

Calico Buttons

By PLINY CROCKETT

(from talk given at Sally Lewis Week)

My knowledge of buttons in general is quite limited. And my knowledge of the calico button in particular is somewhat superficial. Why then, you may ask, am I interested in calicos? The answer to that question has a familiar ring—my wife, she is responsible for my adventure in collecting calicos. It all happened in this way.

Several years ago I bought a house and its contents, and among the goods and chattels there was an old butter box that I stored away at home. A few years later my wife went on an exploring expedition and found that butter box, and now you know what happened—she opened it, of course—and, yes, she found a lot of old buttons. Like Pandora's box, something escaped when the cover was lifted from that old butter box—from that momentous moment there was another button collector.

One day when looking at her early collection, I discovered some calico buttons, and with her approval I appropriated them—and then there was another button collector. At that time I was shockingly innocent regarding buttons, so innocent in fact that I set out with the intention of getting a complete collection of calicos. I do not know just how many I have now, probably over 1000 with no two exactly alike—and it appears that I have made only a fair beginning.

While the calico is not an aristocrat among buttons, it does offer considerable variety and does have

character and adaptability. We are told that calico cloth was made in Europe soon after the year 1700, and that it was worn by the fashionably dressed women of that time. It was quite common in the days of our great grandparents, and was worn then by both men and women.

The early calico buttons were covered with calico cloth on which were printed diminutive patterns, and they were very common. They did not stand up well, however under repeated washings. About one hundred years ago the china calico button appeared on the American market. Previous to this time the calico button had been manufactured only in Europe. Information regarding the origin and manufacture of the calico button is somewhat limited. In the Chatterbox, on page 218 under date of 1921, I have found the following: "The word calico has a strange history. Many years ago, it is said, a king of the province of Malabar, in Hindustan, rewarded one of his underlings in a peculiar manner. For his distinguished services there was bestowed upon the prince all the land throughout which a cock at a certain temple could be heard crowing. That is why the small town which grew up in the center of this region was called Caliconda, or 'the cock crowing.' By-and-by the name was shortened to Calicut and the first cotton goods imported into England and labeled 'calico' came from this place."

Calico buttons are shaped in plast-

er-of-paris molds, polished after partially drying, and then exposed to white heat for 36 hours. Then the calico patterns are printed on paper which is placed on the buttons while in the molds and before the ink is dry and while the buttons are somewhat soft. After the buttons have absorbed the ink, the paper is removed by washing and the colored design undergoes a fixing process. Then the buttons are placed again in the oven and fired until the glazing solution fuses and forms a glossy surface.

In 1848 a Mr. Cartlige and a Mr. Ferguson established a plant in Greenpoint, Long Island, New York, for the manufacture of porcelain or china buttons. At first, adopting a process that had been invented by Richard Prosser in England, they manufactured plain white buttons only, but in July of that year, Mr. Cartlige wrote a letter in which he stated that they had just made a supply of ornamental buttons, about 100 different patterns and that he was, to quote, "in good hope of turning some of them to favorable account, more so than if sold in white." I think that this is the earliest record that we have of the manufacture of the calico button in America.

The Prosser method was patented in England in 1840, eight years before the establishment of the plant at Greenpoint. As a result of this new method, production of the china or calico button was greatly increased. Under date of 1850, Thomas Prosser wrote as follows: "Porcelain buttons are by no means new as an article of merchandise, for they were known as expensive curiosities more than 80 years ago (1770) and it is more than 65 years since a patent was taken out for making

them." Under this new method of manufacture, the price paid for making calico buttons was all of one cent per gross. Today, to my knowledge, collectors will pay as high as \$8.00 for a single button. And some dealers are charging 25c for ordinary calicos.

The material used by the Prosser method was not potter's clay; instead it was a very fine, dry powder. In the manufacture of the calico buttons this powder was placed in a steel die and placed under great pressure. In this way the buttons were shaped for the kiln. We are told that a woman could make as many as twenty-five buttons in one minute. The calico buttons that we admire and collect today are the direct result of this new method of manufacture.

In England these buttons were first made by Minton, a famous name, and within two months after the purchase of an interest in the Prosser patent, the company had six button-presses in operation. A few years later, however, the center of this industry was established in France.

As you doubtless know, the National Button Bulletin for March gives some very comprehensive information regarding the early history of the calico button. And you will find helpful material regarding these buttons in back numbers of *Just Buttons*.

According to Morgan's check list of calico buttons, there are 293 different designs, 15 sizes, 7 colors (green, lavender, brown, blue, pink, red, and sometimes orange) with each color in two shades (light and dark). There are three types—the beveled edge, the cone shaped, sometimes

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called the Rocky Mountain type, and the saucer shaped or concave. Now a complete collection (a fantastic dream indeed) embracing every design in every size, color and shape, according to my arithmetic, will add up to no less than 184,590, if you please. And that is not all—just for good measure there are brass bound calicos, jewel type calicos with shank, and some cloth covered with thread back. And again that is not all—some calicos have two holes, some three holes, and some four holes.

Collecting calicos is a great game all right, but one must not expect to win a complete victory in such a contest—the odds are fixed in advance. Yes, I was quite innocent in the beginning, and I am sure now, if not before, that we are never too old to learn.

Referring now to my collection of calicos, the larger sizes are not common, neither are the three hole variety, and brass bound or brass settings are not easy to find. I have all of the different colors listed by Morgan, including the multicolored, also the three types—convex, concave, and cone shaped. Also I have several of the jewel calicos and several of the brass bound, as well as the 2, 3, and 4 hole varieties.

Calico Buttons

*Some of us remember grandma
In her wrapper years ago.
It was long and snugly fitted
And was made of calico.*

*Calico from old Kalicut
In India far away,
Brought across the sea in ships
Sailing ships of yesterday.*

*Navy was a favorite color,
As was also indigo.
Some were red with specks of yellow;
Others pink with flakes of snow.*

*One pattern might be striped,
Another had tiny rings.
One was sprinkled with rosebuds,
And one with the crowns of kings.*

*Dots made a favorite pattern
On backgrounds of different hues.
Triangles and wavy lines
Appeared on browns and blues.*

*A craftsman fashioned little discs
From the lowly, ugly clay,
And produced the lovely calico
Which is so rare today.*

*These buttons were worn on dresses
With full billowing skirts,
On tiny clothes for children,
And also on grandpa's shirts.*

*Three holes were all that could be put
In some of these tiny discs.
While others were so large
They might hold five or six.*

*These we call Jumbo Calicos
They are as scarce as they can be.
They measure easily an inch,
Quite a curiosity.*

*A few calicos are mounted
In brass rims and jewels set.
Indeed, these are the buttons
Collectors try so hard to get.*

*The designs which we find
On the pretty calico,
Were all copied from patterns
On the cloth of long ago.*

Ruth Snell

The above poem was read by Mrs. Butler Pratt who wore a calico wrapper with calico buttons. Mr. Thomas Owens wore a brown and white calico shirt, with buttons to match. The man for whom the shirt was originally made died in Libby prison. The latter a Civil War prison where the Confederates kept their northern captives. The poem is presented here through the courtesy of the New Jersey Bulletin.

Displayed at the Sally Lewis Week

Trays came from far and wide for the exhibits at programs. Thousands of buttons were on display every day. Many of the trays loaned for the Sally Lewis Week were left for visitors that could not attend on those days.

Picture buttons — Mrs. Florence Z. E. Nicholls, Mrs. Ansel Packard, Mrs. Earle Brechlin, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Buch, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bush, Mr. and Mrs. George Ertell, Mrs. Mary MacFarland, Mrs. Katherine Jones, Mrs. Edna Alling, Miss Amy Hamilton, Mrs. J. Harold Cobb, Mrs. Daisy Jackson, Miss Bertha Green.

These included pictures on ivory, porcelain, paper, glass, horn, rubber, all metals including tin. All kinds of art and craft were included in the making of them. Every subject known was among these most popular buttons, and all sizes.
Little Ceramics—Miss Maude Ham-

ilton, Mrs. A. H. Bushnell, Mrs. Edith Hall, Mrs. H. M. McKenzie, Mr. and Mrs. Herman Zander, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bush, Miss Bertha Green, Mrs. George Ertell.

Among the rare in the last display were Miss Green's card with several of the largest Calicoes and Mr. Crockett's smallest ones and Mrs. Ertell's brown whistle button with a white disc set in the back with the two holes attracted much attention as did Mrs. Hall's whistles with three and four holes in the back. The Zander's and Bushes' sample cards were good to see. There were many other interesting and unique features noticed by the visitors.

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