



Croquet Anyone?

James H. Hillestad takes a whack at examining the 'Queen of Games' in history and in miniature, with a side trip to British India to boot

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

Croquet, which has been described as the "Queen of Games," has inspired 54-mm players by various toy figure makers.

The sport of cricket may be the source of the term "sticky wicket" describing a difficult circumstance. But that metaphor also applies when trying to sort out the

rain, thus creating a "sticky wicket" for a cricketer at bat.

In the United States, "sticky wicket" has come to describe a difficult shot to make in the lawn game of croquet. It is played by using a mallet to hit wooden, ceramic or plastic balls through a series of hoops (also known as "wickets") on a grass court.

"Some debate swirls around how croquet in its recognizable modern form became all the rage in England during the 1860s and went on to spread to the British Empire's colonies, the United States and elsewhere around the world."

rather murky history of croquet. In fact, the two sports' terminology overlaps, but with some completely different meanings.

In cricket, the rectangular playing field, or "pitch," is also known as a "wicket." Weather conditions can affect play. For example, a bowled ball might bounce unpredictably on a pitch dampened by

ORIGIN THEORIES

Along with some other games, croquet evolved from ground billiards, which had its roots in classical antiquity and had been popular in Western Europe at least since the 14th century. However, some debate swirls around how croquet in its recognizable modern form became all the

ABOVE: Casual attire is worn by players in STE's "Croquet at Grosse Pointe Shores, Mich., 1910."

BELOW: Reproduction of Norman Rockwell's Saturday Evening Post cover artwork titled "Croquet." (From the Collection of James H. Hillestad)



rage in England during the 1860s and went on to spread to the British Empire's colonies, the United States and elsewhere around the world.

Two origin theories are presented by author Nicky Smith in the 1991 book "Queen of Games: The History of Croquet."

The first theory is that the game came from France during the reign of England's King Charles II (1649-1685). The fashionable amusement was played under the names "paille-maille" or "pall mall," expressions derived from the Latin words for "ball and mallet." The walk in St. James's Park in London, which is now called the Mall, received its name because the vicinity was used as a playing field by Charles II and his courtiers.

By the time Samuel Johnson's dictionary was published in 1828, his definition of "pall mall" described a game akin to modern croquet as follows:

"A play in which the ball is struck with a mallet through an iron ring."

However, researchers have noted there is no evidence that pall mall involved the croquet stroke, which is the modern game's distinctive characteristic.

The second theory explains that modern croquet arrived in England from Ireland during the 1850s, possibly after being imported from Brittany in Northwest France, where a game with similar features was played on Atlantic beaches.

WILDLY POPULAR

What is known for certain is that a set of rules registered by Isaac Spratt in November 1856 with the Stationers' Company in London is the oldest known document that uses the word "croquet" in a description of the modern game. In part because it could be played for fun by both sexes, croquet became widely popular as a social pastime in Victorian England during the 1860s.

The first croquet all-comers meeting was staged at Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, England, in 1868. That very same year the All England Croquet Club was established at Wimbledon, London. By the late 1870s, however, croquet was eclipsed by another fashionable game: tennis. Many of the newly-created croquet clubs, including the club at Wimbledon, converted some or all of their lawns into tennis courts.

English author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known by the pen name Lewis Carroll, famously wrote about a surrealistic version of croquet in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," published in 1865. A hedgehog took the place of the ball, a flamingo was the mallet and playing cards became the hoops.

Literary references have also included "The Croquet Player" by H.G. Wells. The British writer used the game as a metaphor



for the way in which man confronts the very problem of his own existence.

The game was often depicted by well-known artists of the period, such as Édouard Manet of France and American Winslow Homer. The latter finished the first of five paintings devoted to the subject of croquet in 1865. The game was also a favorite subject of American artist Norman Rockwell, whose 20th-century paintings included "Croquet," which appeared on *The Saturday Evening Post's* cover Sept. 5, 1931.

My Toy Soldier Museum collection includes sets of metal croquet players painted in gloss by a number of makers

through the years, including Red Box, STE and John Eden Studios. Imbued with a charm all their own, my miniature mallet swingers capture the fashionable style, grace and fun of spending a leisurely sunny afternoon on a grassy lawn playing the "Queen of Games." ■

ABOVE: Red Box portrayal of Lewis Carroll's literary character Alice playing croquet.

BELOW: "Croquet at The Breakers, Palm Beach, Fla., 1908" by STE, with the figures in regulation whites.





Croquet Amongst Splendors of the Raj

Croquet is amongst the features of a diorama at The Toy Soldier Museum that was inspired by the splendors of the British Raj in India.

John Eden Studios of England produced a 54-mm group titled "Croquet in India, 1904." The vignette was expanded to become part of a diorama dubbed "The Officers' Club, Simla, 1904."

The game is played on a grassy lawn shaded by palm trees while a quintet performs background music. Inside the club building, British and Indian Army

officers enjoy refreshments in a room decorated with mounted hunting trophies.

In the hot summer months, the British habitually made an exodus to the cooler hills. The smartest of the hill stations was Simla, summer capital of British India.

The overall size of the diorama is 26 by 14 inches. The figures were made by Eden, W.C. Stanton, Bill Speer and Patrick Willis of Sarum Soldiers.

The "trophies of the hunt" were made from W. Britain plastic animals. The "spoils of war" appropriately came from

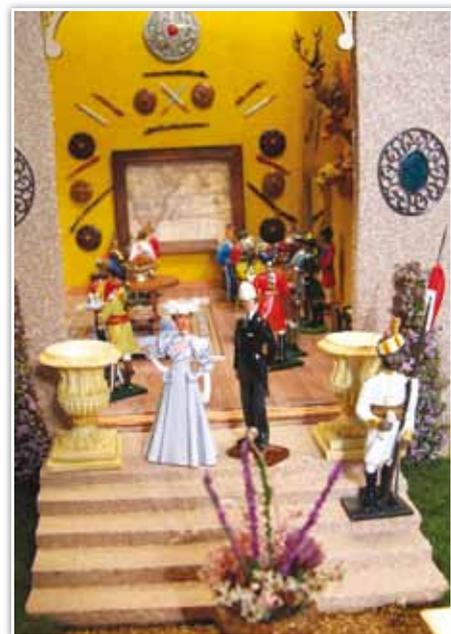
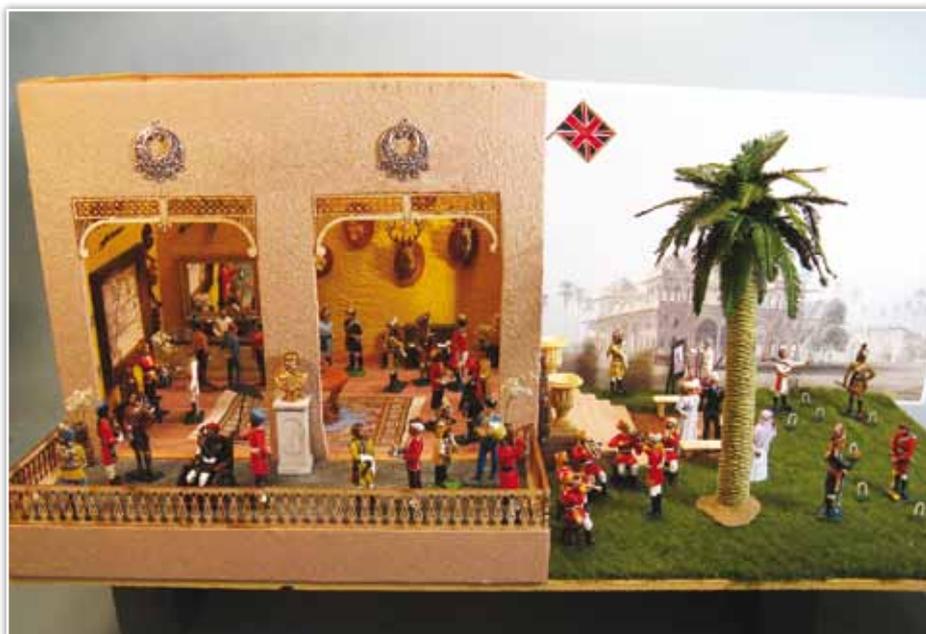
Trophy Miniatures of Wales. Decorative wall jewelry was obtained from the bead section of a craft store.

--James H. Hillestad

ABOVE: "Croquet in India, 1904" by John Eden Studios.

BELOW LEFT: Diorama dubbed "The Officers' Club, Simla, 1904."

BELOW: The entrance to the club.





LEFT: A view of the club's terrace, with a bar in the background.

ABOVE: An artist paints a portrait of an Indian officer.

BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: Hunting trophies decorate the club. Spoils of war are on display.



LEFT: An orchestra performs on the lawn.

BELOW: A bust of King Edward VII lends his presence to the convivial scene.



about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.