

California Agate Company

The term “aggie” has a long history in marble playing and marble collecting. Handcut agates were used for years by marble players. They were favored as shooters for their hardness and density, as well as for their coloring and patterns. In fact, agates were so deadly accurate as the shooter that they were banned from many games and tournaments. Handcut agate marbles originated in the Idar-Oberstein region of Germany, which has a history of agate mining and fabrication of objects from agate that dates back to Roman times.



(left - Idar-Oberstein Agate. middle - Roman agate cup, ca. 1st-2nd Century AD. right - German Handcut Agate Marble ca 1890)

During World War 1, supplies of marbles from Germany to the US were cut off, resulting in a shortage of marbles for playing. A traveling salesman, T.D. Meagher, had seen how the shortage of German agates had affected kids during the war. He saw a demand that was begging to be met.

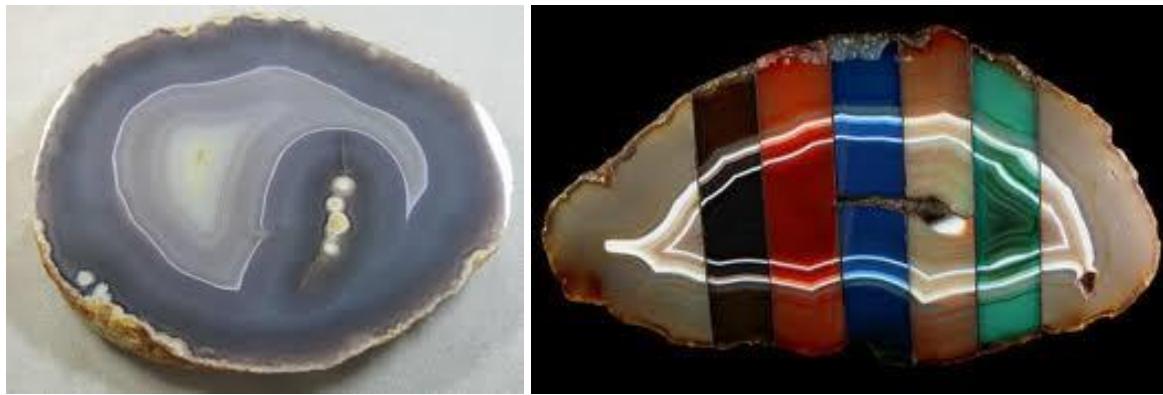
The California Agate Company was founded as a partnership of T. D. Meagher, G. D. Mitchell and G. W. McElroy. A 1924 article reports that Mitchell had moved his family to Los Angeles about 3 years before. He was recovering from being gassed (mustard or chlorine gas) in World War 1, and looking for a job. That's when he met Meagher.

Mitchell made a trip to Baja California where he was able to assure himself that there was adequate quality and quantity of the stone they could use. He made arrangements to have it shipped by sea. It was often colorful, was in virtually unlimited supply, and was found relatively close to Southern California. The proximity of the raw material source to the manufacturing location, coupled with the short distance necessary to transport the finished marbles to the American market, represented a cost advantage to the new venture.



(left - Mexico Agate. right - Mexico Onyx Quarry)

Up to this time, German agates were manufactured from material imported from Brazil, with the finished product re-shipped back to the United States. German agate marbles were originally produced using agate mined in the Idar-Oberstein region of Germany. Over time the easily accessible sources of agate in the area became mined out, and greater effort was required to mine the raw material. Brazilian agate was close to the surface and easier to mine. It was also discovered that subjecting the Brazilian material to varying degrees of heat, pressure and sugar solutions could cause it to change to a color similar to Idar-Oberstein agate.



(left - Brazil Agate. right - Dyed Brazil Agate showing various colors and original at ends)

McElroy was the inventor in the partnership and helped set up the marble making machinery. Meagher was the company's president and responsible for marketing and sales, and Mitchell was in charge of operations.

With little capital, their first "factory" was a shed in Los Angeles. They were successful from the start, given the competitive advantage they had over German agate marbles. It even appears that they had an international customer list. Later in 1924 they moved to a somewhat larger factory in Huntington Park.



(California Onyx Company marble making machine)

Another 1924 article said their new home would be a "sheet iron building", of approximately 3,400 square feet, built by H. A. Kembel at a cost of \$1,500. The products are listed as "marbles, beads and various agate and onyx novelties". It is also known that they produced gear shift knobs, umbrella handles and drawer knobs. Fifteen people were expected to be employed, with room for expansion.

In December 1924, Meagher said their output was 6,000 marbles a day, and they were "the only firm in America competing with Germany for the toy-stone marble trade." Production seems to have lasted for around 10 years. There are some references to a dispute in 1931 with the US Department of Treasury over onyx imports. This probably related to tariffs, but definitive information has not been located. The company's death knell came in the form of a flood of cheap glass marbles produced by the increasingly efficient machinery of the early 1930s. Even had the company's machinery been converted from a manual to a mechanized process, the cost of producing agates would have been too high compared to glass marbles.



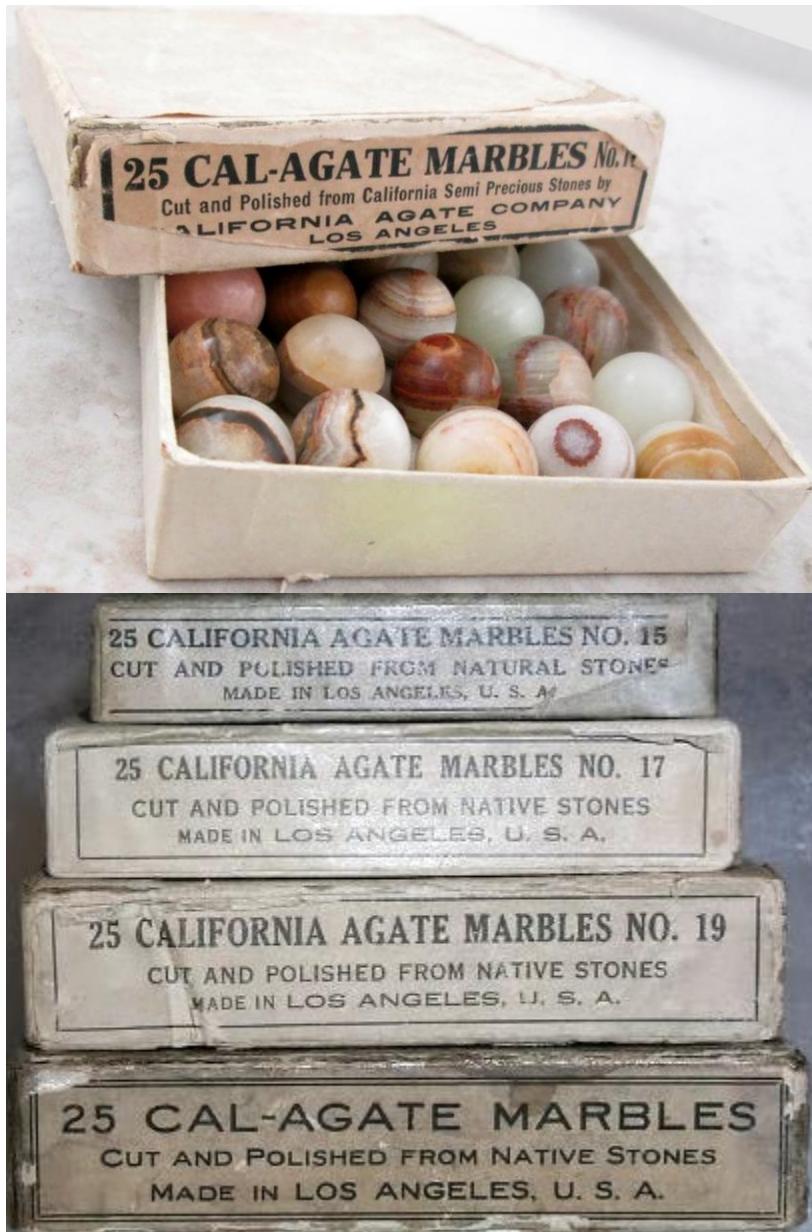
(California Agate Company marbles)

Historical details are sketchy. There are reports of at least two factory fires during the life of the company. At some point, the California Agate Company changed its name to the California Onyx Company. Production appears to have shifted from Agate to Onyx, though the date of this shift, and the reason for it, is not known. Onyx and Agate are both the same hardness (6.5-7.0 on the Mohs scale), but onyx exhibits regular banding, as opposed to agate which has more chaotic layers. Also, agate is generally found as nodules or boulders, as opposed to onyx which can be mined in blocks from quarries (see images earlier in the article)



(California Agate Company box containing combination of California Agate Company and German marbles)

An April 1932 article states that "4-ton blocks of onyx furnish the raw material from which the aggies are made. The blocks are neatly sliced into slabs seven-eighths of an inch thick, and these in turn are cut into cubes. Then the cubes are carried in trays of 200 to a rotary grinder where they become spheres."



A 1931 wholesale catalogue lists boxes of 25-count 13/16" marbles (light color) for 20c each, \$18.00 per hundred boxes, and 25-count 11/16" marbles (dark color) at 24c per box, \$23.00 per hundred boxes.

It is likely that a number of agates and onyx marbles that are in collections were produced by the California Agate Company or California Onyx Company. Originally packaging is rare, but does exist. Square boxes, similar in size to Akro Agate Cardinal Red boxes, have been found. These are printed with either California Agate Company, Cal-Agates, or California Onyx Company. Some are marked as "Seconds". Valuation is difficult, due to the rarity of the boxes and the thin market for them. A Cal-Agates example recently sold on Ebay for around \$375.

(Special thanks to "Steph" of marbleconnection.com for historical information and selected images)