

Curator's Choice

July 2026

Mangled Metal Merry Making?

By: Scott Strickland
Deputy Director, MAC Lab

During Public Archaeology in the Spring of 2026, volunteers and staff at the MAC Lab came across a curious piece of mangled metal (Figure 1). The artifact is tin-plated, round (approximately 5 inches in diameter), with a hole in the center, a large hole just off-center, and several smaller holes in various spots. There are no markings or decorations that can be seen, but there are what appear to be ridges going out from the center like spokes of a wheel, likely to give rigidity to the otherwise thin bit of metal.

It was found at the Straiten site (18CV307), which dates from the 1830s to the 1930s. During the early 20th century it was occupied by the Straiten family of Wallville, who were Black tenants on the Peterson farm that is now Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum. At first, we thought maybe it had to do something with cooking, like a cover for a burner on a stove. There was no evidence of burning, however.



Figure 1. Tin-plated metal toy fragment from the Straiten site (18CV307).

Found nearby were small fragments of gears and wind-up mechanisms. Could this have been part of some sort of wind-up toy? At present, the best we can determine is that it was some kind of child's tinplate toy. But what kind of toy contained flat, round parts? Tinplate toys are thin sheets of iron coated with rust-resistant tin. Tinplate toys were manufactured in the northeast United States beginning in the early 19th century. Early tinplate toys were simple and non-mechanical, which included things like whistles or bubble pipes (Ketchum 1981).

Mechanical tinplate toys with lithographed (a type of colorful printing) designs were popularized in the 1910s and 1920s with prominent makers being the Ferdinand Strauss Company (known as the "Toy King") and Louis Marx and Company, founded by a former Strauss employee (O'Brien 1993). Strauss was an immigrant from Germany, who began selling toys imported from Europe before manufacturing toys in America. Another prominent German toymaker at the time was a company called Bing.

References Cited

El Coleccionista Eclectico
n.d. Bing Pigmyphone Children's Toy Phonograph. Accessed June 2026. <https://www.elcoleccionistaeclectico.com/en/bing-pigmyphone-childrens-toy-phonograph-tinplate-clockwork-p23873>

Ketchum, William C., Jr.
1981 *Toys & Games*. Cooper-Hewitt Museum. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

O'Brien, Richard
1993 *A Collector's Identification & Value Guide: Collecting Toys No. 6*. Books Americana, Florence, Alabama.

Sears, Roebuck and Co.
1928 *Catalog No. 157: Fall and Winter 1928-1929*. Accessed June 2026. <https://archive.org/details/sears-roebuck-catalog-157-fall-1928>

The Strong National Museum of Play
n.d. *Mechanical Figure: Ring-A-Ling Circus*. The Strong National Museum of Play. Accessed June 2026. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/PwEhqURSFMQ8tw>



Figure 2. Left: Sears, Roebuck and Co. advertisement for children's phonographs c. 1928 (Sears, Roebuck and Co. 1928). Right: Bing Pygmyphone toy gramophone c. 1929-1933 (El Coleccionista Eclectico n.d.).

So, what type of mechanical wind-up tinplate toy has a round flat platform? There are two possibilities (Figures 2 and 3). One possibility is a turntable for a child-sized phonograph or gramophone and the other is the platform of a carousel or merry-go-round. Each features a flat disk with a wind-up motor attached to the center. Each also often has a hole punched in the plate just off-center where a wind-up key could be inserted to tighten the spring mechanism to make it turn.

Mechanically these types of toys were nearly identical and could easily have been produced from the same parts and machinery. Where they differ is how they were displayed. Carousel-type toys had very colorful lithograph designs on their rotating platforms since they would have been highly visible. Holes would've been used to secure figures or characters that would rotate with the platform – like we see on mangled metal from the Straiten site. Turntables, on the other hand, were either plain or covered with a piece of felt. What was recovered at the Straiten site is entirely undecorated but bears holes that may have been used to attach figures on a carousel-type toy. So, which is it? It is possible that the toy from the Straiten site was a kid's phonograph with an undecorated turntable that was manufactured in the same factory producing carousels. Either way, the mangled metal found at the site is good evidence for kids being kids.



Figure 3. Ring-A-Ling Circus by Louis Marx and Company, c. 1925 (The Strong National Museum of Play n.d.).



10515 Mackall Road
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685



Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

