

**DECODING A DECODER AT THE
WARNER SITE
20LV334
BRIGHTON, MI**



Abstract

Excavations at the historic Warner site, 20LV334, have yielded a decoder.

Introduction

The historic Warner site, occupied by the namesake family for over 170 years, has produced tens of thousands of artifacts recovered over the course of six field seasons. Five generations of Warners who occupied the property since 1841 were primarily engaged in agricultural pursuits including orchards, cash crops, and livestock. The site has yielded a wide variety of artifacts including an intriguing item discovered during the 2009 excavation season. The find was made near the north clothesline pole roughly twenty-five feet east of the 1855 Greek Revival home. Recovery was made with aid of a metal detector by the author and family member Kevin Van Dyke. The location, recorded through triangulation from two preset datum points, placed it in unit 550 525 N.

The stamped parts appear to be made of a cuprous material such as brass and are held together with a simple rivet device. The surface exhibits a nice bronze patina, though small sections on the obverse are marred with green corrosion. It weighs 17.1 g and is 49.16 mm in diameter. The decorated face is rich with raised embossed symbolism including a star, skeleton-styled keys, a wreath around the perimeter, a scroll at center, along with alpha-numeric characters of “SS”, “ROA”, and “1938”. The tips of a large, centrally located five-pointed star extend past the circular outline while five smaller stars appear in the

points of the largest. The reverse exhibits numeric values in sequential order from 1 to 26 around the outer perimeter of the middle circular disc. A second, smaller disc has raised stippling encircling the rivet by which it is also attached. An area of discoloration suggests that a pin or some other type of clasp may have been attached but is now missing. Mechanical functionality is limited to a rotating dial that moves freely, facilitated by two small tabs arranged on opposite sides with one slightly bent. Movement of the dial reveals a series of rotating numbers and corresponding letters that appear through two round openings on the face equidistant from the mid point within the horizontal scroll motif at center.

Limited to a few cryptic letters and numbers while further lacking any diagnostic indicators such as a patent date, manufacturer, serial/model number, etc, initial searches on the Internet returned little in the way of any conclusive or useful information. Initial speculation and suggestions for identification from family members regarding the use/purpose of the item ranged wildly from some type of calendar/calculator for a fraternal/affinity group to a sort of odd Nazi emblem/pin.

Any association with the Nazi party of Germany was quickly dismissed based on the overall iconography and lack of any documented family connection whatsoever. However, generations of Warners were active in the community and several held memberships in affinity groups that might be associated with the artifact. Laura Fuller-Warner founded the east Brighton chapter of the Michigan Farm Bureau in 1950, though seemingly well after the date of the device attributed to 1938. Another possibility was membership in the informal Pleasant Valley Club, a group of woman who were born or lived in the Pleasant Valley area of Brighton Township. At least two in the Warner family were long time members including Laura Fuller-Warner and Thelma Davis-Warner. The group met at a different member's house each session and published a formal newsletter. Another consideration was Donald Warner's membership in the VFW as well as the Michigan Telephone Pioneers of America. Other more distant family members, such as Howard Warner of Howell, was a member of the Mason's and Knight's Templar and was known to march in parades in full uniform provided for additional intriguing possibilities.

These ideas were all quickly dismissed, however, after the author's wife, Kerry Bennett, at first glance correctly identified the item not as an emblematic symbol of a fraternity group but a toy known as a Radio Orphan Annie Decoder. Radio Orphan Annie was the name of a radio show based on one of the most popular comic strips to appear in newspapers, first published in August 1925 (RadioArchives.com 2012). The RadioArchives.com website provides additional details of the show: It was created by cartoonist Harold Gray, and the comic was originally entitled "Little Orphan Otto". At the request of the owner of the Chicago Tribune in which the cartoon appeared, the main character was changed from a boy to a girl wearing a skirt. The plot includes a series of adventures faced by the main character, Annie, who had recently escaped from an orphanage and her only companion, Sandy, a pet dog.

The radio program targeted young children by featuring the adventures of kids and aired in 1930 (RadioArchives.com 2012). It was first sponsored by Ovaltine in regional syndication. The Secret Society version of the radio show began in 1934 and even included a manual of secret passwords, signs, and handshakes that likely originated from fraternal groups such as the Freemasons (National Heritage Museum 2010). Ovaltine ended sponsorship of the show in 1941 but was subsequently picked up by Quaker Puffed Wheat only to be taken off the air in April 1942 (RadioArchives.com 2012). The decoders offered by sponsors changed from year to year (1935 to 1942) ensuring that children would

continue to consume their products to collect each one as well as keep tuning into the show to reveal new secret messages translated only with the latest version. The 1938 sample recovered at the Warner site was known as the “Telematic” (RadioArchives.com 2012). Examples in original condition were gold in color and had a pin on the reverse to attach to clothing.



The 1940 model was immortalized in the movie entitled “A Christmas Story” starring Peter Billingsley as Ralphie Parker debuting in 1983 (A Christmas Story House 2010). Presumably after drinking gallons of Ovaltine, the scene depicts nine-year old Ralphie who is unable to contain his excitement after finally receiving his long awaited decoder pin in the mail. He runs upstairs to the quiet confines of the bathroom, securing it so that the secret message about to be decoded would not be revealed to any non-society members. Just as he begins to apply himself to unraveling the alphanumeric riddle, his younger brother begins to pound on the door demanding to be let in to use the facilities. His mother, responding to the incessant wails of his sibling, also begins to plead with him to unlock the door quickly resorting to multiple threats of punishment. Under mounting pressure but on the cusp of a great revelation, Ralphie refuses to relent, doggedly working to reveal the secret message, letter by letter, writing them down in great anticipation. Upon completion, though, the thrill of discovery was quickly muted by the sinking feeling of disappointment as the letters coalesced into words that simply stated: “Be Sure To Drink Your Ovaltine.” In classic Hollywood style, an anticlimatic message was used at the end of the scene to maximize dramatic effect. However in reality, the secret messages provided on the radio shows did not promote the sponsors but rather were brief previews of the next show to keep the viewer and society members engaged.

Discussion

The installation of electrical service in the spring of 1930 ushered in a new era for rural Brighton. A safe and relatively cheap source of energy brought lifestyle changes including new ways of lighting and heating homes, cooking meals, as well as the innovation of a host of new devices and appliances that ran on electricity. One of these devices, the radio, would allow rural America to stay connected with the rest of the nation in a way unlike any before it.

Financial instability during the 1930s would seem to make non-essential products such as the radio out of reach of most working class Americans. At an average cost of \$47 (\$822.50 in 2012) just four years after the stock market crash, a radio would seem to be an unnecessary luxury item especially to farmers in rural Michigan such as the Warners (Wilson 2013). However, installment payments with 20% down made radios affordable even in the darkest of economic times and by 1933 over sixty percent of US households owned a radio (Wilson 2013).

Personal accounts suggest that the family owned a radio by the early to mid 1930s, though the precise year has long been forgotten. Fourth generation family member, Robert Warner, recalled listening to shows broadcast by the large floor model radio in the parlor on Sunday evenings. Aspiring to play in the big league, he remembers listening to Tigers' baseball games as early as age 10 or 12 (Warner 2013). Robert was born in 1924, pegging the use of radio at the Warner farm between 1930 (date of electrical installation) and circa 1934. This time frame fits well with the popularity of radio around the country during the early to mid 1930s and predates the year of the decoder (1938).

Excavation of over 4400 ft², especially in the immediate back and side yards where generations of children were known to play, has yielded precious few toys. Besides a substantial quantity of marbles, artifacts classified as toys potentially dating to the first half of the 20th century are limited to a handful of items including a cast iron car, doll parts, hard rubber wheels, a cast lead cow, and parts of a cast iron train. Widespread economic hardship during the Great Depression years of the 1930s and early 1940s likely contributed as a limiting factor to the amount of manufactured toys purchased. Mitigating the need for factory made toys, family accounts suggest that play items, such as animal figurines, were carved from wood by second-generation family member George Warner for his grandchildren who lived with him at the farm. Made of biodegradable materials, these handmade toys were unlikely to survive as part of the archaeological record on a Michigan site.

Conclusions

Few toys have been recovered at the site despite the nearly complete excavation of the known play area adjacently south and east of the extant house. The Radio Orphan Annie decoder, made of durable materials such as brass, survived in the archaeological record. Stamped metal badges like the decoders are still applicable today, seventy-five years later, to engage children not to just purchase store products such as cereal, gum, Cracker Jack, etc, but also encourage participation in all kinds of programs from Scouting to Junior Forest Rangers.

Despite its initial intrigue, the decoder stands as one of the best understood juvenile items found at the site. Although ownership cannot be specifically attributed, likely candidates include fourth generation

residents Robert (born 1924) and Maxine (born 1927), the two youngest children of Herbert and Laura Warner. The decoder serves as a remnant of the technological revolution that swept the country over the airwaves in the 1920s and 1930s.

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