NRA Buttons

By Dorothy Krugner (Oregon)

Have you ever found an ugly wooden button, perhaps in a poke box, that has stamped on the back the letters "NRA" perhaps with an eagle emblem? Well, that ugly button has quite a story to tell!

We begin our story with World War I: 1916 to 1918. The economy was booming during the war. Farmers were encouraged to grow all the wheat they could, and the price of grain was very high. We fed not only our own people, but many in Europe as well. The farmers were plowing up great portions of the Great Plains.

What had been prairie for 35 thousand years was now farmland. The rains came and crops were huge for the times. After the war, soldiers returned and railroads brought trainloads of immigrants to this great, expansive area. Between 1924 and 1929, wheat acreage in the Texas Panhandle grew from 876,000 to 2.5 million acres.

People put money into unregulated banks. The banks loaned the money to almost anyone who wanted to buy (or homestead) land. The stock market was booming through the early 1920’s.

There was great stock speculation and the common investor bought on "margin" just like the big boys!

In industrial areas, the worker labored in the factory for as long as he or she was told: usually 12 to 15 hours each day for six days a week. Children as young as eight and nine years old, both male and female, were employed in this fashion. In 1925 the average weekly wage in a Chicago dress factory for a male was $46.59. For a female the wage for the same labor was $27.54.

And now, the second half of the Nineteen-Twenties arrived. There was great over-production of wheat, corn and other farm products. Europe began filling her own needs. Farm production prices fell as more wheat was produced. Wheat was piled on the ground, as elevators were full. In 1926 the rains stopped. The Midwest began to dry out as it had before in the 1870’s and 1890’s.

In the East, factories were losing contracts and the financial spiral downward had started. October 29, 1929 became black Tuesday when the stock market CRASHED. Over the next three weeks, the market lost 40% of its value. By the early 1930’s, two million Americans were living as nomads, having lost their homes and farms. President Herbert Hoover said "Americans had simply lost their confidence. This will be over in 60 days." In reality, it did not end until the start of the 1940’s.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected in 1932 by 22.8 million votes. In his inaugural address, Roosevelt called for financial reform, emergency relief to the unemployed, agricultural adjustment and a strengthening of cooperation between labor, government, and management. Ahh ha!!! - This was the formation of the "National Industrial Recovery Act" which called for the creation of the NATIONAL RECOVERY ADMINISTRATION or NRA.
The NRA would form consortiums of like industries to:
- Limit competition.
- Raise prices and wages.
- Establish practices and standards for 500 industries,
- ESTABLISH A MINIMUM WAGE,
- Establish a maximum limit for working hours, and
- Guarantee the right of workers to organize.

Unemployment was to drop from 25 million to 10 million. In the summer of 1933 the NRA adopted the Blue Eagle as their official symbol.

The Blue Eagle was designed by Charles T. Coiner, a noted advertising designer, and was to be used on all material issued by companies receiving a "code of authority." The wheel in the right talon is a symbol of industry, and the bolts of lighting in the left talon are a symbol of power. Parades were held in cities across the country to introduce the symbol and what it meant for industry. A postage stamp was issued showing a businessman, farmer, blacksmith and a women stenographer. No more free enterprise!!

What did business think of this? NOT MUCH! Especially big business. By 1935 suit was brought all the way to the Supreme Court, and the NRA was ruled unconstitutional. Within weeks, the Blue Eagle rapidly disappeared.

Our little button was out of business, nearly as quickly as it had arisen.

I have not been able to narrow down a location for manufacture of the NRA
buttons. We do know a very few were made of Vegetable Ivory by the "Art in Button" company. One is shown to the right. The logo is on the face of the button and may have been made for the employees.

By the numbers, I have studied 138 of these buttons and found only 30 that have at least a portion of a back mark. As we have learned from other back marked buttons—notably Mexican silver—it was often the practice to only mark one button in a set. I feel this could also be the case for NRA buttons. In the NBA article of May 1975, the author suggests buttons had the eagle removed after repeal. In my opinion, this would have been too labor intensive for buttons so cheaply made.

I choose to NOT guess, based on the appearance of the wood, what was an NRA pattern or not. The buttons illustrating this article all have either a partial or complete back mark. The person who previously owned the buttons I used in this study had marked many areas on the button backs that in my estimation was "wishful thinking" for a back mark. I also feel there is information in the NBA 1975 article that does not hold up to further scrutiny.

Of the 138 buttons examined, eight were painted: four were royal blue, two were green and two were black. Two had dots of paint on the face (red and blue). Nine buttons have some metal embellishment, either white metal or brass. There were 22 sew-through buttons.

This collection contained a card with several broken NRA buttons, which are clearly wood, and one broken burwood or syrocco button with a clear lack of grain visible in the break.

There are five buttons (right) which I do not believe are NRA
These three buttons are the same pattern and were shown in the 1975 article on NRA buttons. However, the wood used in these buttons is of a finer quality and no backmarks of any kind are found on these buttons.

What materials were used to make NRA buttons? Analysis of broken buttons confirms that wood (#1-#3) and burwood (#4) were used.

These five buttons were in the collection and marked as NRA but these designs have not been found with any of the NRA backmarks.
buttons. I would want to see at least a partial back mark.

One intriguing find was three matching Scotty dog buttons. A look at the edge of the buttons confirms they are wood, although the same design is found in burwood. Of course, these dog buttons would be appropriate at this time because of the popularity of President Roosevelt’s Scotty named “Fala.” This could pose another question, “Did the two Michigan companies, who made the burwood and syrocco material, produce the wooden buttons for the NRA? I tend to think not, as the quality of the NRA buttons is quite poor and there is so little consistency in production methods of the buttons.

This NRA button group is representative of a short period of time, completed just two and a half years after it began. In spite of the NRA’s brief duration, our society still benefits from many ideas developed as the result of its existence. The National Labor Relations Board was a direct result of the repeal of the NRA.

The Bureau of Labor and Industry is another result of the NRA. The Bureau was established to oversee compliance with industrial safety standards, the 40-hour work week, overtime controls, minimum wage enforcement, and restrictions on the employment of children.

Our NRA buttons symbolize a period in U.S. history characterized by great hardship and great growth.

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