

THE ASHLEE BUTTONS: A PANDORA'S CHEST THAT BECAME A PARADOX

Since the organization of the button hobby over forty years ago, few things have caused such an uproar as the controversial Ashlee buttons. In 1941, the fury hit the fan when one publication stated that a "button racket was in full swing in the East". A card of Ashlee buttons was exhibited with the word "FAKE" in huge letters. During the summer of 1941, Mrs. Lillian Smith Albert, while gathering material for her Second Journal, visited four large metal stamping factories in Providence, R.I., and purchased a large variety of the stampings as a record of the stampings which were being assembled. Identical stampings were offered in New York City, some of which are illustrated here. Because the hobby was only a few years old and collectors were eager to collect their favorite picture buttons, many questionable practices were going on to supply these collectors with the buttons. In November, 1941, Mrs. Albert visited various buttons dealers at the National Show and picked up some 30 of these buttons from the dealers' stocks. These were used by Judge Chester Pendleton, who was to give a program on "Earmarks of Old Buttons". Among the many interesting exhibits which Judge Pendleton used for his talk were four cards marked "Newly Made from Old Findings". These were the Ashlee buttons.

The National Button Society was incensed to find that these buttons were being sold on the floor of their show as old buttons. Because of this, a traveling exhibit was made of these buttons so that the membership could recognize them. For more than ten years this exhibit was shown at all National shows and travelled throughout the country to anyone who requested it. The 1942-1943 National Button Society Yearbook acknowledged that it was easy to see how inexperienced collectors would be fooled by these buttons since apparently some of the dealers who had experience in handling genuinely old buttons had been fooled by them. At the time of Judge Pendleton's program, the 60 Ashlee buttons on display could be bought at their

HEADS: From the Xeroxed mounting of Ashlee heads on the left, it is easy for me to see why these buttons fooled so many of the new collectors. They are unique; they are appealing to the eye; some have interesting shapes; and some are rare. The Chanticleer head of Maude Adams at the top and the Chanticleer costume at the bottom are so intriguing one could be inclined to buy them and examine them later. There are two lovely children's buttons: Mary with her Little Lamb and the little Dutch maiden are precious. The children's heads are hard to find. The shaped buttons are counters. The ladies heads are beautiful.

You must remember the Ashlee incident began in 1941 when National was only three years old. The collectors were hungry for picture buttons and many dealers supplied them with the buttons you will see on the following pages. Unfortunately, they failed or refused to tell anything about their age or construction. These buttons had recently been assembled from the old findings with new shanks. Many dealers misrepresented these buttons for old buttons. The practice, unfortunately, went on for years.



THE ASHLEE BUTTONS (CONTINUED)

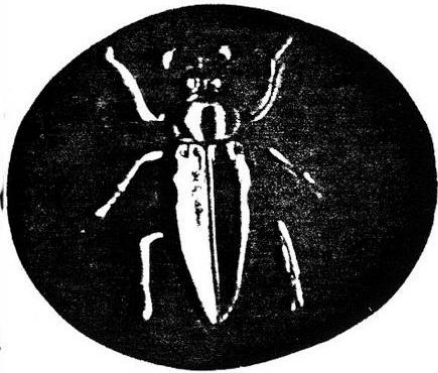
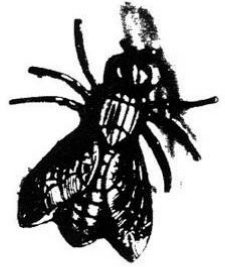
place of origin for \$16.00 wholesale, and from 25 to 50 cents each retail. They were being resold for from \$2.00 to \$10.00 each by some of the dealers - and remember that this was a lot of money in the early forties .

Since I picked up my first Ashlee button in New Orleans in 1970, I (and our president, Bill Odom) have been fascinated by these unusual buttons. We have both collected them since that time, sometimes being unaware that a button we have purchased is an Ashlee. Indeed, in 1974, I was disqualified on what I considered two beautiful trays in Section 15, Division I, because a couple of the buttons were considered Ashlees. Had I known these were Ashlees, I would have entered the trays in Division IX or would have replaced them with old buttons. A score of other trays from other people met the same fate. The magnificent buttons which we had considered as "counters" were in fact Ashlees! That fact does not make these buttons less beautiful or desirable. It is just a matter of knowing where to use them in competition. That is the purpose of this article...to try to acquaint you with these buttons and how to use them.

It is not my purpose in this article to reopen this controversy, but to show you that these buttons have literally created a new genre of buttons which have set the hobby on its toes. The late Lula Opre, in her Dictionary Plus of Button Terms, defined Ashlee

PEOPLE AND ANIMALS: The charming cat on the fourth row and the darling rabbit button on the bottom row were my first introduction to this class of buttons. They were in a collection I bought and Mrs. Galoff had thoughtfully written under each "Ashlee". The second button on the second row began my concern and curiosity for Ashlee buttons. It is St Michael, the Avenging Angel. It brought me pain and grief (and a measles dot) on a tray of metal religious buttons. Several other competitors had made the same mistake. The button next to it is Aurora of the Dawn. My tray of metal mythological buttons suffered the same fate. I had paid good prices for both of them. Often ignorance is the cost of knowledge. This began my research on the Ashlee buttons so that our Texas collectors would not make the same mistakes.

The classical figure with the serpents and the Pilgrims are very rare. I have never seen the real buttons. These are two of the original findings without shanks. The oval button with the little girl and the goose is illustrated in Nichol's Handbook of Buttons. It has been copied by a modern studio designer of jasperware buttons. That is a good indication of the lasting appeal of some of the so-called Ashlee buttons. The button of the cat with the bow tie is mounted on an old pearl background. It looks authentically old until a National judge dots it with a measles and the comment: ASHLEE!



THE ASHLEE BUTTONS (CONTINUED)

buttons in this way, "The Ashlee buttons have caused a great deal of discussion among collectors, because they are newly made buttons from old findings (button parts) around 1940. They were sold as newly assembled buttons by the factory, which was the truth, but not all dealers are honest and in 1948, these newly assembled buttons were turning up and being sold as 'old', which they are not. These buttons are growing older every year, and have been approved by the National Button Society, so don't let the name Ashlee scare you into passing up good buttons".

In a letter written in 1948 by Mrs. May F. Gundlach, owner of the Ashlee Button Company to the editors of the National Button Bulletin and Just Buttons, she said, "...some person or persons are making the name 'Ashlee' synonymous with deceit. I challenge the right of anyone to so label buttons made by an authentic button house and not sold under any misrepresentation." From all reports that I have ever read or heard, the Ashlee Company and Mrs. Gundlach never misrepresented these buttons. She was always a very ethical person and I am sure she suffered severely from the unfounded rumors which were prevalent in those early years. She did not deserve this. No supplier should ever suffer because of the questionable practices of the dealers to whom they supply buttons. How I wish Mrs. Gundlach were alive today, so we could talk with her and find out more about her marvellous buttons!

As more and more collectors became familiar with the Ashlee buttons, great pressure was exerted to recognize them as old buttons, since some of the findings were indeed old. In 1962, Judge Penleton, as a member of the Board of Directors of the National Button Society issued a statement in which he stated that recognizing these buttons as old would undermine the value of the old buttons which were

ANIMALS: REAL AND FABULOUS - In the early years, I wanted to buy a large collection because of the second button. I had no idea it was an Ashlee... and I still love the button now that I know it is an Ashlee. That indicates the compelling charm of some of these buttons. They are classics in their classes. The large rat on the ovaloid button is another classic. Buffaloes are hard to find. There is a reverse to this buffalo, as there is to some of the other full figured animals in these stampings. In other words, the left faces the right as in clasp buttons, but both animals are the same in design except for their position.

The fly stamping in the third row is positioned on a dimensional piece of catlin...a very striking specimen. The fly on the third button is eschutcheoned on a pearl background with an elaborate border. The eagle on the bottom row is especially rare. This is the original stamping without a shank. I think the picture of the Ashlees is now coming into focus. The subject matter is different, desirable, and hence, in demand by the collector. Small wonder this misrepresentation was possible on such a large scale.



THE ASHLEE BUTTONS (CONTINUED)

bringing more and more museum recognition. He felt that unless the buttons were considered modern, the integrity of the National Button Society would be endangered. Thus a policy was made...and the rule is still strong today. These buttons are recognized as authentic by the National Button Society; however, they must be entered into competition under Division III (Modern Buttons) or under Division IX (where age makes no difference)

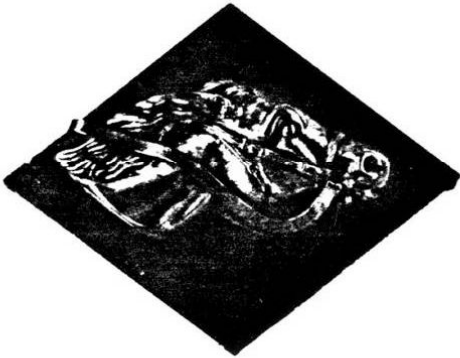
Your editor finds the Ashlee buttons both beautiful and collectible. I would gladly pay the \$2 to \$10 mentioned before for them, or more for certain rare ones. These are good buttons, but they must not be entered in Division I. Division IX is fine, although there are some judges who still consider these as converts and will disqualify you. Until these judges can be educated, nothing can be done about this.

Expanding on this slightly, I cannot imagine doing a really fine tray of large size dogs in Division IX from the buttons in my collection without using at least one and probably two Ashlee buttons.

What are Ashlee buttons? What observable differences do they possess? In a discussion on this subject with Jane Ford Adams, we both agreed that they are very hard to write about, because it is almost essential to see them and feel them to really know them. (Ashlee buttons do have a certain look about them.) For that reason, the buttons shown in this article, which are as many as Bill and I have been able to collect, will be on display at our Spring Show in New Braunfels, so you can see and feel the buttons. There are certain distinguishing features which you can readily recognize once you see a lot of them together. First and foremost, though, you should be able to recognize an Ashlee stamping. I feel very fortunate to have some of these stampings, which were presented to me by Dewy Albert during our 1975 convention. These also are shown on

DOGS AND ROOSTERS: These dog heads are classics. They represent some of the highest relief in stampings. They seem to be almost an inch high. They bulge out the black plastic hanging tray, but I think they are magnificent. The third button on the top row is the first Ashlee I ever bought (I did not know it was an Ashlee), but it was (and is) so beautiful, I didn't care. It is a high relief stamping placed on a thick convex walnut base. Many so-called Ashlee buttons are found in the animal classification, especially dogs, horses, roosters and insects.

Some of the Ashlee buttons appear to be of solid copper. I think when the original supply of old findings was used, some of the more popular stampings were molded in copper. The first rooster on the bottom row is an example. It was available in several sizes as were many of these buttons. This only complicates detection by the unknowing collector.



THE ASHLEE BUTTONS (CONTINUED)

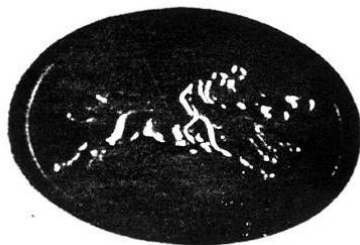
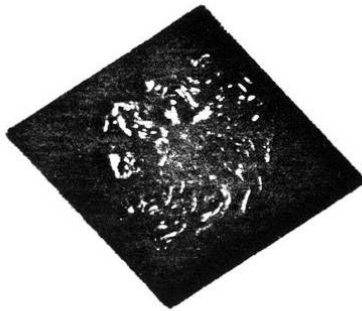
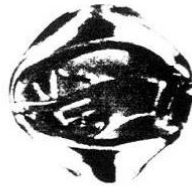
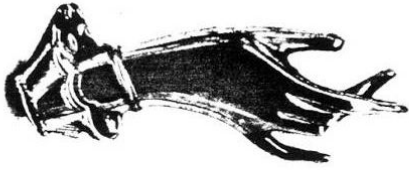
these pages. These are some of the same stampings that his late wife, Lillian Smith Albert, picked up back in 1941 when she was writing her Second Journal. I will be forever grateful for this thoughtful gift.

The reason that some Ashlees are so hard to recognize is that the same stamping may be fastened on a base of metal, the same as the finding, on a different metal, on pearl, on wood, on catlin, on celluloid and many other materials. Many, many fine animals were among the Ashlees, as were old cars and other modes of transportation. I would suggest that you carefully examine any animal or transportation button to be sure it is not an Ashlee, or at least to be warned that it is an Ashlee.

High relief is a characteristic of some of the Ashlees. The very first one I bought was a dog's head. Next I found a beautiful little rabbit in a collection I bought in Wisconsin. Imagine my surprise when I attended a show and saw this very same rabbit on three entirely different mountings! Often the dissimilarity between the stamping and the background should make you question a button as an Ashlee. Discoloration around the attached finding sometimes is a clue to an Ashlee. Many of these findings were used in jewelry and as buckle parts, so they did not take the fixative as well as most old buttons do. Through the years, the discoloration of the fixative around the stamping has become even more apparent. For the most part, metal stampings were soldered on plain or ornamental rings or metal discs with varied background patterns. When the entire face of the button is a metal stamping, the reverse turn over is sharp. Only a metal loop shank (often of copper) was soldered to this one-piece stamping.

ROOSTERS AND HORSES: This whole episode of assembling old stampings lasted for many years and becomes unreal - like some of the comic operas. When they ran out of suitable bases to place the stampings or findings on as escutcheons, they turned to whatever was in the barrels in the back room. Old jewelry findings of all types and parts of buckles were used to back up the stampings which were readily sold to unsuspecting collectors. The rooster head on the ring is an example. The last horse head on the third row was placed on a metal back which was ringed for jewelry - not buttons. The diamond shaped horse head (fourth row) has an unbelievable look. The metal is thin and flimsy and the escutcheon is loose. Hence, sloppy workmanship can be a distinguishing characteristic of some of these buttons.

The large horse and handler at the bottom of the page might not be an Ashlee. I have never found the Ashlee finding. The rule (if there are any) for identifying an Ashlee is to know the finding came from one of the four stamping factories selling these findings in the 40's; but all the findings assembled were not photographed and that is where the difficulty lies; and so I prefer to call this whole genre of buttons "so-called Ashlees".



THE ASHLEE BUTTONS (CONTINUED)

A lighter gauge metal than we usually find in old one-piece buttons was used in some of these stampings. Therefore, learning to feel the weight of the metal is very important. Color is a characteristic of some of these buttons. Some are made from an unmistakably coppery metal. You will have no trouble spotting these immediately. Others are of a bright brass, as if they had been gilded. Sometimes a japanning was applied to give them a contrasting dimensional look. Others had the ovaloid shape of a brooch finding. Most Ashlees have a copper loop shank and discoloration is sometimes evidenced around the base of the shank from the solder. However, these stampings were assembled to order and some that I have were backed up with brass. Others have loose swivel shanks, some v-shanks, and still others vent holes. Because of the many variations on the way they were made for the trade, determination of an Ashlee button can be an exhilarating experience.

How many different Ashlees are there? Frankly, I don't know, and I doubt seriously if anyone really knows. A few veteran dealers might have some idea. Many were made; many were sold; and many are in old collections....and many collectors still don't know what they are!

The Ashlee Company was an outgrowth of the Edgar S Asch Company, which in 1903 took over part of the stock and fixtures of Steel & Taylor, a firm that had been in business since the late 1800's. At this time the firm was owned by Edgar S. Asch and Oscar Gundlach. Upon the death of Mr. Gundlach, Mr. Asch purchased his half of the business but continued to employ Mr. Gundlach's son, George. Mr. Asch retired in 1931 and turned the business over to George Gund-

TRANSPORTATION AND INANIMATE OBJECTS: In my opinion, it would be next to impossible to make a mounting of automobile buttons without including Ashlees. Several of these are pictured in the first button books without indicating they were Ashlees. The third button appears to be cheaply molded of copper - probably an outright molded reproduction of the finding on the button next to it, which has been called "Barney Oldfield". The appearance of Ashlee buttons in the early button books further complicates authentic identification of this sizable body of factory assembled buttons. The authority of the printed page is formidable. Many collectors consider every word and picture in a button book as gospel not to be questioned.

There are very few inanimate objects that I have been able to locate, among them the hands. The July 1962 National Button Bulletin pictures many of the findings and is an invaluable reference for these buttons.

It is hoped that this article, together with the buttons Bill Odom and I have collected over the past years will help you recognize the Ashlee buttons. All the buttons shown in this Bulletin come from our collections.

ASHLEE FINDINGS:



ASHLEE FINDINGS:

If you don't like them.....
If you think they are shoddily made (and many are).....
If you wish to avoid them.....
If you are a picture and age purist and want only authentic
Victorian vintage in your collection.....
If you are on a limited budget and cannot afford the luxury of
making mistakes.....
If you are a judge in State or National competition and want to
judge fairly and squarely.....
Then,

YOU WOULD BE WISE TO KNOW THESE ASHLEE FINDINGS!

THE ASHLEE BUTTONS (CONTINUED)

lach. In 1945, Mr. Gundlach suffered ill health and turned the business over to his wife to manage.

Whether you like or dislike the Ashlee buttons is up to you. One thing is sure: They will be with us forever. The Ashlee types are now a part of our button heritage. Although today's collector had no part in creating this problem, this problem - like Pandora's chest - is now a part of our collecting life, and that is the strange paradox of the Ashlee buttons.

ASHLEE FINDINGS:





IN SUMMARY:

Picture buttons represent a highly important and significant part of our hobby. Most of the button books spend most of their pages illustrating and describing picture buttons. There are some collectors who collect only picture buttons; others collect picture buttons in specialized classes. When I started collecting, picture buttons were the thing.

When these ~~factory~~-assembled buttons were first foisted on the unsuspecting pioneer collectors, picture buttons were king. Everybody was hungry for them. The war was on, money was more plentiful, and collectors had an insatiable demand for rare and unseen picture buttons. These circumstances coincided to make this situation possible.

The Ashlee button created a scandal which lasted for several decades and is still with us. By sheer numbers, by the diversity of subject matter; by the uniqueness of some of the buttons, they are today, some four decades later, a sizeable body of picture buttons. It is my contention that they now constitute a special genre of picture buttons which cannot be ignored by the serious collector. This type buttons went into collections all over the country and they are still to be found in dealer's stocks.

They have been a major cause of an epidemic of measles in National competition over the years. They can be as dangerous as a land mine to the unknowing, capable of blowing up a perfectly beautiful tray in competition in Division I. They are fine in IX, but an absolute no-no in I.

Bill Odom and I will continue to collect Ashlee buttons until we think we have found all of them. We have had a ball tracking down these strange buttons, which have become a paradox to our hobby.

Rarity is both an overused and a relative word. There are Ashlee buttons that give valid meaning to the definition of rarity. They are: Mizpah, the handkerchief cornered sphinx, the classical figure strangling the serpent, the three cherubs, the head with cap and partial star background, the golf bag, the elephant with upraised trunk, the donkey, the wolf, the crab, the lizard, the fat beetle, the peacock, parrots and butterflies, and the lotus blossom.

MWS

ASHLEE PROBABLES: I feel strongly that some of the buttons pictured in this article, which are referred to as Ashlees, were probably not made or assembled by the Ashlee Company. It is a pity that there is no reference material on exactly what buttons were made. All we know for sure is that old stampings were found at the Ashlee factory and upon the suggestion of a button dealer were assembled into buttons and sold. But remember, identical findings were found elsewhere.

As you can see, we are dealing in an area with a lot of gray areas. If you know for sure that a finding is an Ashlee, chances are that the button is recognized as authentic. And then again, as was said in a program on conversions at last year's National Button Show, "If a button is just too good to be true, it probably isn't!"