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Jim Castle restores a pool table that was built at his great-grandfather's Syracuse factory

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Gloria Wright, The Post-Standard

By



Dennis Nett / The Post-Standard

Jim Castle stands next to a pool table he recently restored. The table was made by his great-grandfather, Charles L. Castle, a pool-table manufacturer in Syracuse in the 1800s.

Jim Castle grew up hearing stories about the **pool tables** his great-grandfather made in a small factory at 520 S. Clinton St. in Syracuse. But he had never even seen one.

"I've been searching for one all my life," he said. "Not in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I would be able to own one, and bring it back home for my entire family to enjoy for generations to come."

Now he has one in his North Syracuse home. It's both a family memento and a piece of nearly forgotten Syracuse history -- from a time a century ago when the city boasted four pool table manufacturers.

For Castle, it seemed like he would never be able to touch that history.



Five years ago, he thought he was getting a vintage Castle pool table -- only to find himself the victim of a joke.

"My sister duped me one time," he said. She told him she found one of their great-grandfather's tables, and he took the bait. Castle went to the pool room, excited to see the table. Instead, he walked into a surprise party for his 50th birthday.

Then, his brother, who lives in Baltimore, found a



Charles L. Castle

Castle-made "Unity" pool table on the Internet. The table was owned by **Bankshot** [Antique Pool Tables](#) of Albany, a company that restores **antique pool tables**.

This time, it wasn't a joke.

"It's great to find the absolute most perfect home for one of the tables we've rescued," said Don Bartholomay, co-owner of Bankshot. "By accident or serendipity, this table found its way through time and back into Jim's family, and that elevates it in a very unique way."

The owners of Bankshot told Castle the table came from Sodus.



Provided photo

The pool table built by Charles L. Castle's company before his great-grandson began restoring it.

"It was a hand-me-down in a private family, but I don't know the name of the family," Castle said.

[Family history](#) is a passion Castle got from his father, he said.

Castle's grandfather, Walter V. Castle, talked often about his father, Charles L. Castle, owner of C.L. Castle [pool tables](#). Walter, one of seven children, died in February 2011, three months before turning 103. He was 8 or 9 when Charles closed the factory. The family lived at 221 Davis St., on what is now the city's Near West Side.

Charles Castle worked in the pool table industry for nearly 20 years before starting his own business. He worked as a carpenter, billiard mechanic, bookkeeper and traveling salesman.

In the 1880 census, Castle is listed as a billiard table maker. He opened his factory in 1899 with two employees. The factory operated for 18 years, closing in 1917.

"There are no records of how many pool tables the factory produced," Jim Castle said.

The company's 1911 catalog is in the archives of the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), shown by appointment only, he said.

An undated company advertisement shows a picture of a pool table and says: "This is the only strictly Mission Table made and will meet the demand arising from specifications which call for a room entirely in such style."



Dennis Nett / The Post-Standard

The ivory inlay on the bumper of a pool table owned by Jim Castle, which was made by his great-grandfather, a pool table manufacturer in Syracuse in the 1800s.

The ad says the company made billiard, pocket billiard and combination tables.

The Castle company was one of four making pool tables in Syracuse from the late 1880s into the early 1900s. The most long-lived company, Babcock Billiard Table Manufacturing, lasted from 1868 until going bankrupt in 1935.

The **Onondaga Historical Association** has a billiard table from Babcock, said Dennis Connors, OHA curator of history. A 1907 directory says Babcock was at 207 W. Genesee St., just past Clinton Square.

"There seems to be a tradition over several decades of firms making billiard tables and supplies in Syracuse," he said.

A photograph from 1857 shows a windmill on the roof of a Hanover Square building housing the Joel Owen Billiard Saloon, he said. In addition to running a billiard hall, Owen made cues and balls, and used the windmill to power his equipment.

In 1907, the city of Syracuse had 15 billiard and pool rooms.

Billiards were "one of those things that went in and out of fashion," Connors said. "There was a time when it was associated with gambling and not the nicest characters and nicest places."

Pool and billiard rooms were targets of the Temperance movement in the late 19th century, because "they lured young men in and the next thing you knew they were drinking and gambling," Connors said.

But by the early 20th century, billiards was considered a gentleman's game.

"Mansions were having billiard rooms built in. It lost some of its seedier imagery," he said.

Castle, operations manager of the Independent Systems Operator, a non-profit Albany company that regulates the energy supply for New York state, used vacation time to refinish his great-grandfather's table. (Bankshot, which had the table, is located just three miles from Castle's Albany home office.)

"I really appreciated Jim's passion for this project," said Bankshot co-owner Dave Grunenwald. "He searched and searched for a Castle table before he found

us. And then he spent many hours diligently stripping, sanding, and finishing the table. Jim really did a first-class job."

The table's leather baskets are new, as are the bumpers. Bankshot replaced an inlaid ivory aiming diamond, using ivory from old piano keys.

Grunenwald and Bartholomay spent a day setting up the table in North Syracuse, where Castle turned his garage into a billiard room.

The pool table restoration company not only had a Castle table, but they had a cue rack carrying the family name.

Castle also has an antique set of billiard balls, including a cue ball made of ivory.

"They spent an entire day putting it together. They had to plaster the slate, fill in cracks, sand, then put felt on by hand," Castle said. "It was an hour per pocket to put the pockets on."

There is still a problem with the pockets.

"The pockets are magnets for the cue ball," Castle said with a laugh.

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