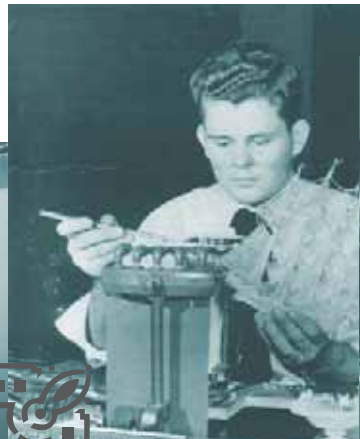


1930s



GENERATIONS IN GLASS

by Laura Rasmussen

The Rasmussen Family, father Herman and his oldest sons Stan and Dick, learned lamp work from an old German Glassblower by the name of Bachman in about 1935 in Southern California. Using lead glass and cross fires fueled by natural gas and compressed air, they worked their newfound craft into an art in short time. In the summer of 1939 Stan and Dick were demonstrating at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. At the close of the fair the entire Rasmussen Family traveled to Miami, Florida where again Dick and Stan demonstrated for the public's enjoyment at possibly the first "Glass Happening" ever. Bill Rasmussen was only eleven years old at that time but remembers that there were 8 to 10 glass families from all over the country working side by side at this exposition. The promoters charged the public admission and then provided them with a guided tour where they learned about each exhibitor and their work. Of course the tour ended at the gift shop area where all of the artists' creations were sold by the promoter's staff.

Bill was too young to work at the exhibit but one

demonstration that sticks in his mind was the lady spinning glass. The glass rod was supported over the torch when the glass reached the melting point she would pull off a thin stringer and wrap it over a spinning wheel. When the spinning was completed she would remove the glass from the wheel, cut it into sections and tie bows with the glass. People were fascinated and couldn't believe that glass could bend.

We stress the family aspect here because up until probably the 1960's lampworking was a closely held family trade. You couldn't learn the craft unless you were a close relative or you married into a glass family. A while back this was called the "glass curtain" by the newer generation of lamp workers who really resented the secrecy. There was a reason for the "secrecy". The old families recognized what would happen if they let go of what they held dear, competition. Today it's information for sale, trade, or sure I'll teach you. Along with this "freedom of information" has come a plethora of information, both technical and artistic making the lamp workers of the last century look like dinosaurs.



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1940s



After the Florida event Dick and Stan traveled to New York where they demonstrated at the New York Worlds Fair. Dick sat next to a man by the name of Dick Manley. When Manley demonstrated making a foot for a vase he would say, "I'm the only man that can do this." He would spin the hot glass and the centrifugal force would flare the glass out to the delight of the audience.

Bill Rasmussen made his first sculptural piece when he was 14 in 1942 using lead glass and the crossfires. World War II interrupted the glass careers of all the Rasmussen sons. Stan was killed in a bombing raid over Germany. Dick saw active duty in Europe, Bill went into the Navy as soon as he was of age just before the war ended. Dick returned home to take up glass again. Father Herman in the mean time had opened a glass shop on Catalina Island where people would stand 5 and 6 deep with money in their raised hands anxious to buy his glass. Herman developed the lapel bubble vase, useful in those days when men wore a flower on their suit lapel. The bubble vase pinned on the lapel and held water to keep the flower fresh. When Bill returned from his tour of duty in the Orient he took up the family trade also, using a homemade torch that Dick had fashioned for him. He thinks it was about 1948 when they changed to Borosilicate glass using the National 3A blowpipe with homemade tips. Their didydidium glasses were

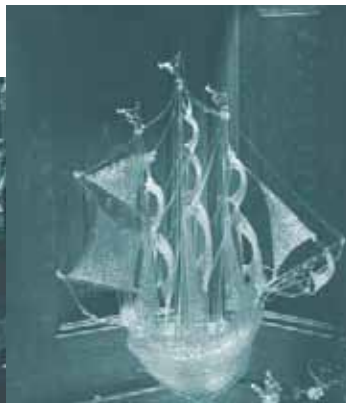
available only in the industrial goggle style. Bill feels he was the first to have the didydidium lenses custom fit in traditional glasses frames.

There were at that time no tools available for lampworkers so they made their own. Dick and his brother-in-law George Hammesfahr had a shop on Olivera Street in Los Angeles. Dick had changed to borosilicate glass, but Hammesfahr refused to change until after a few weeks of watching Dick work faster with the new glass. The old adage "time is money" was very obvious to George.

In 1955 Bill and Dick opened the glass shop at Disneyland and worked side by side at the two-torch workbench making all the Disney characters. They could spend all day making "Lady and the Tramp". Dick would line up Tramps and Bill would line up Lady. The next day all their work would be sold and they would start over again. Never once did they think about raising the price. At the end of the first year Dick left the partnership unhappy with working at Disneyland, but continued to sell Bill merchandise that he and his wife Meyrell made. Meyrell was of the Hammesfahr family another well-known East Coast family of lamp workers. Her brother was James Hammesfahr who co-authored the book "Creative Glassblowing" with Clair Strong. The same Hammesfahr family invented the machine that made the glass push pin.



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During the years at Disneyland glass was priced well below what it is today. One thousand pounds of Pyrex rod cost in the vicinity of \$800.00. Where most of the other lamp workers were working in the network or knitting style, Bill was working in solid sculpture. A natural born cartoonist, he found he was able to express animation and whimsy in glass. That has been what has set him apart from his peers. He developed his own philosophy regarding the marketing of his product. It has always been his style to offer the customer the best. In other words, "good enough just isn't". When business is slow a lot of crafts people will lower the quality and prices to catch the customer. Bill has always felt that the customer doesn't want cheaper, they want better no matter what their financial situation. Bill set the stage for the contemporary lamp worker, always striving to come up with new and better designs, pushing himself to always improve his designs and techniques.

The lamp working families of that time in Southern California were few. Ruben Ducheny, who later opened a shop at Sea World in San Diego, Tony and Raymond Diaz, George Hammesfahr, and Jim Beam, who later opened a shop at Magic Mountain, and the Rasmussen's were the only people supplying glass to the Disneyland shop in the 1950's and 60's. That all changed when Bill left Disneyland. People were being taught to fill the gap left by those who moved on to other endeavors. New names were soon to appear in this previously closely held business. Names like Jim Thingwald, Kemp Curtis, Lewis Wilson and Sundance appeared. In the 1970's when Bill opened his shop at Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco more new names began to appear. Larry and Debbie Brebes, Paul Labrie, Jeff and Karen Ladd, Gary and Pat Lubin. All this time the glass and equipment stayed pretty much the same.

People would talk to Bill in his shop, telling him about colored borosilicate glass, how people were using the color. That you need to use a kiln to

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anneal, something no one had ever been concerned with. Being an old time production worker, Bill knew that if a piece was properly made it did not require annealing. Of course in those days he also was not making the large sculptural pieces that would require annealing. Having always worked with a stopwatch to time himself, Bill didn't want to take the time to work with the colored glass. Looking back now, he wishes he had paid attention to what was happening.

More names began to appear. The work of Hans Godo Frabel, John Paul Lejeune and Warren and Bob Hooper was magnificent in size and design. They were working in clear borosilicate and their workmanship was outstanding. It became obvious that sculptural lamp work was coming into it's own as an art form.

In 1991 in Carmel, California Warren and Bob Hooper put together a wonderful gathering of some of the best lamp workers in the country. Artists came from all over the country to meet old friends for the first time at the Crystal Fox. It was truly a moving experience for all that attended. New friendships were made, and information was freely exchanged bringing down the glass curtain for good. Since then it seems that there has been an explosion in new equipment, raw materials, and talent. At the recent Best Bead Show in Albuquerque, New Mexico it became very obvious that there is a whole new generation of lamp workers who are very aware of all the wonderful materials they have at their disposal and they know how to properly use what's there, they are smart and extremely talented.

For Bill Rasmussen it has been an exciting and far from tedious occupation that has endured for 58 years. He has finally moved from his old National 3A into a GTT Phantom, well, most of the time anyway. He spends a good deal of time coating clear rod and tubing with colored glass and looks forward each day to the challenges facing him. Bill has designed tools specific to his needs. He is



always planning his next tool; working out the kinks then will go ahead with the actual working prototype. The art form as he teaches it will live on in the family a little longer. Daughter Tami has been a sculptural glass artist for over 20 years, Daughter Kirsti has recently taken up glass bead making and shows great talent. He has several students he works closely with in helping them with their skills and catching little bits of information they have picked up along the way. Last but not least, I sit

next to Bill in our home studio and make beads all day long. After over 40 years I still enjoy watching him work, he makes it look so easy.

*For further information on the Happening at the Crystal Fox in November 1991, check the archives of Glassline on the Internet at www.HotGlass.com See Bill and Laura Rasmussen's work on the Internet at www.razberibeads.com. ■

Guide to the Timeline (right to left)

1930s Entrance to the Glass Blowers exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Courtesy of Rasmussen family archives.

Stanley Rasmussen 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

A young Dick Rasmussen at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. Courtesy of Rasmussen family archives.

Dick Rasmussen working at crossfires, Miami, Florida 1939. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

1939 New York World's Fair. Both artists are using crossfires. Stanley Rasmussen on the right. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

1940s Lapel bubble vases made by Herman Rasmussen in the early 1940s. A wire is wrapped around the collar of the vase with a point going down the back to secure to the lapel. Photo by Bill Rasmussen

Colorful lead glass fish made by Bill Rasmussen at the age of 14. Photo by Bill Rasmussen.

Father Herman Rasmussen demonstrates blowing a bubble at his shop on Santa Catalina Island. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

1950s Blue Horse blown sculpture in lead glass by Stanley Rasmussen circa 1940, about 8 inches long. Photo by Bill Rasmussen

Ruby and White Cranelown sculpture in lead glass by Stanley Rasmussen circa 1940, about 8 inches tall. Photo by Bill Rasmussen

Amethyst Cranes blown sculpture in lead glass by

Stanley Rasmussen circa 1940, about 8 inches tall. Photo by Bill Rasmussen.

Dick Rasmussen famous for his very precise loop stitch working on a birdbath 1957. Photo Bill Rasmussen.

The main display wall at the Disneyland Shop in the Crystal Arcade, 1955 to 1968. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

Borosilicate sailboat by Dick Rasmussen as seen at Disneyland 1955 to 1968. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

1960s Bill Rasmussen demonstrating for a segment of the Mickey Mouse Club in the early 1960s. Courtesy Rasmussen family archives.

1980s Large Ming Tree by Tami Rasmussen-Loughlin made in the early 1980s. Tree spans about 14 inches in width. Photo by Bill Rasmussen.

Bill Rasmussen, 1979-1980 Ghirardelli Square, putting the finishing touches on a large sculpture. Photo by Laura Rasmussen.

2000s This sculpture of a cellist measures 5.5 inches in height. Sculpture and photo by Bill Rasmussen.

Jitterbugs, a sailor and his lady. Figures 8.5 inches tall without the base. Sculpture and photo by Bill Rasmussen 2002.

Laura Rasmussen working in her home studio, 2002. Photo by Bill Rasmussen.

Bill and Laura Rasmussen 2002. Photo taken by Bill as a timed exposure. It took a few to get one good pic.

Bill Rasmussen working in his home studio, 2002. Photo by Laura Rasmussen.