Collecting Odd Denominations

The evolution of the American monetary system led to some useful, but short-lived coins.

The American monetary system has been evolving for more than two centuries, with some interesting twists and turns along the way. Today, circulating cents and nickels are common, but did you know several other U.S. denominations were valued at 5 cents or less? Such obsolete pieces are unfamiliar oddities, but they were important and interesting aspects of 19th-century coinage.

Our smallest denomination was the half cent, initially struck in 1793. Though a half cent seems to be a trivial amount, it had the purchasing power of the modern dime. It also was useful for transactions involving fractional Spanish-American coins valued at 12½ cents, which circulated in the United States until the 1850s. However, the large coin—almost the size of today's quarter—was unpopular, and it was issued sporadically and in small quantities. The Coinage Act of 1857, which replaced the 1-cent piece with a smaller version, marked the half cent's official end.

Soon after the start of the Civil War, inflation and hoarding caused small change to disappear from circulation. To facilitate coin production, the Coinage Act of 1864 authorized the issue of bronze cent and 2-cent pieces. The 2 cents is notable because it was the first U.S. coin to carry the motto IN GOD WE TRUST, now on all denominations. Both bronze coins were immediately popular, but as the monetary chaos subsided, the 2-cent piece became obsolete. Its mintage declined every year until its demise in 1873.

The 3-cent piece might seem to be the ultimate odd denomination, but it served an important practical purpose when it was introduced in 1851. The postage rate had just been lowered to 3 cents, and the small, silver coin was more convenient than three large cents. An economic innovation, it was the first American precious-metal coin with an intrinsic value lower than its face value. This resulted in large early mintages, but the coin disappeared from circulation during the Civil War and was totally eliminated in 1873. Its replacement, the copper-nickel 3-cent piece, debuted in 1865. It too was struck only sparingly after its first few years and was discontinued in 1889.

Another odd denomination was the U.S. Mint's first issue. In 1792 a modest quantity of half dimes was made from silver reportedly provided by President Washington. The denomination's mintage waxed and waned over the ensuing decades, but after the chaos of the Civil War, the half dime never really recovered. Its successor, today's copper-nickel 5-cent piece, was introduced in 1866; the silver half dime was last coined in 1873.

The shortest-lived odd denomination was the 20-cent piece, introduced in 1875. At the time, minor coins generally did not circulate in the western United States, and the 20-cent piece was intended to facilitate accurate change-making. But the coin's similarity in size and design to the quarter caused considerable confusion, and production for circulation ceased after only two years.

All these odd denominations still are legal tender, though you won't find them in circulation. However, it remains possible to build a basic type set (one example of each denomination) at a reasonable cost. Expect to pay approximately $20 for a well-worn 2-cent piece, silver or copper-nickel 3-cent piece or half dime, and around $50 each for well-preserved, circulated specimens. Prices will be a bit more for half cents and 20-cent coins. It's wise to consult price and grading guides to find the specific designs, dates and grades that suit your tastes and budget.

Odd denominations represent some of the more unusual 18th- and 19th-century American coins. They disappeared from circulation long ago, victims of changing economic circumstances or novel ideas that became failed experiments. Numismatists are fortunate that the legacy of these interesting collectibles is ensured by the many stories detailing their development and use.

sanders@money.org

The 2-cent piece was the first coin to include IN GOD WE TRUST.

COIN PHOTOS: ANA MUSEUM/JOHN NEBEL