

# THE DRUEKE COMPANY – CHESS DESIGNED IN AMERICA

By Duncan Pohl

*The authors would like to express their heartfelt thanks to Peter Biggins, and his fantastic website – [peterspioneers.com](http://peterspioneers.com). Mr. Biggins was very generous in granting unlimited access to all information and/or pictures we felt would be useful for this article. The website is well worth a visit – it contains fascinating family histories and elevates family genealogy to a true art form.*

So how does a person go from selling stationary goods to toy and game making? Does it take an enterprising buyer to make a suggestion in the first place, or an enterprising supplier too receive the request, or – most likely – both? All of those aspects apparently came together when William F. Drueke, working as a salesman for a stationary company in 1914, had a department store buyer suggest the idea of producing chess sets, as World War I had disrupted their supply source. Drueke was given some sample pieces, and he came up with the chess sets.<sup>1</sup>



set up a factory to manufacture what he had sold.”<sup>2</sup>

The biography of William F. Drueke, Jr.<sup>3</sup> tells it a little differently. He states his father was indeed a salesman for a stationary company, but that a Drueke customer saw a rum box (used for holding playing cards) and suggested Drueke begin producing chess sets, as World War I had disrupted their importation. Since Grand Rapids had plenty of skilled woodworkers, the work could be jobbed out.

And yet a third account, the official history of the Drueke Company according to its current owner, The Carrom Company, states:

At least, that’s one of the stories. According to his daughter, Marian, “he and Mr. Quinn bought out a stationary store that had been in business for many years – it was on Monroe Avenue ‘downtown’ – they had a big inventory to dispose of, dolls that were slightly imperfect and rum boxes.” “So,” Marion went on to say, “Dad went on the road to sell rum boxes in 1914. At the time, Germany and France and England were at war. . . . the buyers of Marshall Fields told Dad that they could not get chess sets and she gave him sample pieces of different sized sets. Dad came back to Grand Rapids and talked to Mr. Waddell about making these sets – he took his sample pieces, made in Grand Rapids – and went to New York to sell . . . business was so good he had Mother join him in New York. When he returned home he had to

“In the early 20th century all chess sets sold in the United States were manufactured in Europe. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the supply of chess sets to the U.S. ceased. Drueke is now known as the quality game manufacturer in the United States using nothing but the finest walnut, maple and aspen for its products. Our chessboard is our oldest product now being manufactured with the cribbage board a close second. In addition, we are the only manufacturer today of a complete line of round wooden poker chips racks ranging from the 200-500 chip capacity. We have the most complete line of cribbage boards in the United States and possibly the world. Our line also includes action games, backgammon, dominos, checkers, game boxes, chess tables and wooden accessories.

<sup>1</sup> Opening illustration is of the printing block of the Drueke logo, shown in reverse for readability

<sup>2</sup> William and Rose Smith Drueke Family  
<http://www.peterspioneers.com/WRSD.htm>

<sup>3</sup> By Cathie Bloom, *The Grand Rapids Press*, September 7, 1995, pF5

The Drueke Company is America's oldest manufacturer of traditional board games. The chessboards and chess accessories we offer are second-to-none. Our reputation for quality chess sets inspired us to produce a variety of classic games for our customers to enjoy.

The heritage of three generations of wood craftsmen still influences Drueke games today. We pledge quality game products, excellent value, and responsive customer service.”<sup>4</sup>

By 1916, Mr. Quinn had been bought out by an Albert G. Dickenson. Mr. Dickenson was probably more of a financier than an active participant as his name was never included as part of the Drueke company name. The company name was changed, however, to Wm. F. Drueke & Co. and described in the Grand Rapids directory as a novelty manufacturer. The business grew to include backgammon, cribbage and many other games.

Demand was great enough by 1917 that William F. Drueke decided the company could afford to start making its own products rather than continuing to depend on other suppliers. The company moved downtown to a small rented building at 122 Scribner Avenue NW. The company bought the equipment it needed to make chess sets and hired its own workforce from the large pool of skilled woodworkers available in Grand Rapids.

The war in Europe was still going on and the company got a big contract from the U.S. Army to make breech sticks for cleaning guns. According to William F. Drueke, Jr., when the war ended, Will Sr. was left with a large supply of these breech sticks, so he decided to make toy rakes, hoes and shovels, using the sticks as handles, and sold them to toy departments.

Also in 1917, *A Beginner's Book of Chess* was written to instruct beginning players.

By 1919 the business had outgrown the building at 122 Scribner so William F. Drueke bought a larger building at the southeast corner of Marshall Avenue and the *Pere Marquette Railroad*

(now CSX). Soon after the move to Marshall Avenue, William added a furniture line and other household items. The product line included spinet desks, secretary desks, bookshelves and tables. Drueke was one of the first companies to put an electric light in a desk.

## **DRUEKE AND SAMUEL RESHEVSKY**

In November of 1920, when he was eight years old, Samuel Reshevsky moved with his parents from Poland to the United States, where his parents made their living from their child's talent at playing chess. Of the future grandmaster, eight-time US champion and world champion contender, William Drueke wrote that, "I, being the only manufacturer of a line of chessmen in this country at that time, became interested in him, not only as a business promotion of the game, but his ability to interest people that had never played the game."

Reshevsky's playing was limited to clubs only, until Will suggested trying department stores. The idea was tested at *Strawbridge and Clothier* in Philadelphia, and it was a 'tremendous success'. William Drueke took on the role of being Sammy's advance agent and had Sammy "playing two games in every city west of Chicago, one in a store and one in a club. Starting in Chicago, and playing at the Fair Store, it took 44 police to take care of the crowd."

But Drueke's experience with Sammy became just a blip in the history of the Drueke game company due to the fact that in 1926 William F. Drueke phased out the business when a friend of his, Albert Sticklely, offered him a job as sales manager for the much larger *Sticklely Brothers Furniture Company* in Grand Rapids. He didn't stay with the company long, however, as they had a disagreement over the purchase of some Sticklely company stock. William Drueke was now out of a job. As his son tells it, Will then started selling hospital furniture, steel cabinets and whatever, to keep his daughter Irene in college at the University of Michigan, and his daughter Marian at the University of Illinois, as well as providing for the rest of the family.

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<sup>4</sup> Carrom.com

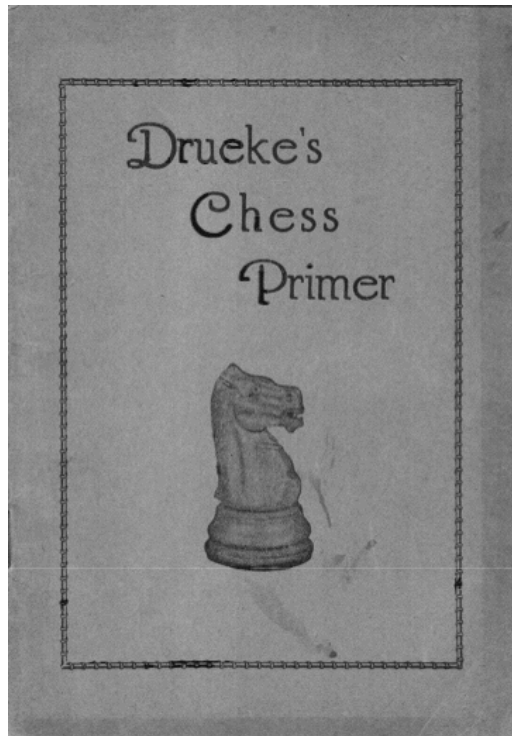
## A NEW COMPANY

About six years later, in 1932, William F. Druke reestablished the Druke game business in the Druke home and resumed making cribbage boards and chess sets. For the cribbage boards, Druke had *The Grand Rapids Chair Company* cut, shape and sand the cribbage boards. *The Sterling Brush Company* drilled the peg holes, put a peg pocket in the bottom of the board and buffed on a wax finish. *The John Stevens Company* supplied the shellac, *Imperial Metals* made the pegs and *The Grand Rapids Box Company* made the boxes.

For a while, the company imported chess pieces from France, refinished and packaged them, and then sold them under the Druke name. William Jr. rigged up a phone line from the basement to the attic. The basement was used for chess dipping, boxing, and other assembly work, which was done by 16-year-old Jane and 14-year-old Rosemary. Bill Jr's job was to go to the dime store and buy used boxes to be used for shipping. The attic was used as an office, run by 24-year-old Marian.

It was also around 1932 that *Druke's Chess Primer* was introduced (below center). It was designed for instructing beginning players and in this way was similar to *A Beginner's Book of Chess*, prepared in 1917 for the original Druke Company.

By 1935 the company was doing well enough that it moved out of the Druke home and into rented space in the Shaw Building at 640 Front Avenue NW. The company now added poker chips and pipe racks, dice, dominoes, roulette racks, gavels and a variety of small hand games. The company was listed in the Grand Rapids Directory as Wm. F. Druke, Inc.



In 1940 the company moved again, this time a few blocks west to a building purchased for \$15000, located at 601 Third Street NW. The building had formerly been occupied by *The Grand Rapids Casket Company*. According to William F. Druke Jr, "We returned the mortician's equipment and sawed up the soft wood used in making caskets into swivel bases for chip racks . . . The addition of three plastic machines allowed them to make chessmen, cribbage pegs and literally millions of interlocking poker chips."

Between 1941 and 1946, Will and his sons Joe and Bill, applied for and received patents on the design of eight games.

<u>Patent</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Applicant</u>	<u>Game</u>
D128794	1941	William F. Druke	Chessmen
D134812	1943	William F. Druke	Chessmen <i>Play-A-Way</i>
D135239	1943	William F. Druke Jr	Game Board <i>Play-A-Way</i>
D135240	1943	William F. Druke Jr	Game Board <i>Play-A-Way</i>
D135706	1943	Joseph W. Druke	Game Device <i>Play-A-Way</i> <i>Roulette</i>
D135707	1943	William F. Druke Jr	Game Device <i>Play-A-Way</i>

The first patent in the list above was for a unique, octagon-shaped variation of the classic Staunton design the company named *The American Design*, which will be discussed later.

Travel games, called *Play A Way*, were shipped overseas to servicemen in the armed forces during World War II. These included chess sets, cribbage boards, roulette, and other games. During World War II, the factory produced 5,000 small games a day for the military. The largest order was for a railroad car full of cribbage boards.

In 1954, the Druke Company purchased the first of three plastic injection-molding machines to manufacture plastic game parts for interlocking poker chips, chess pieces and cribbage pegs (are these the same three machines William Jr referred to in the quote made earlier?). Prior to the purchase, the manufacturing of plastic game parts had been contracted out.

When William F. Druke died in 1956 at age 72, his sons Bill (William F. Druke Jr) and Joe (Joseph Druke) continued to run the business. Bill did the manufacturing and Joe handled sales. They each equally owned a little over a third of the stock in the company with Rose, William F Druke Sr's widow, and Marion, his daughter, owning the rest.

However, in 1971, there was difference of opinion between Joe and Bill and Joe started another company, known as Druke Blue Chip Game Company, even while he still owned his share of the original Druke Company. The Druke Blue Chip Company made pretty much the same games, but imported chess games rather than manufacturing them. Thus, between 1971 and 1987, there were two Druke game companies.



*Druke Blue Chip Logo, Photo Courtesy of Paul Druke*

In July and August of 1972, American Bobby Fischer beat the Russian chess champion Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland. Druke games received a priceless promotion when photos showed Bobby Fischer practicing with Druke chessmen. The match in Iceland between Fischer and Spassky doubled orders for Druke chess sets. An article in the Sunday *New York Times* mentioned increased demand for chess results as a result of the match.

In 1987, when Bill was age 75, the Druke Company was sold to the Low Tech Company. Shortly afterward, Joe also sold his share of the Druke Company to Low Tech as well as the

Druke Blue Chip Game Company. The Druke name was retained. As part of the sales agreement, Joe Sr. continued on as a consultant and in sales for a couple of years, while Joe Jr. became a sales manager.

In 1990, the Low Tech Company sold Druke to the Carrom Company, which moved manufacturing operations to its home in Ludington, Michigan. Joe Jr. continued to work for the Carrom Company as a manufacturer's rep until 1994. The Carrom Company continues to produce games under the Druke name to this day.

The vacant Druke factory building was purchased by Robert Israels in 2008 and by 2010 had been totally renovated. The renovated building, called *The Druke Building*, is now a 24,000 square foot office building. In an interview published in *The Commercial Quarterly*, February 1, 2010, David Israels explained why the Druke name remained on the building, "The Druke family and the Druke game company are part of the history of Grand Rapids, and we still have Drukes living in the city. So it is important for us to maintain that and showcase that as we go forward. It's amazing how many people we've talked to who have a story about a Druke game. That's why we want to keep that name as part of the community."

## **CHESS SETS OF WM. F. DRUEKE CO.**

### **WOOD SETS**

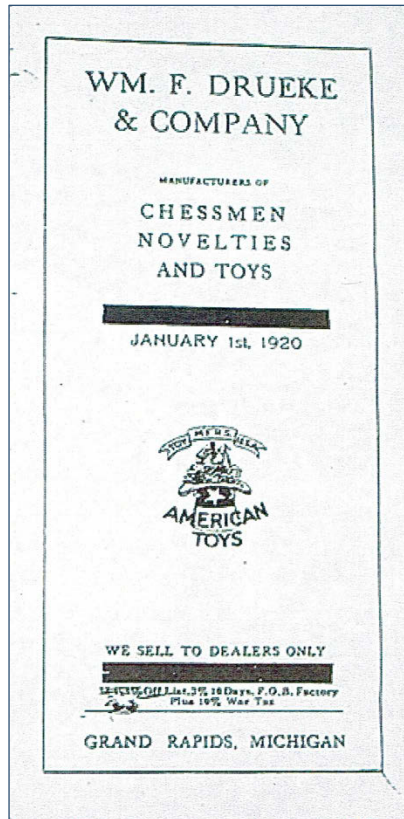
Because of the time that has gone by, plus the added confusion caused by the multiple starting, stopping, and restarting of the company, it is difficult to determine what the original wood sets may have looked like. Sets are often seen being sold with the claim they are from Druke, but often the only connection the seller has for making that claim is the presence of a manual or board from Druke that came with the set, or the set came in a box with the Druke label. Unfortunately, claim based on such fluid evidence don't mean much as it is easy for these things to get switched around over the years.

But there are a couple of clues that may be of help – The first clue is a flyer put out by the Drueke Company in 1920 (right). There are three different wood sets illustrated, made of two kinds of wood – maple, and boxwood. The illustrations are crude by today’s standards, but there are some definitive characteristics that may be of help when trying to identify whether a set actually was made and/or sold by Drueke. But the illustrations also create some problems with identification, which I will attempt to illustrate later.

The second clue is an ad (bottom right) put out by the Drueke Company for the March 1946 International Toy Fair. Just below right center are seen three wood chess pieces from a Drueke chess set. [Interestingly, the pieces, especially the king and bishop, look like they could have the direct inspiration for pieces that appeared in the Players’ Choice set from Drueke nearly 20 years later.] Note how none of the pieces shown in the flyer come even close to matching the pieces in the ad.

This brings us to illustrating the problems with identification: At the top of the next page are pictures of two sets I own that came in boxes with Drueke labels. If one were to attempt to match the set in the first picture to the sets shown in the flyer, the knight would appear to match the set in the middle illustration. While one could argue the pawns, rooks, perhaps even the bishops and queens seem to be a match, the king – not likely – It looks more a match with the king in the third set.

And the set in the second picture doesn’t really seem to match any of the illustrations enough to make any kind of a positive identification.



Photos Above Courtesy of Dan Navarro





One thing to consider is that it is doubtful either of these sets is nearly as old as the flyer, although that is not known for sure. Perhaps the sets are essentially the same with some changes made in the design of individual pieces over the years? Perhaps the style of some pieces was dropped in favor of another, or pieces interchanged to complete sets in assembly, etc.? Whatever the case, there are enough similar characteristics between the pieces in the illustrations and the pieces in the sets that they *could* be from Drueke, but not enough similarity to be able to say definitively, 100%, that they *are* Drueke, either. And that seems to be pretty much true for any wood set said to be from Drueke.

### PLASTIC SETS

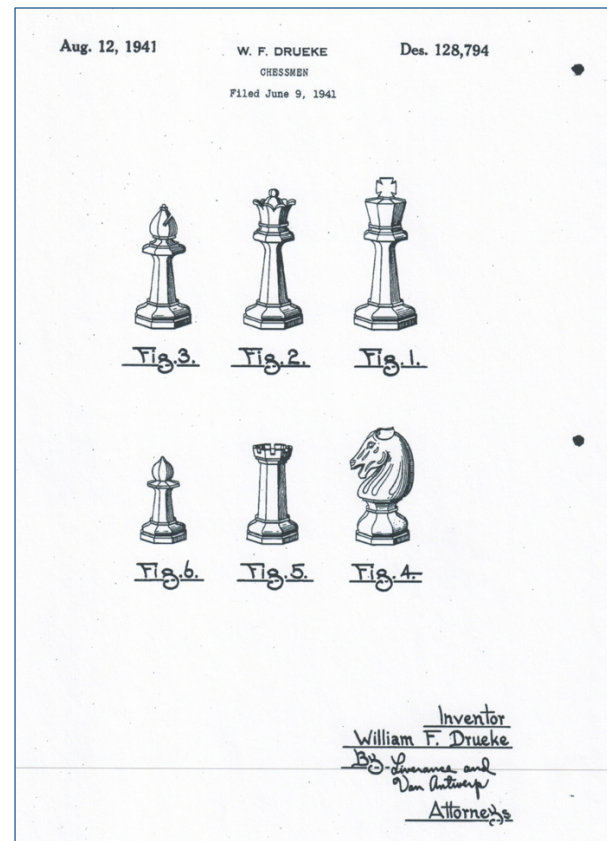
While the company originally started with making chess sets in wood, over the years, the company also developed three distinct designs in plastic chess sets. They were *The American Design*, *The King Arthur* and *The Players' Choice*. There were also some design and size variations within the different sets themselves, which will be discussed with the appropriate set.

### AMERICAN DESIGN

Whatever was the idea, inspiration, or motivation behind the development of *The American Design*, I would love to know it. I, personally, find this design one of the most interesting of all chess designs. Perhaps it is my affinity for architecture and geometry that makes its geometric design particularly appealing to me.

The patent application for the design was filed on June 9, 1941 (below). It was a unique, octagon-shaped variation, of the classic Staunton design. It was the company's first step in turning to plastic to produce chess sets rather than wood. Since the company did not obtain its own plastic injection equipment until 1954, it seems safe to assume the production of those first early sets had to have been contracted out.

*The American Design* only came in one size, but was available in a number of configurations. It could be had in either white and black or white and red. According to the numbering system used by Drueke there were the following 'classifications'





- #20: unweighted, unfelted
- #22: weighted, unfelted
- #23: weighted, felted
- #24: weighted, felted, sold in a 'leatherette- covered' box, possibly only in White & Red.

There may also have been a third color combination as seen below. Nowhere have I ever seen this combination (white & chocolate?) mentioned in any Drueke ad or literature, but there it is, so what is the story behind it? I do not yet know.

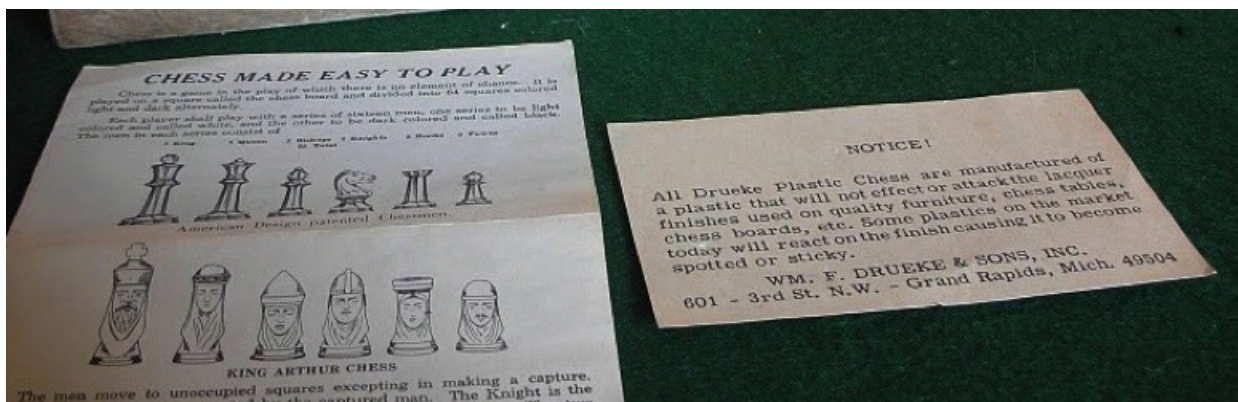


Photo Courtesy of Dan Navarro

There were also a few sub-categories, for various reasons, but the above classifications pretty much covered the sets as a whole. There was also at least one style variation in the *American Design*. The difference(s) can be seen in the picture above – in particular, the difference in

the Queens between the two sets. One variation has a Queen with 'taller' more 'scalloped' coronets while the other variation had a queen with 'flatter' coronets. The reason for the differences is unknown at this time.

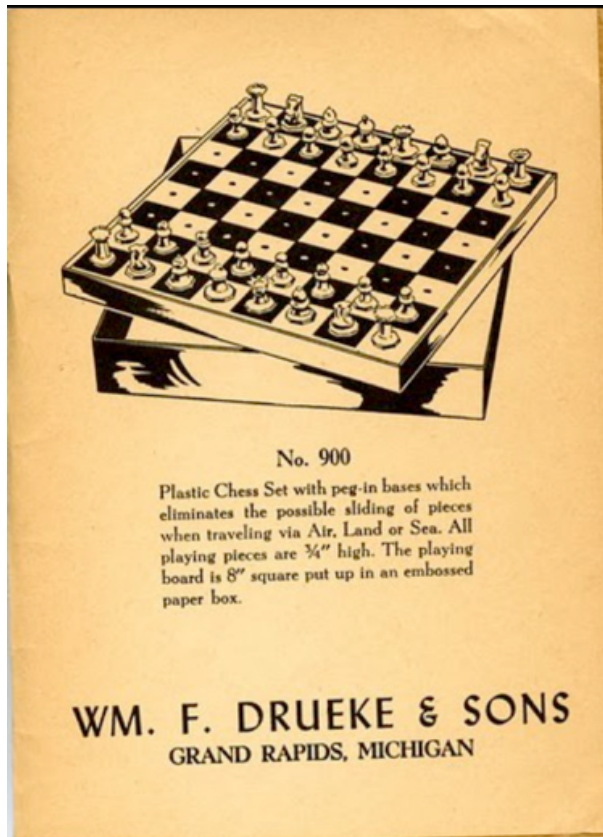
Note the Instruction Sheet and 'Notice' (below). According to it, it would appear Drueke used



**CHESS MADE EASY TO PLAY**  
 Chess is a game in the play of which there is no element of chance. It is played on a square called the chess board and divided into 64 squares colored light and dark alternately.  
 Each player shall play with a series of sixteen men, five males to be light colored and called white, and the other to be dark colored and called black. The men in each series consist of:  
 1 King 1 Queen 2 Rooks 2 Knights 2 Bishops 8 Pawns  
 American Design patented Chessmen

**KING ARTHUR CHESS**  
 The men move to unoccupied squares excepting in making a capture. The Knight is the only man that can jump over other men. The two

**NOTICE!**  
 All Drueke Plastic Chess are manufactured of a plastic that will not effect or attack the lacquer finishes used on quality furniture, chess tables, chess boards, etc. Some plastics on the market today will react on the finish causing it to become spotted or sticky.  
 WM. F. DRUEKE & SONS, INC.  
 601 - 3rd St. N.W. - Grand Rapids, Mich. 49504



To the left is an ad from the back of a Druke Chess Manual, which shows an illustration of the pegged version of the American Design Travel Set, and above is a picture of the magnetic version referred to by Druke as “The Little Jewel”.

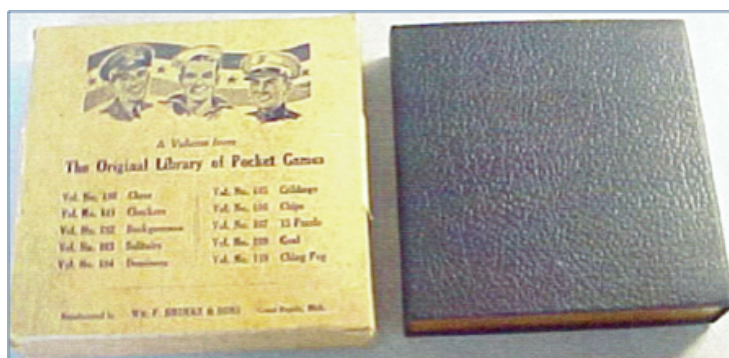
During WWII, Druke, like other game makers, put much of their production effort into supporting the war – producing multitudes of small, very portable ‘pocket’ games to be sent to the soldiers fighting overseas. At one point, Druke shipped out a railroad car that was full of nothing but pocket games – including chess, backgammon, cribbage boards, and other games in their product line.

one single plastic for all the plastic chess sets they manufactured. Since Druke often stated the plastic used in *The American Design* was *Tenite*, a staple of the plastics industry since 1929, this would seem, by extension, to indicate that both the *King Arthur* and the *Players’ Choice* designs were also made of *Tenite*.

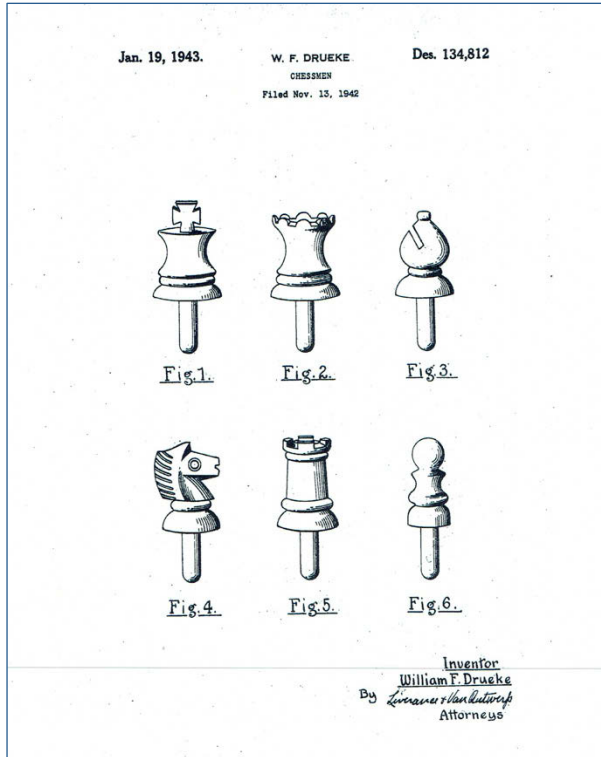
At bottom left is a sample of the chess version of the Pocket Games. The cover also shows some of the other games available at that time for the troops. And below right is a picture of the actual chess set inside the Pocket Game. The travel set appears to match the one illustrated in a patent received by William F. Druke on January 19, 1943 (top right of next page).

## TRAVEL SETS

Travel sets based on *The American Design* were sold in both pegged and magnetic versions.







Fans of Drueke chess sets may have difficulty believing the next set (below left) was really from the Drueke Company, if it wasn't for the evidence given on the box lid itself (below right).

The lid lists two different chess styles available under the same model number, the differentiation between the two sets made only by the stamp seen on the box lid (seen to the right in the photo, located next to the Model No.), identifying the particular set to be found in the box.

While unknown for sure, it is doubtful the K-Florentine chess pieces were actually produced by Drueke. It would seem more likely the Kingsway Company supplied them to Drueke,



given that the Florentine design was patented by the Kingsway Company. But this surprising little 'curve' illustrates the difficult, but also interesting, twist so often seen when examining the histories of American chess companies – what appears to have been a generic sharing of styles and packaging between game manufacturers. It would be interesting if agreements between the different companies could be found. It is definitely a subject deserving of more research.

## KING ARTHUR

Drueke first began to sell its King Arthur chess sets around 1964 – about the same time the company launched its Luxury Line (Player's Choice) chess sets. It may have been Drueke's response to similar sets from their competitors, such as the Ganine Gothic set from Pleasantime Games and the Renaissance set from Lowe. A local wood carver from Grand Rapids by the name of Charles Bendekgey designed it. As inferred earlier, the set may have also been made of Tenite, although the technique used for its manufacture was significantly different. To allow for the insertion of weights into the base of the pieces, the pieces were designed in two parts which were then sealed together once the weight had been inserted. Unfortunately, this led to a couple of problems with the set – one, the weights tended to separate and two, the thickness of the plastic used in making the pieces was extremely thin, to the point where it





was compared to the thickness of ping pong ball [More on this set and its manufacture is planned for a future issue of this newsletter.]

Despite the fact it was heavily promoted by Drueke – ads for the set appeared in many of the company brochures, instruction booklets, chess primers and other ads, perhaps as late as 1986 – it doesn't appear the set ever really caught on with the public, did not live up to the company's hopes or sales expectation and did not prove to be a viable competitor to the Gothic or Renaissance designs. As a result, it is not often seen for sale and still today remains rather rare and unknown to most.

**THE PLAYERS' CHOICE  
(also known as THE  
LUXURY LINE)**

This set came in three sizes:

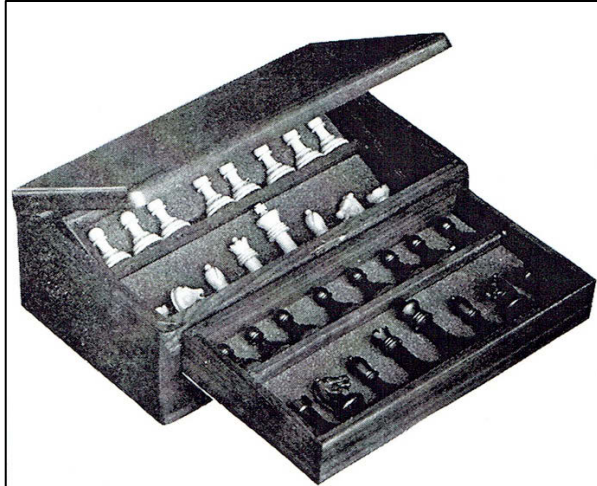
Small (above right): 2½" King. It was also available as a magnetic 'travel' set.

Standard (right): 3¾" King

Imperial (not shown): 5" King

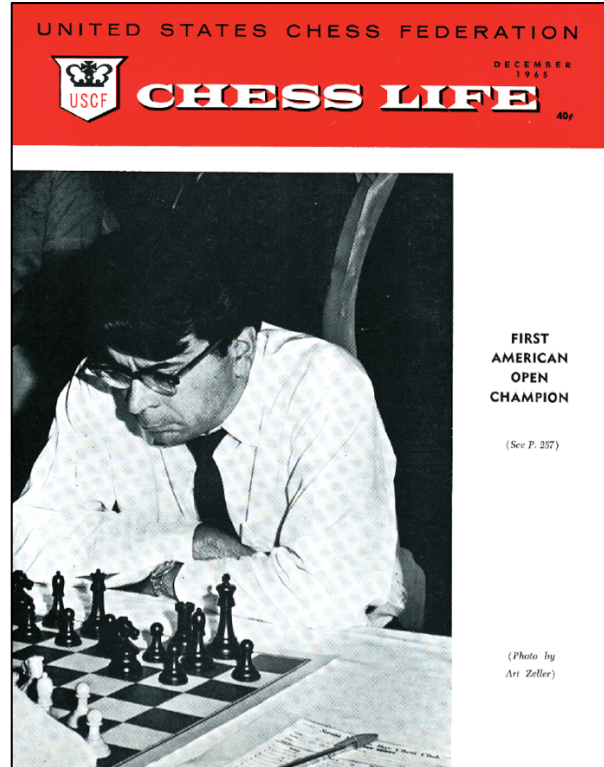
Drueke advertisements of the time stated the Players Choice was introduced at the 1965 National Open Chess Tournament in Las Vegas (where it was so popular every set on hand sold out at the event). But evidence would seem to indicate the set was available months earlier. The ad seen at the top left of the next page appeared in the November 1963 *Chess Life*, page 288.





No. 4466 DELUX LUXURY LINE CHESS SET IN BOXWOOD AND EBONY FINISH is the result of 50 years experience in the manufacture of quality chess sets. The correct design with proper base sizes and authentic proportions from the tournament size king to the pawn. Made of Hi Impact satin finished unbreakable plastic that will not attack the lacquer finishes used on quality chess tables and boards. (Some plastics will attack lacquer). This set is stored in a solid walnut chess chest with two removable trays with foam plastic inserts to hold the chessmen. Smooth quality lacquer finish.

While the maker of the set isn't named – a frequent practice it would seem at the time – a simple comparison between the pieces would seem to make identification possible. Note, in particular, the design of the King, Queen, Pawns, and especially, the Knights, a Druke Knight if there ever was one. The wording is also the same as the wording put out directly by the Druke Company in later ads. This would all seem to indicate the set was available at least as early as November of 1963.



Whatever the case, the design proved to be a popular set. It was the official set for several tournaments and appeared several times on the covers of *Chess Review* and *Chess Life* (above).

The Players' Choice set enjoyed another sudden boost in sales when a photo showed Bobby Fischer using the set in practice while preparing for his famous match against Boris Spassky in 1972.

The pieces to the Players' Choice sets were made in two pieces – with the exception of the knights. I discovered this for myself quite by accident (which I have since had confirmed) – while cleaning a small size set I had recently purchased, the bishop suddenly came apart in my hand (far left). Note also the glue residue that appears on the 'insert' at the top of the stem. I quickly examined all the other pieces in the set and while they appeared to have all been made the same, I wasn't about to

experiment any further by trying to take apart another piece. Note the seam line on the finial/crown in the sample picture of the king (bottom center of previous page) as compared to its base and stem, which shows no sign of a seam line whatsoever..

## **CONCLUSION**

The Drueke Company enjoyed a long history of game making in America and among their products were some outstanding examples of chess sets. They remain popular even today on the secondary market. I have always wondered why Carrom never continued making the

popular sets from Drueke; the most likely reason, I have been told, is that the molds were destroyed when the company was sold. I can't help but think that was a great loss to all the chess players and collectors who have followed.

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