

Pinball For The Masses



By Tom Kane

Rob Craig sits in one of his two gamerooms in his Marion home. Craig collects pinball machines and is sponsoring a pinball show at the Herrin Civic Center.

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By Tom Kane
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Marion, Ill. -

Keep your eye on the silver ball!, ding!, whack!,beep!, ding-a-ling!

If lifetime passions are born in our youth, then seven-year-old Rob Craig found his passion at a 7-11 store in Marion in 1977.

It was his first pinball experience and he was hooked.

Resplendent with lights and bells, it only cost a quarter to play. His father, Bob Craig, supported young Rob's addiction by taking him to the store.

Rob would play just as long as his parents would let him. Every time he saw another pinball machine he begged to play it.

When video games came out in the early 80's Rob wasn't interested. "They took your money too quick. With pinball you could play longer for your quarter," said the thirty-eight-year-old Marion electrical engineering technician.

As video games gained popularity and arcades flourished, pinball machines took a backseat to their video cousins. "The pinball machine is more complex, hard to clean and maintain. When a machine is broken it doesn't get played," said Craig. Gradually the machines become hard to find.

For years while he advanced his education, Craig's pinball addiction lay dormant.

Then one fateful day while in college at Murray State University in Murray, Ky. Craig happened upon a pinball machine in a pool hall. It was called "The Adams Family" and it was a whole new ball of wax.

The game was more complex, had many modes of play, and speech recordings. It even had a mechanical hand that reached out and captured the ball.

Ding! Dong! Zowie!

Craig was hooked again.

Craig said the game sold 20,000 units, the most in pinball history.

Later, when Craig had steady employment and was out of school, he started collecting pinball machines. He would buy them on the cheap, in broken condition, and then repair and refurbish them himself.

His work involved computers but his passion demanded knowledge of schematics, diagrams of electronic devices. The passion kept his knowledge of schematics sharp. Today he owns over 200 pinball machines and has two separate game rooms in his Marion home.

He operated the arcade in the Illinois Centre Mall in 2003 and 2004 but has moved on to hosting pinball shows in Southern Illinois. He and a friend got the idea for a local show while traveling home from a regional pinball exposition in Chicago in 2004.

They secured the Williamson County Pavilion for their first show in Sept. of 2005. Only 200 people showed up and they did not make any money.

Their second show was moved to the Herrin Civic Center in Sept. of 2006 and they actually made money. Two hundred patrons showed up again but because the venue did not charge as much, there was money left over.

The third show in 2007 hosted 340 patrons. This year they hope to break the 400 mark. "It's grown every year," said Craig.

In its third year the show raised money for two local charities by holding a silent auction. A pinball machine was the featured item and they brought in over \$2,000 for the Shawnee Crisis Pregnancy Center and Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

This year they will be auctioning another pinball machine for the same charities.

The Heartland Pinball and Arcade Supershow hosted by the Southern Illinois Pinball Players Association will be Sept. 19-20 at the Herrin Civic Center.

It runs 3-11 p.m. Friday and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday.

The cost is \$10 per day or \$17 for both days for those over age five..

A pay-to-enter pinball tournament with a \$250 prize will also be held.

Children under five may participate in a free tournament on Saturday.

For more information, contact show director Rob Craig at  618-751-8458 or popbumper@gmail.com.

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