

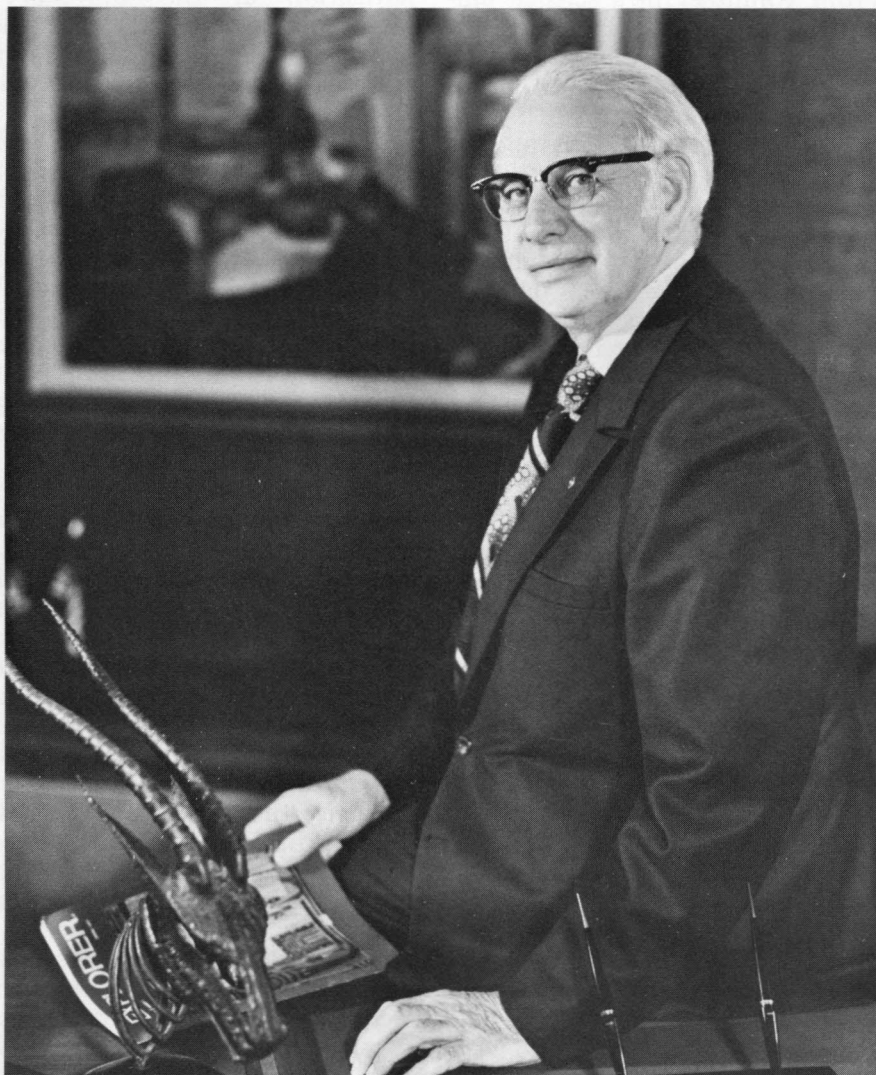
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DR. MILTON D. THOMPSON

(Photo by Marlin Roos)

# THE FROST TRADE BEAD COLLECTION

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In 1941, the Illinois State Museum received a collection of glass trade beads mounted on the seventy-one original sample cards, a few of the hinged display cases, and the boxes in which they were stored. The beads, donated by Dan Frost of New York City, were one of the highlights of the 1903-04 World's Fair in St. Louis.

The sample cards bear the symbol of Stephen A. Frost and Son. The elder Frost began his career in 1848, travelling throughout the continental United States from his New York City headquarters. At an early age, Dan Frost joined his father in business. When his father retired in 1900, Dan continued the trade until 1937, when he retired at the age of 87!

While trading their stock of beads, broadcloth and other items, they came in contact with many of the legendary heroes of the period. One need only consider some of the romantic legends of that past half-century to conjure up scenes of the western frontier, of General Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok, Sitting Bull, Geronimo and others—all reported to be friends of the Frosts!

In exchange for their trade goods the Frosts often received Amerindian handicrafts, which they in turn sold abroad. We have no way of knowing how far their influence may have ranged. The cases of glass beads now in the Illinois State Museum Collection include types that were traded throughout the world.

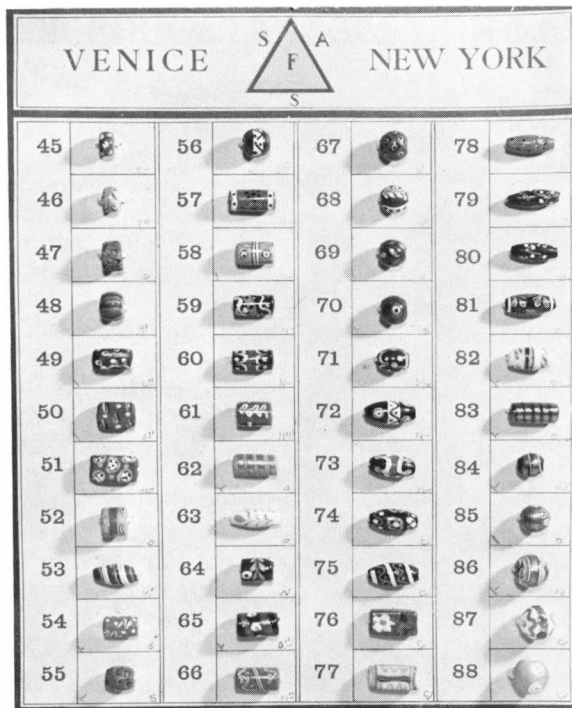
To view the entire collection (literally thousands of beads) is overwhelming, and one cannot begin to appreciate their diverse colors and designs, nor the vivid imagination and technical expertise required

to produce the individual specimens. Beads range from plain-colored discs and balls to glittering, almost grotesquely-brilliant, beads with masses of overlay. Some represent the American flag, melons, berries, snail shells. Others imitate metal (copper, gold, silver) and other substances (carnelian, agate, jet, amber, bone). Some are so large one can visualize being weighted down by a necklace containing only a few. In contrast, the "seed" beads are so tiny, one wonders at the tremendous patience required to completely cover whole articles with these beads. When one first views the collection, some beads appear garish and ugly; and yet individually, each bead has its own appeal and the viewer's senses are bombarded with new impressions at every glance.

Personal adornment is almost instinctive with man, and beads of various materials have always been highly regarded. Glass beads have been in existence for centuries. Egyptians were ornamenting themselves with highly decorated glass beads by 1100 B.C., and some

*North American Indian articles embroidered with "seed" beads.*





Sample card from the Frost Trade Bead Collection, Illinois State Museum.

sources have claimed glass beads were manufactured in the U.S.S.R. (Georgia) as early as 3000 B.C. Glass beads became an immediate trade item in this country at the time of initial contact between the early explorers and the Natives (ca. A.D. 1500).

During the four centuries preceding 1900, tons of glass beads were traded within the North American continent. Large beads adorned everything from gun stocks to knives to cradle boards, while the small "seed" beads introduced in the 18th century found their way into elaborate embroidery in a variety of designs.

Beads were not cheap. The standard of exchange during most of the early history of this country was "one made beaver," a made beaver being one that had been dried and readied for the tanner. In the 18th

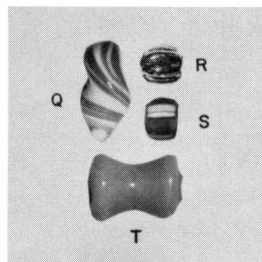
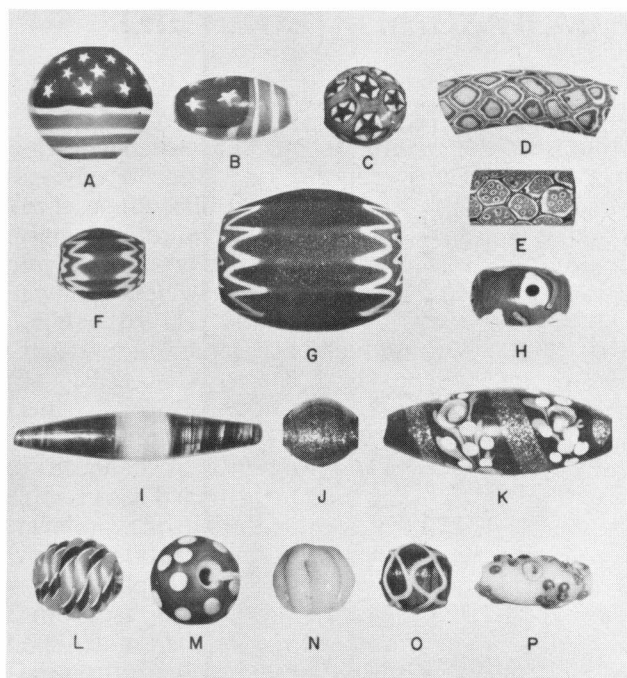
century the Hudson Bay Company listed the following exchange rates for beads:

- 1 lb. beads (seed) for 1 made beaver
- 6 Hudson Bay beads for 1 made beaver

In the currency of the day, one made beaver was equivalent to 50c. Today we find a pound of superior quality, European-made seed beads valued at approximately \$14.00, while the beaver hide is nearer to \$25.00.

Throughout the trading period in America the majority of glass beads originated in Europe. Venice (Murano) held a monopoly on their manufacture for centuries and is still generally considered the center of glass bead manufacture. Beads in the Frost collection were manufactured in Venice and Czechoslovakia during the last half of the last century.

*Continued on next page*



*Examples of beads in the Frost Collection: A,B,C. American flag; D,E. "African"; F,G. Chevron, star; H. "Eye"; I. Onyx; J. "Copper"; K. Fancy; L. Wound; M. Drawn-tube; N. Molded "green pepper"; O,P. Fancy overlay; Q. "Snail"; R. "Copper"; S. Candy-striped; T. Molded. (Note G is 1¼ inches (3 cm.); Q is ½ inch (12 mm.) long.)*

Both the original antique trade beads and new ones of similar design are used in "modern" jewelry. Bead collecting is also gaining favor as a hobby and an investment. Many of the bead designs popular among the Amerindians and early mountain men in this country can still be purchased. The Chevron or star bead made with a blue, red or green background and the candy-striped beads are among the popular types that have survived.

Simple blue beads, in both light and dark shades, have a long history of popularity in this country. Sometimes referred to as "peace" beads, they were generally combined with white beads; and depending on their size, were used for embroidery, weaving, or strung as necklaces.

The collection also contains a number of "African trade beads," currently popular in jewelry today, but probably never traded in this country prior to the modern influx. Fancy, highly decorated beads, although rarely found on American Indian articles or archaeological sites, are supreme examples of the Venetian glassmaker's art.

Many of the Frost Trade Bead sample cards, along with selected articles of beadwork, will be exhibited in the Anthropology Hall of the Illinois State Museum from January 13 through February 27, 1977.

From March 15 through October 31, 1977, this exhibit will be displayed on the third floor of the Dickson Mounds Museum at Lewis-town.