

The President's Letter

By Chris Pilliod

This is my 47th letter as president.

Smart phones are a wonderful tool-- "the internet on your hip." What a great convenience they are. When we drop my oldest son off at college, I am amazed at all the students wandering around campus thumbing on their screens. When I was in college we had 12 guys on a dorm floor scrambling to share one phone mounted on a wall at the end of the hall. Whenever it rang we all yelled it was our girlfriend... except none of us had one.

Here in the past month I became an official owner of my first smart phone. So you are thinking I'm not on the cutting edge... and you are correct. But about a week after I bought it, I put it to good use. Shortly after the purchase, on an engineering visit to our plant in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, I logged onto my smart phone and dialed up Coin World's website. Later that week there was a coin show in Monroeville, near Pittsburgh. I put in the location into my GPS and Voila... it said I was within an hour's drive. "Gosh, I'd like to break away one afternoon and stop over there, I thought..."

I arrived with a couple hours of showtime to spare. I rarely get to a show near Pittsburgh so my goal was to focus on dealers and tables I had never seen, hopefully, some octogenarian local guy whose children had no interest in coins and was set up to sell off his collection. I meandered down the first aisle, bought a few Lincoln Cent errors that seemed cheap, and then a high grade 1867 2-cent piece I thought I could curate and enhance a grade or two. Then I turned around and headed to the adjacent aisle and arrived at a table where the dealer was taking a potty break, or so I assumed.

I took the liberty of perusing his cases and soon my eyes fell on an 1864-S Seated Dime, unusual in that not only was it a low mintage issue, but they just do not last in dealer's cases, even at retail prices. "Man," I thought, "those things sell great

on eBay." And then right smack adjacent to it was an 1856 Seated Dime that dropped my jaw.

"Wow", I thought, "am I really seeing what I am seeing???"

Now, 1856 dimes are high mintage and readily available in both varieties as a Small date and Large Date, and almost never grab my attention. But this one was drop-dead obvious—a wonderful high-grade contemporary counterfeit struck in brass. Contemporary counterfeit collecting has grown exponentially in recent years, mainly a result of greater publicity through books by Davington on the Bust Halves and work done by Brian Greer and Gerry Fortin in the Seated Dime series. More often than not, the counterfeits, as long as they are contemporary, bring significant premiums over the genuine counterpart examples.

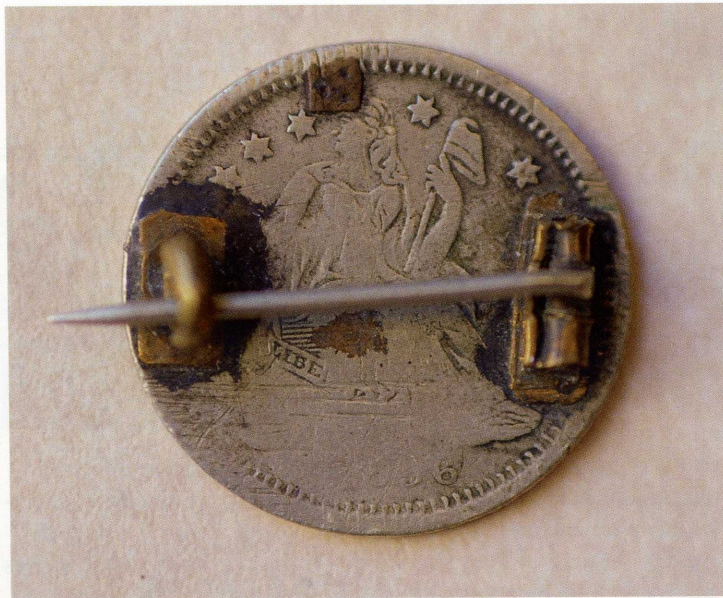
"I wonder if the guy thinks this one is real???" I mused. "I hope so!" I looked up and still no one was behind the table. Man, I thought, I can't let this one get away. I turned to the dealer set up next to him and asked if he knew where the guy went off to.

"Awww, he actually hasn't been around hardly at all today."

"What does he look like?" I asked as I scanned the room.

"He's real fat," came the quick reply. "Gosh," I muttered to myself as I scanned the bourse floor, "that doesn't narrow it down much around here." I whiled away the time thinking about the 1856 contemporary counterfeit dime. There was something curious about that specific issue. I already had two or three in my collection but curiously they all were fashioned either into pins,





or buttons and were made into Love Tokens. Yes, a Love Token on a counterfeit dime! Furthermore, when I asked other collectors of counterfeit issues, unbelievably they mentioned the same exact finding—their 1856 counterfeits were also made into jewelry pins, buttons and so on.

I looked at the one in the case more closely and at least on the obverse it did not seem to exhibit any signs of post-striking mechanical damage. But, finally after 20 minutes of waiting I decided to move on.

At one table I picked up a couple nice Shield nickels, at another I bought a Large Cent with a retained cud I did not recognize, at yet another I bought a couple political buttons. I know nothing about them and had no idea what they were worth but one was Abraham Lincoln and one was guy who lost the 1944 election and they seemed priced right so I bought them. As the show wound down, I could only account for one Indian Cent purchase, a nice AU example of an 1865 Flat Top 5, nothing to shout about.

But as I was wrapping up, a couple aisles away I saw a gentleman ducking behind a table that I thought might be the spot with the 1856 contemporary counterfeit dime, and he was a “trifle portly” as my father would prefer to say. I made a beeline to the table but a couple people were pressed against the showcase already. “Damn” I thought, “they’re gonna recognize the dime easily.” So I wiggled my way in between them and stated I had seniority and wanted to look at a few coins.

The dealer pulled out the 1864-S and 1856 dimes, as well a mint state 1907 Indian Cent exhibiting a nice example of improper alloy mix. “Wow,” I said, “the 1856 is die struck on both sides. Not jewelry. I nonchalantly asked for prices. He grabbed the greysheets and quoted the 1864-S at wholesale level—a quick no-brainer. He quoted the 1907 Indian cent at AU bid, a coin I graded original MS62RB, so another no-brainer. Then he grabbed the 1856 example and peered at it closely. Apparently not satisfied, he pulled out his loupe for a closer examination. “He’s gonna figure out it’s a nice contemporary counterfeit, I thought.”

He grabbed his greysheets and said, “how about \$12???” “Uhhhh, OK, why not?” I quickly responded and I couldn’t get my money out quick enough.

I had a five hour drive back home to think about things. My boys can’t believe how I drive. It’s rare for me to have the radio on. No music, an occasional phone call, but mainly just staring straight ahead at the road. “What are you thinking about?” they often ask.

Counterfeiting of United States coinage commenced not long after the genuine issues; to the point where I often sarcastically tell collectors during one of my talks that counterfeit issues started coming out even before the genuine ones. Obviously the charlatans of the time were manufacturing money for the sole intent of spending it... and, like I always say, it only has to work once. A half dollar in the 1800’s could buy a family a meal, a dime could pay for a lunch, so was it worth the effort? If you could carve a die and make them by the hundreds, the answer is “of course.”

Finding an example of a contemporary counterfeit in a showcase being sold as genuine is a rare experience. For me, it’s happened maybe half of a dozen instances, and then it’s usually a 3-cent silver bogus piece. Typically you will have to pony up and buy examples as true contemporary counterfeits.

The vast majority of contemporary counterfeits are 3-cent silver issues, Shield nickels, Seated dimes, quarters and halves, and a wide variety of Gold issues. You noticed I didn’t mention cents. A cent didn’t go far even back then. To make a counterfeit cent, especially a Large Cent, undoubtedly would cost the perpetrator more than a cent, so cent and 2-cent counterfeits made in the time are extraordinarily rare... except for one trip ten years ago. Yes, that one trip. The trip that was supposed to be four days of golfing with buddies on Jeckyll Island, Georgia but the rains dictated a change of plans. And man did it rain. I hate playing golf in the rain, and I was drenched after 2 holes the first day.

The closest city was Jacksonville, Florida, roughly an hour, maybe hour and a half to the south. Jacksonville is not the most popular destination for tourists in Florida, but as a city it doesn’t play second fiddle to most. It is a lovely city on the banks of the St. Johns River with an endless warm breeze and plenty of great golf courses, including TPC Sawgrass. But it’s not the best of cities for numismatists. I was only able to hit three shops worth my while. While at one, I managed to pick up a choice 1850 Seated Dollar in XF that was holed, still a rare piece. I wish I would have kept that one. The second shop was a complete bust.

The last shop was quite different in nature. The proprietor was a gray-haired hippie, and he rambled on about a multitude of topics, but mainly that Big Brother Government was watching everyone. I think he was stuck in Woodstock. Not surprisingly, it was one of those shops that had inventory everywhere. A box here, a box there...

When I asked for Indian cents he paused and said he would have to go to “the vault.” But all he did was go to the desk behind him and grab a box, so maybe he was worried I was Big Brother. The box was loaded with Flying Eagle and Indian Cents, but mainly just problem coins or common date circ stuff, “run of the mill” as my Dad would say. I was finding barely anything and was about to give up and head out as I looked out of the shop’s

window and watched the rain pummel my rental car. "Do you have another box?" I queried.

And it was loaded with common dates Goods, maybe VG's in the 1880's. But as I went to the second row a low grade 1891 caught my eye. I pulled it out and looked at it closely. "What the heck is this?" I wondered. I had never seen anything like it. A pattern I wondered. No way, the design too crude and the quality was too poor. After five minutes of sweating to get my arms around the thing, a light bulb came on. The dang thing is a contemporary counterfeit!

But for the life of me, why would anyone hand engrave a set of dies to strike cents. By the time they made the dies and the blanks they had to be out of pocket on the negative side. Today it costs the Mint 2.5¢ to strike a single cent, and they are world-class at making high quality coins inexpensively. So not surprisingly, contemporary counterfeit cents are extremely rare. For this President's letter, I went to my safe deposit box and pored through my stash. All but two were numismatic counterfeits. The two contemporary pieces were this 1891 example and another piece that is unidentifiable and I am only 50% convinced is a contemporary bogus coin. To counterfeit silver issues, the culprits could merely take some cheap copper strip and plate or wash a silver layer over the piece... it only had to work once.

I checked my compositional table for US small cents. Over the past 20 years I have run a nondestructive chemistry on 82 different cents, and another hundred or so other denominations but I was surprised I have never analyzed this 1891 example. That will have to wait for another President's letter.

In conclusion, one of the hottest growing numismatic collecting fields is exnumismatic pieces, issues similar in nature or that have genuine coins as host but are not as-made issues of US coinage. Charmy Harker has shared some excellent examples in recent issues. No true cabinet is complete without a choice example of a contemporary counterfeit. My good friend Ken Hill probably best summarized them for me many years ago, and what he said makes a lot of sense. He related that what hobo nickels are to the buffalo five-cent series, contemporary counterfeits are to the type coins of the 1800's. Instead of hand-engraving each coin, the artist hand engraved dies, made his strip and then struck coins from the blanks produced.

Especially collectable are the contemporary counterfeits with engraving errors, such as backwards letters or a mintmark on a coin where none were made that year, like the 1846-O seated dime, or the famous 1891 Barber dime. Even on this 1891 Indian cent, the second "1" looks more like a "J" and the engraver must have been in a hurry to get to press as he only made one arrow tip instead of three! But good luck finding one—I only know of three in existence.

