The President's Letter

By Chris Pilliod

This is my 56th President's letter and when I arrived at work today I was greeted with the news of Chicago Cubs fans celebrating their first World Series win since 1908. Being a Buckeye and having attended college in Cleveland during the city's lean years of the 1970's I was heartbroken over another Game 7 loss. Autumns during my college days would always include a few trips on the RTA "Downtown" Line from campus to catch an Indians game. By September the woeful Indians would be 20 or 30 games out of first, contending for the cellar. I remember one particular game when I scalped a great seat and got the ticket and was so proud I got it under face. Then I walked into Municipal Stadium and there were like 900 fans in a place that held 83,000. The usher walked me to my seat and said "damn kid, you're actually about the only one here that paid for a ticket." No wonder that scalper chased me down when I refused to pay full face value of $12.00 I thought.

I was alone behind the visitors' dugout the whole game and rather than walk down the aisle, the vendors would just yell down the 20 rows " You need anything???" I had a 10-year-old transistor radio I took to college, and as I rode the RTA back to campus that night I listened in to Joe Tate's game recap. "Tonight was another 'ball night' at the stadium" he announced at some point. "Why didn't I get a ball?" I quietly asked myself. Then Joe continued… "Everyone who attended tonight's game caught a foul ball."

After some amount of time and thoughtful refinement most of us gravitate to a favorite series in numismatics. For many of us it is the Indian Cent and Flying Eagle series. Indeed, most of us further refine our tastes with a favorite year or years in those series. If you're a Cubs fan it may well be 1908, the last year of their World Series, which by the way is also the first year cents were struck outside the Philadelphia Mint.

My favorite years happen to be 1864, 1871 and 1888. 1864 being a Civil War year, coupled with both copper-nickel and bronze issues as well as a host of unusual varieties, die breaks and errors. Perhaps my favorite variety in the entire series is the 1864BR Moustache piece. This is a neat variety with great eye-appeal, very reminiscent of the 1855 Large Cent "Knob Ear" variety-- but only about 500 times rarer. It would be a great piece to add to your collection as someday it will be worth a considerable amount of money.

1871 is a date in Indian Cents that does not harbor many varieties but is a real sleeper and finding choice

1871 Snow-1b "Bar Lip"

1864 No L "Mustache"

1888 Liberty Nickel on a cent planchet

XF and above example is a much tougher task than the price guides would indicate. I like die scratches and die gouges, and 1871 has a neat one right across the lips.

1888 is a great year for varieties and finding sharply struck red-brown UNCs is a true challenge. One of my favorite errors in my collection is a GEM Bu 1888 V-nickel struck on an Indian Cent blank. My theory with these errors is a worker, perhaps a janitor, mistakenly threw a mislaid cent blank into the nickel planchets tub.

But if there is one date that might be the most unexpected of all to collect it could well be exactly 200 years ago, the year 1816. Although well before the times of Longacre, this year represents a most intriguing time in our nation's annals. Numismatically, it would be mighty easy to complete this date set; only one denomination was struck, Large Cents. And at a mintage of 2.8 million more than quite a few were struck. A recent low grade piece recently hammered for a whopping $6.19 on eBay. Imagine, completing an entire date set from 200 years ago of US coins for less than ten bucks! For cryin' out loud you can't even complete a 1964 date set for that price.

But 1816 is more transcendent in its intrigue historically than numismatically. It was the year that in many ways changed the future of our nation. The Midwest and West were sparsely settled in 1816, so most of the population lived east of the Appalachians. In the Northeast, farmers planted and harvested their own crops for food, either for them or for their livestock, or for sale or bartering. These demographics would

Why? Because in the United States and Europe 1816 was the year with no summer.

Most Americans literally experienced no summer that year. The snows from a cold winter had melted as temperatures in March and early April warmed as usual, but by May the temperatures quit rising and in fact began to turn cold again. Not just cold, but bitterly cold. In fact, most parts of the Eastern seaboard recorded sub-freezing temperatures each and every day throughout the entire month of May.

By June most residents on the East Coast realized something unprecedented was occurring. A post from the Philadelphia area noted:

"On the 5th of June we had quite warm weather, but in the afternoon copious showers attended with lightning and thunder -- then followed high dark skies and cold winds from the northwest, and back again the cold unwelcome visitor.

On the night of June 6th Jack Frost paid another visit to this region of the country, and nipped the beans, cucumbers, and other tender plants. This surely is cold weather for summer.

On the 6th, 7th, and 8th June, fires were quite agreeable company in our habitations."

A Vermont farmer added, "The most gloomy and extraordinary weather ever seen."

Even in Cape May, New Jersey, an area blessed with warm ocean breezes in the summer, experienced frost in late June and early July. Further north in Albany, NY nearly a foot of snow was recorded that June. Birds arriving north after their summer migrations were observed dropping dead in streets from the

1816 Large Cent

A bitter June gave way to a cold July. Lake and river ice was noted in Michigan, Ohio and northwestern Pennsylvania in July and August. Near Philadelphia, where quoiting is a popular summer pastime, men were observed playing in their winter overcoats on July afternoons. Frost was reported as far south as Virginia on August 20 and 21.

Keeping a diary was a popular pastime in these times. The summer of 1816 could be best summarized by a young Massachusetts girl's two-word entry that summer… "weather backwards."

The weather was not in itself a hardship for those accustomed to long winters. The real problem lay in its effect on crops and thus the supply of food and firewood. On September 13, a Virginia newspaper reported that corn crops would be one half to two-thirds short, and lamented that "the cold as well as the drought has nipped the buds of hope." That autumn across the East Coast many farmers didn't even bother to bring in their harvests as their crops were so withered. People were observed eating raccoons and pigeons for basic sustenance.

The weather pattern had actually started to slightly deteriorate the year before in 1815; but not to nearly to the extremes of 1816. General warming began in 1817 but the year was again colder than normal. Only in 1818 did the weather pattern begin to normalize.

On the numismatic end during this cold spell, probably the fewest total coins minted in any period would be struck. Total mintages of all denominations during the years 1815 through 1817 is the lowest three-year aggregate in Mint history. So naturally the question becomes "Could the weather have played a role in the low mintages in 1815 through 1817?" It's a question we would never think of asking today but the answer in 1816 is probably yes. The economy during this period was primarily subsistence agricultural… people growing crops to feed their families and bartering or selling the balance for family clothing, tools, and other necessities. Close to 80% of the nations' population lived in the Northeast, the area hit the heaviest by the bitterly cold spring and summer. The cold and dark caused widespread crop failures and severe famine across the Northern Hemisphere and as Americans watched their crops wither away, and often never even sprouting, they not only had no harvest to sell, but barely enough to keep themselves alive.

This had a heavy toll on the nation's economy and subsequently coinage demand was low, just as it was in the years 1930 to 1934 at the height of the Great Depression. The price of wheat doubled from 1815 to 1817, and oats saw an even larger increase in price from 12c per bushel to 92c per bushel during this time period. This stressed the economy to unknown limits. Hundreds, perhaps thousands died from the combined effects of typhus, exposure, and starvation. To escape any future hardships, the first real wave of migration began in America.

So what caused this phenomenon??? It would take over a century for scientists to determine the cause of the dramatic weather of 1816. On April 10, 1815 on the other side of the world, the biggest volcanic eruption in human history spewed millions of tons of dust, ash and sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere. The eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia was 100 times more powerful than Mount St. Helens in 1980, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, the most powerful blast in the last 1500 years.

The volcano spewed out enough ash and pumice to cover a square area 100 miles on each side to a depth of almost 12 feet, by far the deadliest volcanic eruption. The eruption spewed sulfur dioxide high into the stratosphere, more than 10 miles above Earth's surface. When sulfur dioxide reacts with water vapor it forms sulfate aerosols that float above the altitude of rain. Here they linger, reflecting sunlight and cooling the Earth's surface, which is what caused the weather and climate impacts of Tambora's eruption to occur more than a year later in America and Europe.