Colorful, and interesting. Purdy was bright, but Edison was brilliant. Here are a few of Purdy's choice of colors and sizes.

Focusing Light on Purdy's Alcohol Lamp

By Ralph Finch

Over the years as a target ball collector, I often came across glass orbs that were touted by uneducated eBay sellers as various things, usually as target balls (wrong), often as oil lamps (close), and — occasionally — as alcohol lamps (correct). They also are found at glass shows, but don't buy one!

And they almost always are labeled "rare" (wrong), or even "unique," and the now meaningless word: "vintage."

The balls themselves are common, since they are made of thick glass and can survive forever in a dump. The glass is thicker on the bottom than on the top, and we'll get to that later.

The lamps, designed by John H. Purdy of Chicago, are rarely found complete, and that means with all six parts: the metal cup base, the wick holder, the attached (by a little chain) snuffer and the wick.

The orbs are embossed with one or two patent dates. If one, the date is "Patd Sep 14th 1880." If two dates, the second is "And March 14th 1893."

The lamps are commonly called jeweler's lamps, used by anyone who needs close-up light, such as watch makers. And despite the illumination, the balls cause confusion with dim-witted people who don't take time to Google information. On the bright side, the balls do offer something special, as they were made in a variety of colors: amber, green, blue, green and clear.

The round balls fit loosely in the cup holder, to allow the user to change the flame to any position beneficial to the task at hand, either vertically, or at some other angle by rotating the ball within the semi-circular cup holder.

Purdy claimed certain improvements for regulating the flame. His 1893 patent addressed the problem of keeping the sphere from moving in the holder by making the bottom of the sphere thicker, thereby giving it more mass than the upper half, and providing greater stability in the base.

Perhaps after working long hours at night with his lamp, Purdy also made an improvement with his third patent on May 31, 1910 (959,804), for a method to fuel the lamp without the need to remove the burner.

Again, while they are not target balls, I am a packrat and felt the need of acquiring these orbs in all colors and all sizes.

In the period from 1878-80 Edison and his associates were given 1,093 patents, and during that time worked on at least three thousand different theories to develop an efficient incandescent lamp. Edison's "New Type Edison Lamp, patented May 4, 1880, pretty much left Purdy in the dark … or, at least, in history's dust.