

# Of Coin Stories - Three Cent Shops and Double Eagle Prizes, Part One

by

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My numismatic pursuits have for many years included collecting anecdotes which describe how people used coins during the 19th century. I scour books, magazines, newspapers and even photographs to uncover some tidbit of information which will shed light on the local availability of coins and describe any related practices or customs. I also like to share what I have found. These coin stories are always popular with other collectors. People enjoy hearing about the boy who used two dimes to weasel his way into a game of monte and then nearly broke the bank, or the frustrated woman in Virginia City, Nevada who finally mailed 25 cents of scrip back east to where "paper money was appreciated", or how a "rusty copper" was tossed into the air and we now have Portland, Oregon instead of Boston, Oregon. Hundreds, if not thousands, of these stories exist. I have to admit that finding a good story is almost as satisfying to me as finding another coin for my collection.

The aggravating thing about these stories is that they tend to be short. If only I could find pages of information about how people used to throw away their small change, how they would not accept certain coins, or how they would shuffle coins back and forth in their hands while playing cards! Sadly, the vast majority of the stories that I have found consist of only a few words or sentences. They rarely last a paragraph or more. This is because people in those days thought there was nothing special about how they handled their money. They were like people of this century and simply did what they had to do. For example, you will not easily find descriptions about how modern merchants have "penny" trays by their cash registers so that customers can add a few coins to their payment to avoid receiving



*A Gambling Saloon in Sante Fe, 1854.*

Illustration from *Saloons of the Old West* by Richard Erdoes.

cents in their change, or that many people believe we still have pure copper cents. It is usually only when the coins are somehow significant or unusual that people mention them at all.

This makes it difficult to determine just how people used their coins during the 19th century or what they really thought of them. However, each story is like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. If you study enough of them the pieces begin to fit together and a clear picture begins to emerge.

In part one of this article I will describe how I categorize coin stories and I will discuss a few examples. In part two of the article, I will go into detail about one particular trait which people had in the 19th century concerning coins and their denominations - the trait concerning the "three cent shops" and "double eagle prizes" in the title.

### Types of Coin Stories

There are many ways to categorize coin stories. One method is to list each story by topic. Topics such as "coins and gamblers" and "coins in Texas", to name a few, are possible. A second method is to separate coin stories depending on how the coins were mentioned. In other words, was a specific denomination mentioned or did the author simply list a price? Both methods offer advantages and I have found that cross referencing between them results in a very powerful study aid.

Listed below are six types of stories which depend upon how coins are mentioned. I have labeled them here as Type 1 through Type 6 and have included an example or two of each kind. Please note that some stories may fit into more than one category, it all depends upon the emphasis you place on the story.

***Type 1: Stories in which a particular coin is discussed as opposed to merely being mentioned.*** For example, in 1866 the motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" was added to our nation's coins from quarters to double eagles. The following is a story from San Francisco:

"The first double-eagle with this legend upon its reverse face, which will hereafter be borne upon all American coins, was coined at the branch Mint in this city and exhibited by Mr. Francis Bret Harte to us yesterday. It was struck off, by hand, at twenty minutes past 11 o'clock yesterday morning, April 20. It differs from the old \$20 gold piece only in the legend, which is placed within the oval ring of stars over the eagle's head and within the arc of rays that stretches from wing to wing of the National Bird. In order to make room for the legend the circle of stars has been enlarged and a portion of the lower ends of the rays cut off. The lettering is not very perfectly executed, as far as we can judge, some of the letters, indeed, appear to crowd the others. But the idea itself is a good one..." (1)

What distinguishes this story is its examination and discussion of a particular coin. I also find this story interesting because it mentions Bret Harte who worked as Secretary for the San Francisco mint. Bret later became famous as a writer of short western stories and in 1866 he was just beginning to become well known. He wrote many of those early stories in what was described as his "gloomy" office at the mint and he often needed to get out and clear his head. I wonder which story he was working on in April of 1866?

These Type 1 stories, which discuss a particular coin, are very scarce. It would be nice if they were more common because they always generate a lot of interest. Fortunately the other types of stories also have much to offer.

**Type 2: Stories which mention a coin of a specific denomination.** These are much more common than the Type 1 stories and a rich variety is available. An interrelated and fascinating pair can be found in Albert D. Richardson's book "Beyond the Mississippi". Albert was a traveling newspaper reporter who toured the western frontier. In 1859 he was near the border between Colorado and Kansas:

"Dined at Station Sixteen, kept by a Vermont boy who has roamed over twenty-seven states of the Union. Near it was encamped a party of Arapahoes, with thirty or forty children playing on the grass. The boys of this company were very expert with the bow, easily hitting a silver half-dollar at sixty or seventy yards."<sup>(2)</sup>

At first I thought Albert meant the boys were merely capable of hitting a half dollar sized target, but his specific use of the word silver struck me. Perhaps the boys really had set up a half dollar and were shooting at it! That theory was supported when, a few pages later, he wrote of discussions he had with Little Raven, the local Arapaho chief. Through years of dealing with the local white people, Little Raven had become wealthy. He had many wives, children and ponies. Albert described him as being "the nearest approximation I ever met to the Ideal Indian" and, because he himself was a bachelor, Albert felt he was losing the conversation when:



**A Visit From Little Raven.**  
Drawing from *Beyond the Mississippi* by Albert Richardson.

“I produce Colt’s new patent which he examines with great curiosity and admiration; handling it cautiously, as if it were an infernal machine, and showing a childish satisfaction not unmingled with terror, as I discharge the five barrels in rapid succession.

How much, he ventures to ask, did it cost?

I mention an almost fabulous sum and his respect for me is visibly augmented. Even the Indian is moved by the almighty dollar - or rather the almighty half-dollar; for that is the only denomination of specie in which he will receive payments.”<sup>(3)</sup>

So it is plausible that the children were using silver half dollars as targets. One, they were not a poor tribe, and two, those were the only coins their chief would accept for monetary payment. Perhaps some of those children were his.

These two stories are typical of many of the coin stories I have found. Coins are mentioned only matter-of-factly and as part of a longer narrative. When presented alone they do not tell us much, but they do provide insight on the use of coins when put together.

**Type 3: Stories which mention coins but are not more specific.** These stories can be frustrating because we numismatists would like more details! Don’t just tell me coins but tell me if they were half dimes or dimes or quarters or whatever. Still, they lend insight into the people of the day and I have found several which illustrate how people in the 19th century viewed their coins. These first two examples come from the early days of the California gold rush. In the first an argonaut named William M’Collum was stranded in Panama. Between attempts to book passage to San Francisco he had spent his time exploring the area and enjoying the occasional fandango. Things got a little hectic at one fandango because:

“Some Americans patronizingly tossed coins on the floor and disrupted the dancing. Pistols and knives were drawn but no one was killed.”<sup>(4)</sup>

The second discusses Theodore T. Johnson who made a quick round trip to the gold fields and is credited as being the first returning forty-niner to write a book about his adventures. He caught a berth on the steamship Oregon which sailed from Panama on March 13, 1849. Seats were sold by scalpers at a premium and Theodore did not have much of anything left when the Oregon sailed into San Francisco bay on April 1:

“Johnson let his gaze sweep over a town of some three hundred unpainted houses plus an uncounted number of tents. Dozens of abandoned ships lay creaking in the cove. Calico, silk, and furniture were piled on the beach in neglected heaps. Quart bottles of gold dust perched on the tables at gambling houses. Johnson plucked some small change out of the mud where high rollers had scattered it and bought a three dollar breakfast.”<sup>(5)</sup>

The tossing of coins by people on the frontier was a common event. They tossed coins to show off wealth, to help bring good luck and to show appreciation of stage performers. Some people even saw small change as a nuisance and therefore an unacceptable medium of exchange. They would often just toss it into the street, not caring what happened to it. But whenever it was tossed, there was usually someone around to pick it up.

This last example of coins merely being mentioned comes from New York City’s

Fifth Avenue Theatre. The play **Pique** reached its one hundredth performance during the week of March 13, 1876. That was pretty successful for those days and to celebrate during that week:

“ticket buyers got their change in silver every night except Friday, when gold coins were used. Since the smallest gold coin was a dollar, some of the audience came out ahead.” <sup>(6)</sup>

This was in the days when circulating coin was still scarce in the eastern United States. So, not only was the theater giving out something special, it was also helping coin circulation return to normal.

Stories which mention coins in a general way are fairly common. However, they must be carefully interpreted. In the 1849 story, Theodore Johnson’s coins could have been American, Mexican, Spanish, French or they could have come from any of about a dozen other countries because this story took place before the Law of February 21, 1857. That law removed foreign coins from circulation in this country. The coins handed out at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in 1876, long after foreign coins were to have been removed from circulation, were most assuredly American.

**Type 4: Stories which mention prices and wages but are not always more specific.** These stories are extremely common, so it is relatively easy to track prices and wages throughout the history of the United States. Many times the author was only listing numbers, since bartering tended to make prices little more than numbers by which to keep score.

Fortunately, the authors phrasing was sometimes such that he or she seemed to have some specific form of money in mind. The tricky part is knowing which one. Greenbacks, silver coin, gold coin and gold dust were all used at one time or another. Varying exchange rates between these forms of money, just as we have today between foreign currencies, can make this information vital to a full understanding of the story. A good pricing example comes from Denison, Texas in 1872:

“The cotton produced within a radius of 100 miles of the freak town was wagoned in and sold for 17 cents a pound in gold, gold being worth 10 cents more on the dollar than greenbacks.” <sup>(7)</sup>

Denison was an unusual mix of northern town layout and southern architecture, hence the use of the word freak. Also, Denison was a trading and farming center. With no source of gold dust in the area the gold noted above had to be gold coin.

Wages varied greatly throughout the 19th century. But in general, a wage of \$5 to \$6 per day, or a bit less if room and board was thrown in, was good. At the bottom of the rung were those jobs which paid only \$1 to \$2 a day. They were often the most menial jobs of all.

Immigrants usually started out looking for work in the cities and formed a large labor force. Ole Andersen was a Danish immigrant in Omaha in 1890. He wrote home:

“I’m working at a slaughterhouse where pigs and cattle are butchered. I get paid \$1.50 a day, and room and board cost \$3.75 a week.” <sup>(8)</sup>

Farm workers were another large group, you got to go outside but the wages were about the same. One farm worker in 1872 Wisconsin reported that

“wages are a dollar or a dollar and a half per day during the harvest season, but usually sixteen to twenty dollars a month.” <sup>(9)</sup>

If farming did not suit the laborer then other possibilities, such as herding cattle, were possible. Wages were a little higher, probably because this was skilled labor, and after the Civil War a wage of \$30 a month was common. Many successful cattle ranchers reported that they got into the cattle business because they did not like being behind a plow. Issac Pryor, a successful Texas cattle rancher got into the business that way in 1870, but only after he had also consulted a phrenologist:

“I asked what I owed him.

‘Ten dollars.’

I paid it - two thirds of a month’s salary. Then I rode back to the farm. While we were eating breakfast before daylight the next morning I pulled out the sheet of paper I had paid ten dollars for and put it on the table. Then I thumped my head and said, ‘Mr. Cain, everything in this head is in this paper. It don’t say a damned word about plowing. I’m going to follow cows instead of mules.’ ” <sup>(10)</sup>

Working for yourself brought the best wages. In the early 1870s Frank H. Mayer was a buffalo runner, as buffalo hunters referred to themselves. Years later he recalled:

“When I went into business, I sat down and figured that I was indeed one of fortune’s children. Just think! There were 20,000,000 buffalo, each worth at least \$3 - \$60,000,000. At the very outside cartridges cost 25 cents each, so every time I fired one I got my investment back twelve times over. I could kill a hundred a day, \$300 gross, or counting everything, \$200 net profit a day.

... marketing was no problem. Buyers at every frontier [post] offered cash for hides.” <sup>(11)</sup>

Frank’s certainty about the value of buffalo hides and the cost of ammunition makes this a valuable statement for anyone interested in the economics of buffalo hunting. It would be nice to know which form of money the buyers used to pay for the buffalo hides.

During the 19th century, twenty-five cents was a common price for simple amusements around the old west. Here is an example:

“A quartz boulder found at Forest Hill, Placer County, in May, ’58, weighing forty-four pounds, was over half gold and was valued at \$5000. It was placed on exhibition at the Forrest Theater in Sacramento at twenty-five cents a peep.” <sup>(12)</sup>

And another:

“A whale drifted in south of the Cliff House and was “tented” by the first finder, who charged 25 cents to view the smelly visitor.” <sup>(13)</sup>

During the Civil War at least four whales were beached in the San Francisco area. True to the gold rush spirit, whoever found a whale could claim it. Eventually they were all rendered, but first the finders made money by charging admission to see their whale. Business was good. The first remained on display so long its stench got its finder arrested! The second whale, the one noted above, apparently also did well. But public curiosity had faded by the time the fourth whale beached. Its finder quickly put out word that he wished to have it rendered, just apply for the job at his stables.

Sometimes twenty five cents was too much. People complained that the charge for the wretched coffee at the Vienna Bakery and Cafe, part of the 1876 Philadelphia Exhibition, was “a whole quarter of a dollar.” <sup>(14)</sup>

Of course, just because something cost twenty five cents does not mean that only quarters were accepted. In the east, people were not so particular and circulating coinage included cents and nickels, as well as paper scrip and postage stamps. Silver and gold coins were preferred in the west, but only if the coin had some heft. Small change, coins less than a dime, were not a factor. They were not popular in the old west and barely circulated there.

Even from its earliest days the west held that peculiar attitude towards small sums of money, a trait noted by many authors. The following is from the Calaveras river region during the California gold rush, 1849:

“While waiting for breakfast, I saw a curious exemplification of the careless habit of miners, in regard to money. One of the mule-drivers wanted to buy a pistol which belonged to another, and as the article was in reality worth next to nothing, offered him three dollars for it. “I will sell nothing for such a beggarly sum”, said the owner: “you are welcome to take the pistol.” The other took it, but laid the three dollars on a log, saying: “you must take it, for I shall never touch it again.” “Well,” was the reply, “then I’ll do what I please with it;” and he flung the dollars into the road and walked away. An Irishman who stood by, raked in the dust for some time, but only recovered about half the money.”<sup>(15)</sup>

Only in the last sentence does it become clear that the author was not talking about silver dollars, or any other form of coin, but gold dust. The astute history buff could guess as much. But, contrary to popular belief, coin did circulate in the gold rush regions. It was only because gold dust was so common that it became a medium of exchange.

**Type 5: Stories which are peripheral but still related to coins.** These stories do not directly discuss coins, prices, wages or some form of money. Yet numismatists can find value in them. This little chestnut, complete with double entendre and pun, comes from the Nunda Weekly Advertiser of Illinois, November 17, 1875:

“When your child puts a penny into its mouth instead of its pocket or the contribution box, give it castor oil at night and whites of eggs three times a day, avoiding all acids, until specie payments are resumed.”

Patience with the lack of circulating coin had worn thin by late 1875, as evidenced above. The Specie Resumption Act had been passed on January 14 of that year but it took time, and distribution adjustments, to get coins circulating again throughout the eastern part of the United States. But do not worry about Nunda, now Crystal Lake, Illinois. Increased production and American coins returning from overseas soon provided more than enough specie for the channels of commerce. On May 29, 1880 this same paper reported that the United States contained “\$125,000,000 more coin now than it did one year ago.” That number was way off. Department of Commerce statistics indicate the amount of subsidiary silver in circulation in 1879 was closer to \$61,000,000. But it made good reading.

The San Francisco mint, circa 1865, provides an interesting little anecdote:

“For the excitement of strangers, the workmen pour a glowing, red-hot stream of melted gold into their hands for a moment, and then empty it out, without receiving a burn. The perspiration protects them, as plumbers thrust their fingers, wet with cold water, into liquid lead, and smelters, into molten iron.”<sup>(16)</sup>

The last story for this section is relatively recent in origin, but when I read it I knew I had to use it somewhere. It concerns Oscar Levant, 20th century pianist and author:

“The model for the face on the Liberty Head dime was Mrs. Wallace Stevens, wife of the famous poet. Introduced once to Stevens, Oscar Levant’s first words were: “Why shouldn’t you be a great poet? I’d be inspired too if my wife had little wings where her ears should be.”<sup>(17)</sup>

**Type 6: Stories which are peripheral but help us understand people and their attitude towards coins and money.** I like to think of these stories as those which shed light on why people in the 19th century thought more about their coinage than we do today. For example, before the Civil War people had to think about things such as which type of foreign coin to accept. During the war, and afterward, circulating coinage was scarce for much of the country and so it was a bit novel. Without the distractions of such things as television and computers, there was time to consider how coinage looked, what it was made of, what it was really worth and how to wring out its last bit of value. This attention to detail carried to many facets of daily life. For example, the inhabitants of mining regions could often tell, just by looking, which ore or which dust came from which mine or which stream. That information was important to them because there were often slight differences in value. The following is from Virginia City, Montana:

“Gold dust was not worth the same amount per ounce from one poke to the next, that from some local gulches assaying some silver, while other gulches might produce a dust containing platinum, which shot its worth up considerably. To the expert, the dust from each gulch had characteristics of its own - coloring varied from pale yellow to dark; the shape of the flakes varied also, some being flatly smooth, others rounded; while dust from a third gulch might be rough, not having been worn down. Gold out of Alder Gulch contained a lot of natural sand. The experienced storekeeper and banker knew his gold or hired an expert who did. He paid as little for his gold as he possibly could. If the miner was not an expert, he had to take what he could get for it. The merchant and banker also took advantage of the unwary and inexperienced by taking in high-grade dust but always giving out low-grade.”<sup>(18)</sup>

Attention to detail was demanded and often required to get ahead. Sanders Norvell was a hardware man who began his career in the early 1880s with the Simmons Hardware Company of St. Louis:

“Mr. Simmons without any preliminaries told me if I would come down the following Monday morning at 7:30 I could go to work in stock and that my “compensation” would be \$20 per month. Even in the excitement of the moment I could not think of the large size of the word “compensation” and the small size of my salary!

The number of pages of orders each clerk got out and the number of errors he made were posted on a blackboard. In time our salaries were adjusted according to our records. I was never a very swift stock clerk, but I was an accurate one. I never stood out at the top in the number of pages got out, but I frequently headed the list on account of my lack of errors. It was not long before I was receiving what seemed to me the princely salary of \$60 per month.”<sup>(19)</sup>

Saunders also writes about a 50 cent supper allowance when he and his fellow workers stayed late. Even then “the boys tried to save out a dime of the 50 cents for a cigar!” Dime cigars were high quality in those days.

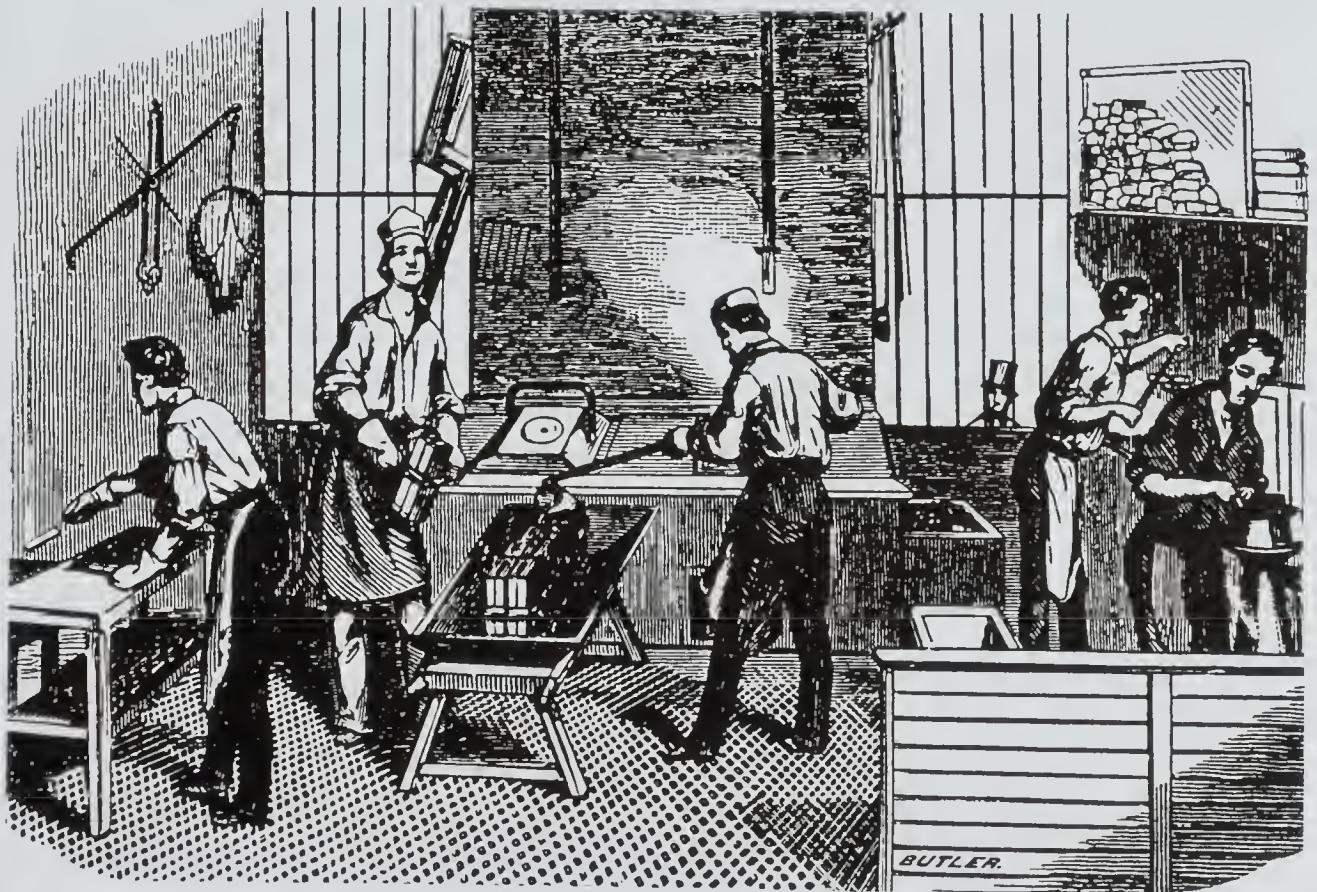
One last story. Due to their weight, gold and silver coins, while popular, were not always favored. This helped lead to the eventual acceptance of paper money but



the debate lasted throughout the 19th century. James Polk, eleventh President, preferred using gold and silver. His wife could be more practically minded. In 1834, before becoming President, he and his wife, Sarah, were traveling from home in Tennessee to Washington, D.C. One morning he was short of pocket money so he asked Sarah for a bag of specie hidden away in their trunks. A bit upset, she opened up one of their trunks and began searching. "Don't you see," she said, "how troublesome it is to carry around gold and silver?" Polk replied that he just wanted the money. Turning a trunk upside down, Sarah finally shook out a bag of coin. "Why," she said, "if we must use gold and silver all the time, a lady can scarcely carry enough money with her." (20)

### Where to Find Coin Stories

Like gold, coin stories are where you find them. My favorite sources are personal travelogues published in the 19th century. Whenever anything unusual was encountered the authors would write about it. Those unusual encounters often included some mention of coins. Their original wording is also an advantage. We do not have to fear that someone has reinterpreted what was written and exchanged modern terms for old, that is inserted nickel for half dime. Personal memoirs written in the 19th or early 20th centuries are also good sources, especially those written



*Running the Gold into Ingots at the San Francisco Mint.  
From Hutchins California Magazine, October 1856.*

by people who ran small businesses. People from all over the country wrote memoirs and they often mention how coins played a part in transactions.

Old newspapers contain lists of prices, and occasionally mention coins, but they do not yield as many discussions about coins as I would expect. That is probably due to their mostly being written by people who were already familiar with the local peculiarities regarding coins and money. It was not new to them and so it was not news.

Modern college history text books provide useful background information but rarely contain useful coin stories. Money is money to these authors and they rarely discuss coins. Also, many college texts concentrate on the politics and politicians of the day. As a result, they present little which describes the people and how they lived. On the other hand, recent 20th century history texts which concentrate on one particular event or locality can be excellent sources of information. These authors tend to quote original sources and as stated above, the original wording is what is needed.

So where do you find all these books and newspapers? Used book stores, the type that specialize in hardbacks, and public libraries are excellent sources. In Illinois, where I live, there is an interlibrary loan service which allows me access to any library book in the state, including those in rare book collections. Libraries also have 19th century newspapers, either the originals or copies on microfilm. Microfilm viewing machines often have copiers built into them. Larger book stores will often have the modern specialty history books I mentioned. They are also carried by historical societies. Some universities maintain mail order houses which specialize in history. Good book stores know how to contact them.

It also helps to have some specific titles to search for. Many titles may be found in the reference lists given at the back of historical texts. One can lead to another and then to another. It is amazing just how many books were written by people in the last century and how many coin stories are out there!

### List of References

Following are the numbered references given in this article. I have also written a little something about each book. Their availability and cost vary.

1. *The Man Who Built San Francisco* by Julian Dana. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1936. Page 208. This is the story of William Ralston, early west banker and investor, who helped make San Francisco a financial center. Julian extensively quotes old newspapers and includes many interesting anecdotes of the day. This book includes many coin stories.
2. *Beyond the Mississippi* by Albert D. Richardson. American Publishing Company, New York, 1867. Page 172. Albert toured the western United States and wrote about his experiences. This book is especially rich in first person coin stories.
3. *Beyond the Mississippi* by Albert D. Richardson. Page 192.
4. *Gold Dust* by Donald Dale Jackson. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1980. Page 114. This book has many coin stories and is also one of the best I have ever read about the California gold rush.
5. *Gold Dust* by Donald Dale Jackson. Pages 116-117.
6. *Centennial, American Life in 1876* by William Pierce Randel. Chilton Book

- Company, Philadelphia, New York, London, 1969. Page 335. This book discusses everyday life in the United States in 1876. It has many first person accounts by visitors to America. It is mostly background information for the interested numismatist. It also has a few good coin stories.
7. *Entrepreneurs of the Old West* by David Dary. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1986. Page 272. This history of American frontier businesses mainly discusses prices and wages. It mentions coins only a few times.
  8. *Danes in North America* edited by Frederick Hale. University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1984. Page 104. Reprints of letters by Danish immigrants from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most all areas of the United States are covered. Wages, beer, work and religion are big topics.
  9. *Danes in North America*. Page 16.
  10. *Cow People* by J. Frank Dobie. Little Brown and Company, Boston and Toronto, 1964. Page 17. Excellent overview of cow people by an English professor who was raised in the ranching business. Much of it was compiled in the 1920s. Some good coin stories from the Texas region.
  11. *Entrepreneurs of the Old West* by David Dary. Pages 218-220.
  12. *The Autobiography of Charles Peters* by Charles Peters. The LaGrave Company, Sacramento, circa 1915. Page 110. Memories of the oldest living forty-niner in California. Many interesting anecdotes and coin stories.
  13. *The Man Who Built San Francisco* by Julian Dana. Pages 151, 171, 174, 175 and 188.
  14. *Centennial, American Life in 1876* by William Pierce Randel. Page 298.
  15. *Eldorado or, Adventures in the Path of Empire* by Bayard Taylor. Goerge P. Putnam & Company, 1856. Pages 80-81. Record of a newspaper reporter who traveled to and from the California gold fields in 1849. Many coin stories from both the United States and Mexico.
  16. *Beyond the Mississippi* by Albert D. Richardson. Page 459.
  17. *Little Brown Book of Anecdotes*, Clifton Fadiman general editor. Little, Brown and Company, Boston and Toronto, 1985. Page 352. Collection of short anecdotes about famous people.
  18. *Gold Camp, Alder Gulch and Virginia City, Montana* by Larry Barsness. Hastings House, New York, 1962. Page 174. History of this gold camp, a few good coin stories.
  19. *Forty Years of Hardware* by Saunders Norvell. Hardware Age, New York City, 1924. Pages 27-32. Sanders concentrated on the philosophy of how to run a business and mixed in a good selection of business style anecdotes. A few brief coin stories.
  20. *Presidential Anecdotes* by Paul F. Boller, Jr. Penguin Books, New York, 1982. This book has a few good coin stories.

