

Numismatic Perspective

How Coin Collecting Can Help You Relate to Events of "far away and near, long ago and recent"

by *John L. Murbach*

I do not know what I may appear to the world but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Sir Isaac Newton
England's mintmaster, 1701-27

Who is the coin collector? Why is he devoted to his hobby? Just what is "the bug" that bites the few but ignores the many? And what causes a non-collector to scratch his head in quizzical wonderment when he engages in a conversation with an avid collector? (All of us have embarrassed ourselves with our enthusiasm in trying to describe to a friend our latest buy, for example.) Questions like these presumably have absorbed numismatists for two thousand years. Prior to the 20th century a cultured man could not be considered truly refined unless he owned a smorgasbord of antiquities: fossils, sculpture, paintings, artifacts, curiosities, scientific instruments, a library of classics, and naturally, a coin cabinet. Coins were merely an adjunct, though quite necessary, to becoming a well-rounded, well-educated gentleman in times past.

Most men do not concern themselves with the whys and wherefores of life; they have little interest in seeing things as they are and in knowing what has gone before. History to them is as bone dry and barren as the desert is to a thirsty man. The only difference is the thirsty man seeks to quench his thirst. Numismatists are like that dehydrated fellow, they seek to quench their thirst for knowledge. Some may call it the "joys of collecting." But what really inspires such individuals is the educating process: learning new stories about their Liberty Seated half dollar or Civil War token, finding an odd die characteristic on their large cent and wondering how it got there, discovering in a small mintage figure that times were tough or that the mint had a fire and had to shut down. The essayist Albert Jay Nock likened getting an education to getting the measles; you have to go where the measles is.

A coin without its history, without its *why* and *wherefore*, without some connecting link to its past, has no meaning. It is only a metallic artifact from bygone days. Is it not this apparent lack of significance which causes

a non-collector to remark that coins only are good for spending? Such a person is unaware how every coin has a story to tell, a story each of us must discover. And that takes labor. And thought. Yet to those of us who have the collecting gift, so to speak, it isn't work at all! The search is the reward.

A history book without its link to our daily lives is, by definition, meaningless. Back in the 1960s the catchword of the day was "relevance." Students and agitators kept ballyhooing that what they were being taught had no relevance to what was needed in their day-to-day living. Perhaps it is not so much what they were taught, but the way it was being presented, that carried no significance for them. After all, no one *teaches* a student anything; he 'larns himself--if he has the motivation. To most of us the doings of men and women in ancient Rome and Greece seem as far off as the happenings in Outer Mongolia. Yet this need not be so. I'll give a recent experience to demonstrate how four seemingly unrelated strings (one being the collecting bug in this numismatist) intertwined naturally with a desire to "see things as they are."

1. First, the "relevant" part: the once-nasty Soviet Union vs. the U.S.A. We're all aware of these giant forces in the world today. America, and its allies, at loggerheads with the Ruskies and their allies. It is a political historian's cherished clash of ideologies.

2. Last year [this was written in 1988] I bought an ancient coin of the Greek city-state of Gela, on the island of Sicily off the toe of Italy. It's a fat little Onkia, about the size of a gold dollar, though struck in copper, and I paid \$30. A glance in a Greek coins guidebook pinpointed it on the map and gave a cursory description.

3. Also last year I bought the autobiography and writings of Thomas Jefferson. Being a lover of early U.S. coinage, and hoping to learn more about one of the men who created our monetary system, I thought this would work well within the purview of numismatics. Jefferson was a prolific letter writer, corresponding with scores of famous--and not so famous--men and women of his day, both here in America and abroad. His scope of interest was nothing short of astounding. In one letter to a friend he laments his heavy public duties, and years for a quiet retirement at Monticello with "my Tacitus and Thucydides." Now, Thucydides was a Greek author and military man who wrote the definitive history of the Peloponnesian War. Having a budding interest in ancient coins--the Gela piece, and several other inexpensive Greek coins, whetted my interest--I thanked Jefferson for his suggestion and purchased a copy of Thucydides "The Peloponnesian War." (More from Jefferson in a moment.)

4. The Peloponnesian War. Athens, and her allies vs. Sparta and hers. Theirs was an early version of our own U.S./Russia clash. Off and on for 30 years towards the tail end of the 400s B.C., Athens and Sparta squared off in a series of battles and skirmishes, negotiations and broken treaties, prisoner trades and clandestine spying. Both were empire builders. Athens touted the blessings of her "democratic" rule, while cursing the tyranny of

Sparta's militarist government. Sounds a lot like our troubles today, doesn't it? In 416 B.C., in the middle of their hot-and-cold war, the Athenians got it in their heads to invade Sicily. Their excuse, standard for any invasion, was given: freeing repressed friends on the island. (Their real reasons were empire building and booty, as history shows.) In light of our own recent military campaigns this Sicilian invasion was Athen's Vietnam. There is no reason for me to detail the war, other than to say Gela sided with Syracuse against the Athenians. Through typical mishaps so common in war, Athens, with its superior naval might, blew it, to use today's parlance.

Can you imagine I was to read the part Gela played in this turmoil? I held the coin in hand as I engrossed myself in Thucydides' fast-paced style. To top it off, the Gelan coin was minted between 420 and 405 B.C., exactly as the battles raged! I wonder now, as I did while reading, what part my trivial copper Onkia played in that troubled affair. How much did it buy? A few loaves of bread? Some onions? A piece of cloth for a bandage?

Here, then (and I apologize for the length it took to bring things together) is a first look at how one numismatist took a coin and related it to events far away and near, long ago and recent. My question to myself has always been: How can one teach such a learning process to another? What spur is there but self-interest in enticing a person to study numismatics? I spent \$30 for a coin, \$30 for the Jefferson book, another \$1.50 for Thucydides (found in a used book store), and spent many happy hours reading and digesting and ruminating. Numismatics doesn't have to be expensive. Nor does it entail having to squirrel away your treasures in a dark safe deposit box where they cannot be enjoyed. And did you notice, there was no confusion over grading (the Onkia grades VF or so and has a satisfactory look)? And the priced seem reasonable--emphasis on *reason*--so I bought it. I didn't fear for the coin's authenticity (having bought it from a long-time dealer in the series). Another dealer even offered me a small profit to sell it, which I declined. Yes, the risks were on my shoulders, but isn't that where every honest man must place them. Don't the rewards and the responsibilities of buying a coin, and learning about it, go hand in hand?

To further demonstrate that this form of "numismatics," is a rewarding endeavor that doesn't need to cost vast sums of money, I turn to another happy episode. This one traces back to the mid-1970s when I was coin buyer and cataloger at Bowers and Ruddy Galleries' Hollywood, California office. (I trust Dave Bowers will not get red-faced when he reads my revelations). Dave Bowers grew enamored with *wildcat* bank notes of New England. Ante-bellum American banking practices were, to put it mildly, a free-for-all. Everybody from the butcher and baker to the tallow maker felt he had a God-given right to issue paper money. The Constitution said nothing against it. As a result, many quaint and colorful products came off the nation's private printing presses, and were injected into the streams of commerce with little more integrity and sound backing than the puffery or supposed good reputation of their issuers. To a historian like Dave, these bits of early Americana are the meat and potatoes of numismatics. They tell stories of the rise and fall of small New England towns, of the

business ventures of canal-building companies, of the agonies, the crises attendant to financing the War of 1812.

As the collecting bug caught hold, Dave sent notice about his interest to all the currency specialists; immediately they began mailing packages of 50 or 100 or 200 notes for his approval. I recall many a morning when, shortly after the company mail arrived, he would scamper back to his desk to tear open that day's newest approval shipment of New England bank notes. Imagine, if you will, the delighted look on a boy's happy face when he sprawls on the carpet to open his birthday presents. That fit Q. David Bowers to a T! Each bundle torn open revealed a multihued cascade of vignettes, oddball denominations, strange town names, and curious signatures--just the thing to enchant the child in any true collector. He show me many of his new buys with an avidity I'm sure we all feel when our collecting switch is set to HIGH. I never caught the wildcat note bug myself, but to this day I remember many of Dave's purchases and the stories behind them.

That was more than a decade ago. Once again I can thank Thomas Jefferson for re-igniting this memory, for he revealed in an 1819 letter one of the unhappy side-effects from this abundance of broken bank notes. As in the instance of the Gela coin, a confluence of events and my reading of history combined with my numismatic background to give me an eye-opening look into one forgotten aspect of our nation's history:

First. Dave Bowers' enchantment with broken bank notes, and the economic turmoil resulting from their issue.

Second. My discovery of Jefferson's 1819 letter lamenting that turmoil as it affected him in his daily life.

Third. An interest in American history during its early boom period, 1800 to 1861, especially the troubles during and after the War of 1812.

Fourth. Our similar troubles today because we have failed to learn the lessons of history.

My reading had prepared me for the aftermath of the War of 1812. Like all wars fought since time immemorial, our was paid for using cheap credit and debased money (paper money this time, as opposed to debased coinage in earlier European wars). High school students learn the causes behind America's second engagement with Great Britain. But few are ever taught the later effects on the nation's economy from winding down the war, and the consequent dislocations.

During the struggle business activity picked up markedly. It always does. New banks surfaced to flood the land with a deluge of fiat money, money unbacked by gold or silver coin. The U.S. Treasury itself issued, for the first time, currency in the amount of \$36,680,794--a gigantic sum for a young nation. The number of private banks ballooned from 89 the year before hostilities broke out to 246 at the end of 1816. Nobody knows how

many small businessmen and merchants added their notes to this growing pile. Probably they numbered in the thousands. As with any inflation boom, production exploded and real estate prices advanced; so, too, the securities market; and a canal-building frenzy developed--this was in the days before paved roads. Paper *values* for all commodities rose accordingly. The day of reckoning arrived--which it must--early in 1819, and panic ensued along the lines of the 1929 to 1933 affair. Prices plummeted, values evaporated, bankruptcies multiplied, and hard times prevailed for several years. (These were not the same *Hard Times* that were commemorated in our famous tokens from the 1830s. That was the following crash.)

Although he fails to mention it, Jefferson must have been referring to these abundant issues of national, state, and especially broken bank notes, when he wrote to Nathaniel Macon on January 12, 1819: ". . . There is, indeed, one evil which awakens me at times, because it jostles me at every turn. It is that we have now no measure of value. I am asked \$18 for a yard of broadcloth, which, when we had dollars, [he means hard money "dollars"] I used to get for 18 shillings; from this I can only understand that a dollar is now worth but two inches of broadcloth, but broadcloth is no standard of measure or value. I do not know, therefore, whereabouts I stand in the scale of property, nor what to ask, or what to give for it. I saw, indeed, the like machinery in action in the years '80 and '81, and without dissatisfaction; because in wearing out, it was working out our salvation. But I see nothing in this renewal of the game of 'Robin's alive' but a general demoralization of the nation, a filching from industry its honest earnings, wherewith to build up palaces, and raise gambling stock for swindlers and shavers, who are to close too [sic] their career of piracies by fraudulent bankruptcies. My dependence for a remedy, however, is with the wisdom which grows with time and suffering. Whether the succeeding generation is to be more virtuous than their predecessors, I cannot say . . ."

Familiar, isn't it: ". . . wherewith to build up palaces, and raise gambling stock for swindlers and shavers . . ." Looks exactly like what just happened on Wall Street. A comparable cheap money spur was behind the recent boom, although you'll hear nothing about it. Jefferson's final comments are worth a moment of thought.

This, to me, is what numismatics is about. Not grading controversies, not investment portfolios, not quality chasing, nor price appreciation, but a bringing together of diverse bits and pieces--of coins and paper money, of history and economics, of men and ideas, in times long ago and recent--then putting it all together to arrive at right thinking, at a common sense view of things and events. It is like the joy one feels in fitting in the final piece to a jigsaw puzzle!

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