG KONG, MID-20TH CENTURY



SPORTY MAGNETIC BOARD, 1950s



FOSSILIZED WALRUS JAWBONE WITH AN IVORY PLAQUE



THE “HOLY GRAIL” OF CRIBBAGE BOARDS, BY JOHN GILL MFG., PATENTED 1863