

Reminiscences of a Numismatic Bookseller 1

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Numismatic storytelling has a venerable history. From the sixteenth century, when numismatic books first emerged, fact and fable have been interwoven into interesting stories. John Cunnally's remarkable 1999 *Images of the Illustrious* cites the 1579 account by Antoine Le Pois "of a bronze coin of the emperor Augustus that was found in Brazil, thereby proving that ancient Roman mariners had reached the New World long before Columbus." Another example, perhaps more credible, is found in Jacques Spon and George Wheler's late-seventeenth-century travel book, which includes a fascinating account of a voyage to Greece with famous numismatist J. F. Foy-Vaillant. Before they left France, near Marseilles, the travelers were alarmed by the near approach of a "Turkish" corsair, prompting Vaillant to swallow twenty ancient gold coins to avoid their appropriation by said privateers. Sea pirate lore also later played a part in a story adduced to explain the rarity of 1804 dollars.

In nineteenth-century America, Augustus B. Sage and Edward Cogan, fathers of the American coin trade, published tantalizing if brief reminiscences of their numismatic careers in the initial 1866–1867 volume of the *American Journal of Numismatics*. In recent years, that printer's devil Joel J. Orosz has written widely and wonderfully about American numismatists and numismatics of our past. And, of times both past and present, no one has contributed more to the genre than Q. David Bowers. Many of the writings of John Adams belong in this category, as do others left unnamed here. I make no grandiose claims but do hope that readers of what is intended to be a series of reminiscences and "what have you" will enjoy the perusal, in some degree, of what I am having so much fun writing.

Recently, I published a book entitled *The Reference Library of a Numismatic Bookseller*. The preface perhaps best sets the stage for subsequent articles, and it follows:

I began collecting coins as a child of nine or ten and, in the mid- 1960s, began dealing in coins in a small way. Soon, I was buying current reference works on various numismatic topics, mainly from Bebee's of Omaha, the premier retail numismatic bookseller of the day. I also began to receive Frank and Laurese Katen's auction catalogues and fixed price lists of rare and out of print numismatic literature. This opened a new world for me. A love of books since early childhood, combined with a love of coins but decidedly poor coin dealing skills, metamorphosed over several months into a fledgling career as a numismatic bookseller.

Soon I was visiting Southern California out of print and antiquarian book stores on a regular basis. Every month or two I made the trek to Los Angeles and nearby Hollywood, both book meccas at the time. The streetwalker/drug-dealer culture was yet to come to Hollywood Boulevard— at the time there were one or more good bookstores on nearly every one of the dozen or so blocks that would later become notorious for less salutary activities. Nearly always a bounty of numismatic books was the result of an excursion and I began issuing modest lists of Numismatic Literature for Sale in May 1967.

Early on, in a hole-in-the-wall store in the City of the Stars—on the eastern outskirts of the

book scouting section of Hollywood Boulevard— a volume was purchased which I described as follows:

HEATH, GEORGE F. Ed.: *The Numismatist 1888–1893*. The first six volumes bound together. ALL ORIGINALS. Very rare. Price on request.

It was acquired quite reasonably (determined to be a better bookseller than a coin dealer, I had also asked for and received a modest discount). The “on request” sale price, a mid three figure amount, was reduced a bit to the sole prospect and a celebration was in order when payment arrived. Nowadays, needless to say, the price would be in five figures and a full page description and color illustrations would be required; then, twenty-odd words sufficed.

In addition to frequent book scouting forays, I had the good fortune to make contact with Charles Z. Mihalyi, a prominent Glentown, New York real estate broker and a noted numismatist. His exceptional collection of Hungarian and Transylvanian coins and medals was sold posthumously at auction in 1977 by Stack’s in a catalogue bearing his name. From the 1920s through the 1960s, Mihalyi methodically formed his extensive collection by participating in coin sales worldwide. And he saved nearly every catalogue! I bought his entire holdings, a large box or two at a time, over a period of a few years. It was an education. Not only did I encounter virtually all of the numismatic auction sales catalogues issued over nearly a half century, I learned how to value them, however modest those prices may have been at the time.

A hiatus in the early 1970s corresponded with an acceleration of interest, spurred in the United States by the Katen sales of the George J. Fuld library, and in Great Britain by the emerging career of Douglas Saville at Spink & Son Ltd. and the superb catalogues which were beginning to be issued by David Edmunds under the John Drury banner. Following a few successful fixed price lists, the first Kolbe mail bid sale was conducted on February 28, 1976. The business had dramatically changed. A market capable of supporting a career as a numismatic bookseller had somehow emerged in a matter of several years. In 1977 and 1978, the outright purchase and subsequent sales of the fine numismatic libraries of Floyd Hazelwood and Bill Castenholz led to a public auction sale in 1979, the first of many to come.

After operating for a decade under the name of “G. Frederick Kolbe,” it became clear that an expanded appellation would be beneficial. In 1978, after being addressed one too many times as “Fred” or “Frederick,” it became obvious that a name adopted to facilitate mail sorting had become a negative, and my full name, “George Frederick Kolbe,” was henceforth adopted.

By Sale Two, descriptions had begun to improve and a bibliography of “Some Works Cited” was printed on the rear inside cover of the catalogue. Though comprising only ten titles, it was the beginning of a concentrated endeavor, culminating in the library described here. Beyond providing an invaluable source of professional information, its formation became a challenging and most enjoyable pursuit. It should be noted that no claim is made as to completeness, particularly in the case of more recent publications and those of an obscure nature.

Early positive influences were many. The “John Drury” catalogues, replete with bibliographical citations and scholarly commentary, were an inspiration, as were the painstakingly detailed descriptions of rare American numismatic publications written by John J. Ford, Jr. in several of the New Netherlands Coin Company catalogues of the period. A close friendship was formed with Douglas Saville, whose understanding of the worldwide rare

and out of print numismatic book world is second only, perhaps, to his marketing abilities. His encouragement to develop an international numismatic book business was instrumental. The infectious enthusiasm and exhortations of Jack Collins resulted in the publication of catalogues with higher production values; often graced with illustrations attributable to his photographic talents.

From Sale One, John W. Adams was a steadfast friend and an invaluable mentor and supporter. Later on, the advice and encouragement of Jonathan Kagan was key. John Bergman was another inspiration, particularly in terms of his serious devotion to the topic and his sterling ethics. The support of my wife Linda and my father and mother were indispensable. The satisfaction and joy derived from being a numismatic bookseller for over four decades is due, in the main, to the rather wonderful world inhabited by numismatic bibliophiles and researchers. To the many not mentioned here, rest assured that you do not go unappreciated.