

A Carson City *Challenge* Coin

By Ryan Baum

#RM-0197

While most of the articles in this journal discuss varieties of Carson City coinage, this article recounts how one member became interested in Carson City coins and how this interest has led to a lifetime of pleasure. This interest ultimately led to the custom production of a military *challenge* coin based on the reverse of the Carson City Morgan silver dollar.

My first memories of coin collecting were when my father gave me a Buffalo nickel and an Indian Head penny from a local coin shop when I was five. Over the years my interest in coin collecting blossomed as I scoured my parents' change and had them get rolls of coins for me at the bank. In 1977 I visited the old San Francisco Mint and ordered my first Proof set with the mint's magnetic ordering cards. Then in 1979-80, I became mesmerized as the price of precious metals went up almost daily. I tracked the melt value of my common silver coins and started buying the *Wall Street Journal* to get information on the bullion markets.

During these same years I became fascinated with the California Gold Rush. The idea of approaching a river and finding a fortune for the taking was simply fantastic. Nearly every year while I was in elementary school or junior high, I found a way to write a report on the Gold Rush.

A major turning point in my interest for coins occurred in 1983 when on a family trip we visited the old Carson City Mint. While the San Francisco Mint had been impressive six years earlier and its gold display awesome, the Carson City Mint seemed more inviting and more of a direct connection to the Big Bonanza years. While

the San Francisco Mint had produced huge amounts of coinage from the western mining strikes, some of its metal could have come from trade through its port. Carson City coins, however, offered with near certainty that their metal came from one of the fabulous Comstock mines. Yes, I continued to search for San Francisco coinage in pocket change and knew that its coinage was usually the rarest for most years of the early twentieth century. After my visit and basic teenage research I decided, however, that Carson City would be my favorite mint for nineteenth-century coinage.

While in high school, I began acquiring whatever Carson City coins I could afford. One year I worked vacations and weekends at the same coin shop where my father had bought those first coins a decade earlier. In those years I was able to acquire circulated “CC” silver dollars for minimal amounts. I also canvassed the floor of the Long Beach Coin Convention a few times each year searching for Carson City bargains. In hindsight I was fortunate to have acquired several years of the Carson City Morgan dollars this way.

As with many collectors, my acquisition of coins was temporarily suspended while I attended college and graduate school since I was more focused on paying tuition and living expenses. Upon graduating from business school I was very fortunate to join a firm with a deep history rooted in the Gold Rush- and Boomtown-eras, Wells Fargo.

My numismatic background came in handy at Wells Fargo when the Corporate Properties Department learned that it was receiving a coin collection through the acquisition of First Interstate Bancorp. Because of a few issues at the time of the Crocker National acquisition, the Fixed Asset Group within Corporate Properties had learned to be on the lookout for any portable assets of an acquired institution. A fax was received shortly after the acquisition and I

was asked to review it. The fax listed the coins within the collection and provided the loan agreement between First Interstate Bank of Nevada and the Nevada State Museum. I was thrilled to realize that this document was detailing the actual collection on display inside the old Carson City Mint! After confirming that this collection was indeed on loan to the museum, I was able to allay any fears that the coins might disappear. Even today, eleven years later, I am tickled to know that I crossed paths with the coin collection.

As the internet began to bloom and I was confronted with selecting e-mail and online auction IDs, I signaled my interest in Carson City Coins by using “CC dollar” such as in ccdollar@hotmail.com. While few non-coin collectors understand its meaning (until I explain it), I have received many smiles from other coin collectors.

Although I had not joined ROTC while in college, the tragedy of 9/11 inspired me to join the United States Navy Reserve Component as a Supply Corps Officer. As I traveled a couple of times each year for military training, I would use the travel as an opportunity to search for a local coin shop or visit another mint. My three trips to the Supply Corps School in Athens, Georgia, allowed me to visit the Dahlonga Mint. (Did you know that Guam does not have a single coin shop?) During my military training I also noticed the modern tradition of military units issuing *challenge* coins. Little did I realize that I would have an opportunity to follow this tradition.

In spring of 2006 I found that it was now my turn to join a mobilizing unit. I was called to active duty and joined Navy Customs Battalion ROMEO. We served in the Middle East performing customs inspections on all personnel and cargo returning from theater. Our battalion immediately designed a *challenge* coin based on our theme of “ROMEO Rough Riders.” The Battalion coin has a view of Teddy Roosevelt raising his saber while astride a horse. The

reverse shows a sailor and ship in the desert to signify our land-based assignment. As is popular, the Battalion coin was larger than a real coin, measuring two inches in diameter.



*“Romeo Rough Riders” coin from
Navy Customs Battalion Romeo.*

In January of this year I began to think of the end of our deployment and what token gift I could give the sailors who served under me in CHARLIE Company. T-shirts would be too common. Coffee mugs would be silly. As I continued to think of CHARLIE Company, I decided to order a Company-specific *challenge* coin and give one to each of my sailors. I worked via e-mail with a stateside maker and instructed the maker that I wanted the standard silver dollar diameter of 1 ½ inches, silver color, reeded edges, frosted proof appearance, and the reverse taken from a Carson City Morgan dollar with the substitution of “Charlie Company” for “One Dollar.” This was ideal since the “CC” mintmark could stand for CHARLIE Company just as easily as Carson City!

With much anticipation I waited the month between order and receipt. I was excited that I was able to make a connection to my



Ryan Baum's custom CHARLIE Company coin with "CC" mintmark.

interest in Carson City coinage in even the most austere environment. When the challenge coins arrived, I was not disappointed. Although the manufacturer had reversed my frosted proof request, I was still delighted at the detail that he was able to generate from the e-mails we traded. (Yes, the frosted field makes some lighting scenarios difficult to enjoy the coin.)

While I display the obverse of the Battalion coin proudly to show Teddy Roosevelt and the ROMEO Rough Rider emblem, I always will show my Company coin with the reverse side first and include the story of how this is connected to Carson City. If I ever get mobilized again, I'll use a Carson City gold eagle reverse for any future Company Coin and I will make sure that I'm part of CHARLIE Company.

(Images Courtesy Ryan Baum)