

Twin Pins – Double Trouble or Twice as Nice?

PART 2 - Metal Cables in the USA

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The date when circular knitting needles appeared in American shops and stores is not precisely known — similar to the early days of circulars in the United Kingdom.

U.S. Patent 1,286,125, issued in 1918, is cited by several brands of circular knitting needles up to the 1940s.

Although no patents for circulars have been found for the 1920s, at least thirteen other patents were issued during the 1930s and 1940s for various features of circular knitting needles — most not referenced in this article. Many of the forty United States brands sold between 1920 and 1950 do not cite a patent reference. However, many other features help to establish a rough chronology of American circular history.

Clues to dating include the composition of the needle itself (metal, plastic, or other materials), the nature of the packaging (shape and components of the packing and introduction of plastic packaging), and information printed on the packaging.

Early Distinctions

Most early circulars (Fig. 1) used metal cables between the knitting pins. For the most part, metal cables were made of steel that was fastened to the steel pins on each end, although there were a few attempts at differentiation, such as noting the use of cadmium or bronze in the needle manufacture (Fig. 2). Indeed, the Boye Needle Company boasted that their pin was made of



Figure 1. Very early circulars, all made in the USA. Left, Van B&H was a large early-20th century haberdasher, Van Blankensteyn & Hennings, who sold knitting needles under the Cinderella brand. Peerless was a brand name of A.F. Brabant of Yonkers, New York. Nothing has been established about the “Beau” brand.



Figure 2. Old Glory brand boasted that it was cadmium plated. At this time, cadmium was occasionally used for corrosion-resistant plating on steel, although nicked steel was more common.

the “finest Acroplane Cable.” Tube-Point (Fig. 3) claimed their cables were “EXTRA STRONG RUST PROOF.”

While the new circular knitting tool was establishing itself, many packets were printed with guide-



Figure 3. Tube-Point claimed its metal cable was rust-proof.

lines for use: “transfer only a few stitches at a time” and sharp statements that breakages would be the fault of misuse, not shoddy manufacturing. Buyers were counselled that circular knitting needles would not rust, that they should not hold the pins too tightly, or press the ends of the points where they join the cable.

The vast majority of early circular knitting needles sold in the United States were proudly labelled as made in the United States. This was in contrast to the situation with early sewing needles and straight metal knitting needles, which had been imported from overseas, mainly from England. In contrast, haberdashery firms such as Bucilla, Fleischer, and Nuns did label their circular knitting needles as made in Germany.

The metal cable was generally relatively thin in diameter, regardless of the diameter of the pin itself. But pins were pretty thin, too, as bulky knitwear was not fashionable then.

As in the United Kingdom, the brand name (Fig. 4) and size were sometimes inscribed on the pin.

Brand Names

One significant effort to establish a unique type of needle was the “Sure-Fit,” marketed by the haberdasher Bucilla, a company initially founded in 1867. Their U.S. Patent No. 1,966,690 was issued in 1933 for holes pierced into the points of the circular needle.

The complicated intention was that the knitter could tie a long string onto both points of the circular needle so that some stitches could be slipped off the circular needle itself and onto the string. Thus, the knitted fabric could be stretched out, and the knitter could lay the knitting flat to measure it or wiggle into the skirt or sleeve to measure the length on the body.

Some other needle distributors did take up the Sure-Fit. Another haberdasher, Fleisher’s, used the same backing card except for the name change. Figures 5 and 6 show the fronts of two different backing cards and a close-up of the pierced



Figure 4. Brand names for Dritz are inscribed on the pin (needle).



Figure 6. Close-up of Sure-Fit pierced tips.

points. But the information on the reverse of the card was the same, illustrating how to put on a skirt using the tied-on string feature.

The Boye Needle Company, founded in 1905 to make and distribute sewing machine needles, added first crochet hooks and then knitting needles to its product line in the 1920s as the knitting craze swept the nation. By the 1930s, Boye had already marketed a wire cable circular for several years when it sought a patent for the unique needle point shape (Fig. 7). Sears, Jewel, and CABLEKNIT also used its U.S. Patent No. 1,983,536, but today, Boye’s Concave Points are hard to distinguish from those of other circulars. Boye promoted their Concave Points for many years (Fig. 8), but like the “Sure-Fit,” this feature must have eventually died out.

In 1935, Boye claimed in a Fortune magazine article that it sold “75 percent of the 10 million knitting needles sold in the U.S. last



Figure 5. The fronts of the very similar Bucilla and Fleisher’s “Sure-Fit” brand cards.



Figure 7. Two early Boye packages promoting their “specially tapered points.”

year.” Whether the figures were accurate, the article noted that the most significant increase had been in circulars.

The Artercraft, made by Artercraft Manufacturing Co. of Oklahoma City, was another needle with a differently shaped point. Graphics on the printed packet illustrate the arrowhead tip (Fig. 9). However, (continued on page 14)

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examining an actual needle (Fig. 10) shows a much less dramatic needle point. Did the needle live up to the claims on the packet itself — we have never seen another, so perhaps not.

John Thornton & Company of New York, New York, established in 1858, also attempted to differentiate the shape of the needle points (Fig. 11 and 12). No information on the firm or its trademark could be located. Again, the graphic on the front of the envelope showed a much more distinctive shape of the (bent) needle than the reality of the circular inside the envelope.

Another marketing innovation was in the presentation. Early American circulars were never sold in a box, like the earliest models in the United Kingdom. In the United States, a manila envelope was printed in whatever fashion the needle manufacturer, distributor, or reseller ordered. One interesting example of packaging used in several retail outlets is the Circular Steel Knitting Pin. The envelopes shown in Figures 13, 14, and 15 were printed in at least six variations.

In Figures 13 and 14, the Circular Steel Knitting Pin packets were overprinted with details of specific retail shops. In Figure 14, a handwritten “March 13 – 39” date has also been added. Although Roxana Yarn Co. chose to hand stamp its name rather than have it printed on the packet, Roxana also stamped August 12, 1936, on the back of the packet, presumably when it was taken into stock.

Other Dating Clues

In addition to patents, trademarks can be used to establish some dating



Figure 8. A later packet in the new Boye livery shows the front and the extensive marketing information on the back. Here, the points are called “Boye Concave Points.” A Wahl’s price sticker appears on the new livery package, incorporating aids to gauge and length identification.



Figure 9. Artercraft’s printed envelope with the graphic showing the arrow-shaped tip. The arrow tip at the top of the envelope is a pencil drawing, presumably by a bemused knitter. Note also the very Art Deco typeface of the packet — a sure sign of 1930s design.

information. The Square Sale trademark appearing on the envelope for Frederick J. Fawcett’s Speedstitch brand of circulars (Fig. 16) was registered in 1934. Fawcett, a well-established haberdasher by this time, could also have used the trademark for years before it was registered.



Figure 10. The needle tip is much less radical than that shown in the graphic.

Postal codes can be another dating clue. In 1943, postal zones were introduced in 124 larger cities across the United States. The system was simple: a one- or two-digit code was assigned as a suffix to the city name, indicating a specific geographical area (Fig. 17). An address in New York City might read “New York 16, NY”. There were no postal codes before 1943, and these short code numbers existed until the introduction of five-digit ZIP codes in 1963.



Figure 11. The front of Thornton's "quality-feeling" envelope makes many claims about the product's longevity and "up-market" status.



Figure 12. The actual Thornton pins show a much less acute angle of the bend.

Hand-written dates can be a treasured find. Such numbers can indicate when the product was being retailed or used. Examples with hand-written dates include the Little "Boye" Blue and the Universal Circular Knitting Needle.

When the Boye Needle Company promoted a new line of circular needles branded Little "Boye" Blue, the manila envelopes were heavily printed with blue ink and the words "Do not return after...." on the envelope. Two such envelopes in this collection have pencilled dates of 1936 and 1943. These packets (Fig. 18) were still printed on the back with much merchandising information on other Boye products. Some also had a leaflet inside the packet.



Figure 13. Three packets for the Circular Steel Knitting Pin were overprinted with details of specific retail shops.



Figure 14. Polar Yarns Packet with retail shop details.

Although no manufacturer or reseller name was published for the Universal Circular Knitting Needle, it was considered a quality product. The envelope in Figure 19, hand-dated on the back to 1936, was printed in solid blue with graphics on the front and an internal flyer highlighting the jointed feature of the end pins attached to the metal cable with a looped hinge—more differentiation.

Among its advertising messages were "Better because points are



Figure 15. More variations for the Circular Steel Knitting Pin, both for Superyarn, presumably a local yarn shop in New York City.

jointed to cable. Easier to turn, therefore easier on your hands" and "The Universal Needle costs no more. Specially constructed for easier working. FULLY GUARANTEED." The envelope included a unique patent number, U.S. 2,061,282, dated 1936, and boasted, "IT'S UNIVERSALLY JOINTED". Universal is the only example of this feature, so presumably, it was not that popular.

It is unclear if thick cardboard backing cards were introduced after the flimsy envelopes or if they existed together. Printed backing cards were cheaper to produce than fold-up glued envelopes. Generally, they seemed more modern in their design and type fonts, suggesting they came into use later than the

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envelopes. But they probably existed side by side for some years. Compare the Bucilla backing card in Figure 5 and the Universal Circular Knitting Needle envelope in Figure 19. Both were used initially in the 1930s.

Some backing cards offered further protection with a clear or yellow cellophane envelope. Cellophane was developed early in the 20th century and was used for retail packaging from the mid-1920s until about 1950. Cellophane allowed the buyer to see exactly what she was purchasing. Most marketing messages were printed on the card, which might have different base colours.

Nun's was another long-established haberdasher with links to German production. Their backing sheet (Fig. 20) in the easy-tear cellophane packet was very similar to Bucilla and Fleisher's, including the sizing guidelines—although matching your needle to a printed example does not look very reassuring.

Nun's card contained a printed warning at the bottom: "Needle not returnable without this card. Not returnable after" The date, Jan 12, 1937, was stamped on the card, presumably by the retailer.

Many other brands, large wholesalers, and businesses also used cheaper cardboard backing cards. See Figure 21 for examples used by Octo, Bel-Mer, and Princess.

The War Years and Beyond

Moving into the 1940s brought wartime rationing and restrictions. Metal was restricted to wartime uses—stories abound of resource-



Figure 16. The Speedstitch brand circular needle packaging included the Square Sale trademark of the haberdasher Frederick J. Fawcett (a bit of a pun on the image of a sailing ship). The trademark was registered in 1934, but could have been in use earlier. It was common at this time to claim prior use when registering.

ful families making straight knitting needles from bicycle or umbrella spokes.

Like producers in many areas of manufacturing and agriculture, Universal had to stamp a wartime disclaimer on the envelope flap. It read, "Due to the inability of obtaining priorities on metals to be used in the manufacture of these needles, it is not possible to continue our unconditional guarantee."

If circulars had been scarce before the war, they would have been almost unobtainable in some areas during the conflict. Figure 22 shows the lengths to which one desperate knitter in Australia resorted. This classified ad appeared in the Weekly Times of Melbourne on 18 July 1945. The paper featured farming, agricultural, and rural news, so many of this tight-knit group might know each other despite the long



Figure 17. The manila envelope for John Dritz & Sons shows the two-digit postal code "New York 16, N.Y."



Figure 18. The Boye Needle Company's Little "Boye" Blue, still promoting their needle points, is now called the perfect point and still has a lot of merchandising information on the back.

distances between Australian farms and stations. Presumably, any responders would post their reply to the classified advertising department of the newspaper and ask for their reply to be forwarded. The two



Figure 19. Universal Circular Knitting Needle packet featuring a hinged joint between needle and cable.

parties would be in direct contact after that.

World War II also saw the introduction into the knitting needle world of the Susan Bates brand, a relaunch of the Chester brand made by C.J. Bates & Co. of Chester, Connecticut. Bates had been making vanity and nail care items for decades and got into knitting needles when they acquired another vanity item maker with a sideline in knitting needles. In the 1930s, they were sold under Chester and Barbara Bates.

In 1942, the firm launched the Susan Bates brand (Fig. 23), which eventually became so well-known that the company changed its name. Barbara Bates was an actual daughter of the family, but Susan Bates is a made-up name.

Bucilla's "Sure-Fit" needles (Fig. 24) with holes in the needle points were still being sold in the late 1940s. New post-war packaging not-

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Figure 20. Nun's gold, cellophane-wrapped backing card.



Figure 22. A desperate classified advertisement during World War II.



Figure 23. The front and back of the Susan Bates manila envelope were issued no earlier than 1942 when the brand was launched. Note the crossed-out reference on the envelope front to "heavily nicked steel" cables — another indication of adaption to wartime shortages. The back of the envelope notes other brand names for single-point and double-point needles made by the firm, including the now famous red-white-blue series, part of its wartime support effort.



Figure 21. Cardboard backing cards with slots or holes to restrain the stubborn wire cables.



Figure 24. The backing sheet for Bucilla's post-war needles was made in the British Zone of Germany. Note the needle attached to the backing sheet also has plastic tubing in place of the metal cable.

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ed that the needles were now made “in the British Zone of Germany.” The British Zone of Germany existed from 1945 until 1949, when the three western occupation zones were amalgamated into the Federal Republic of Germany.

As noted at the start of this article, most circulars sold in the United States until World War II were made with metal cable. But some rigid

circulars made of resin — which sounds like a contradiction in terms — were the first circulars without a metal cable and were in use by the 1930s. Part 3 of this Twin Pins series will examine the development of plastics and natural materials in circular knitting needles

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A SOUVENIR FROM THE 1926 SESQUICENTENNIAL IN PHILADELPHIA (continued from page 18)

the Tower, was never completed as the money dried up. To make matters worse, the area saw downpour after downpour — from May 31 to November 30, there were 107 days of rain. In addition, the director fell ill and then died a week after the initial kick-off. He suffered a “nervous breakdown.”

By the time the fair closed, four hundred creditors had presented bills totaling \$5.8 million. The City of Philadelphia paid off the debt in May 1929.

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