

The Sand Art Bottles of Andrew Clemens

Barbara Ching
Iowa State University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2016 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Ching, Barbara. "The Sand Art Bottles of Andrew Clemens." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 276-277.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12313>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

The Sand Art Bottles of Andrew Clemens, by Roy Sucholeiki. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015. vii, 138 pp. Illustrations (many in color), appendixes, references, index. \$55.00 paperback.

Reviewer Barbara Ching is professor of English at Iowa State University. She is the author of " 'This World Is Ours': The Bily Clocks and Cosmopolitan Regionalism, 1913-1948" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2009).

In *The Sand Art Bottles of Andrew Clemens*, Roy Sucholeiki has written a wide-ranging, copiously illustrated appreciation of Iowa artist Andrew Clemens's sand art bottles. Neither a catalogue raisonné nor a biography (critical or otherwise), *Sand Art Bottles* relies on a lengthy 1945 interview with Clemens's relatives conducted by Marian Rischmueller for information about the life and career of Clemens (1857-1894).

The third son in a family of six boys, Andrew was a self-taught, isolated artist and a highly motivated entrepreneur. The son of German-speaking immigrants who moved several times in search of opportunities in the upper Midwest, Andrew spent most of his life in McGregor, Iowa. After encephalitis left him deaf at the age of six, he attended the Iowa School for the Deaf in Council Bluffs. Sometime in the early 1870s Clemens began to make sand art bottles to sell in a local shop where the owner also made and sold them. Clemens gathered colored sand from a cave in Pikes Peak State Park; according to Sucholeiki, such collecting was a tradition that may have been started by the native inhabitants of the region. Certainly, the book's final chapter, a survey of the handful of sand bottle creators Clemens inspired, demonstrates that other white men in the driftless region carried on sand collecting and bottle crafting for several generations. Sucholeiki also discusses at some length Ole Anderson, a bottle creator who worked out of a souvenir shop in Yellowstone.

Packing sand into upside-down apothecary bottles, Clemens quickly distinguished himself by his pictorial skill, particularly the fine delineation he could achieve. He created special tools to enable that precision. He often designed bottles to order; clients requested personalized bottles to commemorate weddings, birthdays, and holidays. An order sheet reproduced in the book offers bouquets, steamboats, marine scenes, and the like as central images. The prices ranged from \$.50 to \$4.50 depending on size and complexity. An appendix lists recent auction prices for the bottles, reaching as high as \$45,000. When he signed the bottles in sand, Clemens did so near the bottom, on the back. In early bottles, Clemens would add that he was "a deaf mute."

Sucholeiki reads the recurring features of Clemens's bottles as a blending of regional and American motifs. The bottles' bases feature

abstract, wavy bands of varying colors, a depiction of the region's geology: the sand itself. The upper segments regularly portray eagles and American flags, situating the artist and his subjects in the United States. Objects or locales are faithfully illustrated at the center of the bottles. Sucholeiki identifies a bottle depicting George Washington as Clemens's masterpiece and devotes a chapter to its development. The book closes with Sucholeiki's brief statement on Clemens as a "fully fledged professional artist" in contrast to his followers and other folk artists. Such distinctions may not be of great interest to most readers; what the book does well is document the possibility for creative, widely applauded creative expression in rural Iowa in the late nineteenth century.

Skunk Hill: A Native Ceremonial Community in Wisconsin, by Robert A. Birmingham. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015. xii, 116 pp. Maps, illustrations, census chart, allotment chart, notes, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Eric Steven Zimmer is a research fellow at the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS) on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He is the author of "Settlement Sovereignty: The Meskwaki Fight for Self-Governance, 1856-1937" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2014).

In this fascinating and accessible contribution to midwestern history, archaeologist Robert A. Birmingham details the founding and decline of the village at Skunk Hill, a large community of Potawatomi people founded on the bluffs of central Wisconsin in 1905. The Skunk Hill community, he argues, "was the most prominent of several ceremonial communities in Wisconsin based around a cultural and spiritual revival movement known as the Dream Dance," often called the "Drum Dance," which "swept across the Midwest and eastern Great Plains in the late nineteenth century" (2). The U.S. government had forced these Potawatomes onto a reservation in Kansas decades earlier. They fled that place before securing dozens of land allotments around Skunk Hill on which they assembled a cohesive community of about 20 families. The Skunk Hill Potawatomes lived, worked, and worshiped on that land base for more than 20 years. They shared a communal cemetery and a space for harvesting maple sap, as well as areas for ceremonies and dances. Skunk Hill disbanded in the early 1930s after its founders, many of whom were spiritual leaders, died and most community members sold their land.

Birmingham deftly deploys archaeological and archival evidence to piece together the story of Skunk Hill. He also cultivated relation-