

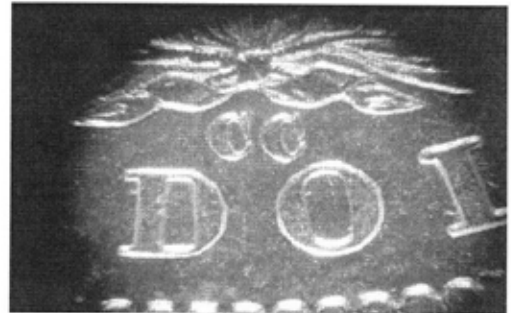
Carson City Coins

How Did They Become *All the Rage*?

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If you have ever collected coins from the Carson City Mint you know the rush you get when you add a new one to your collection. Anyone unfamiliar with these fascinating coins probably scratches their head and wonders what all the fuss is about. However, once bitten by the "CC" bug, a person becomes joyfully caught up in the historical and intriguing qualities of the subject and the thrill of the hunt.

Why Carson City coins? What makes them so special? After all, coins have been produced at other mints around the country, some located in cities far more historic and glamorous than Carson City, Nevada. Surely San Francisco and New Orleans have more to offer in terms of historical significance and sheer sociological impact; and what about the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia? How can you get any more historic than that?



There is no doubt about it; Carson City does not hold a candle to any of these notable sites in terms of size, age, influence or historical significance. However, when simply comparing the coins produced at these various mints, void of any geographic, demographic, historic or political undercurrents associated with the cities in which they are located, Carson City's offerings, as a whole, stand out.

A quick, simple explanation for the magnitude of popularity for Carson City coins is the attraction of the double letter mintmark compared to the mints with a single letter, or in the case of Philadelphia, no letter at all. But this fact alone is not sufficient to elevate "CC" coins above the others. So we play the next card in the hand which is the Comstock connection: Next to the Gold Rush in California's Mother Lode region, the "Big Bonanza" on the Comstock located in northwestern Nevada resulted in many enthralling stories of whim and fortune, skullduggery and heroism, and rhetorical encounters of the political kind.

For reasons that will probably never be known, politics in Nevada have always played a prominent role on the national scene, way beyond rational justification. After all, the state entered the Union during the Civil War despite a population not meeting the legal requirements for statehood. And senators from

Nevada's early years succeeded in influencing favorable silver bills, with one sophomore senator given credit for the introduction of the silver twenty-cent piece in 1875. Then of course there is always the political power derived from casino



gambling, as some of the top power brokers of the 20th and 21st centuries are spokesmen for the gaming industry in Nevada. It is little wonder why Las Vegas has become the destination capital of the nation and the place to be seen if you want to draw attention to yourself. It must never be forgotten that it was politicians who launched the GSA sales program in the early 1970s to market the stockpile of nearly 2.9 million cartwheels with the "CC" mintmark. As a result, Carson

City silver dollars came to the forefront and have never looked back. Why weren't silver dollars from the New Orleans Mint marketed by the U. S. Government in similar fashion, or those from Philadelphia?

Probably one of the most common reasons cited for the popularity of Carson City coins is the myth, legend and romance of the Old West era. It is true that Carson City coins were produced during this era, however, the sleepy Nevada hamlet at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains was not known for its gun slinging cowboys, bank robbers, and barroom brawls. The rough and tumble adventures around the Comstock region, with legends of poker tables stacked with \$20 gold pieces and houses of prostitution, sparked the glamorization of this area, causing it to become linked with the Old West almost by default. Nothing perpetuated this aura more than the TV series *Bonanza* which aired from the late 1950s into the 1970s. The Ponderosa and its familiar faces served as the perfect opening act for the introduction of the GSA "CC" silver dollars. It will never be known how few people may have heard of Carson City by the time the GSA program was launched if Ben Cartwright's ranch had not been a short buggy ride from it. Virginia City was also heavily promoted by the *Bonanza* TV series, and of course Carson City would always be inextricably linked with this famous mining center. All of this and Mark Twain too: the perfect ambassador and loremeister for the era in review.



But aside from the above mentioned cultural, sociological, political and historical underpinnings, reasons for the popularity of the Carson City Mint are the coins themselves and the grand assortment of sets available for the collector to pursue. If it is true that coin collecting is the most popular hobby in the country, a significant base of enthusiasts is assured for most of the categories that comprise it. Without question, this multitude of collectors will always be seeking a specialty series to satisfy their penchant for seeking to fill the next spot in their set. And aside from the simple task of filling openings in a coin album, most people are drawn in by the stories surrounding the coins. Essential elements in these stories are the notoriety of key players involved in the production of the coins, scandals and controversies associated, historical events linked to the era in which the coins were produced, and pricing information concerning the coin's values.

This latter element probably generates as much interest as any of the other factors. Simply stated, people are curious about how much collectibles such as coins are worth. Typical water cooler banter involves comments like, "Did you hear that an old baseball card just sold for \$450,000?", or, "I just saw a music box from the 19th century appraised for \$16,000 on *Antiques Roadshow*." Double-takes are guaranteed when showing people nickels worth \$3 million, silver dollars worth \$4 million, or a dime worth \$1 million. Add to the divulgence of today's value a review of price appreciation over the past 50 years and the sense of amazement only increases. It boggles the mind to discover that certain rare coins have appreciated 25,000% or more since the 1950s. This exceeds the staggering price increases in the California real estate market at times.

Of course this accelerated appreciation is not confined to coins displaying the "CC" mintmark, since examples can be shown across the board in the U. S. coinage series. What sets Carson City coins apart is the relative recentness of their price advances. For the most part, this popular coinage series did not experience significant upward trends in value until the 1970s, and even then, prices did not spike, but instead were gradual and steady. By the mid-1990s, a portend of things to come was revealed during the *Eliasberg* sales when Carson City coins that had been off the market for decades shattered previous price records. All this did was establish a firm foundation, however, because prices did not sustain the vigorous pace witnessed at those auctions. It became apparent that "CC" coins, especially the scarce dates, were not going to appear in auctions with any frequency. Many collectors, possibly sensing that the prices



realized in the *Eliasberg* sales were an aberration, backed off temporarily in the late 1990s resulting in what proved to be a bargain hunter's paradise. This was just the breather the "CC" market needed to prepare for uninterrupted growth beginning in the early years of the 21st century. Prices for "CC" coins had been stifled for so long relative to other coinage series prior to the 1990s that by the dawn of the 21st century increases were inevitable. Because this specialized category of coins had lagged behind the market in general any price appreciation would appear to be justified as long as the rest of the coin market remained healthy. This is exactly what is occurring today and unless the coin market suddenly enters another bear cycle it appears as if prices for Carson City coins have not even reached the tip of the iceberg.



Although exceptions may be cited, "CC" coins were not as heavily promoted during past bull markets like in 1979 to 1980 and 1986 to 1989; and as a result were not subject to the severe price declines suffered in other categories. For example, in June of 1989, the bid price for an eight piece common date U. S. gold type set in MS-65 was \$115,000. Today that same set is bid at \$36,000. Also in 1989, the bid price for a three piece type set of common date Barber coins in MS-65 was \$14,600, and today the bid is only \$3,350. The combined bid in 1989 for a couple of scarcer 19th century type coins, Seated Liberty silver dollars *With Motto* and Trade dollars, both in common dates, graded MS-65, was \$75,000, whereas in 2005, the bid price for the pair is just \$19,500.

On the other hand, when analyzing the one category in the Carson City series subject to the most volatility during this same period, a 13-piece set of "CC" Morgan silver dollars graded MS-65 combined for an aggregate bid price of \$223,000 in June of 1989, while this same set today (2005) is bid at \$210,000. Individual dates in this set were subject to more significant percentage losses, such as the 1878-CC, and 1882-CC through 1884-CC issues, although still not

approaching the drastic declines of some of the more generic categories in the U. S. coinage series.

Furthermore, when considering the examples below listing price comparisons for “CC” coins between the two periods, a countertrend is evident:

<u>Fall 1989 Stack's Sale*</u>	<u>May 2005**</u>
1876-CC Dime Uncirculated - \$ 248	\$ 600
1877-CC Quar. Uncirculated - 358	800
1877-CC Half Uncirculated - 1,210	1,600
1874-CC T \$1 Uncirculated - 1,540	4,000
1875-CC T \$1 Uncirculated - 935	3,000
1870-CC \$20 VF - 18,150	95,000

* *Prices realized. These were uncertified coins.*

** *Estimated prices MS-62-63 for Uncirculated coins, VF for 1870-CC \$20 gold.*

Although this represents only a random sampling, it is indicative of “CC” coins as a whole and provides confirmation that Carson City coins have continued to appreciate at a solid pace with no signs of slowing down.

This fact, along with the other reasons cited above sheds light on the question, “How did Carson City coins become all the rage?” When positive price histories are combined with the romanticism of the times, political shenanigans, colorful characters, and low surviving populations of coins, the stage is set for adventurous and rewarding experiences for collectors. The Carson City coinage series has been a rising star in the field of numismatics for the past several decades and before the light begins to fade, if it ever does, hopefully *CCCCOA* will be able to illuminate the way for future generations of “CC” enthusiasts.

