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Early Gold Coins

After the discovery of gold in California, assayers (men who analyzed the ores) were needed, and they came—good and bad. The assayers melted the gold, cleaned it of its “dross”, or dirt and impurities, cast it into bars or ingots, and tested it for fineness or purity. The better assayers then reported the true value to the owners.

After the assayers came, miners and merchants knew a little more definitely than before the value of their gold. But what were they to do with the bar? On account of the scarcity of money the brokers seldom gave the miners coin for them. Only large debts could be paid with them.

So the logical thing to do was to make the melted gold as much like money as possible. The assayers did this. They cast many small slabs and Ingots and stamped upon them a definite value according to their weight and purity, but not their full assay value. These ingots, especially the smaller ones, then passed from hand to hand as money.

From this it was only a step to the making of still smaller pieces of the size and shape of actual money and with designs stamped upon them often closely resembled those of gold coins of the United States. Thus came into being the curious private coinage of California of 1849 to 1855—coins which are now rare and highly valued by collectors. One would think it strange to be offered as money a coin with a Goddess of Liberty and “Ten Dollars” stamped upon one and the name “Norris, Gregg & Norris” upon the other. This private mintage was not a counterfeit coin, for there was little effort to deceive. Nor was its manufacture unlawful. Up to that time the right of private persons to issue coins had not been seriously questioned by the government.

In the centennial issue of “The Mother Lode Country,” a geographic guidebook along Highway 49, published by Division of Mines of the State of California, we find this reference: “Now completely abandoned, Mt. Ophir is sometimes said to be the site of California’s first mint. Although it is probably true that here were “coined” the famous octagonal \$50 gold slugs, the Pacific Co, in San Francisco seems to have minted the first gold coins; these were stamped with the date 1849. In 1854 when the first United States Mint was established in

California, at least a dozen private coiners were at work. Of these Moffett and Co. were the largest.

Gold pieces bearing private stamp had been made as early as 1830 by Templeton Reid, an assayer near the mines in Georgia, and by Christopher Bechtler in North Carolina. With their “mints” both of these men came to California and were among the first to “make money” in the new gold fields.

Early in 1849 the private issues began to appear. The newspaper Alta California, of May 3, 1849, mentions a five-dollar gold piece struck at Benicia City. This seems to have been the first coin made of California gold.

Moffett and Co. issued rectangular ingots of gold which circulated in place of circular coins; and in July or August, 1849, a circular \$10 piece appeared bearing their stamp, the first of that denomination to be struck in California.

The closing months of 1849 saw a quality of private gold. “Every big company coming from the East,” says one pioneer as quoted by Theodore S. Solomons, “bought machinery for coining.” Many of the issues were of great varying value, and some bore interesting and original designs. Others followed the types of the regular coinage very closely. About 50 California coins of private mintage are listed in the collection of the United States Mint. Many others are known to collectors.

William Heath Davis who wrote “Seventy-five Years in California” and was an early pioneer, estimated that \$80,000 to \$100,000 in gold was taken from the mines in the first two years. Abel Stearns, a resident of Los Angeles, estimated that \$4,000 to \$8,000 a year was extracted prior to 1847. Hubert Howe Bancroft, the historian of early California, states that by December, 1843, 2,000 ounces had been taken, valued at \$38,000.

As a matter of record, the first California gold dust sent to a United States Mint belonged to Don Abel Stearns. On July 8, 1843, his package of 18.34 ounces of placer gold was deposited in the Philadelphia mint by Alfred Robinson. The gold had been transported around the Horn and at the mint brought somewhat over \$19 an ounce.

(To be continued)