

## *The President's Letter* By Chris Pilliod

This is my 48th letter as president.

Even though she was of no relationship to me or my siblings, we always called her "Aunt Gert." I knew her from birth, an elderly lady that lived right next door to the little white house where my mother grew up in tiny Delta, Ohio. Gert was as nice as the day long, always smiling, always having a baked treat for us kids when we would drive over to my grandfolks from our small town of Swanton, seven miles to the east. I would come to realize over time that she was my ma's second mother, a widow next door who's husband passed away at a very early age having no children and never re-marrying. Gert, much older than my mother and being a devout Catholic, would often ask my ma, a much younger lady but equally devout, to accompany her to Sunday mass in Wauseon, the closest town with a Catholic church. Years later it would be a touching gesture on my mother's part to immediately ask her to be my older brother's Godmother upon his birth.

The more I reflect on my numismatic career, the more I believe Aunt Gert was as big a part of introducing me to the hobby as my father was. One hot, dry Midwest summer when I was maybe five years old, the farmland behind my grandparent's house in Delta caught on fire. It was 1961 or '62 and the auburn field to the west of town was fallow that year. By late summer, the weeds looked like dry kindling branches sticking up from the ground. Piles of old brush littered the field and fueled the conflagration. They seemed to also make a nice hideout for teenagers sneaking in a cigarette.

After receiving the urgent phone call from the grandfolks, we all hopped in dad's 1955 Studebaker and hi-tailed it west on County Road L and onto Monroe Street to see if the fire would fan all the way to the homes a few hundred yards to the leeward side. By the time we got there, the town's fire trucks had already arrived but their hoses couldn't get nearly close enough to the fire-line. To me and my brother, the fire looked to be of biblical proportions, and even though we hadn't yet heard of the apocalypse, the end of the world was surely near. We'd never seen anything like it and could feel the heat from the fire searing our faces.

One of the firemen rushed by and stopped in his tracks when he caught my Ma standing there with four kids... "Sadie, you keep those kids back!!!" he yelled as he ran by with some shovels. Another team of men pushed a mobile tank of water past the homes towards the field. Fire teams from neighboring villages were called in and, as they sped into the area with lights flashing and horns wailing, it quickly looked like we might be right—the world was truly ending.

In a couple of hours, the fire was extinguished, more from running out of fuel than by any heroics on the men's part. When the dust settled and all the nerves were calmed, we looked over at Aunt Gert's house where she had starting emptying her place of all her valuables. What appeared like a garage sale, we observed boxes of sundry items strewn across her driveway. As my Ma and her engaged in the transpirations, I noticed an old Maxwell House coffee can. My brother and I craned our heads

over to it and witnessed what looked like a treasure in front of our eyes. It was a can of old pennies... but not just any pennies. We indulged ourselves and, after carefully studying them, noticed they all had an Indian on them. "My late husband saved those from his letter carrying days," Aunt Gert said as she walked towards us. It's hard to believe in today's world, but I still recall in rural Ohio towns there were two mail runs—a morning delivery and then later the postman would deliver the afternoon mail. In those small villages, everyone knew everyone, so it was not uncommon for a postman to be asked to run an added chore for a mother needing stamps, or even a small grocery of some kind and the mailman would bring it around on his afternoon run. In return the carrier would be told to "keep the change." Gert's husband would pull out the Indian cents he received in change and the assemblage accounted for a pretty heavy can.

Aunt Gert's voice broke the silence. "Would you boys like those coins? I have no use for them." My brother and I stared at each other in amazement, as if we had won a lottery.

"Really???" we asked in unison.

"Sure," she softly replied, "they're yours."

My brother and I spent the whole night poring through those coins, not knowing really what we were looking at or looking for. The vast majority would end up being common date low grade circulated pieces from 1895 to 1907, a few 1908 and maybe a 1909. But there was one piece that was very different than the brown smooth pieces we stacked up that night.

"Chris," my brother exclaimed to me, "here's one from 1873. That's almost 90 years old!!! And look this one has letters the other ones don't. It says "Liberty" on the feathers!!!"

"Wow," I yelled back, "Dave, it's orange too! How much is it worth??"

"Dunno," he replied. It was the only coin that was different, the only one before 1890. We had no inkling of a Red Book, or how to grade, really no knowledge of coins whatsoever. But years later, it would be the series I would gravitate to first and foremost and still love to this day. A few years later as our interests grew, we became members of our little town's coin club (yes, back then, towns with populations of just a couple thousand residents had coin clubs). We would learn that our precious 1873, while having XF or AU details, had been heavily cleaned to the orange color it exhibited and also we weren't the only ones who enjoyed Indian cents. Another older member offered to trade for our rolls and being a novice at values we traded several rolls of Indian cents for one common dog-eared 3-cent nickel piece per roll. At the time, I thought it was a good trade but I still burn a little over that when I think about it. What is really irritating to me after all these years is I still vividly recall this member wanting me and my brother, a couple of pre-teens new to the hobby, to tell him, a collector for decades, what would be a fair trade. He





*Image courtesy Minterroneews.com*

**1900 Indian Cent on \$2.50 gold blank**

was smiling and very eagerly grabbed the rolls and headed off. I can't remember if he tried or not but he didn't get the 1873. And to this day it rests in my safe deposit box.

I gave up numismatics when I entered high school to focus on my golfing career, which I continued, rather un-illustrously, through college and then a few years after that playing amateur events. It became apparent I was never going anywhere in golf, and shortly after this, I returned to numismatics with a passion. And not long into my renewed hobby, I was reminded of that 1873 Indian cent with the pumpkin orange color. I believe it was at an ANA or another large coin show where a 1900 Indian cent was in auction lot viewing with the same color and look as my 1873. Except this one was of original color, brilliantly lustrous and original. I read the description in disbelief.

"1900 Indian Cent. Struck on \$2.5 Quarter Liberty Gold planchet." How can that be, I wondered. The description went on to state that some Indian cents were mistakenly struck on gold planchets and sent into circulation.

Man, I thought to myself, that's the same color as my 1873, maybe I need to check that when I get back home. It later

proved to be a fruitless exercise. The 1873 in my collection weighed correctly, had the proper diameter and at the end of the day was still just an overscrubbed, polished to within an inch of death coin, burnished to a gold color.

But at lot viewing that year, I fell in love with that 1900 on a gold piece. I hadn't been out of college long and just purchased a new 1983 Camaro Z-28 with cash and hardly had two nickels to rub together. I asked around to see what it might sell for. The estimates I received were in the \$5,000 to \$10,000 range. I began musing how I could muster up the cash to see if I could be a proud owner. I could sell some silver I accumulated, my Silver Dollar collection as well, and some nice type coins I stuck away, oh and a couple nice CD's that were matured. That was it, I was going to go all in and eagerly awaited the lot to come to the floor.

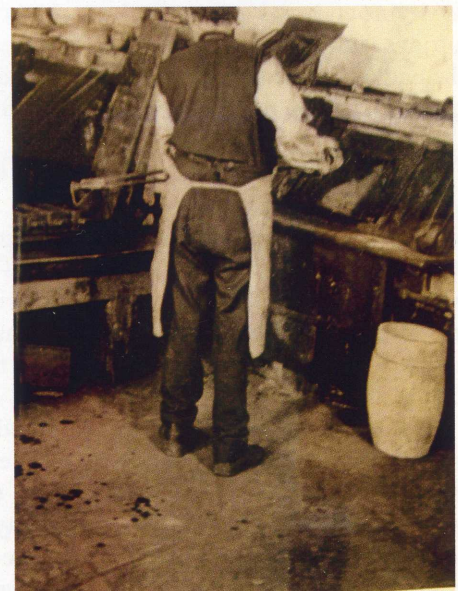
My eagerness soon turned to despair as the coin flew by the estimates in a flurry of bidding and hammered at \$15,000 or thereabouts. Knowing now what I didn't then, I would have taken my Camaro back to the dealer and traded it in for a bicycle to own the coin. The last Indian cent on a quarter eagle gold planchet that went to auction was in 2010 at the FUN Heritage auction and was a gorgeous 1905 in a PCGS MS64 holder. Owning one now is a dream, this piece hammered at \$253,000!!! Now instead of my car I would have to trade in my house.

But I have to this day been puzzled by how the mint could have possibly allowed gold blanks, the most precious of all coinage materials, to be confused with the lowliest of all—copper. Well, perhaps we have an answer.

A few years ago in my 38th letter as president, I wrote about the pilgrimage to Philadelphia I make in an effort to do a walking tour of the four Mint buildings in the downtown area. Actually, only the last two buildings are intact—the third and the fourth, the latter of which is the current facility in use. In that newsletter I left you dangling at the end with what I observed in one of the photos in the third Mint building.



**Annealing Room 3rd U.S Mint, c1900**



**Can you spot the blanks on the floor?**