

Disappearing Dollars

As gold and silver prices skyrocket, some ignore numismatic value in their quest to make a quick buck.

LIKE ALL professional numismatists, I have more than just a passing interest in the precious-metals market, as intrinsic value affects the price of most numismatically traded items. My experience with precious metals goes beyond my involvement with coins: in a previous life, I owned a jewelry manufactory, complete with finishing, casting and refining capabilities. (I also am a bench jeweler and can make a ring from scratch if I have to.)

With the recent increases in the prices of all precious metals, coin dealers with stores or retail customers have found that a large part of their business day now is devoted to the purchase of gold and silver items. Besides old or broken jewelry and precious-metal scrap, these include circulated coins struck by the U.S. Mint and private issues produced by companies like the Danbury Mint.

Sadly, some of these coins once had numismatic value. I am not referring to war nickels, the huge quantities of circulated, common-date 90- and 40-percent-silver coins struck before 1968, or the thousands of pre-1933 U.S. gold coins that have been mounted, soldered or polished as jewelry. No, I am talking about piles of

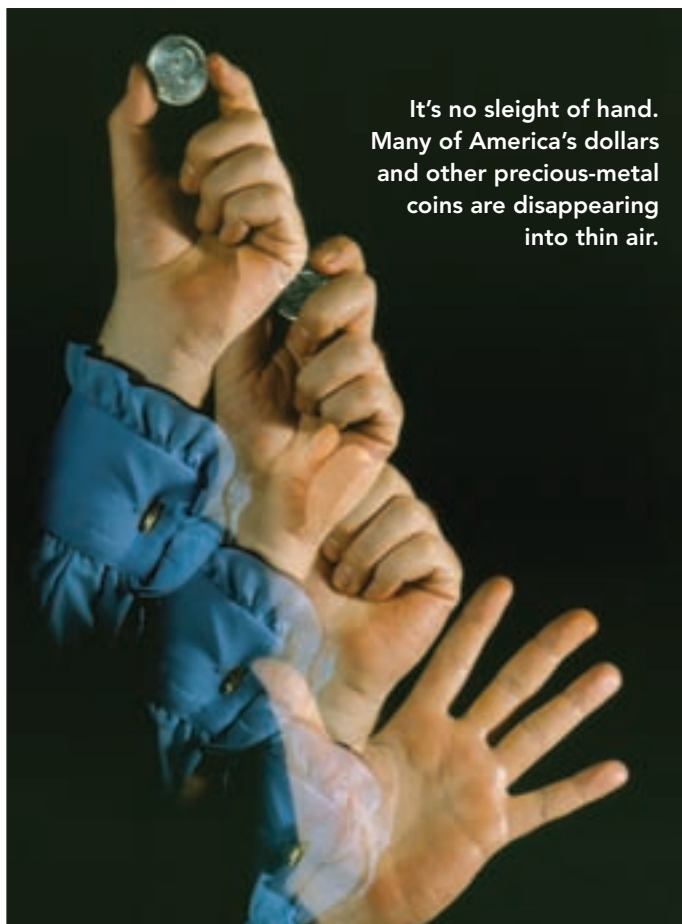
low-grade Morgan and Peace dollars; heavily used Barber quarters and halves; Walking Liberty half dollars; dateless Standing Liberty quarters; and new gold and silver commemoratives that are being sent to the melting pot. I have even seen platinum and gold coins of Russia's Tsar Nicholas II that have been cut, filed,

damaged Morgan dollars, as well as two gold \$10 coins and three sets (each containing two proof and two uncirculated silver dollars) issued for the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. (All had reasonably low mintages for modern commemorative issues.) I also let go of two dozen 1986 Ellis Island commemorative silver dollars and more American Buffalo dollars than I can count.

Regrettably, these coins usually come to me with file marks or acid burns from uninformed jewelers and metal dealers who do not bother to even inquire about their numismatic value. While I personally do not consider American Eagle bullion coins to be "real" numismatic collectibles, I know lots of hobbyists like them, so it pains me to see them jostled around in bags, past the point of any numismatic interest.

In a few years, I will be interested to see the impact of removing these coins from the numismatic marketplace. It already is apparent that the original mintage figures for these modern commemorative dollars will have no relevance to their availability, possibly making the survivors slightly more collectable. However, it is wise to remember that, as a rule, common issues struck after 1900 never will become rare, regardless of how many coins are destroyed.

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It's no sleight of hand. Many of America's dollars and other precious-metal coins are disappearing into thin air.

acid-burned or all of the above in an effort to determine their metal content. In my book, this is a crime.

For lack of a buyer, I recently was forced to consign to a refiner several hundred very low-grade, circulated or

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