

A Primer on Rivet Button Collecting

By David E. Race

A Brief History / Chronology of Rivets

1853 - Leob Strauss moved to California to start a wholesale supply business to sell canvas tents to miners. He discovers no market for tents...and is left with a large inventory of canvas. He does discover a market for work pants made from canvas and begins manufacturing those. He changes his name from Leob to Levi.

1872 – Jacob Davis of Reno, Nevada, invents method of attaching work pants using riveted buttons. He offers to share his invention with Levi Strauss in exchange for Strauss funding his patent on rivets. Levi Strauss submits patent on riveted buttons...but in his own name thus stealing Jacob Davis' invention for his own use.

1930's – Jeans, as the work pants have become known, become popular among workers due to their exposure as the clothing of choice by actors portraying cowboys in early westerns.

1940's – Jean manufacturing declined due to metal shortages during World War II. The metal shortages curtailed rivet button manufacturing.

1950's – Jeans again regain their popularity due to exposure by returning servicemen from Europe and Asia who wore jeans as off duty clothing and then as work clothing in civilian life back in the U.S.A. after the war.

Jeans were also seen as the clothing of choice of actors portraying the "rebel" image in movies such as James Dean "Rebel Without A Cause" and Marlon Brando "The Wild Ones". Teenagers adopted jeans to project a rebel image. Jeans were generally banned from public schools.

1960's – Hippies continued the anti-establishment image by using jeans as their clothing of choice in concert with other "unconventional" clothing items. This continued into the 1970's until after the end of the Viet-Nam war.

1980's – Jeans finally become accepted by mainstream America with the introduction of designer jeans, the first of which was "Sergio Valente". The disco era of the 1980's brought jeans into the forefront of personal fashion as designer names began promoting their own brand of jeans including Ralph Lauren, Gloria Vanderbilt, etc.

1990's – Jeans become part of everyday wear with an entire range of jeans for all economic groups from mass produced low-priced brands carried by discount stores like K-Mart and Walmart such as Faded Glory, Gitano, Lee, Levi Strauss, Wrangler, etc., to more exclusive designer brands such as Steel Jeans, Izod, DKNY, New York Line, etc. The late 1990's saw the use of rivets spread to teen and children's clothing such as Disney, Looney Tunes, The Children's Place, Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse, etc.

2000 – The growth of rivet use in jeans spread beyond jeans to other materials in jackets, pants, shirts for all economic groups and rivets are produced using various embellishments such as paste stones in their design.

The production of various rivet types by now is in the thousands with no end in sight.

A Closer Look At Rivets

If you take the time to actually stop and take a close look at a rivet button, you will notice that riveted buttons aren't as simplistic as they might first appear. They do, in fact, comprise a number of facets not normally associated with the oft-envisioned plain work clothes button,

Construction

The construction of a riveted button is the first thing one will notice when examining taking a close look for the first time. A riveted button is made of, generally, of three component parts.

The Cap

The cap is the front of the rivet and often displays either the name or logo of the manufacturer's brand. Generally, the cap is of one of these colors: Polished Steel, Dull Steel, Zinc, Copper, Bronze, or Brass. The cap also may show the use of paint, usually enamel, to shadow the letters or darken the design or lettering to make it more distinctive. Also, embellishments such as paste stones may be found on the cap. Please note that because of the utilitarian nature of rivets that nearly all rivets are found in a circular form. Shapes range from scarce to rare and are very unusual from any manufacturer. The cap is usually attached to the shank by the use of either small metal clips or by pressing the edge of the cap over the head of the shank.

The Shank

The shank of the riveted button usually is in two parts: The rivet back and the shank itself. The rivet back is usually found in three types: 1) Steel, 2) Copper, and 3) Black. Of these, the copper shank is the scarcest. Consequently, terms such as "black back" to describe a rivet with a black color on the head of the shank is often used to describe the color of the cap.

The body of the shank may or may not be the same color as the "back" of the cap. Also, some older rivets use a metal ring...a "washer" to help clamp the rivet onto the material. This ring is attached to the shank between the "back" and the End. Also note that often, manufacturers will imprint back marks of both words and designs to the "back" to identify the model or maker of the rivet. Back marks, while found on many rivets, are not found on all rivets.

The End

The End of the rivet is found attached to the end of the shank opposite the Cap. The End is normally attached in one of two ways" 1) The End is fashioned in the form of a "nail" and literally pounded into a plastic form inside the shank to attach the rivet to the material. 2) The End is comprised of a small circular metal piece attached to two or more metal prongs which are pushed into the end of the shank. Both manners of attachment serve the same purpose...to keep the rivet attached to the material. Ends are also often marked with either designs, lettering, or both, to identify the model number or the maker of the rivet. Please note that while most rivet makers manufacture all three rivet components, not all do or have in the past.

Cap Designs

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of rivet collecting is the seemingly never-ending variety of rivet designs. There are rivets with raised lettering, incised lettering, lettering using paint to both shade and exaggerate the letters. Designs include manufacturer's logos, cartoon characters, and various items that portray or identify with the lettering on the rivet. One example of this is the Pioneer, Type 1, Rivet. This rivet shows the lettering "Pioneer" which is shaded with red paint in the letters and also an incised design of a covered wagon also shaded in red paint. The result is an unusual rivet that is very visually appealing. Note, however, that detailing of design is NOT an indication of scarcity.

Back Marks

With respect to back marks, more often than not, rivets are found without them. Generally speaking, older rivets did not have back marks but were instead found smooth, often corroded, usually of somewhat uneven wear.

End Designs

While End Designs exist in many different designs, the most commonly found are a pattern of concentric circles. Also, as with back marks, older rivets did not typically have End Designs but were smooth and sometimes show what appears to be a tiny circle which is, in reality, not a design, but a mark left by the machine and pounded the End into the Shank. These marks are normal and are not considered damage to the rivet.

Materials

Rivets are found in a variety of materials usually metal, plastic, or porcelain. Of these, metal rivets may be found on all types of clothing while plastic rivets are usually found on childrens' clothing and porcelain rivets were usually created solely as collector's items and were not used as buttons at all in much the same way as studio buttons are buttons but were not actually used as buttons on garments.

Doughnuts

Often rivets are found with a round or square (very scarce) hole in the center of the cap. This hole or deep indentation (since not all holes go all the way through) is known as a doughnut.

Oversized

Rivets come in a variety of sizes usually ranging from 9mm (the distance across the cap) to as much as 25mm. The customary size of a jean rivet is 15 ½ to 16mm in diameter. Rivets larger than 16 mm across are considered oversized.

Embellishment

Since rivet caps are generally of a one-piece construction, any add-on characteristic such as a paste stone(s) would be considered an embellishment. Note though that enamel paint of any color is not an embellishment.

Valuation

Let's talk a bit about what makes one rivet more valuable than another.

The value of any collectible is determined by only 2 things....supply and demand. Supply basically means...how many of them are available in the marketplace. Demand basically means how many collectors want them enough to buy or trade for them? If supply is greater than the demand then prices stay low...if demand is greater than supply then the price goes up to a point where the demand meets the supply. That point is called the "fair market value". It's like anything else. When you find a dealer and they offer a rivet for sale you, the collector, have to decide if the price they are asking is "fair" in your mind. If it is then the price reflects that fair market value to you. If it is lower than what you would have been willing to pay then it is a bargain. If it is higher than you value it, then you will likely not buy it. It is these decisions by both buyer and seller that determine a rivet's value in the marketplace. In other words, age does not equal value.

Scarcity

First of all, let's make something clear. Valuation has nothing to do with scarcity. Valuation has to do with supply and demand. For example, a rivet with a popular theme such as Woody Woodpecker might sell for as much or more than an older rivet because, as a popular theme, there is more demand for it than for an older rivet that has only writing on it and no design even if the older rivet is much scarcer than the newer one.

Scarcity has to do with the quantity of a given rivet in the marketplace. This is all about numbers. From our observations, we've noticed a definite order when it comes to rivets that appear to be available. These are:

Rivets produced before 1976

Rivets produced after 1976 but before 1995

Rivets produced from 1995 to the present.

Sources of Research

We have found it impossible to try to identify specific companies whose rivets are scarce because so little information is generally available about their use from company to company. For example, while researching rivets for our book, I telephoned the Izod Company to ask about a rivet we had that was a verbal inscribed "Izod Baby". The public relations person to whom I spoke put me on hold then returned saying that he had just spoken to a lady who had been with the company 17 years and she had never heard of the company having ever produced children's clothing. They also had no records of what rivets they used. We found that lack of information with every company we phoned that would speak with us. Some companies wouldn't even speak with us.

Rather, they referred us to their company website. Incidentally, I did find in the copyright/patent database in Washington, DC, the information on the Izod Baby clothing line and discovered that the line was introduced then almost immediately abandoned as was the patent on their Izod Baby name. It's no wonder then that no one at the company remembered it. It also shows that there are records available that can provide an approximate date for rivet use by a specific company if you are prepared to take the time to look for them. Incidentally, the date shown on some rivets has nothing to do with the date of the rivet or of when rivets were first in use by that company. Levi Strauss, for example, shows a date of 1889 on some of their rivets yet it is known that they didn't begin to use riveted buttons until the 1930's.

The best place we've found to find rivet information is:

The garment itself

When you obtain a garment with a rivet, take the time to learn everything you can from the tags on the garment. Often you will find such things as where the garment was made as well as a possible copyright date that will date that particular clothing line and thus date the rivet approximately. Since specific modern clothing lines tend to change about every 3 years, we can get a pretty good idea of a rivet date from a dated tag if one is available.

The rivet itself

The rivet is the best source there is for information specific to it. The cap size and design, the back mark, if any, the type and color of the shank, and the end design are all available to you to help identify which rivet this is when it comes to either a catalog or some other yet-to-be developed method of uniform classification.

The Copyright and Patent Office

If you are intrepid enough to brave the use of antiquated computer software and can be specific enough when doing your searches and don't mind scrolling through seemingly endless pages of information then you'll find this database a real wealth of information.

Other collectors and dealers

Often, you can save yourself a great deal of time by talking to other collectors and button dealers who have already taken the time to identify specific rivets for their own collection. Also remember that new rivets are being introduced all the time so the opportunities for research are seemingly endless.

Where to Find Riveted Buttons

Believe it or not, with the proliferation of rivets on so many types of clothing, this should be pretty evident. Here are but a few possibilities for you to consider:

At Home - Look closely at the clothing you find worn that you would otherwise discard without thinking. How many of them are jeans, denim clothing items...jackets, shorts, skirts, etc., children's clothes...jumpers or other clothes which use rivets for adornments, or perhaps teens clothes which use rivets as decorations?

Friends and Relatives - We all have friends or relatives who discard old clothing just as we all do. If they have no interest, perhaps they will save the old garments for you and you can obtain a wider variety of rivets in that way.

Yard Sales – How many of us have driven by yard sales which we have dismissed because they "only" had clothing? Once you realize that every yard sale in which clothing is sold can be another opportunity to find that next elusive rivet...perhaps that one rivet with the paste stone that you want for your display tray...or perhaps that shape that you need for your competition tray....every yard sale with clothing becomes a potential gold mine for your collection.

Thrift Shops – Take another look at that local Salvation Army store or local Thrift Shop. Many of these have "bag days" that offer all the clothes you can stuff in a bag for a low price...usually a few dollars.

Church Sales - During the year, typically in the Fall and Winter months, many non-profit organizations such as churches hold sales and bazaars which feature donated clothing. Check your Sunday paper for these as they are often featured there.

City-wide Sales - During the year, many towns hold city-wide sales in conjunction with local celebrations such as Old-Settlers Days, Dogwood Festivals, Local Crop Harvest Days, Fire Ant Festivals, etc.

Auctions – Although this source may seem a long shot, you may find a lot of clothing for sale via auction. Often when this is the case, many garments will simply be lotted together to get rid of them all at once as a convenience to the seller.

Button Clubs – Find a button club near you and perhaps you might find another like-minded rivet collector who has duplicates that they are willing to trade for your duplicates. Who knows, you might even find a new friend along with some new rivets. If you cannot find a button club near you then try the Internet. Just search on Button Bytes and you will find the Internet's most active button club. If the internet is not your "thing" then you can use this means to get the address of the state button club for your state or the National Button Society.

Other collectors – This one seems pretty obvious and if you know others that collect buttons then you only need inquire to see if anyone you know has a similar interest.

The Internet – Online Sites such as Ebay or Yahoo Auctions sometimes list lots of rivet buttons for sale. As you can see, there are many ways rivets can be obtained for your collection.

How To Collect Rivets

Ultimately, the way in which you choose to collect rivets is up to what interests you. Some collectors try for completeness while others are interested in designer rivets or childrens clothing rivets. The choice of what to collect is up to you.

Why Collect Rivets?

Rivet collecting offers the best of button collecting...scarcity, variety of materials and design, sub-varieties of rivet types with varying back marks and end marks, and the fact than nearly ANY rivet can be found by anyone in that next yard sale! It offers the ability to assemble a collection at a relatively low price as well as the thrill of the hunt...and all on an equal playing field for all collectors. No longer does a collector have to feel shut out of the opportunity to assemble an award winning collection because they do not have the financial means of other collectors. All collectors have an equal opportunity with no unfair advantages for anyone. To me, this makes button collecting what it is supposed to be, the chance to have FUN and share your finds with others while expanding your collection inexpensively. What more could anyone ask of a hobby? Happy Collecting and good luck in your search for that one exclusive rivet that will make your day!

Now, for my soapbox (You can skip this part if you want to!)

I believe that rivet collecting has reached a position of popularity that makes it time to seriously consider the formation of a specialist society devoted to their study. The goals of such a society could be any number of things but I think that a good starting point would be these:

Standardization of Rivet Terminology

Creation of a Census Database to keep track of the known number of truly scarce rivets held in collector's hands.

The development of a course on rivets that would provide anyone who is interested with a fundamental knowledge of rivets, and those items mentioned above, history, valuation, scarcity, terminology, etc.

The development of a certification course for those who wish to be certified as an accredited judge so that – at long last – rivet displays can be objectively compared by judges who have a proven knowledge of the subject rather than by whomever is willing to "judge" them at any given show. This should give rivet collectors a more secure feeling that when they get a blue ribbon at a button competition that it is because theirs was objectively evaluated and was, in fact, the best of those trays in their category.

The development of a research library, available to all members, so that research performed and submitted by members can be available to help all members become more educated about rivets and thus make them better informed collectors, buyers, and sellers. This clearinghouse could be internet based so that information is available to all members at their convenience.

The development of a reference collection of rivets for comparison purposes that would be the property of the society and would be made available for exhibition purposes. The emphasis here would be upon completeness of all types known and researched.

The development of a monthly internet-based newsletter profiling achievements of members, newly released research, a button show calendar, etc.

Membership to this society would be open to anyone with an interest in riveted buttons regardless of where they live.

If you would be interested in helping form such a society so that these and other goals can be achieved, please let me know. I think that it's about time if we really want to promote rivet collecting to the general population for what it is: educational, fun, inexpensive, and something that parents can do with their children.

My email address is: dave@daveanddeb.com

Our website address is: <http://www.blujay.com/midamericacollectibles>

My telephone number is: (217) 222-1378.

I really am interested in what you think about all of this. Please take the time to let me know.
Thanks for taking the time to read this pamphlet. I hope that you found it useful.

Dave