



# THE CLEVELAND GRANDMA

One man's love affair with a fortune teller

by **Tim LaGanke** • Novelty, Ohio, USA • Photos by the author



William Gent Manufacturing Company's Grandmothers Predictions, colloquially known as the *Cleveland Grandma*, was manufactured between 1929 and 1932.

“If the recently organized Penny Arcade Owners Association would hold their next convention in Cleveland, it would be a university education for all of them.” That is what the editor of *The Automatic Age* said in 1931, and there was a good reason for that statement. In those days there were not many people in the world who recognized

the creativity and mechanical ability of a man from Cleveland, Ohio, who built, sold, and operated some of the finest arcade machines ever produced. His name was William Gent and he was known for producing one of the best fortune-telling machines ever made, now known as the *Cleveland Grandma*.

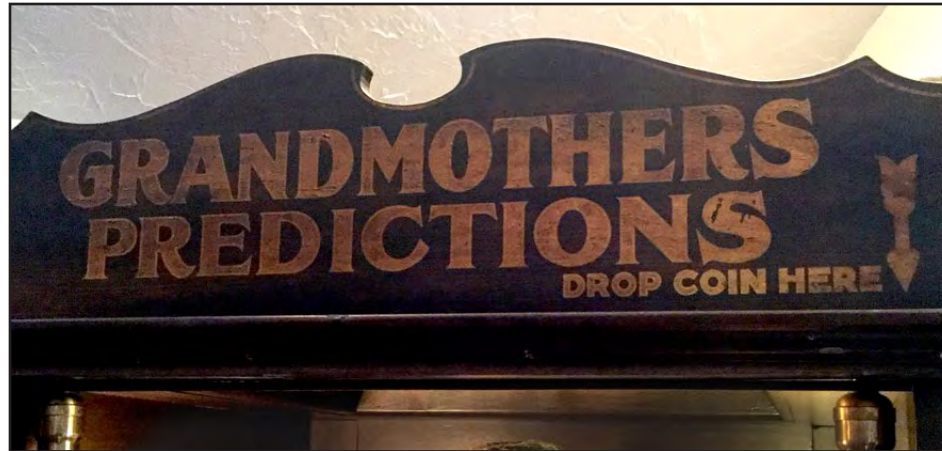
In 1931, visitors to the Cleveland convention of the

Coin Machine Operators Association of America had an opportunity to visit the most beautifully situated coin-operated-machine factory in existence—the William Gent Manufacturing Company. The factory stood on the bank of a river, into which one could cast a fishing line out the window, taking a couple of hours off from strenuous labor to catch some fish. From such an environment came the clear thinking and the perfect workmanship that produced a number of substantial arcade machines. What a pleasure it must have been to work in those bucolic surroundings.

Mr. Gent was an old-time arcade operator and coin-op-machine inventor in the US, who fully understood every phase of the coin-machine business. His arcade at Euclid Beach Park was recognized as a model for penny arcades around the world.

One of Mr. Gent's most outstanding successes was the *Grandmother's Predictions* machine. This large fortune teller swept the country and made tremendous profits in chain stores, department stores, and amusement parks.

The factory also manufactured



The cabinet was topped by a wooden marquee proclaiming "Grandmothers [sic] Predictions."



Grandma's head was a waxwork, made in Dresden, Germany.



The brass coin slot.

scales and other coin-operated machines of various types, and Mr. Gent was the first president of the Coin Machine Operators Association of America.

### My Grandma

I would like to tell you about my machine and some of the many Grandmas that I have restored and owned over the last 35 years. In 1972, I made my first trip to Mike Munves, a coin-op-machine distributor in New York City that was the home of one of the largest collections of arcade machines in the world. There were four or five floors of the greatest stuff that you could imagine. My good friend Wes Brewer and I had free range of the whole building.

We climbed over Chester Polard Derbys and wedged ourselves between '27 and '37 World Series baseball machines, got on and off the elevator, and found so many early and great machines that we couldn't decide what to buy. Many of the machines bore pieces of masking tape with people's initials on them, meaning that those machines had already been spoken for.

We had gone there especially to find a *Cleveland Grandma*. On



the third or fourth floor, stepping off the elevator, we didn't find just a standard *Cleveland Grandma*, but a great-looking variation—a Grandma with a cat over her shoulder. There were also two or three fortune tellers of other makes.

Wes immediately said that he wanted that *Cleveland Grandma*. It was in good condition and, according to Joe, then the owner of Munves, it had just been picked up from an arcade in Harlem. He said that it had been well used by people looking for a "number" to play every day. We asked him what he wanted for the piece and he said \$1,500, which was out of our price range. In those days you could buy a World Series baseball machine for \$600-\$700, exhibit diggers for \$500 each, and iron Mutoscopes (in working order, with great reels in them) for \$300-\$400.

We filled our station wagon with as many smaller pieces as we could afford with the \$400 or \$500 that we had with us. Wes told Joe that he would let him know about the *Cleveland Grandma* in a week or so.

I was back home for about a



Grandma's right arm waves over her fortune-telling cards as her head nods up and down. Her chest rises and falls, as if she's breathing.

week when I heard of another *Cleveland Grandma*. This machine had come out of the Indianapolis antique-advertising show and had been purchased by a bar owner in Jackson, Michigan. I called him to see if he was going to keep it or if it was for sale. I was told that \$2,500 would take it. When I told Wes about that machine, he said, "Let's take a ride and look at it."

What we found was an almost-perfect example of a brand new *Cleveland Grandma*. Wes bought it and we brought it home. Of all the *Cleveland Grandma* machines that I have seen, this was probably the best. Wes had that machine for a number of years, then sold it to a friend of ours who had it for another 20 years. A few years ago I was asked to sell that machine for him, and magician David Copperfield bought it.

Wes had bought that piece, so I moved in on the Munves machine. It has now been 47 years since Wes and I drove back to New York City to pick up my machine. It was one of those fantastic trips when everything fell together perfectly. It had



taken me almost a month to put the \$1,500 together and, up until then, it was the most expensive machine I had ever bought.

I was surprised to find Munves waiting for me—they had moved the machine out to the street. At just after rush hour, about 9:30 in the morning, we came around the corner. There was my machine, waiting to be picked up. People on their way to work were stopping, looking, and even dropping coins into it.

Today I consider the *Cleveland Grandma* to be one of the most interesting and historic arcade machines ever made. During the '70s I restored seven or eight of these for other coin-op collectors. Many of the machines were in terrible condition, some needing to have the cabinets rebuilt and parts and pieces of the mechanisms remade. I remember having four cabinets in my garage at one time, all in different stages of restoration. Often, the marquees and/or glass, with the correct painting, were missing.

My wife, Mary, made 15 or 20 dresses that resembled the originals as closely as possible. I remember selling those dresses



Interior of the Gent Grandmother Fortune Teller. Every machine is mechanically identical, with a strong, well-built mechanism made of cast-iron and bronze parts. **1.** Westinghouse motor. **2.** The card-vending mechanism, with bronze tray. The fortune card is delivered through an opening in the front door. **3.** Bronze cams, which control all the movements. **4.** Switchable interior work light for servicing the mechanism.

for \$500 each. I am sure that Mary spent fewer than 20 hours making each one. We thought we had a good thing going and it helped us to add more machines to our collection. Today, this *Cleveland Grandma* is still one of our prized possessions.

### Features

Here are highlights of some of the special features of this machine. At the top is a highly visible, four-sided marquee, stating "Grandmothers Predictions" and, in smaller print, "Drop Coin Here." The machine is housed in a well-made cabinet with glass on three sides. The front glass panel reads "What does Grandma say? Your answer is here."

This machine was made to operate on nickels and, during the 1920s, it sold for \$1,500. It took 30,000 plays to pay it off, and you had to supply the fortune cards.

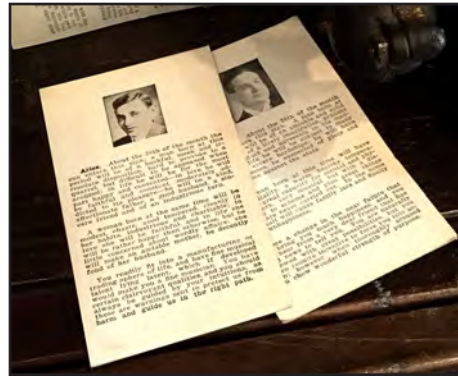
Grandma's hands and head were made of wax in Dresden, Germany. She had moving glass eyes and a chest that heaved, as if she were breathing. The mechanism itself is almost unbreakable, with a strong motor, brass and bronze cams, steel gears,



and a perfectly operating coin mechanism. The machine even came with an assortment of spare springs and other parts, all labeled and numbered for replacement. A work light is installed over the mechanism, with a note reminding the operator not to leave the light on, as that could melt the waxwork.

A coin box was built in that looks like it would hold about \$500 worth of nickels, and there is a storage area to hold the fortune cards. Every machine has an automatic counter that records every play. It's sealed so it can't be changed. This machine was built to last forever.

When a nickel is deposited in the slot, it triggers a switch that starts an electric motor that turns a number of revolving cams. These cams move Grandma's right arm, causing it to swing over her fortune-telling cards. Also, her head moves up and down, nodding at the cards and the customer. Finally, hidden card-vending mechanics below push a fortune card out of a slot near the base of the cabinet. The entire cycle takes around a minute to complete. A video of a machine in action can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/4SQ4lpMVLbE>



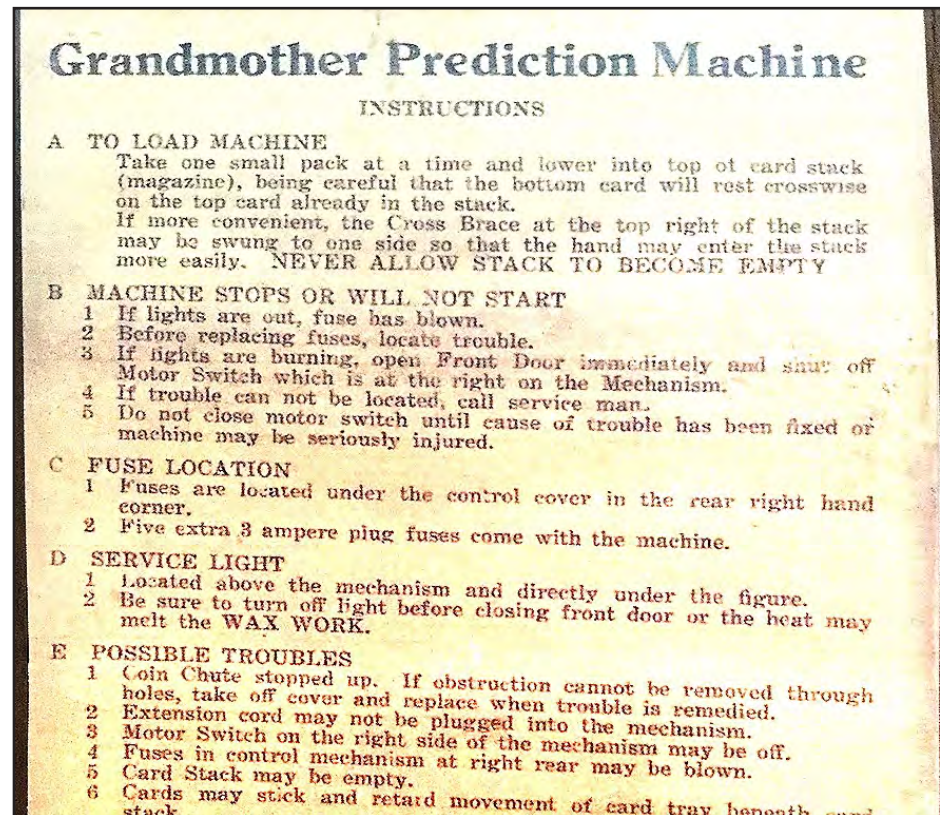
Sample fortune cards. Cards were manufactured by a variety of different companies.



Fortune cards were dispensed through a slot near the base of the upper cabinet.



The locking coin box bears the name of William Gent's original company.



Operating, maintenance, and troubleshooting instructions for the owner/operator. It includes a list of supplied spare parts.

I estimate that fortune cards were produced by six or seven different companies, including Mutoscope, Exhibit Supply, Munves, Automaton Corporation (Gent), and others who didn't put their name on them. The exact number of *Cleveland Grandmas* is unknown. There are around 75 examples known to exist today, though I have seen serial numbers from 67 to over 350.

Over the last 10 years I have found a new passion—collecting antique advertising automata. My fascination with these machines has grown from my attraction to the *Cleveland Grandma*. It truly is one of the finest pieces of coin-operated automata ever made. In fact, William Gent's original company was called The Automaton Corporation. 