

# A Token of Our Love

by **David Carpenter**, SWCS Director / Member [Images not to scale.]

Coin collectors reading this newsletter no doubt love coins. And coins have been given as gifts and expressions of love for longer than you'd expect. Many modern mints offer a host of Non-Circulating Legal Tender (NCLT) coins specifically for that purpose: to mark anniversaries, weddings, and births to name a few. Some are even explicitly designed with love and heart themes, such as Royal Canadian Mint's recent *Celebrate Love* coin. →



Canada 2023 Celebrate Love, Proof 20 Dollars designed by Jori van der Linde, QEII / Infinity Heart, 1-oz 99.99% silver, gold-plated highlights, 31.39 g, 38 mm, mintage 10,000. [Image by Royal Canadian Mint.]

In the United Kingdom, a silver sixpence was thin enough that it could be bent into a curl with a person's bare hands, and became known as a bender. Originally it had significant value, enough that presenting one to a sweetheart would have been quite the gesture. Consider that the Royal Mint points out that one could drink in a tavern all day for a tuppence (two pence), so for the value of a "bender" one could get quite drunk. This is supposedly the origin of the term "going on a bender". →



A post-medieval silver penny of Charles I, probably bent to form a love token, dating between 1625–49. [Image from Museum of London courtesy of Portable The Antiquities Scheme Unique ID: LON-8BF5A4 Creative Commons by attribute licence.]

If a bender was given to a sweetheart and accepted, the suitor was successful. If rejected, it might be tossed into a field or worse. Many benders have been un-earthed on the banks of the Thames river, according to the Museum of London... each one the result of unreturned affection. Also go to this link for a related *Guardian* story, [https://www.coinbooks.org/v21/esylum\\_v21n08a33.html](https://www.coinbooks.org/v21/esylum_v21n08a33.html).

At the *right* is a bent coin dug up this way, this one a silver penny. It's unclear whether this represented a smaller level of affection than a sixpence or perhaps a smaller available income. Either way, someone gave it the old heave-ho.

These days when we speak of Love Tokens, we usually mean something akin to a "Hobo Nickel": that is, a legitimate coin-of-the-realm that has been somehow defaced or engraved, sometimes with a sweetheart's initials. Many were rubbed or sanded down to a uniface coin, and then engraved on the flat side. In the example with "RWH" initials engraved, you can see slanted marks possibly left over from the sanding process. It should be noted that putting holes in a piece and smoothing down a side to engrave it, reduces the original precious metal content of the piece.



USA 1876 holed, Seated-Liberty 90% silver dime, RWH love token, 17.9 mm. [Image by Etsy Minnesota seller DisorderlyGirl item 26199.]



Great Britain 1838-1887 sterling silver (92.5%) uncrowned 1st portrait Victoria 3-Pence (Maundy), RG, Crane, holed love token, 16 mm. [Image by eBay / Facebook seller American 123vic1.]

There are plenty of examples of these love tokens and related items at the Love Token Society's website <http://lovetokensociety.com/>, plus a great deal of history and interesting context.

Closely related to Love Tokens are Mizpah tokens and Mizpah jewelry. The word *Mizpah* comes from a story in the Jewish Torah (known to Christians as the Bible's "Old Testament") about Jacob and Laban. In short, Jacob had worked for Laban in order to earn the right to marry his daughter Rachel, and Laban had altered their deal and tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah first. When Jacob eventually fled with his wives, having had enough, Laban caught up with him and suggested they together make a covenant under God, as neither could trust the other. A pile of stones

was heaped up and given names in both Laban's and Jacob's languages that roughly mean "witness heap". A pillar was added that was called *Mizpah* meaning "watchpost" or "watchtower", signifying that God would ensure that both kept up their end of the deal.

Mizpah jewelry has been made for Jews and Christians, sometimes simply bearing the word "Mizpah". Over time, Mizpah has taken on a meaning of God watching over a loved one. Sometimes Mizpah jewelry is inscribed with the words "May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another." In other words, the jewelry acts as both a blessing and a love token of sorts given to a loved one during a long separation. →

It follows naturally that some of these Mizpah tokens would be made in the same manner as love tokens, and this turns out to be the case... like the initials engraved on the love token coins discussed earlier, we find the word



Sterling Silver (92.5%) Raised Flowers and Bird beaded brooch (38 x 25 mm) with C clasp, legend "MIZPAH • THE LORD WATCH BETWEEN ME AND THEE WHEN WE ARE ABSENT ONE FROM ANOTHER". [Image by Etsy seller Joanne Chreptyk (JosVintageGoods) owner of Jo's Vintage Goods, Coldwater, Ontario, Canada.]

Mizpah used the same way. ↓

Some mizpah tokens and jewelry are split into two parts that are meant to be worn by two people, and then joined back up when the two individuals do in fact meet again, not unlike certain "sweetheart" and "best friends" charms. This is popular with military personnel where the person wears half and their spouse wears the other half.



Great Britain 1893-1901 Sterling silver (92.5%), holed 3<sup>rd</sup> portrait Victoria 3-Pence (Maundy) Mizpah token, 16 mm. [Image by Instagram / Website seller No. 4 Vintage <https://www.no4vintage.com/>.]



Great Britain 1892 Sterling silver (92.5%), holed 2<sup>nd</sup> portrait Victoria 3-Pence (Maundy) Mizpah token, 16 mm. [Image by Instagram / Website seller No. 4 Vintage <https://www.no4vintage.com/>.]



MIZPAH COIN (...) (MFD STERLING .925), double looped keychain / pendant. Possibly military person carried a half as spouse or lover hence the wear (edges worn down so no longer fits snug with other half), and the other half carried by a person not going into battle. [Image by code 602 (Justia) defunct Consign It Now (Jennifer Williston, LY) eBay user consignitnow.]



Keychain for Lovers with Mizpah coin, Brazil, copper-nickel, 1920 400-Reis split. [Image by Number One Money Man eBay American seller number1moneyman.]



Couples Heart Pendant with Cutout Heart with rope chains, 22 x 25 mm, Sterling silver (21-gauge) with yellow gold-plating (24-gauge), manufactured pieces. [Image by Alison & Ivy Crafts, Chicago, Illinois, <https://www.alisonandivy.com/>.]

Italy, Catholic, MIZPAH COIN, GENESIS 31.49 (...), silver-plated copper-nickel, in two looped-halves (manufactured). This is a donation piece, as 10% of the sale goes to fund St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. [Image by Midwest Find Products eBay user thatoneguy77.]



Another sub-genre of the love token are so-called "convict tokens". These are historical artifacts that were engraved by prisoners being sent to penal colonies. Usually convict tokens can be identified and traced to actual

prison records and matched to a person. An example up for auction as I write this dates from 1818 and is engraved on both sides by Joseph Blake, a convict sentenced to death but instead deported to Van Diemen's Land. Van Diemen's Land, (1642-1855), the southeastern Australian island colony that became the commonwealth state of Tasmania. Between 1803 and 1853 approximately 75,000 convicts served time in Van Diemen's Land. Of these 67,000 were shipped from British and Irish ports and the remainder were either locally convicted, or transported from other British colonies.

A search of eBay and Etsy will show that modern Hobo nickels and love tokens are making something of a comeback. Love tokens in particular had peaked and waned during the Victorian era, probably due to the proliferation of lockets with photographs. Some amazing art is being done on coins as artists pick up the craft, and it's worth doing a search and seeing what's out there. With the Hobo pieces, due to spacial issues, artists have been using Quarter-, Half-, and One-Dollar coins, but a few jewellers, probably making children's pieces, are using Half-Dimes (Nickels). Of course, the original Hobo Nickels (USA Buffalo Nickels) remain the foundation of this artistry.

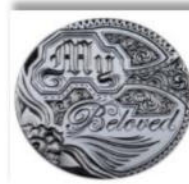


Noble Numismatics PTY. Ltd. , Auction 133, 25-28 Jul 2023, Lot 1287 (est. value \$1,000AUD), copper Convict Love Token pertaining to Joseph Blake, Convict, sentenced to death but reduced to deportation to Van Diemens Land in 1818. Legend: "a gift to you / from me a friend / whose love for you / shall never end / Maria Knott / 1818" / "when this you / see Rem me when / In a foreign country / Blake" underneath a heart with two arrows piercing it. [Image courtesy of Jim Noble, owner of Noble Numismatics PTY. Ltd.]



"Y" Love Token on 2010P Liberty Dime. [Image by Artesanias Dimas www.dimassm.es.]

DR + MD Love Token carved on a US 1969 Kennedy Half Dollar [Image by The Hobo Nickel Shop.]



Current-day artist Andy Gonzales engraved this My Beloved design on a 1900 Liberty nickel. [Image from Collectors' Weekly via Love Token Society.]



Gonzales engraved this My Beloved design on a 1902 Liberty nickel. [Image from Collectors' Weekly via Love Token Society.]



↑ TO MOTHER FROM OTTO, Spinner Pin—Love Token made from a USA Eagle Half Dollar, could be worn either side facing outward. [Image from Collectors' Weekly via Love Token Society.]



Roman Booteen is a master of crafting hobo nickels. He carves intricate designs featuring icons from pop culture, literature, history and film onto American nickels and silver dollars. Based in Yekaterinburg, the fourth largest city in Russia, Booteen's incredible one-off coins sell for hundreds to thousands of dollars each. In 2017, his 1921 Morgan Dollar Hobo Nickel (Trap With The Golden Bait) was sold for a staggering \$10,101USD. Booteen experienced an influx of requests from excited collectors wanting a piece of modern art history. Sadly, it was a limited edition of one, but it became an overnight icon. However he made other mechanical pieces. [Artist's images.]

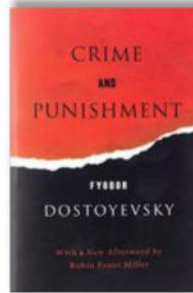


←This Roman Booteen 1921 Morgan Dollar piece also sold for over \$10,000USD. It's a depiction of a knight and a woman with the knight's attention toward a wall with etchings all-around a darkened window. However, Booteen has allowed for the knight's sword to be removed from its sheath, (he removes the sword with a pair of tweezers) as the sword doubles as a key, which unlocks what is behind the wall. [Artist's Instagram images.]

Is the giving of love tokens a lost art? It would seem not. In 2021 I heard a great story on the *CoinWorld* podcast.



ALEXANDER III THE GREAT AR silver tetradrachm. Babylon, lifetime issue struck 325-323 BC, under the satrapal authority of Stamenes, or Archon. Head of Herakles right, wearing lion skin. Reverse - ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ. Zeus seated left on throne, holding eagle and sceptre, honeybee above M in left field, monogram below throne. Price 3619; HGC 3.1, 910q. 25mm, 16.3g. [VCCoins.com image.]



Russian 1866 Alexander II gold 5-Roubles СПБ-ИИ MS65 NGC (6.544 g, AGW 0.1929 oz, 23 mm) St. Petersburg mint, KM-YB26, Bitkin-14. Obv. Crowned double-headed Imperial eagle holding orb and scepter. Rev. Date and value in beaded circle with legend around. [Heritage Auctions Jan. 7, 2019 Sale, Lot 31122, sold for \$3,600USD (before Buyer's Premium), [www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com).]

*CoinWorld* had discovered that there was a recent posting on Facebook by Alex Harris and his fiancée Elizabeth Dittman of Florida. After going to the restaurant where they had their first date, and after dining on a steak entrée, followed by a tiramisu dessert, Alex proposed to Elizabeth. He did not get down on a knee and propose with a ring, but since both he and Elizabeth are coin collectors, he made another choice.

The previous Christmas, Alex received as a gift from Elizabeth an Alexander III the Great silver tetradrachm, the Babylon *Lifetime Issue* coin, which he was absolutely thrilled to have. Both Alex and Elizabeth are avid readers, particularly historic books. *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* features 1860s Russian roubles and kopecks. Elizabeth loved the book and told Alex that she hoped to one day have an 1866 Alexander II gold 5-roubles coin – not another year like 1865 or 1867 but the more difficult-to-locate 1866, and not a kopeck. The value of these coins was much higher in 1866 than they are today. For instance as pointed out in a number of numismatic blogs and forums, the book says Marlmeladov's family somehow managed to put together his government clerk uniform for him for 11.5-roubles, including boots, shirt fronts, and the uniform itself. Today, a subway trip in St. Petersburg costs 45-roubles. Raskolnikov's father is described in the book as having an annual pension of 120-roubles. Today, a poor pensioner in Russian has a pension of about 12,000 roubles per month.

Alex decided finding that coin would be an engagement ring substitute. He tried regular avenues without luck. He finally spotted a listing online (eBay) but did not know the seller. Since Alex and Elizabeth were already loyal customers of Sarasota Coin Gallery, they sought help there. SCG confirmed the seller was legitimate, it was Mark Obstalecki, owner and founder of Numismatically Yours Rare Coins in Ohio. Sarasota arranged the transaction. Now Alex had the "Alex" slabbed coin to propose to Elizabeth with. Thankfully Elizabeth didn't cast that one into the nearest field or river, but enthusiastically accepted his proposal. Now *that's* a love token!

The *CoinWorld* interview of the couple can be heard at <https://www.coinworld.com/coinworld-podcast> Episode 120, about 27:30 into the show. There's a great deal more to learn about love tokens and related exnumia. And there's always more to love about numismatics as well.