

The Origin of Hobo Nickels and Early Nickel Carvers



In 1913 the US Mint issued a new 5¢ coin. The obverse depicted the head of an American Indian and the reverse featured a bison or buffalo. This coin quickly came to be known as an Indian head or Buffalo nickel. When the Indian Head 5¢ was introduced in 1913, it was a natural attraction for would-be coin engravers or untalented individuals who at best did little more than deface the coins with crude scratches, punches and graffiti. The big Indian head was a radical departure from previous coin designs. The head was much larger than heads on previous coins, which gave the artists a bigger template to work on, and allowed for more fine details. The head on the new buffalo nickel was a man. The heads on nearly all earlier coins were of women (Liberty heads, Barber and Morgan heads). A male head has larger and more rugged features (nose, chin, and brow) that can be altered in many ways. Either side of the host coin could be transformed by punching, carving or engraving into limitless number of designs. Often the buffalo reverse was altered into another animal or a man with a backpack. This was the origin of what we today call hobo nickels.

We're not really sure how the name "hobo nickel" came into common use to describe such altered coins. Among the possible explanations is one from World War I. More than three million American soldiers passed through Hoboken, New

Jersey, the prime port of embarkation for the American Expeditionary Forces. Oftentimes, to pass the down time in military camps, some soldiers had picked up the popular hobby of carving designs into the new Indian head nickels. Although much appreciated today, the nickels at the time were considered debased and worthless as money. Many of these "hobo nickels" ultimately showed up in jars in the many bars around Hoboken after the soldiers had pulled them out for a few laughs from the bartender. Many of these nickels featured a rendition of the Kaiser. There is another source which may have added the name "hobo nickel" to our vocabulary. During the Great Depression homeless and out of work men traveled the countryside, often hiding in train cars, as they attempted to find seasonal work. Some of these itinerate workers, dubbed hobos, would carve designs on an Indian Head nickel and then trade them for a meal or place to spend the night or just something to do to while away the hours in a hobo jungle. These hobos used a simple pocket



knife or nails, perhaps a few punches fashioned out of old files or other tools, and a hammer to create a design. The standard hobo nickel has the Indian's head altered into a man wearing a rounded derby

style hat, with a beard, ear, and collar(s). Nicer specimens may have the profile changed, and possibly a cigar, cigarette, or wording added. Although usually referred to as "hobo nickels," they are also sometimes referred to as "reworked," "transformed," "bum nickels," "trench art," or "prisoner nickels."



Nearly all the "old" or classic hobo nickels (before 1980) were made in obscurity by many hundreds of different people, not all of whom were hobos. No records were kept, and nothing contemporary appears to have been chronicled or published by the early hobo nickel makers, or reporters, or authors, on this little-known folk art practice of carving coins.

Although the names of the majority of these early carvers have been lost over time, their distinctive carving styles have made it possible to identify the works of specific individuals. The Original Hobo Nickel Society (OHNS) has provided nicknames for some of these artists. One of the better known of these is "Peanut Ear."



Carved nickels by prolific early unknown carver nicknamed "Peanut Ear"

There are a small handful of old-time carvers for whom we know their names. The Original Hobo Nickel Society (OHNS) defines a carver to be an old-time or classic nickel carver if he produced his body of work prior to 1980. In 1981 Delma (Del) K. Romines published a series of articles about hobo nickels in *COIN WORLD*

magazine and then published the book *HOBONICKELS* in 1982. These articles and books spawned a new generation of hobo nickel carvers, some of whom copied earlier classic designs from photos which had appeared in Del's book. A second book, *The Hobo Nickel* was published in 1996 with Del's wife, Joyce Ann Romines, listed as the author.

One of the best known early carvers was a hobo named George Washington "Bo" Hughes. "Bo" had originally been taught by another hobo carver named Bertram "Bert" Wiegand. "Bo" produced a large body of work, but carvings produced after a hand injury in 1957 were of lesser quality. Bert



Top four nickels are by George Washington "Bo" Hughes. The bottom two are by Bert Wiegand.

did not produce as large a body of work (carved nickels) as "Bo," but the ones that have survived are all of Superior (see below) quality.

The value of hobo nickels to collectors is primarily based on the quality and subject of the carving or engraving on the nickel. The better the carving, the higher price the nickel will yield. High quality older carvings generally are more desirable than contemporary carvings of similar quality. Themes other than the traditional "bearded man wearing a hat" seem to be more collectible, as are reverse carvings. Old or classic carvings on high mint state nickels are highly desirable. Carvings by Bo and Bert always command a premium.

OHNS lists five main quality designations. **CRUDE** is a poorly-made hobo nickel. **BELOW AVERAGE** is a decently-made hobo nickel, done by an artist with some limited talent. An **AVERAGE** hobo nickel is made by an artist with enough talent to create a nicely altered coin. An **ABOVE AVERAGE** specimen is a very nicely done hobo nickel by a talented artist. **SUPERIOR** renderings are a top-quality work of art by a very talented hobo nickel artist.

In 1992 The Original Hobo Nickel Society was formed for "all persons and organizations interested in original hobo nickels." The society now also supports collecting of modern or contemporary carvings, many of which are created using power assist tools and microscopes unlike the carvings of a bygone era. For more information about old and new carved and engraved coins, go to the Original Hobo Nickel Society website at www.hobonickels.org. You will find a downloadable membership form if you choose to join OHNS and participate in this amazing hobby.

