



Collecting Merit Badges

The ISCA Getting Started Collecting Series

If you have been a Boy Scout long enough to have gone to summer camp, then you have probably earned a merit badge. Congratulations! You are in good company. Merit badges have been an important part of Scouting since its start. Since 1910, well over one hundred million boys have earned well over one hundred million merit badges. Earning merit badges is fun, and it also helps you learn important skills on the trail to Eagle. The badges that you earn should be sewn on your sash and then proudly worn at Courts of Honor and other special events, just like your millions of predecessors have done.

Imagine for a moment that you were a Scout during the early days of Scouting in the US after 1910. Like today, you could earn merit badges for Archery, Art, Architecture, Aviation, Astronomy, Athletics, Bugling, Camping, Chemistry, Cooking, Cycling, Electricity, First Aid, Forestry, Gardening, Horsemanship, Lifesaving, Music, Painting, Photography, Pioneering, Plumbing, Public Health, Scholarship, Sculpture, Surveying, and Swimming. There were many more merit badges that you could have earned then that are similar to those of today. For example the Angling merit badge became the Fishing merit badge in 1951. Civics became Citizenship in 1946, and in 1952, Citizenship expanded into Citizenship in the Community, Citizenship in the Home, and Citizenship in the Nation. The interpreting badge was discontinued in 1952, but some of its requirements became part of World Brotherhood in 1969, which became Citizenship in the World in 1972.



Type A, Blacksmithing

There are quite a few badges from Scouting's early days that no longer exist though. For example, Blacksmithing (1911-1952), Craftsmanship (1911-1925, which could be earned up to eight times with different requirements for different crafts), Machinery (1911-1995), Pathfinding (1911-1952), Signaling (1911-1992), and Taxidermy (1911-1953) merit badges no longer exist. Many other badges have been discontinued, renamed, or changed, while new badges were started. One of the newer merit badges is Cinematography (1989-present), and Steven Spielberg, the famous director and a former Scout, helped write the requirements for it. For every badge like Foundry Practice (1923-1952), Masonry (1911-1995), and Stalking (1915-1952) that disappeared, there is a new one like



Type A, Craftsmanship



Type A, Pathfinding

Atomic Energy (1964-current), Space Exploration (1965-current), and Computers (1967-current) to take its place. Merit badges have changed in many ways over the years, and yet in many ways they have stayed the same.

The original 1910 BSA handbook listed 14 merit badges, eight of which were pictured with drawings. The original 14 merit badges were Ambulance, Clerk, Cycling, Electrician, Fireman, Gardner, Horseman, Marksmanship, Master-of-Arms, Musician, Pioneering, Seamanship, Signaling, and Stalker. None of these are known to actually exist, and they probably were never made. The 1911 handbook named the first 57 merit badges that were actually awarded. Early Scouts sewed their badges on sashes, like today, but the first sashes were homemade, and that is not the only way that merit badges were worn. Some Scouts wore their merit badges on their right sleeve. Other Scouts wore their badges on a removable sleeve, or false sleeve, that they wore over their regular sleeve on special occasions. In the early days, many Scouts sewed rank patches and other patches on their sash as well, sometimes even on the back. Some sashes were two badges wide and some (like today) were three badges wide.

Today, any Boy Scout under the age of 18 may earn merit badges. It was not always that way. During various times in Scouting's history, you had to be at least Second Class to work on merit badges, and at other times, you had to be at least First Class. At first, any Scout or Scouter could work on merit badges and advance to Eagle. Adults in some councils could earn merit badges and become Eagle Scouts up until 1965.



False Sleeve with Square Merit Badges

Merit badges have always been a major part of Scouting. That makes them very collectible. Merit badges that you collect are quite different from merit badges that you earn though. You do not wear merit badges that you collect. Merit badges are fun to collect because there are lots of badges that you can get for very little money. There are also many older and rarer ones that are expensive, but you will not need to worry about them when you are starting out. All merit badges since 1911 have had an embroidered circular border with an emblem inside, just like the badges of today. However, there are many ways in which the merit badges from the early days of Scouting are different from those of today. Merit badges over the years have come in ten different types and are designated by the letters A through J.

Type A merit badges are called “square” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1911-1933. They consist of a piece of square or rectangular cloth with an embroidered design. The sides of the cloth were folded under to form a smaller square before they were sewn on the sash. Some square merit badges are called “teens” or type AA badges. The merit badges issued during the first decade of the BSA, the twentieth-century teen years, were often different from the square merit badges that followed in the 1920s and early 1930s. Teens merit badges are highly prized, and new variations are still being discovered even to this day. Even some of the oldest square and teen-era square merit badges are fairly common today and can easily be obtained for your collection, particularly those that were required for Eagle, since so many of them were earned. However, many square merit badges and most of the teens badges are very rare. There are two square merit badges, Invention and Stalking (leaf), that are thought to exist, but none has ever been seen!



**Type A, Square
Aviation, Beekeeping, and Machinery**



**Type A, Square on the left and a Teens Variety on the right.
Lifesaving, First Aid to Animals, and Mining**

Type B merit badges are called “wide border crimped” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1934-1935. The outside cloth was folded under by the manufacturer and “crimped” or pressed into place forming a wide circle of cloth around the border. Several later types of merit badges were crimped as well. The thing that distinguishes the wide bordered crimped badges is the amount of cloth between the embroidered border and the edge of the badge. The width of the outside cloth is approximately 3/16 to 1/4 inch in diameter. Wide border crimped merit badges were not used for long, and so they are one of the harder types to find, but many are quite affordable.



Type B, Wide Border Crimped Archery and Stalking

Type C merit badges are called “tan narrow border crimped” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1936-1946. The tan-colored cloth was folded under by the manufacturer and crimped into place leaving a narrow, approximately 1/8-inch border. Examples of this type of badge can easily be obtained for your collection, particularly those that were required for Eagle. These badges are very similar to type E badges, which are khaki colored. Some of the tan badges have a slight olive or khaki tint to them, but the khaki badges are a darker green. When in doubt, look at your badge in the sunlight. If there is only the slightest tint of green, it is probably a tan badge.



Type C, Tan Narrow Border Crimped Carpentry, Camping, Woodwork, and Leatherwork

Type D merit badges are called “fine twill” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1942-1946. They were crimped and are very similar to type C tan narrow border crimped merit badges. The difference is they were made from a lighter-weight cloth with very fine twill, sometimes called a “sand twill.” The change was due to Scouting’s attempts to help the war effort in WW II. The heavier khaki cloth was needed to make military uniforms, so BSA quit using it. These badges tend to be very difficult to find.



**Type D, Fine Twill or Sand Twill
Photography, Bird Study, Hiking, and Lifesaving**

Type E merit badges are called “khaki narrow border crimped” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1947-1960. They are crimped and are very similar to type C and D crimped badges. The difference is they were made from a darker green cloth. Examples of this type of badge can easily be obtained for your collection, particularly those that were required for Eagle.



**Type E, Khaki Crimped
Gardening, Textiles, Journalism, and
Farm Layout and Building Arrangement**

Notice in all of the crimped types, that many times you will find these badges all or partly uncrimped. For example, the crimping on all of the fine twill badges shown on this page has come undone. However, you can still see the line where the original crimping occurred to distinguish them from the wide-border crimped badges.

Type F merit badges are called “rolled edge khaki twill” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1961-1968. They have a rolled edge like today’s badges, but they are not solidly embroidered. This type of badge is easy to find, and it is easy to get a nearly complete set of them. From 1961-1968, most of the merit badges were twill, but some were solidly embroidered. They are identical to our next type.



**Type F, Rolled Edge Khaki Twill
Corn Farming, Indian Lore,
Plumbing, and Rabbit Raising**

Type G merit badges are called “cloth back” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1961-1971. Like today’s badges, they have a rolled edge and are solidly embroidered. They differ from today’s badges in that they have a cloth back instead of a plastic back. Many of these badges are easy to find, but some were only used for a short time and so are harder to find. In 1969, all merit badges became solidly embroidered and the borders of Eagle-required badges became silver.



**Type G, Cloth Back
Safety, Computers, Engineering, and
First Aid**

Type H merit badges are called “plastic back” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1972 to the present time. If you are a Scout today, most of your merit badges that you have earned are probably of this type or type J. They have a rolled edge and are solidly embroidered, but unlike type G badges, type H badges have a plastic back. These badges are easy to find, and it is easy to get close to a complete set of them. Note however, that you can often get these badges at Trade-O-Rees and from other collectors for less money than they would cost new in your Scout shop. It pays to shop around and be patient when you try to accumulate this type of badge.



**Type H, Plastic Back
Archeology, Atomic Energy,
Entrepreneurship, and
Cinematography**

Type I merit badges are called “computer designed” or “computer generated” merit badges. They were issued from approximately 1993 to the present time. All previous badges were made with the style of embroidery known as Swiss embroidery. Swiss embroidery refers to a style where the stitching has some physical depth and some threads may be sewn over others of a different color. In contrast, computer design refers to a patch manufactured using a computerized embroidery machine where the stitching lies relatively flat across the surface of the patch. Only a fraction of merit badges have been manufactured in this way, and it seems doubtful that this design will be used in the future. The easiest way to distinguish these badges from other modern badges is by their wide border.



**Type I, CD,
Disability Awareness, Energy,
Gardening, and Animal Science**



**Type J, Plastic “Scout Stuff” Back
Climbing, Truck Transportation,
Snow Sports, Theatre**

The term “computer designed” is unfortunate, since it really refers to the manufacturing process not the design process. The CD technique is increasingly used with modern badges (for example, type J Truck Transportation and Type H Entrepreneurship) that do not have the wide border style and hence are not type I.



**Type G, Cloth Back,
Type H, Plastic Back, and
Type J, Plastic “Scout Stuff” Back**

Type J merit badges are the latest variation on plastic back merit badges. They have the “Scout Stuff” logo on the back that guarantees that the badges meet the BSA manufacturing requirements. From the front, most of these badges look like type G and H badges although many of the newer ones are manufactured with the CD embroidery and not Swiss embroidery.

For all of these types, a statement was made about when they were issued, and the word “approximately” was used in all cases. Many council offices did not throw out their stock of merit badges every time BSA switched the badge design. This was particularly true for minor changes like with the crimped types and during the change from cloth back to plastic back. It is not unusual to see sashes with two, three, or more different types of badges on them. My own sash has badges of types F, G, and H on it. As of this writing in

January 2005, our local Scout shop has badges of types H, I, and J for sale, and I found a type G there only a couple of years ago.

Badges of type A through E have a cut edge and a certain amount of cloth around the embroidered border. Note however that some Scouts, and unfortunately even some collectors, have taken badges of these types and cut them to round. They have cut away the excess cloth around the border. Other times, some of the border cloth was left, but it was cut from square to round. These alterations *dramatically* lower the value of the badge. In some cases, it also makes it hard to tell the type. Never, ever cut a badge. Leave them the way they were issued. Like any other collectible, condition is important. An unsewn, unwashed, pristine square merit with a large amount of cloth can be worth many times more than a used or cut version of the same badge. Sometimes you can find complete sashes, which will make a wonderful addition to your collection. Don't remove any badges from the sash. Leave them intact, the way the Scout earned them. Old sashes make a wonderful display that is much nicer than a series of badges in a notebook.

If you collect merit badges, you should set some modest goals at first. A reasonable first goal is to get a few square merit badges, and a number of crimped, twill, and solidly embroidered badges. Then you might decide to get at least one of each type. You may pick a few Eagle-required badges, and try to get every type for that badge. Start with the easy badges first. Do not spend a lot of money on a collection until you become much more knowledgeable through your experience. Unlike other common Scout collectibles such as OA and CSP, you will probably not be able to do much merit badge trading at Scouting functions. As your collection progresses, you will need to make check lists for each type, and you should definitely get a reference book. Much of the information in this report comes from the *Merit Badge Field Guide*, by Fred Duersch, Jr. It contains pictures of all of the badges and a check box for each applicable type. It contains issuance dates and name changes and reports on the number of each badge issued. It is reasonably inexpensive, and you can get it from many dealers at Trade-O-Rees.

Serious collectors collect more than every name and every type; they collect every variation. Some badges, such as Safety, Camping, and Cooking have at times been required for Eagle and at other times not required, so they come with both silver and green borders. Some merit badges were made with a design error. For example, White Water merit badge once had a black border and the first Atomic Energy badges were incorrectly made with an atom with no nucleus. Beekeeping was once made with a silver border, as if it were an Eagle-required badge. Beekeeping in particular, has had a number of strange designs. The first Beekeeping merit badge in 1914 looked something like a fly with four legs. The next design still looked like a fly, but at least it had six legs. The design after that



Beekeeping Merit Badge Design Changes

looked much more like a bee, but unfortunately, it looked like a squashed bee. It looked like someone had stepped on it! In 1957, Beekeeping was redesigned to look like a real live bee. The Insect Life merit badge, which later became Insect Study, first had a spider and a web on it. Of course a spider is not an insect! Taxidermy merit badge only had one design, and that was a rather grizzly looking bird foot. The first



Aviation Merit Badge Design Changes



Type A, Taxidermy

Type A, Insect Life

swimming merit badges had a swimmer with a full suit that covered the torso, which was common for boys and men in those days, but today, it looks more like a girl's bathing suit. Some changes were made to reflect increasing safety concerns. The skier in Water Skiing merit badge now has a life jacket, and the tractor in Farm Mechanics now has a roll bar. Over the nearly 100 years of Scouting, we see the Aviation merit badge go from an early biplane to a prop plane to a jet. We see Beef Production, Sheep Farming, and Wireless, go out while Law, Medicine, and Golf come in. There have been many other changes over the years.

Merit badge collecting is a great hobby. Merit badges show the history of Scouting and changes in our interests and culture. If you search for a good deal, you can get many merit badges for under a dollar each, and in some cases for 50 cents or even 25 cents each. It pays to be patient and shop around. Even a few sewn and washed teens-era merit badges can be found for under \$10 if you keep your eyes open for a bargain. Check the flea markets, thrift shops and estate sales. Keep searching! Only a few of



Type A, Rowing



Type A, Pigeon Raising



Square Merit Badge Sash

the most serious collectors will ever get them all. The thrill is in the chase. The next discovery of a previously unknown teens-era merit badge or a super-rare type-A Pigeon Raising or type-A Rowing merit badge may be waiting for you in the next bin or on the next table!

-- Warren F. Kuhfeld