

Reeds and More Reeds – A Study of 1876-CC Quarters

By Bruce Spence

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You all know the setup. Upon discovering that you are a coin collector or coin dealer, and therefore a fitting repository for an unwanted accumulation of poorly understood coins, someone approaches you and offers you a box or a bag of mixed coins. The person doesn't know if there's anything valuable in the group—but hope springs eternal. “No,” the person tells you, “I don't want to wait for a detailed evaluation, just pay me now and I'll be on my way.” So, you take a quick look and see mostly worn U.S. small denomination coins, some silver, some base metal, from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. You make an offer that is probably pretty weak. But hey, you doubt if there will be anything in the group worth much more than the melt value of silver, and, anyway, you're not running a charity here! The anxious seller accepts your offer, the transaction is completed and you part ways. Sometime later, maybe a lot later, you sit down to go through the bunch of junk to try your luck, knowing that it is probably pretty poor at that moment.

One of my first encounters like this, decades ago, yielded the expected haul of circulated Mercuries, Buffalo nickels, Wheat and Indian Head cents, and Standing Liberty quarters. However, the lot did include a very few Liberty Seated coins, which warranted a closer look. The last of these was a well-worn Liberty Seated quarter dated 1876, in maybe Good-4 condition (if you blink). Flipping it over to check for a mintmark, I was surprised to see a “CC.” This was a good thing since this would be only my second Carson City coin. (My first one was a nice Morgan dollar that I got in high school in change at a local coin-fed gas station. I unwisely carried it as a pocket piece and lost it a few weeks later on a bus trip to a band

event. A hard lesson but a valuable one.) I set the old warhorse quarter aside for more attention later.

Later when I revisited the 1876-CC quarter, for some reason I took a closer look at it, including the edge. Despite my powers of observation being none too sharp at the time, they raised a yellow flag to my consciousness: “Whoa! something’s not right here.” A second and then a third look produced the tentative conclusion that the reeding was awfully fine. I grabbed a couple of other Seated quarters from my collection and compared the edges to the “CC” specimen. In spite of the wear, it was clear that the Carson City coin indeed did have much finer reeding than the others, maybe twice as many reeds. Being the good analytical person I am, I set about counting the reeds, not as easy a task as I first envisioned. I finally settled on 152 as the apparent number of reeds.

Well, that was interesting, but I wasn’t sure what to do about it. I couldn’t find any information in my thin numismatic library, so I came to the obvious (but incorrect) conclusion that it must just be an anomaly, a one-off error of sorts. I put the coin in a stash of miscellaneous items of uncertain attribution or value and proceeded to forget about it.

I would run across the old coin on occasion over the following years and I eventually decided to look into it some more. When I checked a more current *Red Book* I discovered that a footnote had been added on the 1876-CC quarter: “Variety with fine edge reeding is scarcer than that with normally spaced reading [*sic*]” (52nd edition, 1999, page 141). This certainly was interesting and informative but it left, and raised, questions. For one, why did the *Red Book* editors choose to use the *rare* footnote rather than add a new line in the listing itself as is usually done with a significant variety? But, more importantly, I was no closer to an answer about why this fine-reeding variety

exists. So, I decided to lay the question on a top-drawer expert: Q. David Bowers. In the December 26, 2000 issue of Bowers & Merena's informational tabloid *The Coin Collector*, the venerable Mr. Bowers replied to my question:

The oddity was caused by the use of a restraining collar that had more "reeds" cut into it than usual. Reeding "counts" vary on many other United States series, some of which are mentioned by Breen. The 1876-CC was and still is quite scarce, but the demand for the "fine reeding" variety is not great, and a significant premium is not usually attached—except by a specialist in the Liberty Seated series.

It seemed I had hit information pay dirt on the cause of the fine reeding.

This subject being not so high on my hobby priority list, six years went by before I got another piece of information. In a Q & A segment on page 54 of the December 19, 2006 *Numismatic News*, someone asked, "What's the story on the 'fine reeded' 1876-CC quarter?" The Answer Man replied, "Abnormal reeding varieties turn up from time to time, and this is perhaps one of the more spectacular. There are 153 reeds, rather than the normal 119 for the CC-minted coins. The pieces are rare, and the fine reeding is known only for the one date and denomination." The Answer Man and I were only one apart on the reed count, making me feel a little less like I was seeing things. By this time, my hobby library had acquired a copy of Walter Breen's heavyweight *Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins*. In the section on the 1876-CC quarter, Breen identifies five varieties. On the following page are his numbers 4087-4091, with the pertinent characteristics.

Breen's 1876-CC Quarter Varieties

Breen No.	Reverse Type	“CC” Config.	Reed Count	Availability
4087	Type I	Small wide	Fine (153)	Rare
4088	Type I	Small close	Fine (153)	Scarce
4089	Type I	Tall (1 mm)	??	Scarce
4090	Type II	Small	113, 122 or 153	??
4091	Type II	Tall (1 mm)	Fine (153)	??

This data states that fine reeding showed up on four of the five varieties, two of which aren't tagged as scarce or rare. This seemed to be at odds with Bowers' and the Answer Man's characterization of these fine-reeded quarters as scarce or rare. If I had no information other than that in Breen, I would conclude that most of the 1876-CC quarters would have fine reeding. What to do about this apparent dilemma?

I identified my worn quarter as Breen-4091 with a Type II reverse and the expected 153 reeds. Another 1876-CC quarter resides in my collection, an XF example that I acquired as an upgrade to my eleven-piece Carson City type set. Examination showed it to be a Breen-4090 with the Type II reverse and 122 reeds. This was interesting but not very helpful, so I decided that some additional data might not hurt.

I went into Heritage Auction Galleries' auction archives and called up any instances of 1876-CC quarters selling. The helpful computer returned 200 records spread over the past eleven years. In studying this information, I quickly discovered that the grading services do not identify this variety on their slab labels. None of the 125 slabbed coins I checked had any note about reeding. Looking at the lot descriptions on two dozen lots yielded only two with any mention of reeding in the lot descriptions, though perhaps one in four did identify

whether the reverse was Type I or Type II. I certainly understand that the auction companies can't very well evaluate the reeding with the coin in a slab—Makes it a little tough on the collector, too.

It seems that all this still leaves me today (December 2010) with a pair of big questions:

1. What is the true relative rarity of the 1876-CC quarter with fine reeding?
2. My original question: Why did the Carson City coiner employ a collar with finer than usual reeding? Was it a sanctioned trial or just the experiment of the coiner? Or was the collar made in error with the fine reeding, and did Carson Mint economics require that it be used, regardless of whether it would produce coins that would, over a century later, plague an average coin collector, who happened on worn evidence of this slight diversion from the usual?

Something that Dave Bowers said stuck in my mind, that “reeding ‘counts’ vary on many other United States series.” I checked Breen for other mention of fine reeding on “CC” coins during the 1874-77 period. There was nothing else on quarters and I came up dry on the half dollars as well. But I hit pay dirt on the dimes. In the listing for the 1875-CC dime, Breen-3382 (wide “CC” in wreath), appears a note that some coins have “fine reeding, like 1876, or coarser reeds (89) as in 1871-74.” This revelation didn't answer the question. But finding the same reed pitch variability in the 1875-CC dimes, as that on some of the quarters of the following year, made the idea of a spontaneous one-off experiment seem less likely. And the prospect of an error being made in the collars for both denominations a year apart, while not out of the question, seemed unlikely as well. The prospect of an official trial sounded better all the time.

I can't escape the feeling that if my small library contained Rusty

Goe's *The Mint on Carson Street*, I might know a bit more about this. That time should come. But in the meantime, perhaps some C4OA member, who has all the answers to this, will take pity and get me straight if I'm on the wrong track, and, especially, enlighten me as to the reasons-objectives for the Carson City Mint's experiments in alternate reeding densities.

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