

Collecting Walking Liberty Half Dollars

By C. Joseph Sutter

Walking Liberty Half Dollars were minted from 1916 until 1947. Designed by Adolph A. Weinman, they were part of a design makeover that included the dime, quarter and half dollar. A contest was setup involving three of the most noteworthy designers of the time, Weinman, Hermon A. MacNeil and Albin Polasek. The plan was for each man to design one coin. However, Weinman's offerings were selected for two of the coins, dime and half dollar, MacNeil's was chosen for the quarter and Polasek was not picked at all. The new designs debuted in 1916 and replaced previous designs by Charles E. Barber which had been in place since 1892.

The Walking Liberty design, considered one of the most beautiful, consists of a representation of Liberty walking towards the sunset. She is draped in the American Flag and is carrying branches of laurel and oak. The word "LIBERTY" surrounds her and the motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" appears above her right leg. The reverse contains a majestic eagle with wings erect as if ready to fly standing on a rock with a mountain pine sapling extending from it. "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA" and "HALF DOLLAR" appear inside the rim and "E PLURIBUS UNUM" is in front of the tree branch.

One of the best descriptions of the symbolism in the design is found on the blue Whitman collection folders of the 1960s: "liberty is progressing in full stride toward the dawn of a new day." Her branches are "symbolical of civil and military glory. The eagle on the reverse side is fearless in spirit [sic] and conscious of his power." The sapling springing from the rock symbolizes "America". In 1916 America had not yet entered World War I, that would come in April 1917. Maybe the design of the coin was statement to the world of the potential power America could bring to the conflict.

The coin weighs 12.5 grams. It is composed of .90% silver, .36169 oz., and .10% copper. Its diameter is 30.6 mm and it has a reeded edge. It was minted at the Philadelphia, Denver and San Francisco Mints. Mint marks for Denver and San Francisco appear in two locations, on the obverse below "IN GOD WE TRUST", in 1916 and 1917, and on the reverse in the lower left area, about the "8 o'clock" position, from 1917 until 1947. The designer's initials "AW" appear under the tips of the tail feathers.

Walking Liberty Halves have very few varieties. One that is mentioned in the Guide Book of United States Coins, 2013 edition is the 1946 Double Die reverse. It is listed with a slight premium over the non-double die 1946 in lower grades, G-4 – VF-20. The premium rises sharply as the grade improves. For example in G-4 the difference is six dollars (\$20.00 vs. \$14.00) and in MS-63 the difference is \$500 (\$550.00 vs. \$50).

Several years are known to have large and small mintmark [sic] variations. San Francisco used two sizes in 1928, 1942 and 1943. In 1933 the Denver Mint went to a larger mint mark. Issues of 1934 used both sizes. While you may seek out the different sizes, no valuation premium is required.

This collection can be started on a limited budget and completed when discretionary income increases. A word of caution. [sic] The author attempted this type of collection and discovered that coins that were very expensive on a limited budget are still expensive when funds increase. However, the walking liberty half dollar is such a desirable coin that pursuing it at any income level is very enjoyable activity.