

THE 1920 WILSON DOLLAR

THE SERENDIPITOUS DISCOVERY OF ITS ORIGINAL OBTVERSE DIE & THE MEDAL'S 2020 REINCARNATION

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IN 1920, THE United States Mint produced a medal to commemorate the opening of the Manila Mint in the Philippines. The medal is popularly known today by collectors as the “Wilson Dollar” a name derived from the prominent portrait of then U.S. President Woodrow Wilson on the obverse of the medal. One-hundred years later, medals struck utilizing an original obverse die discovered by an American Army officer in 1945 among the war-ravaged ruins of the Manila Mint were used for a medal commemorating the centennial of the Manila mint opening.

Ironically, the latter series has its genesis in the war-ravaged ruins of the mint, but, with the fortunate discovery of the obverse die among the debris and ashes of the building, a new medal arose. This article examines both the original medal and the 2020 commemorative medal, as well as the story of the die’s survival and fortuitous emergence on the numismatic stage at the 2012 FUN Show, as well as the use of the original die to strike the medals in 2020.

Today, the 1920 medal commemorating the opening of the Manila Mint is commonly known in the hobby as the Wilson Dollar, which is somewhat of a misnomer, as it is not a legal tender issue, nor does it carry any reference to a denomination. Indeed, even the “Dollar” title is confusing, as one could argue that it should have been called the “Wilson Peso,” given that the currency of the United States Philippines was the peso and not the dollar. In any event, this is a handsome medal struck to commemorate the opening of the Manila Mint on July 15, 1920.

To fully appreciate the medal, the Manila Mint’s existence requires some background history. Following the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Islands were ceded to the

United States by the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898. The treaty was negotiated on terms favorable to the United States, which allowed it temporary control of Cuba, and ceded ownership of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. The cession of the Philippines involved payment of \$20 million to Spain. Filipinos, unable to obtain complete independence from the United States after the war, started guerrilla warfare on February 4, 1899, which only ended in April of 1902, slightly a year after the capture of their leader, Emilio Aguinaldo on March 23, 1901.

In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt signed a bill authorizing a separate coinage for the Philippine islands. The designs and denominations served multiple purposes: showing United States sovereignty over the islands, maintaining the Peso denomination already familiar to the islands, and replacing the Spanish Colonial money that was then circulating.

As a result of that legislation, starting in 1903 coins were struck in denominations of 1/2 centavo (1903-1908), 1 centavo, 5 centavos, 10 centavos, 20 centavos, 50 centavos and 1 peso to replace Spanish colonial issues then in use. Unlike the previous Spanish issues, the United States did not strike any gold for use in coinage for the Philippines. Thus, from 1903 to 1945, the U.S. Philippines had its own unique series of coinage.

While earlier coinage of the U.S. Philippines was struck in the United States and then shipped to the Philippines, the demand of commerce led to the reopening of a former Spanish mint in Manila, previously known as “Casa de Moneda,” which was commemorated with a medal, now known as the Wilson Dollar, to celebrate its opening. The Manila Mint is unique in that it was

the only branch mint of the United States established overseas. It operated from 1920 until the Philippines were invaded and conquered by the Japanese in 1942.

The Manila Mint was not exactly a “new” mint, as it was originally operated by the Spanish, but it had been closed since the late 1800s. After the transfer to American sovereignty, the demand for locally minted coinage had increased, requiring the opening of a local minting facility. The building was refurbished and modern. Electronically operated coining equipment made in the Philadelphia Mint machine shop was sent to the islands starting in June 1919. The equipment travelled from Philadelphia by shipment to Manila through the new Panama Canal. The mint was built in the Intendencia building, which also housed the offices and hall of the Senate and the offices and vaults of the Philippine Treasury.

When the Manila Mint opened it became the first (and to date only) U.S. branch mint located outside the continental United States. Coins struck at the Manila Mint sport a “M” mintmark.

The commonly called Wilson Dollar was the official medal produced to mark the formal opening of the Manila Mint. In addition, it was one of the first items produced at the Mint. Some older reference sources, such as Neil Shafer and Aldo Basso, credit Clifford Hewitt as the designer of the medal. Hewitt was the chief engraver at the U.S. Mint and was responsible for the installation of mint equipment and machinery at the Manila Mint, including instructing the Filipino employees in its operation. The obverse of the medal features a bust of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson facing left. Wilson was President at the time of the opening of the Manila Mint. The words “PRESIDENT OF THE

UNITED STATES” appears above the portrait around the beaded border rim. However, more contemporary sources credit the design to George Morgan, perhaps best known to collectors as the designer of the Morgan dollar (1878-1921) who is also known to have executed the dies at the Philadelphia Mint. Morgan’s incuse initial “M” appears on both sides of the medal. On the obverse, it appears on the shoulder’s truncation.

The reverse of the medal features a representation of “Juno Moneta” kneeling and holding a balance scale in her upraised right arm, while watching over a young boy pouring coin planchets from a small cornucopia into a coining press. Not a scene one typically encounters at the mint, but an allegorical representation, with the naked child symbolizing the Philippines. The inscription “TO COMMEMORATE THE OPENING OF THE MINT” around the medal’s edge, with “MANILA P.I.” in the exergue, and beneath that, within an incuse oval, the date “1920.” Morgan’s initial, an incuse “M,” is found just to the right of the left foot.

The reverse design is also similarly credited to Clifford Hewitt in older reference books, although contemporary sources credit George Morgan, who also produced the dies at the Philadelphia Mint. This design is reminiscent of mosaics that adorned the Philadelphia Mint and is also a design theme that appeared on some previously issued Annual Assay medals. For the Wilson Dollar, the reverse design did not strike well, and specimens are usually found with a somewhat weak-looking strike, usually on the shoulder of the Juno Moneta.

This official medal was produced in silver and bronze for sale to collectors. The original issue price for the silver medal was \$1. The bronze version sold for 50 cents.

A total of 2,200 pieces were struck on silver planchets identical to those used on United States silver dollars of the period. The silver issues are composed of .900 silver, .100 copper. The bronze issue had a higher mintage of 3,700 examples struck.

In addition, a small number of gold pieces were struck. The gold medals were reportedly made solely for presentation purposes and was not offered for sale. Older reference books report that five gold pieces were struck, one was presented to President Wilson, another to the U.S. Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker and three were retained in the Philippines. One is known to exist in the Money Museum of the Bangko Sentral ng Philipinas. Moreover, according to “So-Called Dollar” expert Jeff Shevlin, contemporary findings indicate that were more than five struck, and Shevlin claims that there are seven gold Wilson Dollars known today, so perhaps extra medals were made either for sale, or for some unreported

presentation. In recent years, five examples have come to auction, with the finest known — graded MS62 by Numismatic Guaranty Corporation (NGC) — bringing \$74,750 in 2008. A sixth example was certified by NGC in 2017.

In addition, William Swoger, in his 2008 book, *National Commemorative Medals of the United States of America*, notes the possibility of additional gold medals. Swoger also reports that a medal was struck in vermeil (gold on silver). Swoger does not report a mintage figure for the vermeil issue, although a photograph is included. Similarly, Swoger relays a report from Tony Spicer of a gilt example, which Swoger lists, but also notes that the gilt medal may not exist.

The “gilt” example reported by Swoger may actually be a brass example that NGC certified, possibly a trial strike or pattern, that didn’t have the “M” on Wilson’s shoulder. This piece brought over \$7,000 in Heritage’s January FUN 2015 auction. All the medal varieties were struck in coin rotation, plain edges, and measure 38.1 millimeters.

The Wilson medal is well known and coveted by collectors of several popularly collected series: So-Called Dollar collectors following the Hibler and Kappen book will find these medals designated HK-449 (Silver), HK-450 (Bronze) and HK-1031 (Gold). Collectors specializing in United States Mint medals, and similarly seek out examples of this medal.

Collectors of United States issues of the Philippines (1903-1945) typically add this official medal commemorating the opening of the Manila Mint to their collections. In addition, for a great many years, due to the popularity of the Wayte Raymond United States commemorative coin holders, collectors of United States commemorative coins have included the Wilson Dollar (along with the Norse Centennial Medal and the Pony Express Medal) along with their sets of United States commemoratives. Thus, the medal has collectors of several different series seeking examples for their collections.

It should also be noted that the Wilson Dollar is featured prominently in Whitman’s “Mega Red” version of *A Guide Book of United States Coins*, the expanded version of the “Red Book,” where the publisher devotes more than a page and a half to the Wilson Dollar. According to Dennis Tucker, publisher at Whitman Publishing, this “is a measure of the importance of this intriguing, richly layered, and many-storied medal.”

The Manila Mint produced coins for circulation in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, and 50 centavos from 1920 to 1922 and then again from 1925 to 1941. The Mint also produced three commemorative coins to celebrate the Commonwealth consisting of both the 1 peso and 50 centavos denominations. In addition, it produced special

coinage for use in the Culion Leper Colony. The Manila Mint operated until troops from the Empire of Japan invaded and occupied the Philippines during World War II.

The imminent Japanese invasion resulted in an organized effort by the retreating Americans and Filipinos to prevent gold and silver, along with paper currency, from being captured by the enemy. In 1942, this involved sending gold out of the country for safe keeping, burning paper currency, and the dumping of about 16 million pesos in silver coin, which were crated and thrown into the sea near Corregidor to avoid seizure by the invading forces of Japan. Included in this mix were a substantial number of unsold silver and bronze Wilson Dollars.

It is estimated that since the end of the World War II, well over 10 million pesos have been salvaged, along with a large but undocumented number of Wilson medals in both silver and bronze, and examples of the 1936 three-coin set of Commonwealth silver commemoratives.

Over the years, savage efforts have recovered a number of coins and medals, although the majority of the coins and medals recovered are heavily corroded from their decades long immersion in salt water. Sea-salvaged specimens of these battle-weary medals, commemorating an often forgotten American branch mint that itself was a casualty of the war, are today relatively common on online auction sites such as eBay.

During the Japanese occupation, the Manila Mint was operated under Japanese control, although no Japanese occupation coins were issued. No United States coins were ever struck at the Manila Mint again, although U.S. coins in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, and 50 centavos were minted in large quantities for the Philippines at the Philadelphia, Denver, and San Francisco Mints in 1944 and 1945. The Manila Mint Building itself was largely destroyed during the American-Filipino liberation of Manila in 1945.

Ironically, at the moment the Manila Mint lay in ruins, a young U.S. Army Warrant Officer, Lloyd V. Spriggle, happened upon the abandoned Manila Mint as the battle to liberate Manila raged between February 3 to March 3, 1945. The Manila Mint was in shambles, with its doors blown open when the then-32-year-old Spriggle found the obverse die of a medal that commemorated the Mint’s opening 25 years earlier. The die featured a portrait of President Woodrow Wilson, who had been elected president the year Spriggle was born. According to Erik Martin of *Coin World*, who broke the story, the elder Spriggle provided to his family a typewritten account of his service during World War II, which his grandson, Shawn Spriggle, later shared with *Coin World*.

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According to Lloyd Spriggle's typewritten account:

"The [Manila] mint next to the fort was a shambles and wide open. While there was no gold in it, there were several piles of silver coin stock in bars about 18 inches long 12 inches wide and three-eighth [sic] inches thick. Some of the boys picked up a few for souvenirs, but I figured they belonged to the Filipino's [sic] and picked up a die that was used to stamp a Wilson medal instead. The mint was left for several weeks before a guard was put on it and the Filipinos themselves raided it quite often. They were great on filigree work and used it as a base for that."

Lloyd Spriggle didn't record the date that he found the die, and he subsequently brought the die home to the states. Interestingly, Lloyd and several generations of Spriggles reportedly used it as a paperweight without ever knowing its historic numismatic significance.

The obverse die was in the possession of WWII veteran Lloyd V. Spriggle from his discovery of it in 1945 until his death in 1993, then by his son, Keith Spriggle, a Vietnam veteran who passed away in 2008. It then passed to Keith's son, Shawn Spriggle,

For the numismatic world, the survival and existence of the obverse die was eventually brought to light by his grandson, Shawn Spriggle, who brought it to the Florida United Numismatists (FUN) show on January 5, 2012. There, Erik Martin of *Coin World* reported that noted error expert Fred Weinburg and rare coin dealer John Dannreuther examined the piece and opined that it was a genuine United States medal die for the obverse of the 1920 Wilson Dollar.

The die was eventually sold by the younger Spriggle to Jeff Shevlin, a dealer and specialist in So-Called Dollars at one of the American Numismatic Shows held in Chicago.

The purchase by Shevlin proved fortuitous, as the acquisition of the die brought to life the possibility of a new striking. At the Philippines Collector Forum held on August 15, 2019 in conjunction with the American Numismatic Association convention in Rosemont, Dennis Tucker, editor of the "Red Book," announced that Shevlin would be producing restrikes of the Wilson Dollar struck utilizing the original obverse die to commemorate the Manila Mint's centennial in 2020. The story on how the die was discovered was also presented to those in attendance. Related to the centennial of the Manila Mint, it was also announced that a special edition of the 2020 "Red Book" would be produced, commemorating the centennial. This special "Red Book" (*right*) was issued in May 2020 and features the reverse of the Wilson Dollar on the

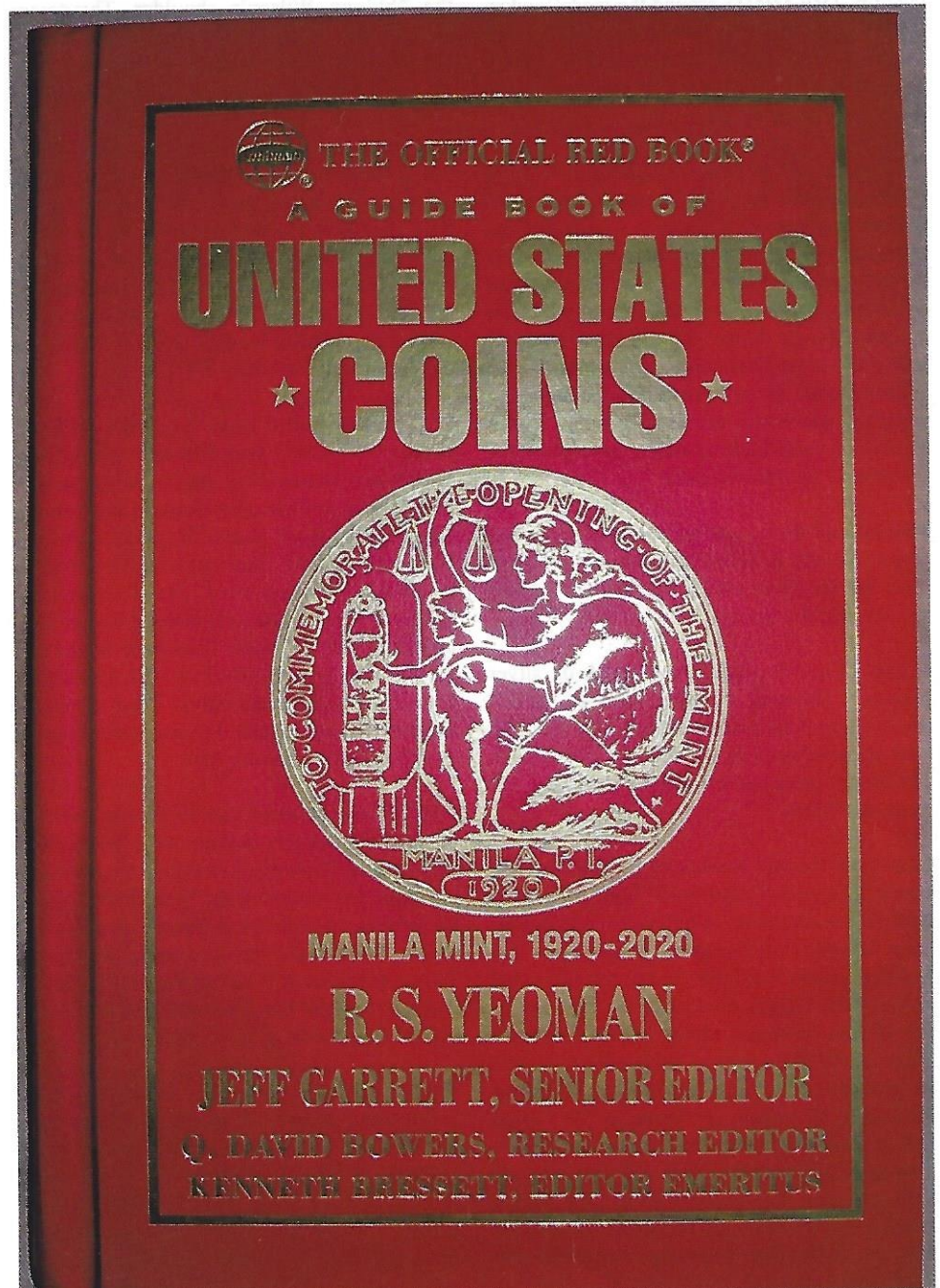
cover. Only 250 copies of this special edition were produced, of which 24 disappeared in transit, and another 24 were damaged with badly smudged covers.

The following year, on August 24, 2020, in commemoration of the centennial of the Manila Mint opening, the Wilson obverse die, itself now over a hundred years old, was paired with a new reverse die to mark the centennial of the Manila Mint. The new reverse design, sculpted by Daniel Carr with design specifications from Jeff Shevlin, faithfully reproduces the original 1920 reverse, with the exception of a new legend, which reads "TO COMMEMORATE THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE MINT" and date "2020" (*opposite page, lower right*).

According to Shevlin, the original obverse die did not require any restoration or polishing. It

was paired with the new reverse, and used to strike silver, silver with gold overlay, bronze, aluminum, nickel, and brass examples. The initial striking of the medals occurred on August 24, 2020 at the Moonlight Mint located in Loveland, Colorado, and Shevlin was present and participated in the minting along with Daniel Carr. Although the Moonlight Mint has its own website offering its mint products, the Wilson Dollar Centennial issue was offered by Shevlin through his website www.SoCalledDollar.com.

The silver issue was offered at \$100, with the silver bearing selective gold overlay on the Wilson portrait for \$125 (*opposite page, center right*). The silver issues have edge lettering that reads "ONE TROY OUNCE .999 SILVER." The bronze medal was issued at \$50 and the aluminum, nickel, and brass examples were available for \$35. In addition, gold examples,



containing 50 grams of gold, were produced upon special order for \$5,000. At the time of this writing five gold examples have been produced. The medals all have a smooth edge, with the silver issues sporting the above referenced edge inscription and the gold medals similarly bearing an edge inscription "50 GRAMS 999+ GOLD."

The silver medals were the first to be produced. After striking the first 40 silver examples in medal rotation, it was remembered that the original Wilson Dollar was struck in coin rotation, thus they stopped the press and struck all the remaining silver and other medal compositions in coin rotation. Other than the inscriptions on the silver and gold examples, none of Shevlin's other medal varieties produced for sale contained any edge inscriptions.

Mintages for the Wilson Dollar 100-Year Anniversary medals are as follows:

- Gold - 20
- Silver - 202
- G-P - 140
- Copper - 180
- Brass - 193
- Nickel - 184
- Aluminum - 168
- White metal - 7 (*produced with aluminum*)

As of February 2021, Shevlin completed the mintage of the Wilson/Manila Mint medals, with no plans to strike further examples. As to the original Wilson die, Shevlin plans to keep it as part of his extensive collection of So-Called Dollars and related material.

An additional medal utilizing the Wilson obverse die merits attention here as well. The Wilson obverse die was used for a very low-mintage group of medals commemorating So-Called Dollar gatherings, these medals were produced in silver, silver with gold overlay, copper, brass, aluminum, and white metal and were also struck on August 24, 2020. The reverse design commemorates three gatherings of a group dedicated to collecting So-Called Dollars. The outer inscription reads "SO-CALLED DOLLAR FELLOWSHIP" and the bottom rim has the inscription "RENO, NEVADA" (*upper right*). The design consists of three independent circles, within each one, inscriptions relevant to the meeting dates of the organization in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The "gathering" reverse was also paired with the Manila Mint Centennial medal reverse design.

Shevlin reports identical mintages of the following medal types for both the Wilson Obverse and the Manila Mint Centennial reverse paired with the "gathering" design. This includes 15 pieces struck in silver and another 15 pieces made minted in silver with selected gold overlay. Additional pieces were struck composed of copper, brass, aluminum and white metal, with each of these having a mintage of 30 of each type. All

were struck in coin rotation. These medals were offered on Shevlin's website for sale as well, with the original issue price of the silver at \$65, the silver with gold overlay at \$125, the bronze at \$20, and the remaining base medals examples at \$35 each. The silver issues have edge lettering that reads "ONE TROY OUNCE .999 SILVER."

Shevlin also produced a small run of antiqued brass examples with the Wilson obverse, which were numbered 1-14 that he gave out to the attendees of his annual "So-Called Dollar Fellowship Gathering."

Mintages for the Wilson Dollar Gathering Medals:

	<i>Obv. Wilson</i>	<i>Rev. Manila Mint</i>
Silver	27	27
G-P	12	12
Copper	30	30
Brass	44	30
White Metal	30	30
Aluminum	30	30
Nickel	7	

Lastly, worth noting, Shevlin produced and offered for sale a number of unique overstrikes, novodels, and errors utilizing the Wilson obverse die, with overstrikes employing Morgan and Peace dollars, Philippines one pesos, as well as other United States coins.

The 1920 Wilson Dollar was struck to celebrate the birth of a new mint. It is a historic medal that is avidly collected as part of a surprisingly large number of different collecting specialties. The 2020 Manila Mint Centennial medals, which were struck using the original obverse die of the Wilson Dollar, offer a tangible link to the past, a unique story of survival, and commemorates the centennial of an important part of United States as well as Philippines history.

Spanning 100 years and outlasting the building it commemorates, the use of the original obverse die for new medals commemorating the Manila Mint centennial offer an affordable and attractive collectable with an interesting back story. For collectors interested in an attractive medal commemorating the opening of America's only overseas mint, the 1920 Wilson Dollar and its 2020 Centennial counterpart can make for a thoughtful addition to one's collection. ...

