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Printing History of the Graphic Arts: The National Recovery Act of 1932

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The NRA was based on the premise that the Great Depression was caused by market instability and that government intervention was necessary to balance the interests of farmers, business and labor.

The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was an agency established by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) in 1933. The goal of the administration was to eliminate “cutthroat competition” by bringing industry (fig 1), labor, and government together to create codes of “fair practices” and set prices. The NRA was created by the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and allowed industries to get together and write “codes of fair competition.” The codes were intended both to reduce “destructive competition” and help workers to set minimum wages and maximum weekly hours, as well as minimum prices at which products could be sold.



Fig. 1. Businesses used the NRA logo in various configurations on their stationery.

The agency called on every business establishment in the nation to accept a stopgap “blanket code”: a minimum wage of between



Fig.2. USA 1933. National Recovery Act stamp. [Sc 732]

20 and 45 cents per hour, a maximum workweek of 35 to 45 hours, and the abolition of child labor.

On April 19, 1933, a stamp (fig 2) was issued to

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arouse support for the National Recovery Act, one of Franklin Roosevelt's first acts after he became President. It was a direct result of the general business decline in the United States beginning in 1929. The act provided for the expenditure of great sums of public money to carry out a recovery program.

Roosevelt personally requested the stamp, which he emphasized must be "issued at once to be most effective." The stamp was produced and placed on sale in just 13 working days.

The public was divided on the quality of the stamp design. Some remarked on the way the farmer carried his scythe on his left shoulder, which is rarely done by real farmers. Some pointed out that while four people were portrayed, they only shared seven legs between them.

As a stamp collector, I don't think the stamp is any better or worse than other stamps issued at that time.

Posters were produced for display in merchants store windows. Stamp-like labels were produced in sheet and coil form (fig 3). The NRA, symbolized by the Blue Eagle, was popular with workers.

Businesses that supported the NRA put the symbol in their shop windows and on their packages, though they did not always go along with the regulations. Membership in the NRA was voluntary; however, businesses that did not display the eagle were very often boycotted, making it seem mandatory for survival to many.

The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA) was passed by the U.S. Congress to authorize the President to regulate industry for fair wages and

prices that would stimulate economic recovery.

Roosevelt contended that the "blanket code" would raise consumer purchasing power and increase employment. By the time it ended in May 1935, industrial production was 22% higher than in May 1933.

In 1935, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously declared that the NRA law was unconstitutional, ruling that it infringed on the separation of powers under the United States Constitution. The NRA quickly stopped operations, but many of its labor provisions reappeared in the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act), passed later the same year. The long-term result was a surge in the growth and power of unions, which became a core of the New Deal Coalition that dominated national politics for the



Fig. 3. NRA single label (above) and coil (below).

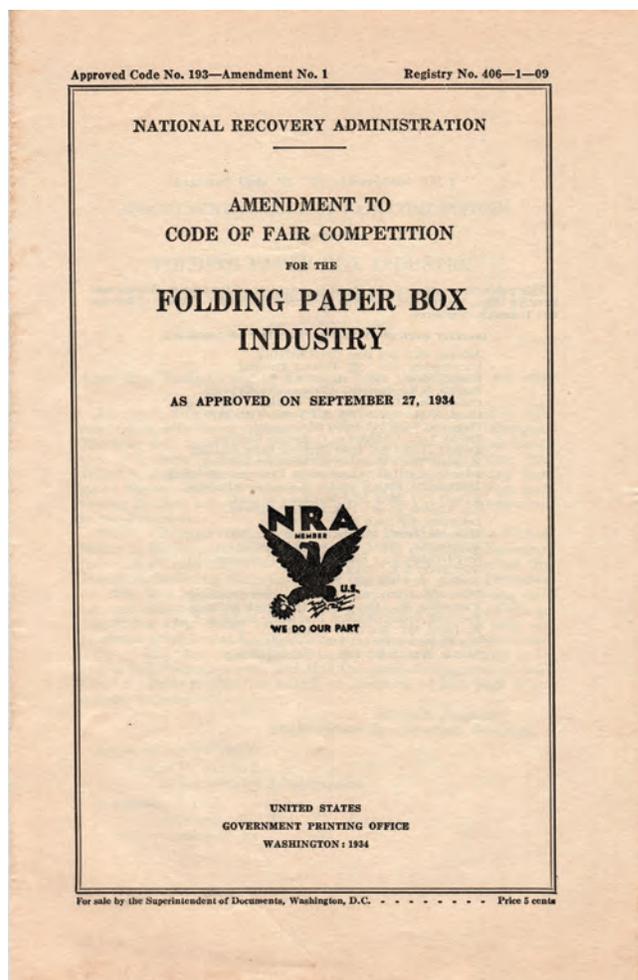


Fig. 4. Amendment to Code of Fair Competition for the Folding Paper Box Industry.



Printing plates used to produce the NRA “Blue Eagle” from the author’s collection. The two small plates were used to print the two-color label. They are about ½ inch square (36 points in printers’



terms). The large plate was etched into a piece of Bakelite (plastic) which is unusual, as most plates at that time were etched into a sheet of zinc or copper and mounted on a wood base.

next three decades.

The printers worked overtime (at 45 cents an hour) to keep up with the government. There were some 3,000 administrative orders running to over 10 million pages. Along with that, there were “Amendments to Code of Fair Competition.” And of course, the posters for the store windows, the labels and the printed stationery. The 8-page booklet

shown on previous page (fig 4) was one of many amendments to the code.

The Supreme Court found these amendments unconstitutional because the Federal Government could not regulate commerce within a state. The Federal Government had no control over a farmer that raised chickens, slaughtered them and sold them within his state.

Longtime GPA member David Celani, author of this article and countless others that have appeared in *Philateli-Graphics*, passed away earlier this year.

Dave was an “email friend” of this editor and others before me. His numerous articles about the “Printing History of the Graphic Arts” were always well-researched and fascinating to read.



It was not uncommon for me to be “an article short” for an issue of *P-G*, and I knew I could simply email my need to Dave and in a few days one of his unique articles, with illustrations, would appear in my inbox.

Dave was a true supporter of our Graphics Philately Association and *Philateli-Graphics*. And I am proud to call him my friend.