

JOHN FENTON AND MILLERSBURG GLASS

BY BRIAN PITMAN

The story of John W. Fenton, born in 1869 in Indiana, PA, is a sometimes tumultuous one, filled with so much hope and glory and art, and also failure. John has been compared so many times to his younger brother Frank L. Fenton that many obvious contrasts have evolved, not only between their character and personalities, but also between their companies. The best way to look at John is to think of him as George Bailey in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

When The Fenton Art Glass Factory opened its doors in 1907, the president of the company was John Fenton. Research shows that John was the instrumental person in finding and earning the money to locate and build the plant in Williamstown, and John was the main force behind making the Fenton factory a reality. If there were no John, there would simply be no Fenton. Frank would have possibly continued on as a talented worker for Harry Northwood in Wheeling, West Virginia.

You see, John was "impetuous" and larger than life. He could handle nearly any situation. He was a marketer and a promoter. He could probably sell ice to Eskimos. The fatal flaw in John's character was that he was not the sound business-minded man that Frank was. As the initial president of Fenton, John was the "big idea" man. He was the one that would come up with the big ideas and get them started. He was not, however, a details man, or a finisher. Maybe, just maybe, iridizing the glass to make it more grand and romantic was John's idea. John liked to think outside the box, and he liked to spend outside the box. He could look at a piece and say "Meh, not pretty enough. Make it better." If there were no John, very likely carnival glass might have started later and not taken hold, banished to the great failures of history.

But John was bored. He loved challenges, and he liked to be in the middle of constant motion. As President of Fenton, he was able to go into the office, do some promotional activities, but little else. Whether it was because John recognized his shortcomings, or because he wanted Frank to take care of the "details", Frank was really "the man" at the Fenton factory. And John knew it.

In 1908, while still president of Fenton, John went looking for a challenge. What he found was a place that probably aroused the romantic side of him: beautiful scenery in a location that was NOT on the Ohio River, a small community with old world values and people that were friendly and willing to work, and a place to get away from it all. John found Millersburg.

Then John went to work. He convinced the locals that building a glass factory would stop the migration of locals to larger cities. He convinced the locals that building a glass factory would put the town of Millersburg on the map. And he convinced the locals that building a glass factory would bring in a lot of money for everyone to share.

In September 1908, the factory started to be built, and in May 1909, glass was being produced. All the while, John W. Fenton remained the president of Fenton. Some research indicates that perhaps the first Millersburg samples were run at Fenton. Some news reports at the time suggest that some Millersburg orders were filled at Fenton. No one can deny, however, that for a time, John Fenton was the president of both Millersburg and Fenton. He was on top of the world, the king of his game. A big man with big ideas, and a man loved by the masses.

The Holmes County Farmer even ran his picture in the paper on May 27, 1909, with the following description:

"It is with considerable gratification that we are enabled to present to our readers this week the excellent picture of John W. Fenton, the man who engineered, constructed and is now operating the big

factory of the Millersburg Glass Company. Mr. Fenton came to Millersburg a few short months ago a perfect stranger. Today he has the good will and esteem of everybody. We know Mr. Fenton, and therefore take the privilege of writing about him as we believe we know him. He is a plain speaking, blunt fellow with a cheerful countenance, who can say yes or no in such a pleasant manner that you know he means it. He is the best example of an energetic, progressive, far seeing man, the kind we read about but rarely see, that ever struck Millersburg, and fortune certainly smiled on us when he decided to locate his factory here. He has more than made good on every promise and is entitled to the gratitude of every citizen in Holmes County.”

John was an excellent promoter who quickly gained favor from those who met him, as you just heard. He became THE showman and master promoter of carnival glass. Without John, carnival glass very well may have fallen, unnoticed, into mediocrity.

In 1910, Millersburg began making carnival glass. On the evening of January 4, 1910, John’s four year quest to produce the best quality iridescence possible struck a breakthrough. And John, ever the clever one, knew the power of branding a product. “Radium” was born. And it ignited everything. The reviews of the glass (probably written in part with John’s master promoting hand) were through the roof. Carnival Glass took off, and Millersburg started to boom.

John’s excellent eye and genius understanding of art was evident in his glass. John was a man that truly did not know the meaning of “shear mark”. His own daily life converted into his pattern design. Here are several examples.

Trout and Fly

Big Fish

John used to go fishing locally in Millersburg, something it is said he very much enjoyed. No doubt this love and daily activity transferred into the need and details of these two very good and very much loved patterns.

Peacocks of all sorts

John brought a flock of peacocks with him to Millersburg, and he let them roam around freely in the vicinity of the glass plant. While these are not pleasant creatures (screeching and hollering constantly), they epitomized John’s love of things natural and beautiful. Millersburg did so many things with Peacocks and this is all so very much a reflection of him.

Courthouse

The very building still stands – a Carnival pattern in front of your very eyes on the Main Street in Millersburg. John made a tribute to the people of his adopted home by placing their famous landmark on the face of some of his most famous glass. In fact, it should be noted that John didn’t name his factory after himself; he named it after the town as an honor to them (and to perhaps help him sell the idea to them better).

Peoples Vase

Much debate occurs over whether the “Holland Vase” is of the Dutch, or perhaps the local Amish. Personally, I believe the People’s Vase is a tribute to the local Amish that John loved and saw on a daily basis. As a perpetually busy man (something to which I can relate), John had to be drawn to a simple life with few difficulties and lots of honest hard work. He epitomized that desire in himself by making his piece, possibly one of the worst business decisions he could make.

Nesting Swan

John brought two pairs of magnificent white swans home which later escaped, but he immortalized them forever on glass in the Nesting Swan pattern.

Cherries

John had a fondness for sweet blackheart cherries, and there were several trees near the glass factory. This love made its way into the glass.

Exteriors

Not satisfied with just one amazing pattern, Millersburg often gave you the most incredible, complex, fantastic EXTERIORS.

Geometric Magnificence – jewel-like and scintillating. Two beauties for the price of one.

RAYS AND RIBBONS and CACTUS

FLEUR DE LIS and COUNTRY KITCHEN

NESTING SWAN and DIAMOND AND FAN

PRIMROSE and FINE CUT HEARTS

WHIRLING LEAVES and FINE CUT OVALS

VINTAGE and HOBNAIL

Some HANGING CHERRIES have HOBNAIL

Some HOLLY WHIRLS have NEAR CUT WREATH

GRAPE LEAVES and MAYFLOWER

POPPY Compote and POTPOURRI

BERNHEIMER bowl and the MANY STARS have TREFOIL FINE CUT

John was also a master of color. He knew what looked good and he stuck with it. He didn't compromise on excellence. No playing around with experimental colors and watery pastels that might weaken the beauty of the iridescence. When he made Vaseline he didn't fudge it with marigold iridescence on top like Fenton did. He smacked fantastic radium iridescence on it instead. He made less of certain colors, like blue, because perhaps his brother did so much blue and he didn't want to be compared, or perhaps he just thought (like even many Millersburg lovers today) that it wasn't that darned pretty.

And of course, John owned iridescence. Radium was THE revolution in iridescence. A complete triumph in its own right, it changed, literally, the face of carnival glass. John made other carnival glass companies better with this creation, as they all had to raise their own game to compete. In the press, Radium was described as "art glass for the masses". And there are even some who believe that the unique mixture of chemicals in the radium iridescence gives those pieces something more important than any other piece of glass: a longer life. You see, iridescence will eventually wear out, and so will the glass. Some scientists even think that within 200 years, the glass will be gone. Radium iridescence, some believe, has a small radioactive isotope in it that will seal the iridescence onto the glass for years to come. In other words, the last piece standing.

If there were no John Fenton, then perhaps iridescence would never have been "stretched" to new levels, and not ignited the love and fanaticism of today.

John was also a master at shapes. Think about the shapes he did outside the realm of the ordinary and unexpected.

Pipe Humidor

Peoples Vase

Cleveland Ashtray

Hobnail Cuspidor

Seacoast Pintray

What innovative shapes did Fenton make to compete with these Millersburg beauties?

Of course, in 1911 it all began to fall apart. Several lawsuits from creditors started to hit, and Millersburg even failed to pay its taxes. John, the big picture, big idea guy, started to lose out to the real world, in which bills needed to be paid, promises needed to be kept, and the paperwork at the end of the day needed to be done. He wasn't the one to do those, or pay much mind to them. The biggest accomplishment and biggest failure of Millersburg was the one and same thing: John Fenton, his own worst enemy.

In September 1911, after a bankruptcy, the company was sold and became the Radium Glass Company with John as the Vice-President. Innovation continued, but so did the problems. It died in May 1912. John and his family stayed in Millersburg, his adopted home and place of both turmoil and tranquility. The town itself was his muse, and he wouldn't leave her.

In 1918, his daughter died of influenza. In 1921, his wife died in a car accident. In 1934, John died of heart disease, his grave in the Millersburg cemetery. His shining successes were all overshadowed by his resounding defeats. Today, Fenton glass lives on, but for a short, almost 2 year period, John Fenton was the best. He was the best of Fenton glass, and he was the best of Millersburg glass. He put his entire heart and soul into his work, which many of you own today. When you own a piece of carnival glass, you own a piece of John W. Fenton, the flamboyant, over the top, excessive, failure, art genius of carnival.

Indeed, it was a wonderful life, marked with promise and genius, tragedy and mistakes. John's benefits live on today, in the glass we collect. Without him, nearly none of it might have happened...