



The History of Patch Trading

The ISCA Getting Started Collecting Series

When Scouts from different parts of the country or world get together, trading is one of the most popular activities. In the early days of Scouting, this swapping of mementos included exchanging hand-made trinkets, pins, hand-carved neckerchief slides, and even entire uniforms. As patches became more available in Scouting, especially in the United States during the 1940s and after, they became the main focus of trading activities.

The Origins of Patch Trading

The origins of patch trading are lost to history, but trading was probably quite modest at the start and has gradually evolved into the widespread activity of today. When the Scouting movement began, only a few patches were available. These were the official rank, merit, and position badges worn on uniforms. It is possible that Scouts attending the World Jamborees in 1920 and 1924 swapped parts of their uniforms with Scouts from other countries. We know, however, that the BSA provided custom-made uniforms for those Scouts with all of their badges machine-sewn on. It is doubtful that parts of these custom uniforms were cut off and traded.

Trading arose when Scouts from different parts of the United States were brought together for a meeting of some sort. Most commonly, this occurred at National Jamborees (held in 1937, 1950, 1953, 1957, 1960, 1964, 1969, and every four years since) and national conferences of the Order of the Arrow (held roughly every 2 years since the 1920s). There were other gatherings that brought Scouts together, such as a Region 7 Hoe Down held in 1948. This was a training event for local council "hoe downs." Making a patch vest was part of the craft program in 1948 and also at some of the later council hoe downs. Dwight Bischel (the author of the first OA patch book) recalls trading patches at the Region 7 Hoe Down, making a vest, and sewing patches on it later.

Scouting veterans from the 1940s recall that trading was a way to cement a new friendship with a token of remembrance. You met someone new from another council or part of the country, visited for a while, and then maybe swapped something. All manner of things were swapped: sharks teeth from the Calvert Cliffs bordering the Chesapeake Bay, hollowed pieces of dried cactus from the Southwest that could be worn as a neckerchief slide, pieces of redwood from the Pacific Northwest, neckerchiefs, and neckerchief slides. Traders from the 1940s through the 1960s remember attempting to obtain new neckerchiefs and slides that could be worn at home as marks of distinction.

The BSA designated the right pocket as the place on the uniform where temporary badges could be worn. Among the first such official temporary badges were contingent badges worn by Scouts from the United States to the early World Jamborees. Local councils later began making temporary badges too. We know that felt, woven, and composition material camp badges exist from as early as 1916. Into the 1930s and 1940s early twill cloth background badges were made for attending camps and council activities, such as camporees (weekend gatherings of local troops for competition and training). The earliest patch trading was probably the exchange of these temporary badges.

In the United States, patch trading probably got started at the national Order of the Arrow meetings in the 1920s and 1930s. These were the most prominent events at which Scouts from various parts of the country were brought together. Minutes of those meetings say that patch trading was a popular activity, and this drives the OA collectors of today mad, because we know of only a few OA badges from that era. In the 1930s, the first OA badges began to appear, and they were traded at national meetings. Patches from other OA lodges became treasured mementos for the OA members at those events. Other lodges were introduced to patches for the first time and went home to design their own.

The Evolution of Patch Trading

The Order of the Arrow was a key factor in the growth and spread of patch trading, although unintentionally, and the importance of the OA in the evolution of patch trading continues to this day. OA patches served as identification badges for an elite group of Scouts, and were a source of pride and distinction. Because these patches were available only to a small percentage of all Scouts and were relatively scarce, they were considered special and desirable. Among OA members, the tradition arose of making friends from other lodges and exchanging lodge patches as a token of friendship. Dwight Bischel dedicated the *Wabanningo Lodge Emblem Handbook* to the Order with the hope that it would help "... bind firmer and weld more tightly every link of Brotherhood...."

Being at the forefront of the Scouting movement, OA members were most likely to stay in the program longer, continue on as adults, and attend national, area, and local events where trading took place. This exposed them to a great variety of Scout patches. Their personal accumulations of patches just for participation could become a substantial base for a collection. A few of these Scouts and Scouters in the OA made the transition from accumulators to traders and collectors. The majority of all Scout patch collectors today are or were members of the OA.

Patch trading was introduced to a great many (non-OA) Scouts for the first time at the 1937 National Jamboree held in Washington, D.C. The number of people who gathered together at national OA events was quite small when compared to this Jamboree. Trading

of all kinds was popular there, and patches were part of this activity. The BSA made a number of souvenir items, including an official pocket patch. Order of the Arrow patches were traded, as well as council activity patches, camp patches, and other local patches. Region patches existed for professionals, and there were a few contingent patches available.

Trading patches of all types grew in popularity at national meetings of the Order of the Arrow in 1946, 1948, and 1950. By 1950, over 400 Order of the Arrow lodges were in existence, and more than half of these had issued a patch of some sort for identification. Restrictions on obtaining and trading OA patches were not the problem for collectors that they would become later in the 1950s and 1960s.

Patch trading really took off in the United States at the 1950 National Jamboree. This was the first such national event since 1937, and 47,000 youths and adults attended. Council contingent patches made for local recognition and for trading appeared in substantial numbers for the first time. New patch materials and types had been appearing for several years, and larger Scout enrollments made patches for all types of uses more economical to issue. Relatively inexpensive Swiss embroidery on twill was driving out the silk-screened felt patches. The widespread use of Swiss embroidery was the first major milestone in the history of patch collecting. By 1950, camp, council, and activity patches existed for almost all councils and had been in use in some cases for twenty years or more. This meant there was a large variety and quantity of patches available at the Jamboree and patch trading was active.

Spurred by the bewildering variety of OA patches available at the 1950 National Jamboree and the 1950 NOAC, Dwight Bischel decided to assemble the first reference book on OA patches. He had found that many of the OA patches of the era were difficult to identify. Many had no name or other means of identifying the lodge from which they came. Some could not even be distinguished as OA badges. He felt that a guide to the patches of each lodge would be useful. In 1952, he published the *Wabaningo Lodge Emblem Handbook* which showed a patch or badge from over 150 different OA lodges. He attempted to note the totem of each lodge and the meaning of the lodge name. This was the first privately published reference book of any kind about Boy Scout patches.

The *Wabaningo* book is a remarkable document in the history of patch collecting. The photographs it contains portray nearly the complete evolution of early OA patch types. We can see examples of the earliest badges, including leather and silk-screened felt. We see partially embroidered emblems on twill and fully embroidered emblems. We see patches with cut edges, flat rolled edges, and rolled edges. We see the first flap patch ever made (Ajapeu Lodge 33) and probably the first fully embroidered flap patch (Delmont Lodge

43). We see chenille patches (like high school letter jacket patches) that originated in Pennsylvania; we see rounds, arrowheads, and neckerchief patches. See <http://www.oaimages.com/wab.shtml> for an incredible full-color recreation of the *Wabaningo* book. Only a few significant changes in OA patch styles and manufacture have taken place since the days of the *Wabaningo* book. These include synthetic fibers, woven patches, the use of computer guided stitching, plastic backing for holding shapes, and overseas manufacturing.

In 1947, Ajapeu Lodge 33 of Doylestown, Pennsylvania issued the first flap patch. Flap patches were being worn by several OA lodges at the 1950 National Jamboree as an experiment. In 1954, the National Insignia Committee of the OA declared the right breast pocket flap as the official uniform location for wearing OA insignia. The *Wabaningo Lodge Emblem Handbook* was obsolete soon after publication because of the speed with which lodges around the country made the transition from pocket or neckerchief patch to pocket flap patch. By 1960, most lodges were wearing a flap patch on their uniforms. The arrival of the OA pocket flap patch was the second major milestone in patch collecting.

Several traders got together after the 1953 National Jamboree to found “The Traders,” the first organization of Scout memorabilia collectors. E. Forest Reynolds, the driving force behind The Traders through the 1950s and 1960s, almost single handedly fostered the growth of mail trading and trading newsletters. He traded his Gansote Lodge 159 flap patches with anybody for any other flap, and freely offered advice to hobby newcomers. Reynolds published the first *Blue Book* in 1958 and later editions in the 1960s, which were basically unillustrated checklists of OA lodge badges (to see the 1958 Blue Book go to <http://www.oaimages.com/bb-1958.shtml>). These were the first significant OA patch references since the *Wabaningo* book. Later, Dave Leubitz published a series of Blue Books in the 1970s. The blue books of that era consisted of very simple lists like “ARFFFSS” which meant the lodge issued an arrowhead shaped patch, followed by a round, then three nonsolidly-embroidered flaps and finally two solidly-embroidered flaps. The Blue Books of today are published by Bill Topkis and the American Scouting Historical Society and are much more detailed.

New books continually appear now on selected patch collecting topics and, since 1953, at least one newsletter has continually existed about patch trading. Books, newsletters, and the web keep traders aware of what patches exist, new issues, trading events, and other news of interest to collectors. Newsletters, e-mail, and the web are important ways by which collectors around the country can meet each other. Good reference material and information about trading has helped increase the popularity of the hobby.

Dwight Bischel recalls that patch trading at NOACs in 1952 and 1954 threatened to overwhelm the other activities of the event. In response to this threat, the national leadership of the OA began limiting when and where trading could take place. At the local level, some lodge leaders who were opposed to trading took matters into their own hands by severely restricting the number of OA patches that their members could obtain. Restrictions such as one patch per life or one per year were not uncommon. These limitations on supply became a real problem for OA patch collectors during the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond because patches from many lodges were nearly impossible to acquire. During the 1960s, patch value depended primarily on lodge restrictions, not age, design, or absolute numbers made. Reference books, such as Bill Price's *OA Illustrated Lodge Patch Handbook*, often listed the known restriction placed on each lodge's flap patch so that collectors could estimate approximate values.

An incident at the 1961 NOAC shows some of the frustrations of that era. Trading was taking place around the dormitories of Indiana University at Bloomington, where the NOAC was held. A collector inquired about trading for a beautiful fully embroidered neckerchief patch from Blue Heron Lodge 349 (349x1 or x3). The owner responded that because the patch was issued one per life, he had to have twenty flap patches for it. In a spontaneous act, twenty different traders contributed one flap to the trade and then joined in the celebration when the Blue Heron patch was burned in a general protest about restrictions and twenty-for-one offers.

Collectors from the 1940s and early 1950s remember that it was mostly one-for-one (patch for patch) trading. By the middle 1950s and 1960s, rarities had been identified and restrictions were advertised to the point that some patches commanded premiums. One trader of the era recalls that to trade for a Blue Heron flap you had to pile up flaps on their backs to the height of the Blue Heron standing on its edge (about 1 3/4 inches). He recalls that this was a common trading price for tougher badges, although others say they have never heard of the practice.

At each succeeding National Jamboree and NOAC since 1950, the number and variety of patches available has increased. This has occurred despite shrinking enrollments in Scouting since the 1970s, because patches have become an important source of funds for councils and lodges that have seen their incomes slip. The increasing reliance on patches as fund raisers has resulted in more marketing of patches and more interest in them. This has led in part to the continuing popularity of Scout patches for trading and collecting. While Scouting enrollments have been decreasing, patch trading has increased.

Another important step in the history of patch trading was the acceptance of the Order of the Arrow as an official BSA program in 1948. The OA (known in the early 1920s as

Wimachtendienk W. W.) was one of four societies sanctioned in 1922 as official experiments for keeping older boys interested in Scouting. The other programs being considered were the Tribe of Gimogash, Tribe of Mic-O-Say, and Ku-Ni-Eh. The adoption of the Order of the Arrow made the insignia of this group official and created the most popular type of Scout badges for trading and collecting. It is probable, however, that if one of the other groups had become official instead, badges from Gimogash, Mic-O-Say, or Ku-Ni-Eh lodges would be the most popular Scout patches today. When the Order of the Arrow became official, it reorganized from 26 areas into 12 regions corresponding to the 12 regions of the BSA. These regions were further divided into areas, or sections. For example, Nentico Lodge 12 of Baltimore changed from Area E in the old system to Area A of Region 3, or Area III-A.

Scouting enrollments grew in the patriotic flush of victory following World War II. Returning veterans swelled the ranks of adult volunteers. New OA lodges were founded and previously inactive lodges rechartered because all other camp honor societies were asked to disband in favor of the newly sanctioned OA. The number of sections increased. Examining lists of lodges through the World War II years and into this period reveals that a significant number of lodges were revived. Lodges within sections began getting together annually in the 1950s for meetings called pow-wows or conclaves. Patch trading quickly became a popular activity at these meetings and helped foster the interest in regional patches. Annual conclaves gave OA traders a new, and often very active, market.

There are rumors of a first Trade-O-Ree occurring in 1957, but the first for which we can find some evidence was in the early 1960s. Rob Kutz says there were Region I TORs in 1961 and 1962. (Region I was New England.) The first of nearly 20 annual Amaquonsippi TORs was held in Illinois in 1962. TORs were a response to the desire to trade every year, not just every four at National Jamborees, every two years at NOACs, or for a few hours annually at a conclave. A copy of the 1976 *TeePee Trader* lists eight TORs held that year. We know more TORs than that were held in 1976, but perhaps no more than 15. In the 1980s the number of TORs held around the nation increased substantially. In the 1990s several of the oldest continually held TORs celebrated their 25th anniversaries.

In the early 1970s, the red & white strip for council identification began to be replaced by colorful shoulder patches. These became known as CSPs (council shoulder patch) and were unique to each council. This created an important source of additional revenue for Scouting and a popular new patch type to collect and trade. CSPs were easy to obtain at home for trading, they were real Scouting memorabilia for wear on uniforms, and they often presented colorful designs that reflected some characteristic of their community.

The interest in collecting shoulder patches further expanded when special CSPs, called JSPs (jamboree shoulder patches) were made for National Jamboree contingents. The 1973 National Jamboree, which was the first Jamboree after CSPs became official, was the first one that had a significant number of JSPs. For the 1993 National Jamboree, over 400 different JSPs have been identified. For the 2001 Jamboree, the number was close to 1000. The arrival of the CSP and JSP was the third significant milestone in the history of Scout patch collecting, following Swiss embroidery and the OA flap patch. The early and middle 1970s may have been the golden age of Scout patch trading. Since then, the BSA went through a reorganization that reduced the number of regions from 12 to 6, and a number of councils and OA lodges merged. The new CSP patches, plus patches issued by the newly formed OA lodges, spurred patch trading. Several new trading newsletters sprung up, although many were short lived.

Prior to the 1970s, OA lodges often did not change the design of their flap or other patches for several years. The demand for funds provided incentive for issuing more and more patches. Now it is not uncommon for OA lodges to issue a half-dozen (or in some cases many more) new patches each year. Special flaps are made for Jamboree contingents, NOAC contingents, conclave delegates, conclave hosts, OA treks to the Philmont Scout Ranch, other events, and any anniversary.

Arapaho II, published in 1979, was the major reference for all official OA insignia known from the history of the Order at the time. It consisted of 144 pages of patch listings in two columns, with seven lines per inch, allowing for the listing of 14,200+ patches from entire history of the OA up to the date of publication. In 1988 and 1993 supplements to *Arapaho II* added substantially more listings, reflecting both better reporting and increased numbers of patches being issued.

In the 1990s a dedicated group of OA collectors banded together under the direction of Bill Topkis to create an entirely new *Blue Book* that drew on the local knowledge of regional editors throughout the country. *Blue Book V* was published in 2004 and incorporates not just official badges, but neckerchiefs, event patches, and chapter patches. It catalogs over 50,000 items.

These numbers show the extremely rapid (or exponential) growth in the number of OA patches issued over the years. Roughly twice as many OA patches were issued in the years between 1979 and 2004 as had been issued in the previous 64 year history of the Order. This production is even more remarkable when you consider that the number of OA lodges and OA members shrunk during that period.

In a manner similar to the *Blue Book*, a dedicated band of CSP collectors now labors to publish regularly a catalog of existing shoulder insignia. This very popular area of collecting has also blossomed as councils create special shoulder insignia for all types of events.

Patch Trading Today

In the new millennium, the hobby of patch trading has never been stronger, despite shrinking enrollments. More people are trading and more patches are being issued on an annual basis than ever before. Better research is available and more is coming out each year. Many traders can attend several TORs within a four hour drive of their house each year. Besides the trading going on every day inside the National Jamboree, there was a TOR running all day outside the gates and another running each night at a nearby motel. Also, on the auction site eBay, old Scout items have been coming out of attics and closets around the world. E-mail has made mail trading faster and easier. Traders no longer must send out letters and wait often weeks for a reply to a trade offer. A trade can be proposed and agreed to in minutes.

Patch trading is not without concerns. National now forbids adults from trading with youth at National Jamborees. The great quantity of patches being issued by councils mainly to raise money is debasing the significance of each individual patch. Some patches being sold by councils are not for uniform wear, just profits. Looking back to the 1940s and 1950s, Dwight Bischel recalled that the emblems traded then were worn and traded with pride. Today he sees one lodge's fund raiser being traded for another lodge's fund raiser, not an exchange of meaningful emblems.

Patch trading evolved as a Scouting activity—something you did in uniform at a national, sectional, or lodge event. Long-time traders remember that most attendees wore their uniforms to TORs, even those that were privately held. The connection between trading and Scouting is growing more tenuous. Fewer people wear uniforms to TORs. Many collectors are minimally involved in the Scouting program, choosing instead to spend much of their leisure time with their hobby. In the past, it was essential that you be active in Scouting if you wished to trade or collect. It was very difficult to buy or sell patches. That is no longer true due to the increasing sophistication of the Scout patch market, especially given the rise of e-Bay as a source for both obtaining and selling patches. Another concern today is the continuing plague of fakes, spoofs, and private issues. Counterfeits, reproductions, and bogus patches are made cheaply and in quantity to trade for official patches. Patch trading remains a fun and healthy hobby, despite its flaws. It is a great way to build self-esteem, keep in touch with Scouting history, make friends, and perhaps build a valuable collection.

-- Bruce C. Shelley