

Ways to Diversify a Carson City Trade Dollar Collection Outside Conventional Boundaries

By James D. Sneddon

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In the United States Trade dollar series, with respect to having a complete set of Carson City issues, a basic ten-coin set is thought to be the ultimate, with respect to the Type I and Type II obverse and reverse combinations of the 1875 and 1876 coins, along with the two main “CC” die varieties—the 1875-S/CC and the 1876-CC Doubled-Die Reverse. A dedicated Trade dollar collector would also add the chopmarked counterparts, thus doubling his or her “CC” Trade dollar collection. To these, you could also add the 2M and 2L obverse/reverse combination sub-varieties and the size combinations of the “CC” mintmarks, along with the various width differences between the Cs. You could also include these sub-varieties’ chopmarked counterparts.

This is still the traditional and conventional thinking about assembling the ultimate, complete set of Carson City Trade dollars. Sometimes, however, you need to think outside the traditional and conventional box. In my own case, I looked at the *New England* Trade dollar collection, which contained virtually a complete set of Proofs, business strikes, selected Trade dollar varieties, and the chopmarked issues. This collection also contained some counterstamped Trade dollars, some “potty” dollars, some Trade dollar love tokens, and some locket/opium Trade dollars. It inspired me, beginning in 1998, to expand my own Trade dollar collection in these areas. With the exception of the counterstamped Trade dollars, I’ve obtained some potty dollars, some love token Trade dollars, and some locket/opium Trade dollars.

The first thing I noticed about these four non-traditional categories of

Trade dollar collecting, with respect to the *New England* collection, was that there were no Carson City Trade dollars of any kind among them. The counterstamped Trade dollars, the potty Trade dollars, and the locket/opium Trade dollars have specimens from both the Philadelphia and San Francisco Mints. In the case of the *New England* collection of counterstamped Trade dollars, there were four Philadelphia-minted coins and one San Francisco specimen. As for the potty dollars, there was one specimen each from the Philadelphia and San Francisco Mints. The locket/opium Trade dollar category had one Philadelphia specimen and five San Francisco Mint specimens. The two love token Trade dollars were dated 1875 and 1877. The name of Lizzie C. Nittinger, who had received it from her grandmother Hekel, was engraved on the obverse of the 1877-CC, around the figure of Liberty.

One of my objectives is to acquire examples of Philadelphia, Carson City, and San Francisco Trade dollars in each of these four categories: counterstamped Trade dollars, potty dollars, love tokens, and locket/opium dollars. Most of these coins are very difficult to find. In fact, I have yet to acquire any kind of counterstamped Trade dollar. Moreover, in my own studies on the subject, I haven't been able to confirm the existence of a counterstamped Trade dollar, potty dollar, or love token Trade dollar bearing the Carson City mintmark. I do, however, know for certain that at least one Carson City locket/opium dollar exists, because I was able to purchase one. It's an opium box 1877-CC dollar, graded VG or thereabouts. It was looped at the top of the obverse, and it contains a picture of a 19th-century gentleman with a mustache. I got it as Lot 916 in the ANR sale of the Lake Michigan and Springdale collections in June 2006.

The obverse/reverse hub combination on the above-mentioned coin is a 2M/2M, with the 2M reverse most likely being from a



Obverse and reverse of an 1877-CC locket/opium box Trade dollar in closed position. Notice the seams around the periphery on the reverse, showing the separation between the rim and the interior plate of the coin.

host 1877-CC coin. The mintmark on this particular coin doesn't match up with any of the known 1875-CC, 1876-CC, or 1878-CC reverses. It does, however, match up with two 1877-CC varieties. The 2M obverse, on the other hand, could be from any of the three mints. This is the only instance in which I can personally verify that a Carson City opium box dollar exists.* In a November 1979 article by James Vernon Epps in the *Gobrecht Journal*, Mr. Epps did not confirm the existence of Carson City opium box dollars, and I have no other sources on them existing. In his article on opium box Trade dollars, Mr. Epps did say that John Willem told him that he owned a box dollar that had chopmarks on it. James V. Epps



*Exterior of reverse of an 1877-CC
locket/opium box Trade dollar in open position.*



*Interior of an 1877-CC Trade dollar
modified into a locket/opium box.*

reported that he hadn't seen any opium box dollars with chopmarks, and he had personally examined over 50 of them. Mr. Epps said that every one of them was exactly alike, except for one that was obverse-hinged, instead of the usual, reverse-hinged configuration. This to me indicates that Carson City locket/box dollars must be very rare, and that they would be very interesting additions to any "CC" Trade dollar collection. One unusual thing about the "CC" locket/box dollar I bought is that the person whose picture is in it, has facial features eerily similar to my own, except for the mustache. If I didn't know better, he could easily be a close relative of mine, who lived in the 1880s to 1890s, and was in his mid-twenties.

These locket/opium dollars weren't originally intended to carry drugs, but were most likely used to carry a picture or a lock of hair of a loved one. They could also have been used to carry pills like aspirin. I almost have to wonder if today drug dealers would use them to smuggle high-value drugs into this country.

The opium dollars are unique in one respect, they are the only Trade dollar in an exonumia category that can have specimens with a Type II obverse and a Type I reverse. One specific example of this is Lot 763 of the *Willem* collection sold by Henry Christensen Inc. on September 5, 1980. The lot was described as an "1878 opium dollar, with an 1878 obverse muled with a Type I, P-Mint reverse." It sold for \$225. I'm not 100% sure, but the lot directly after Lot 763 may well be the chopmarked opium box dollar that John Willem told James V. Epps he had. If it is, it may well be a unique Trade dollar specimen. Following is the exact description of Lot 764 from the September 5, 1980 Christensen auction: "764-1877-CC gold plated, with a reverse chopmark. About EF." It sold for \$175. I have to believe it is a locket/opium dollar because of the order in which the collection was auctioned in this particular sale. It started with a

Proof 1873 Trade dollar and continued through the business strike examples. Next, came a chopmarked example, and in the case of the 1873-P, came a coin that had its reverse planed off. It was engraved and it made for an elaborate pocket piece. This was very likely a form of a love token. Cataloged as Lot 697, the description said it came from Abner Kriesberg in January 1964.

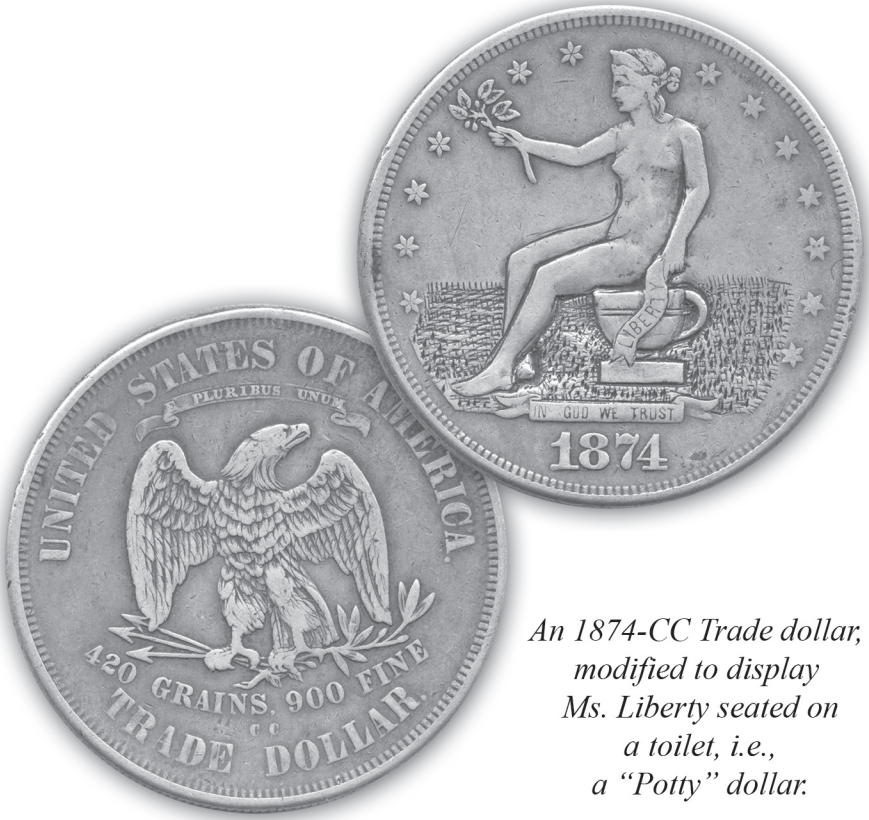
The pattern of this auction was to go through each date starting with Proofs, then business strikes, and finally chopmarked examples. The order, according to mints, was Philadelphia, Carson City, and San Francisco, with several varieties or errors mixed in. This proceeded all the way to 1883, but after Lot 762, which was an 1883 Proof, the 1878 opium box dollar, struck from a Type I Philadelphia die was sold. I have to believe Lot 764, with its reverse chopmark, was also an opium box dollar, because if the 1877-CC, with a reverse chopmark had just been a regular coin that had been gold plated, it would've been sold right after the AU chopmarked 1877-CC piece as a second chopmarked example, at least according to the order in which the other lots were sold. If my theory is correct, Lot 764 would be the second example of a "CC" locket/opium dollar that I know of, but I'm not absolutely certain, since I haven't personally examined it. It seems like very compelling evidence though, that it's an example of a "CC" opium dollar, with chopmark.

The locket/opium dollar is also the only category that has genuine 1873 and 1874 Trade dollars that have been muled with Type II reverses. James V. Epps stated in his November 1979 article in the *Gobrecht Journal*, that he had seen an 1878 obverse Trade dollar, with a Type I reverse, and also examples of some 1873 and 1874 Trade dollars with Type II reverses. In my own collection, I have an 1874 opium box Trade dollar with a Type II, S-Mint reverse. Because it's a 2L reverse, combined with other reverse characteristics, I have

to conclude that the S-Mint reverse on my 1874 locket/opium dollar originally came from an 1878-S Trade dollar. (With locket/opium dollars, you can very often identify specific Philadelphia, Carson City, and San Francisco Mint obverses and reverses on certain dates).

Also in my collection, I have an example of an opium box dollar with a Type II obverse paired with a Type I reverse. My specimen is an 1876-P II/I. It's virtually certain that the Type II obverse on this coin came from an 1876-S II/II coin, because the obverse hub is a 2M combination. Every known 1876-P II/II Trade dollar has a 2L/2M hub combination. It's very unlikely that a 2M/2M 1876-P exists. The P-Mint reverse on my opium box dollar very likely originated on a coin dated 1873 to 1875. It's very unlikely that it came from an 1876-P Type I reverse coin, because virtually all of the known 1876-P Type I reverses have broken letters on UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, and no period after FINE. I've only seen four 1876-P I/I Trade dollars with *no* broken letters and a period after FINE.

To get a good idea of just what exists, you need to have access to large numbers of locket/opium dollars, or own lots of them. In my case, I have 13 locket/opium dollars in my collection. Six of them have a Philadelphia reverse, six have a San Francisco reverse, and one has a Carson City reverse. I have one II/I combination, an 1876-P. I have two I/II combinations, an 1874-S, and an 1876-S. The rest are II/II combinations, two 1877-Ps, two 1877-Ss, three 1878-Ps, two 1878-Ss, and one 1877-CC. I would like to expand my collection of them, and I'm particularly interested in obtaining more examples of Type I obverses and reverses, as well as more "CC" locket/opium dollars. I believe that potty dollars were created out of disrespect and contempt for the denomination, because unscrupulous bosses foisted



An 1874-CC Trade dollar, modified to display Ms. Liberty seated on a toilet, i.e., a “Potty” dollar.

the coin on ignorant workers after the coin was demonetized. When merchants took them in trade, it was usually at discounts of 85 to 90 cents on the dollar. Many collectors today associate the coin with love tokens, but I just can't see the connection. Since the Trade dollars weren't worth face value, some people modified the figure of Ms. Liberty to appear as if she were sitting on a chamber pot or a toilet, as a way to dishonor and mock the denomination, even to the point of making potty dollars out of several of the Proof coins. In doing research on potty dollars, I do know that both P-Mint specimens and S-Mint specimens exist. I've not been able to confirm the existence of a Carson City potty dollar, but I'd very much like to have one (or some) in my collection.* Right now, I only own

three potty dollars: an 1875-S, an 1877-S, and an 1878-S. I have good reason to believe that Carson City potty dollars exist, because I know for sure that at least two impaired Proof potty dollars exist. One is an 1880 in VF condition from the *New England* collection, and the other is an 1879 in F/VF that was sold privately in 1993. I have to believe that a person is a lot more likely to find a “CC” potty dollar than he or she is to find an 1879 to 1883 impaired Proof potty dollar.

A challenge to any Carson City Trade dollar collector would be to add a counterstamped Trade dollar, a potty Trade dollar, a love token Trade dollar, and a locket/opium Trade dollar, all with “CC” mintmarks. You could also add items like a clashed-die “CC” Trade dollar, with and without chopmarks, and a rotated-reverse die “CC” Trade dollar, with and without chopmarks. I personally, also want to own some love token Trade dollars with “CC” mintmarks, if possible. I can add them to the two Philadelphia Mint specimens I already have.

In looking outside the traditional boundaries of U.S. Trade dollar collecting, I came upon an unusual lot in Stack’s June 28, 2008 auction of the *Glenn E. Bergstrom* collection. Lot 309 was described in the following manner:

309–1878-CC, XF-40. A scarce date, and the final year that Trade dollars were struck at the Carson City facility. The coin has scattered marks on both the obverse and reverse, most likely from use in the Oriental trade. Polished years ago and now retoning, the surfaces have the tell-tale reflectivity of a coin that was polished. A decent hole filler for those who desire the date, but do not want to spend multiples of what this coin will bring for a problem free example.

This coin is a transition piece, between the Carson City Trade dollars

that never left the United States, and the Carson City Trade dollars that performed their intended function in the Orient, having had one or more chopmarks stamped on them indicating they'd been accepted by an Oriental merchant in trade. This particular 1878-CC wasn't chopmarked in the formal sense of the word. Upon very close examination of the coin, you can see that almost all of the marks on both the obverse and the reverse are what F.M. Rose calls "test marks." They are usually file or cut marks on the surface or edges of the coin. These weren't random bagmarks, but instead were marks that were made in a pattern. There were also scattered, crescent-like marks that had to be deliberately made on both the obverse and the reverse. It's something a person could easily miss if he didn't examine the coin very carefully.

This particular 1878-CC did give me a complete Breen 5823 Trade dollar set. It starts with a Fine/Very Fine 1878-CC that circulated in the United States. Then comes this XF-40 1878-CC that was circulated extensively in the Orient, and that some sharp-eyed person noticed was a very rare date that hadn't been formally chopmarked, and pulled it out of circulation. Because it was very rare, and, not being a trained numismatist, that person polished it up in a mistaken attempt to make it more appealing. My set is completed with my *Willem* specimen, an 1878-CC Trade dollar that has one obverse chopmark at 2 o'clock. When this particular coin was sold in the September 5, 1980 Christensen auction as Lot 754, it was graded VF/XF. When it sold again in the January 1984 Kurt Krueger FUN auction, the same coin was graded XF-45 and sold as Lot 3172. In the June 1996 Heritage Long Beach sale, it again sold, this time as lot 5642 and cataloged as an XF-40.

Our president, Rusty Goe in his book, *The Mint on Carson Street*, encouraged collectors to do research on both chopmarked Trade

dollars and locket/opium dollars, possibly not realizing the existence of the Chopmark Collectors Club, where members had been doing research for years, at least on chopmarked Trade dollars. I suspect there are a fair number of chopmarked Trade dollar collectors who haven't yet come out in the open, and who possess knowledge that could answer questions on aspects of chopmarked Trade dollars that remain unanswered.

Some of the non-traditional U.S. Trade dollar categories such as opium dollars, potty dollars, counterstamped dollars, and love tokens, need to be more thoroughly researched to see just what exists.

One thing I would really like to do, is track down John Willem's chopmarked locket/opium dollar, especially when there's very compelling evidence it might have a "CC" mintmark on it. I want this coin as much as Morgan dollar collectors want to find the Uncirculated GSA 1892-CC and 1893-CC dollars, with their accompanying certificates of authenticity.

(Images courtesy of Southgate Coins)

- * Editor's note: James Sneddon was unaware of the existence of the specimens of the "CC" locket/opium box and the "potty" Trade dollars pictured in this article. They belong to Southgate Coins.