

Interview with the Nickel

Constantly circulating, the Jefferson nickel takes

time out to comment on his 2004 makeover.



RECENTLY, I managed to catch up with the widely circulating Jefferson nickel. He filled me in on his busy schedule for 2004:

MITCH SANDERS: I understand you'll be in two new releases this year, one about a big real-estate deal and the other with an action/adventure slant. What roles are you playing?

JEFFERSON NICKEL: I'm representing two important events in American expansion and exploration: the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. To mark their shared bicentennial, I'll appear as a circulating commemorative, combining my obverse portrait with two new reverse designs. The spring release features two clasped hands, symbolizing friendship between the U.S. government and Native Americans. The fall sequel features the expedition's keelboat.

MS: Is it true that the spring issue is a remake?

JN: Yes, the image actually comes from the Peace medals that Lewis and Clark presented to Native American leaders.

MS: How did you get involved with this project?

JN: It really makes sense from a historical perspective. Thomas Jefferson arranged the Louisiana Purchase and organized the Lewis and Clark Expedition, so I was a natural choice for the part.

MS: What other projects do you have lined up?

JN: I'm planning to continue as a circulating commemorative in 2005, possibly with a new portrait and reverses. The reverse featuring Jeffer-

son's home, Monticello, is on hiatus right now. It'll be back in 2006, maybe with a revamped image.

MS: Would you say that this new role is a major change for you?

JN: Oh, definitely. I debuted back in 1938, and now I'm glad to show some new sides to my work. My only other design change was minor—the addition of designer Felix Schlag's initials to the obverse in 1966.

MS: You were close to Schlag, weren't you?

JN: Yes, we went through a lot together. The open design competition for the Jefferson/Monticello coin was quite an audition, with nearly 400 entries! And Felix had to edit the reverse extensively before production.

MS: Then, soon afterward, you served the United States during World War II.

JN: Yes, I contributed on the home front. I'm usually 75-percent copper and 25-percent nickel, but conserving nickel was critical for the war effort. So, from late 1942 through 1945, I was 56-percent copper, 35-percent silver and 9-percent manganese—a "nickel" without nickel.

MS: I understand that you originally hail from three cities—Philadelphia, Denver and San Francisco.

JN: That's right, I've always been produced at those cities. Mintmarks for Denver ("D") and San Francisco ("S") appeared to the right of Monticello until 1964, and below the date since 1968. All wartime nickels had large mintmarks above Monticello's dome to facilitate identification and possible withdrawal later. These actually were the first American coins with Philadelphia mintmarks ("P"), which returned in 1980.

MS: Your fans seem to appreciate



▲ The Jefferson nickel offers some thoughts on the secret of his success and longevity.

that all of your releases, from blockbusters to more obscure pieces, are widely available.

JN: That's because most of my date/mintmark combinations were made in large quantities, and low-mintage specimens typically were saved by collectors. So, most pieces can be found in circulation or purchased very inexpensively. Only a few cost more than several dollars, even in nice, uncirculated condition. And the key dates—1939-D, 1939-S, 1942-D and 1950-D—still are quite affordable.

MS: What do you consider your best performances?

JN: "Full step" coins have especially strong strikes, clearly showing ©

Monticello's six steps. Also, proof specimens made for collectors are very nicely done.

MS: People also enjoy your bloopers. How do you feel about that?

JN: I try not to take myself too seriously, because any coin series has its share of die varieties. My biggest blunder was the 1943-P with a "2" under the "3." There also are coins with doubled design elements or overlapping mintmarks.

MS: One last question—what motivates you as a storyteller?

JN: Well, I want to be accessible in a variety of ways. There are many collecting possibilities, from a basic type set to a complete date/mintmark collection, and advanced areas like die varieties and full-step pieces. Overall, I think the most important thing is to do what coins have always done: tell interesting stories in an appealing way.

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