

Omaha Coincidental

By Douglas Ward

While perusing a recent auction I came across a beautiful and curious medal dated 1898.¹ One I had not seen before. As the only official medal of the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition, it was more than 125 years old.² More importantly to me, its obverse described the exposition's location – Omaha. A few days later I would travel to Omaha to visit my youngest son. He had graduated from Creighton University less than a year ago and now worked for Union Pacific Railroad. In a quick internet search, I found a website created by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.³ It contained thousands of photographs, memorabilia and text depicting an extraordinary extravaganza, but was otherwise mostly silent regarding its genesis and fate. While what I found when visiting Omaha and the exposition site was in some ways unbelievable, in other ways it was inspirationally coincidental. My wife and I arrived in Omaha on Tuesday evening, February 20th, 2024.



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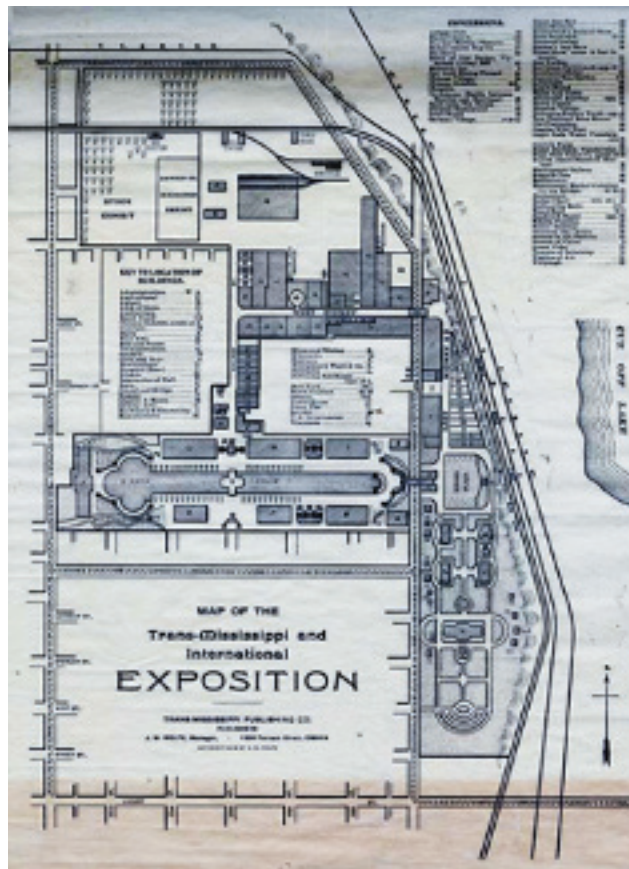
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The official silver medal of the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition, SH 10-1S. Images courtesy of Heritage Auctions.

Wednesday the 21st

Searching the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNK) website, I found a map of the exposition layout. A 'cut off lake' to the east of the exposition site was the most distinguishing

geographic feature. I decided to search for cut-off lakes along the Missouri River using the map program on my cell-phone. Consequently, I found only one such lake of any prominence; Carter Lake, in north-east Omaha. The exposition map identified five streets south of the exposition, the southern-most being Locust St. All five streets were found to the south-west of Carter Lake on the cell-phone map. Kountze Park, located north of these streets and west of Carter Lake, looked to be on the exposition site. Cross-streets were difficult to read, but seemed to be numbered. 20th Street, now Florence Boulevard, ran through the center of both Kountze Park and the Exposition. My wife and I decided to drive to Kountze Park after breakfast.



Map of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, undated. Courtesy of the trans-mississippi.unl.edu website.

During breakfast, I searched for information on Kountze Park and found it was named after Herman Kountze, a wealthy banker and real estate developer. Mr. Kountze sold the land on which the exposition was located and donated the land later used for Kountze Park to the City of Omaha. He would become the exposition's treasurer.⁴ The eleven acres of Kountze Park was located at the center of what had been The Grand Court, which itself had occupied 34 acres north-west of downtown Omaha. The park had encompassed the core of exposition, including the Fine Arts and Liberal Arts buildings, the Agricultural and Manufacturing buildings and the Arch of States which served as its official entrance. A lagoon had run for nearly half a mile, east to west, through the center of the Grand Court, although the cell phone map seemed to reveal none of this. However, directly east it did show the cut-off-lake which also appeared on the exposition map, even though it's actually located about 400 feet further east. Surely it was included on the exposition map as the only recognizable geographic

feature in an otherwise endless sea of grass lands. It served its purpose 125 years later by allowing me to easily find the present-day location of where the exposition had stood.



Cell phone map of Omaha, NE, showing Kountze Park and overlay of the exposition map. The cut-off lake, Carter Lake, is to the east and was the only recognizable geographic landmark on the exposition map. Present day map courtesy of Google Maps.

After breakfast, we drove to Kountze Park with high anticipation, but low expectations. Would anything remain of the Grand Court with its ornately decorated buildings adorned with beautiful sculptures and many colorful flags? Would something of the Lagoon remain, where gondolas ferried guests under the summer sun to the cool spray of the Fountain of Neptune. The exposition had been a marvel of the age and a pride of the prairie. Designed and built in less than two years, it attracted over 2.6 million visitors to exhibits from the mid-west and all over the world. It boasted the use of more than 20,000 electric light bulbs at a time when most farmhouses were still using oil lanterns. This nighttime spectacle was among the many visions that captivated visitors to the most iconic exposition held west of the Mississippi River. Much of this was quickly grasped earlier that morning, as I flipped through many of the images recorded by official photographer F. A. Rinehart.



The Grand Court looking west across the Lagoon and toward the gold domed Government building. Photographs taken from a Twin Tower of the Colonnade, in daylight and at night. Center image of a Grand Court Column studded with electric light bulbs. Images courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu.

As we drove up 20th Street toward Kountze Park, it became apparent that if anything remained, it would not approach the grandeur of the shinning 'White City,' as the Omaha exposition would come to be known. From pleasant neighborhoods with nice yards, we began passing corner business areas where only the liquor store remained open. The houses became older and more rundown, with a few in utter disrepair. From grand estates where those with mean would escape the city hustle and bustle, Kountze Place had degraded to a modest, lower-class quarter – seemingly a purveyor and attractor of few resources. We parked next to a community building on the east side. The park was mostly deserted at ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning, though it was unusually warm and sunny for mid-February. Two men conducted business at the further end of the parking lot. They left before



Right: The Agricultural building from across the Lagoon with gondola in foreground. Left: The Fountain of Neptune with the Government building behind. Center: Plaster cherub fountain on the agricultural building. Images courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu.

I opened the car door and my wife refused to go with me. I left the car, heard the door lock behind me and walked toward the center of the park, taking pictures as I went.

Kountze Park was a stark contrast, but pleasant in the cool morning air. Leafless trees filtered bright sunlight over a patchwork of green and brown grass that still resisted winter's grip. There were no white buildings, no columns of lights, no flags, no lagoon or gondolas and no crowds of people with parasols and top hats. Where Florence Boulevard split the park in two, north and south, there once stood a balustraded island and arched bridges spanning the lagoon. On each side of the street, historical markers now stand witness to the spectacle that



Left: Historical marker located in west Kountze Park near Florence Blvd. The daytime picture looks west toward the Government building and balustraded island and bridge. Right: The view from the historical marking looking in the same direction. Photographs by the author.



Left: Looking west at night across the lagoon from the balustraded island and bridge. Images courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu. Right: The same view today in the light of day from the where the historical marker now stands. Photograph by the author.

was the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. Each holds a picture of the view from its perspective, looking east and west, in daylight and at night. They testify to the

grandeur, but are silent to its fate and leave one to wonder, while evoking some sadness and regret. We left the park with a determination to know what had happened in the wake of such a spectacle.

Thursday the 22nd

We met up with our son and over breakfast agreed that the best place to continue our exposition exploration was the Durham Museum. Housed in the restored Union Station, it's Omaha's distinguished historical repository. Among its many displays of frontier life and exploration was an expose of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, perhaps its largest single exhibit. Along with a chronological history, many artifacts and ephemera were presented, including a scale model of the Grand Court, some five by twenty feet long. Its descriptions are those of transformation as a microcosm, or perhaps a euphemism, for the civilizing of the Great Plains from which it sprang.



Left: Scale model of the exposition's Grand Court at Durham Museum, Omaha. Right: A poster advertising the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. Photographs by the author.

The Exposition in eastern Nebraska took place at a curious time. From the Panic and Depression of 1893, economic fortunes had turned to a boon of sorts that extended across the mid-west. However, the outbreak of the Spanish-American war in April of 1898 threatened to squelch enthusiasm for the emergent celebration. That enthusiasm harkened to the splendor and marvel of the 1893 Columbian World Exposition. Also known as the Chicago World's Fair, it was quite literally the template on which the Omaha exposition was conceived, designed and built. Despite the burgeoning international conflict, the exposition

opened on June 1st to hopeful crowds and was ultimately crowned a financial and cultural success. The festivities reached their peak during Peace Jubilee Week, October 10th – 15th, when the nation celebrated its triumph in war and the resumption of peace. October 12th was President's Day in honor of William McKinley, who presided over a crowd of perhaps 100,000. From the Grand Plaza bandstand, he delivered a speech exclaiming that the Nation's quick victory confirmed its actions as 'God's will.' Nebraska's own congressional representative, presidential candidate and Free Silver advocate, William Jennings Bryan, also commanded the stage and crowd that day.



Left: The crowds gathered on President's Day during Peace Jubilee Week to hear President McKinley. Images courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu. Right: The crowds view today of where the amphitheater and bandstand once stood. Photograph by the author.



Left: The double sided, celluloid souvenir badge sold to commemorate Peace Jubilee Week and President McKinley's address. Right: The Art & Industry Medal presented at the exposition. Photographs by the author.

Also exhibited were numerous artifacts and memorabilia that further described the exposition in its many attributes and forms. Highlighted was the Indian Congress, a central attraction meant to educate, as much as feed the public's fixation and fascination with their savage trophies. Adding to the consequential air of entertainment was Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show. Its arrival in August coincided with cessation of the war with Spain and it would draw some of the largest crowds the exposition would see. This fixation with the Indian savages was enshrined on the reverse of the official souvenir medal. Many of the 25,000 made and sold were struck at the fair on an actual Mint coining press, a central feature of the Treasury exhibit that drew accolades from the public and press alike.



Left: Award medal and ribbons. The metal bears the obverse of the official souvenir medal. Photograph by the author. Center Picture of the Mint coining press in the Treasury exhibit. Image courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu. Right: Other award metals in bronze and gilt presented at the exposition. Images courtesy of Ebay and Stacks-Bowers.

The official medal, a so-called dollar, was engraved at the Mint by George Morgan or Charles Barber. The obverse was designed from a composite photograph of the most beautiful woman in the Trans-Mississippi region by renowned photographer George G. Rockwood. For this purpose, forty-three photographs from twenty-two states were submitted through various contests. These were laid upon one another in a palimpsest meant to elicit the most common features of each. This caused some controversy, with

certain organizations claiming it lacked fairness and others that it appeared to protect interests. Inspiration for the reverse came from sketches by the exposition's Architect-in-Chief, Thomas R. Kimball, who's inspiration was possibly the 1857 \$3 certificate of deposit



1857 Omaha, Nebraska Western Exchange \$3 note with a striking resemblance to the Indian's mount on the reverse of the official medal (right). The medal's obverse (left) depicts the most beautiful woman in the region from a composite photograph. Images courtesy of Ebay.



Other so-called dollars of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, left to right; Indian Congress, Turn Festival, Floral Parade & Art, Science & Industry medals. Images courtesy of The So-Called Dollar Guys, Jeff Shevlin & Bill Hyder.

note issued in his home town of Omaha City. The reverse date of 1848 signified the half century that had passed since the gold rush and Mexican-American War. Medals were also struck commemorating the Indian Congress, Floral Parade, Turn Festival and Arts, Science & Industry.

The Durham Museum exhibit contained photographs and descriptions that made it clear that every aspect of the exposition was temporary. Even though organizers continued the fair in 1899 as the Great American Exposition, like the Chicago World's Fair, it was made to be torn down. This was the only way that the City of Omaha and the State of Nebraska could afford such a spectacular event. Most buildings were made of wood laths and staff; a mixture of plaster, cement and hemp fiber. Most of the statuary, columns and trimmings were made of plaster rather than stone. Although elaborately styled and ornately adorned, these structures were nothing more than extravagant barns. After the encore's conclusion in October, 1899, every exposition building was demolished or moved by June of 1900.⁵ The lagoon was drained and filled in, with only a small pond left as evidence. Even so, there seem to be only a few pictures of the demolition. The only present day, yet inconspicuous remnants are the brick pavers from the Grand Court promenade that were later used to pave several neighborhood roads. All other remains are now but an epitaph, written in the records, photographs and ephemera – scant evidence of the odyssey and spectacle that mesmerized the mid-west for five months in 1898.



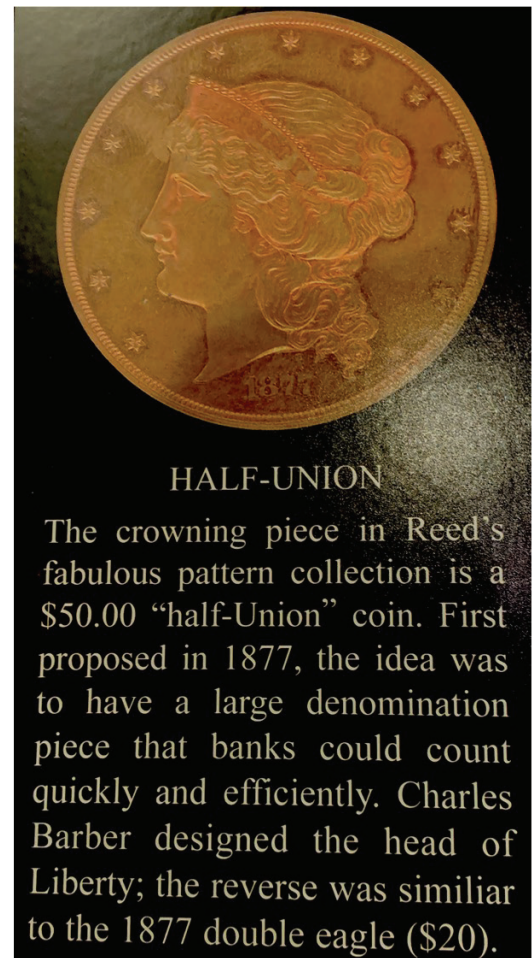
Left & Right: Pictures of the exposition's demolition. Images courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu and northomahahistory.com. Center: Image of laths and staff construction used for building façades. Picture taken by the author at the Durham Museum, Omaha, NE.



Left: The brick paved Grand Court Promenade with the Colonnade and Twin Tower Restaurants in the background. Image courtesy of trans-mississippi.unl.edu. Right: A remnant of the exposition seen in the brick pavers from the Promenade later used to pave neighborhood roads. Photograph by the author.

My original purpose for wanting to visiting the Durham Museum was actually to view the Byron Reed exhibit. Mr. Reed's coin collection was one of the top assembled during the late 19th century. He moved to Omaha in 1855, shortly after its informal founding and before its incorporation in 1857. Mr. Reed founded the first real estate company in Nebraska in 1856 and quickly became one of Omaha's most prominent and wealthiest land owners. His success allowed him to pursue his passion for collecting, which included rare books and documents as well as coins. Byron Reed bequeathed all his collections to the City of Omaha on his death in 1891.

The Reed coin collection came to my attention when writing an article on the 1877 Half Unions for the Pacific Coast Numismatic Society in 2022.⁶ It just so happens that an 1877 Half Union struck in copper, J1547, is in



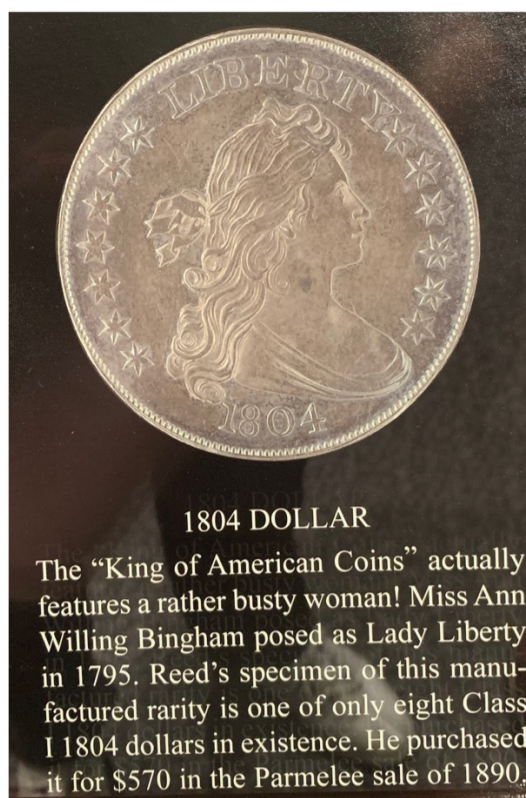
The Byron Reed copper Half Union, J1547; one of ten known. It was actually proposed in 1854 by Treasury Sec. James Guthrie. Photograph by the author.

Mr. Reed's collection. These unofficial releases of pattern coins from the Mint were enigmas in the collecting brotherhood of the late 1800s. Only one half union, J1549, a sister to Mr. Reed's design, had appeared at auction before 1910. Some were suspected, few were known and one each in gold did not appear until they sold for \$10,000 each in 1909. Since Byron Reed passed away in 1891, this makes the copper Half Union displayed in the Durham Museum strong evidence of his collecting prowess and deep numismatic contacts. A notation in the exhibit states that although a relative latecomer, between 1870 and 1891 he had acquired the bulk of the coins from three of the most prominent collectors of the time.

Described as the "King of American Coins," the most valuable piece in the Reed Collection is undoubtedly a Class I 1804 dollar. One of the finest of the eight known, it was bought by Reed from the Lorin G. Parmelee auction in 1890 for \$570. Legend has it that a "Lady" acquired it from the Mint during the time that James K. Polk was President, from 1845 – 1849.⁷ Two were originally struck in 1834 for diplomatic coinage sets used as gifts for the King of Siam and the Imaum of Muscat. A third was accessioned to the Mint Cabinet, possibly as early as its inception in 1838. The other five Class I specimens left the Mint over the following decade. Intrigue and recrimination were created with the subsequent surreptitious striking by Mint

personnel of a dozen or so others – the Class II and III specimens. These were sold through numismatic fences, such as John W. Haseltine, and some were seized by the Mint and later destroyed, along with the related dies. With numismystique of the highest order, the Reed specimen would likely fetch as much as \$10 million in today's rare coin market.

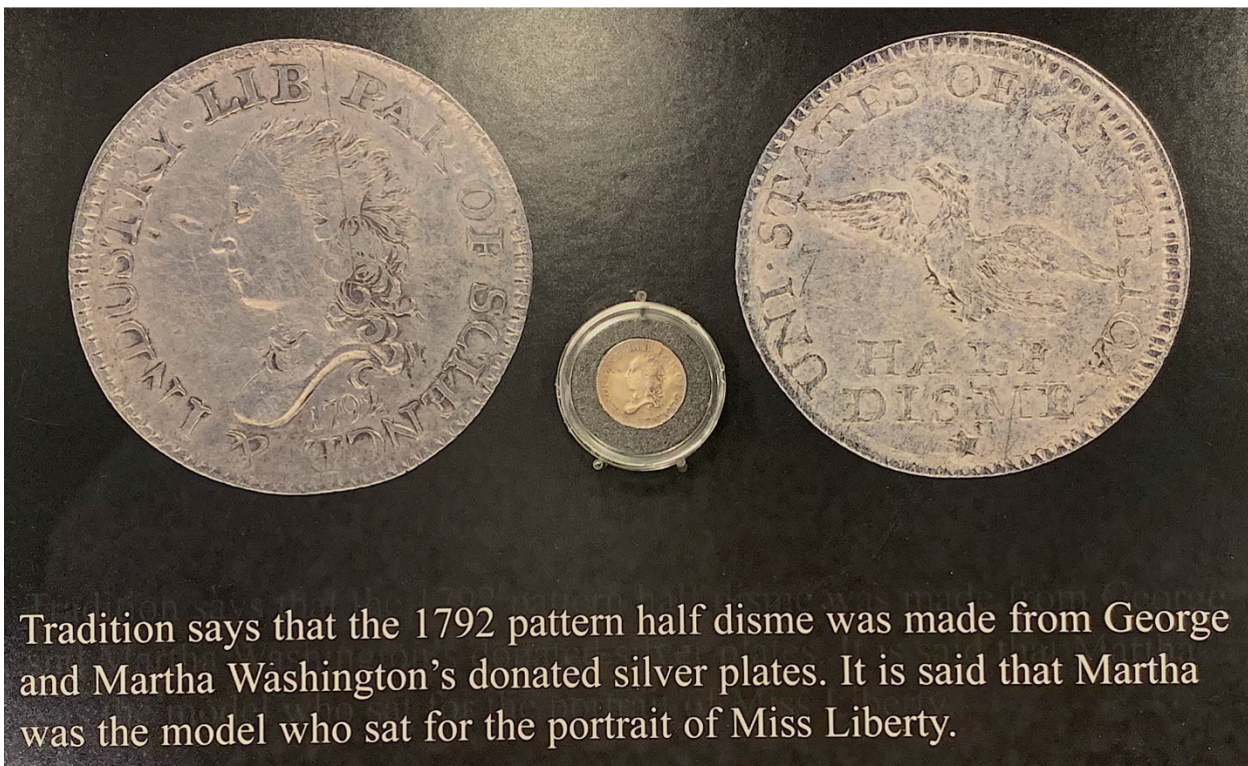
Another coin of renown and historic significance in the Reed collection is the 1792 half disme, or half dime. Although not excessively rare, it's difficult to find in mint state.



The Byron Reed Class I 1804 Dollar; one of eight known. Photograph by the author.

Numismatists today regard this coin as a regular issue, rather than a pattern, with at least 1500 struck and a few hundred surviving pieces.⁸ Its intrigue emanates from the legend that it was made from silver plates donated by George and Martha Washington, becoming the first silver coinage struck by the United States Mint. Further numismatic folklore holds that the obverse portrait is of the First Lady, Martha Washington. President Washington referred to it as “a small beginning” and its widely considered to be the first coinage struck under authority of the Coinage Act of 1792.

Contrary to this legend, a July 10th entry in Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson’s personal log book states that he withdrew “100. D.” from the Bank of the United States. An entry a day later stated he “Delivd. 75. D. at mint to be coined.” These were Spanish silver dollars and undoubtedly the origin of the silver in the half dismes. On July 13th, 1792, Jefferson recorded; “Recd. from the mint 1500. half dismes of the new coinage.” He left on vacation the same day and it appears from his log book entries that he spent most of the 1500 half dismes by his return to Monticello on October 5th. Lastly, since the Mint had not yet been built or received coining equipment, it’s believed that the half dismes were struck in John



Tradition says that the 1792 pattern half disme was made from George and Martha Washington’s donated silver plates. It is said that Martha was the model who sat for the portrait of Miss Liberty.

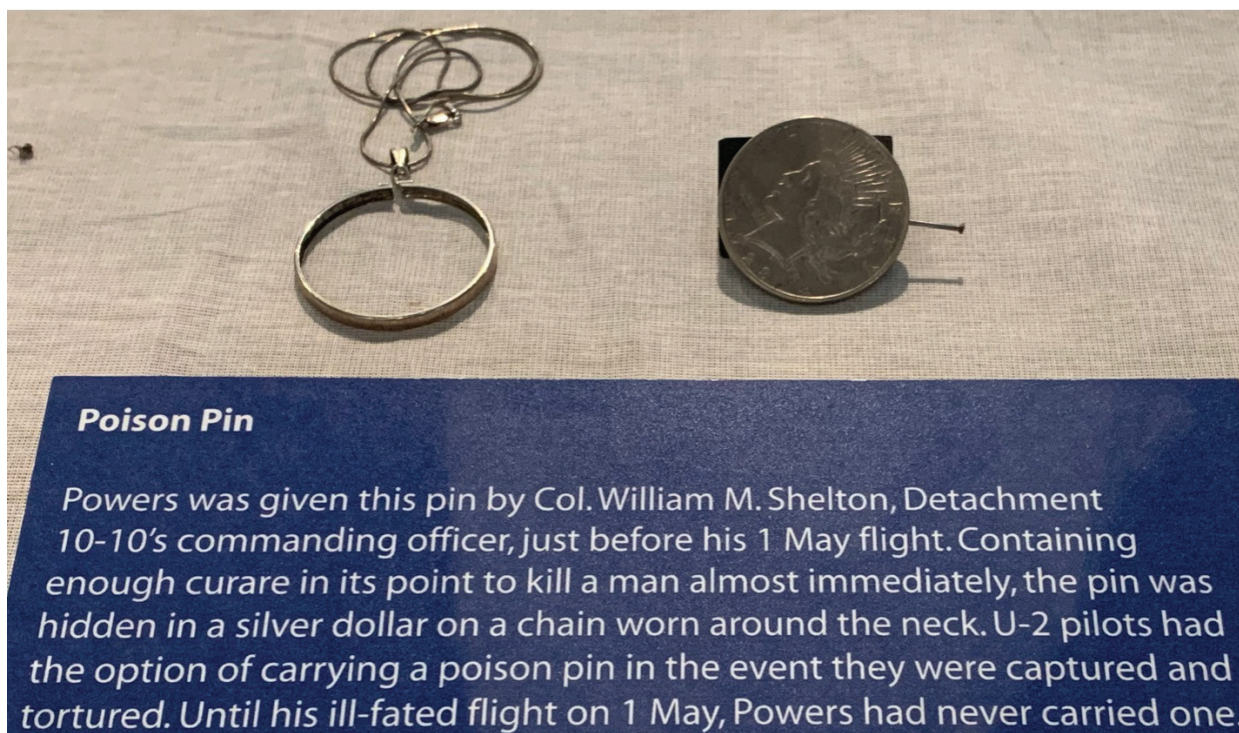
A 1792 half disme, now known to have been coined in July, 1792, for Thomas Jefferson as a private citizen under the Coinage Act of 1792. Photograph by the author who just days before had visited Mount Vernon and spoken with Martha Washington who claimed to know nothing of her disme likeness nor the legend of her silver plates.

Harper's cellar – Mr. Harper being a mint contractor and state coinage artisan at that time. These events more recently came to light and were chronicled in a 2020 Money.org blog by Pete Smith, Joel J. Orosz and Leonard Augsburger.⁹

Friday the 23rd

It's true that the biggest surprises arise in the most unusual places. When we decided to visit the Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum, coins were not on the radar screen. My oldest son had joined the Marines on an air contract and had completed officer's training the previous November. In adherent to their motto "Every Marine an Infantryman," he's now in basic training and will begin flight school after his graduation in June. Our visit to the "SAC" museum was a bow to his endeavor and came with animated orders to report back!

Unlike the Smithsonian and Udvar-Hazy Air and Space Museums in Washington D. C. and Virginia, the SAC museum was up-close and personal. In most cases this meant we could walk up to the planes and in some cases crawl through the cockpit and fuselage. We spent the better part of the day doing exactly that and it wasn't until late afternoon that we ventured onto the mezzanine to view several exhibits. That's where I came full circle and again face to face with numismystique. In gazing through the exhibit on U2 spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers, I set eyes on a 1922 Peace dollar with a secret of its own.



Strategic Air Command and Aerospace Museum exhibit of the 1922 Peace dollar with its concealed poison pin and clasp & chain. Photographs by the author.

Captain Powers had been discharged from the Air Force in 1956 in order to join the Central Intelligence Agency's U2 program. There he would fly espionage missions at altitudes above 70,000 feet and beyond the reach of the Soviet Union's air defenses, it was thought. This stark miscalculation was realized four years later on May 1st, 1960, as he parachuted toward the vast Russian steppe. Having been knocked from the sky by the nearby explosion of a Soviet SA-2 missile, he faced several immediate and critical decisions. Among the most personal of them revolved around the "tortures and unknown horrors" awaiting him as a Soviet prisoner and whether to use his suicide device.



Left: Poison pin silver Peace dollar of the type given to Capt. Francis Gary Powers. Right: poison pin imbedded in the silver Peace dollar and coated with curare. Photographs by the author.

Prior to each flight, U2 pilots were given a choice – one they were neither required nor expected to accept or to use, if presented with the circumstance. His original plane being grounded for maintenance, he instead flew a plane with a reputation for malfunctioning. And so, when he was offered the silver dollar with a concealed poison pin, he accepted, something he had never done before. The coin was encircled by a clasp and suspended around his neck from a loop of chain. As he drifted down toward a plowed field, he considered using the poison pin within the Peace dollar – strangely referred to as his “good luck charm.” Powers’ thoughts instead went to a conversation he had with his father regarding religious beliefs and the eternal consequences of suicide.¹⁰ He reported pulling the coin from his neck and throwing it into the field before he was captured. Details of these events, including his eventual release in a prisoner exchange, were captured in the SAC exhibit. The espionage

backstory, including the use of a Jefferson nickel coin-box, was dramatized in the 2015 film “Bridge of Spies.”

Sunday the 25th

Omaha, Nebraska – in the center of the North American Prairie – is not normally considered a destination of much consequence. But for three days in February, it had become one of numismatic coincidence. Unforeseen just a week or so earlier, coins – of all things – had engaged and delighted not only this coin-bug, but his stubbornly disinterested wife and their more often consumed youngest son. As usual and most compelling, coins again showed their propensity to appear at the center of significant human endeavors. Whether as remembrances of forgotten spectacles, unique revolutionary and clandestine dealings or concealed arbiters of fate – coins remind us of where we’ve been, who we are and where we’re headed. As we boarded the plane to return home, I pulled a penny from my pocket and turn to my wife – “Heads, I get the window seat, tails...”

~For Now~

Notes:

1. Certified American Tokens & Medals US Coins Showcase Auction #60366, Heritage Auctions, February 12th, 2024, lot 50020.
2. “So-Called Dollars, Volume 1: United States Expositions,” by Jeff Shelvin and William D. Hyder, So-Called Books, 2023.
3. “Trans-Mississippi & International Exposition,” trans-mississippi.unl.edu website, by Timothy Schaffert, Wendy Katz & Katherine L. Walters, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
4. “The Trans-Mississippi and International Expositions of 1898-1899,” Edited by Wendy Jean Katz, University of Nebraska Press, 2018.
5. “North Omaha: A History of the Demolition of the Trans-Mississippi Expo,” northomahahistory.com, by Adam F. C. Fletcher, Sept. 6, 2017.
6. “Of Half Unions, Half Measures & Hidden Treasures,” by Douglas Ward, Pacific Coast Numismatic Society, April, 2022.
7. “The Fantastic 1804 Dollar,” by Eric P. Newman and Kenneth E. Bressett, Whitman Publishing Company, Racine, WI, 1962.
8. USPatterns.com, Research Center, by Andy Lustig and Saul Teichman, updated November 19th, 2023.”
9. “A More Accurate History of the 1792 Half Disme,” by P. Smith, J. Orosz & L. Augsburger, blog.money.org, American Numismatic Association, July 14, 2020.
10. “Spy Pilot: Francis Gary Powers, The U-2 Incident, and a Controversial Cold War Legacy,” reviewed by David A. Foy, Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 63, No. 2, June 2019.