

WHEN CALIFORNIA USED MEXICAN COINS

by

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In reading the history of early California one usually concludes that virtually all trade was in the form of barter. Before Spanish settlement in 1769, and for years afterward, California's Indians received from white men glass beads, hardware, and textiles in exchange for their valuables, and later sea otter pelts of the shore and cattle hides of the prospering ranches became monetary units of foreign trade. Indeed, in the Mexican period, the "Age of the Rancheros", cowhides destined for New England's young leather industry went aboard ships similar to those described by Richard Henry Dana in his classic *Two Years Before the Mast*. These were called "California banknotes" and "leather dollars" by the Yankee traders who were making them Mexican California's chief "money crop."

Yet, long before yellow dust would give gold-rush California a worldwide fame for bullion, coins played a part in California history. Most readers familiar with the English seadog, Francis Drake, know that in his brief visit of 1579 to California he left a silver six-pence bearing his sovereign, Queen Elizabeth's image, inserted in a brass plate on which he claimed "Nova Albion" for England.¹

In 1774, Juan Bautista de Anza, Spanish pioneer, was blazing a trail northwest from Mexico to California, and near the site of today's Yuma he presented the local Indian chief, Palma, with a red ribbon "bearing a coin of his Majesty (King Charles III of Spain) of whom that image seen on it was a likeness, an honor which I was conferring upon him as a sign of the obedience which he must render to the king".²

By that time, for generations specially-minted medals or coins had been traditionally used to cinch Indian loyalty to European rulers, so California history was no exception.

Apparently the Franciscan missions of California under Spanish (1769-1822) and Mexican (1822-1846) rule must have had more coin available -- probably minted in Mexico -- than is usually thought. When Mexico ruled California, Eulalia Perez de Guillen, who lived, if we are to believe her chronology, for nearly 150 years, was cashier of San Gabriel Mission where she was in charge of its money room. There, bags of silver coins were piled all around as high as she could reach. She made all disbursements of this coin with the chief padre's approval.³ Far to the north, at Santa Clara Mission, Senorita Encarnacion Pinedo knew well the details of mission life. She recalled that at weddings a dozen coins of gold or silver were placed with the wedding ring on a plate. The padre blessed them, and the groom, after slipping the ring on his bride's finger, put the coins in her hands saying, "These coins I give thee in token of matrimony," and she replied, "And I accept them." When an altar boy held a plate beneath the bride's hands, she dropped the coins on it, donating them to the church's use.⁴

At baptism rites during the Mexican era, California godparents, always very important in lands of Spanish culture, would cast handfuls of silver coins among the people who serenaded them at the church door after their godchild's christening. Another custom required a wealthy rancho, usually a bride's father, to scatter gold among the Indians

or poor generally.⁵ No wonder the French visitor, Auguste Duhault-Cilly, when visiting Mexican California in 1827, found already well-established a custom which let Indian girls beg him for coins.⁶

In that pastoral age, before hotels existed, California's earliest travelers were given lavish and lengthy hospitality at any ranch where they stopped, and, we are told, when visitors were about to leave, they found that their host had placed a bowl of coins in their rooms for their use on the journey ahead.

William Heath Davis, active for decades in pre-American California, wrote that when his Yankee father was trading on the coast, sales were made in gold and sea otter skins. An order once was sent to Missions San Buenaventura and Santa Ynez for further supplies of coin to pay for his New England imports.⁷

In 1833, Davis himself received payment in California Cowhides, sea and land otter skins, beaver pelts," and Spanish and Mexican doubloons, which had probably been laid away for many years."⁸

Even the rancheros' often elegant clothing styles could be influenced by Mexico's coinage. Hubert H. Bancroft, pioneer historian of California, found that a rich young don in the Los Angeles of 1842 wore buttons on his jacket and breeches made of Mexican pesos, with the ubiquitous eagle design. His waistcoat, of yellow satin was set off with gold dollars as buttons.⁹

Yet, Bancroft was probably right when he said that as late as 1840 coins were scarce in California because of the fear of war with the United States, which discouraged commerce with the mother country. Men hoarded what hard cash they came by.¹⁰

This scarcity may partly account for the fact that John A. Sutter, Swiss-born immigrant to California, who in 1839 opened agricultural colonization of the Sacramento Valley, paid the local Indians who worked for him in a type of tin money he "minted." It was stamped with dots, indicating the number of the workers' days of labor. These were exchanged – at very high costs -- for Sutter's cotton cloth, trinkets, and sweetmeats!¹¹

When the gold rush almost overnight brought hundreds of thousands of people to California, many foreign coins circulated and among them, of course, was Mexico's money, but by then it was "alien."¹²

Since then, residents have occasionally discovered quite accidentally a number of Mexican coins, while professional excavators have rescued others. For example, near Oakland in the 1940's, an Independence era eight-real coin issued by José María Morelos in 1813, was dug up.¹³ One wonders whether or not it was lost in circulation in Mexican California, or dropped by a more recent "gringo" numismatist.

As the years pass, other "buried treasure" may be found, to the greater interest of coin lovers than mere money-hunters, and providing mute evidence of California's coin chests of long-past Latin days.

FOOTNOTES

1. C. G. Fink and E. P. Polushkin, *Drake's Plate of Brass Authenticated* (San Francisco, California Historical Society, 1937)..
2. Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Anza's California Expeditions* (Berkeley, 1930), II pp 39-40
3. Lon F. Chapin, *Thirty Years in Pasadena* (Los Angeles, 1929), p62
4. Charles Warren Stoddard, "Old Mission Idylls,," *Sunset*, XVIII, December, 1906, p113
5. Susanna Bryant Dakin, *The Lives of William Hartnell* (Stanford, 1949), p74.
6. Auguste Duhaut-Cilly, *Voyage autour du Monde* (Paris, 1834).
7. William Heath Davis, *Seventy-Five Years in California* (San Francisco, 1929), p.204.
8. *Ibid.*, p.10.
9. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *California Pastoral* ('San Francisco, 1888) p.388.
10. *Ibid.*, p.485.
11. E. Gould Buffum, *Six Months in the Gold Fields*. Ed. by John W.Caughey (Los Angeles, 1959 p.40.
12. See Oscar G. Schilke and Raphael E. Solomon, *America's Foreign Coins* (New York, 1964), for information on the circulation of Mexican coins in nineteenth-century United States; for foreign coins used legally in gold-rush California, consult "Changes in Coin Curiosities of Early San Francisco," *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, February 26, 1888, p.6.
13. Roy Hill, "Mexican Insurgent Provisional Coinage," *Quarterly of the California Historical Society*, XXVII, #2, June, 1948, p.132.

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