

= Elgin , Illinois , Centennial half dollar =

The Elgin , Illinois , Centennial half dollar was a fifty @-@ cent commemorative coin issued by the United States Bureau of the Mint in 1936 , part of the wave of commemoratives authorized by Congress and struck that year . Intended to commemorate the centennial of the founding of Elgin , the piece was designed by local sculptor Trygve Rovelstad . The obverse depicts an idealized head of a pioneer man . The reverse shows a grouping of pioneers , and is based upon a sculptural group that Rovelstad hoped to build as a memorial to those who settled Illinois , but which was not erected in his lifetime .

Rovelstad had heard of other efforts to gain authorization for commemorative coins , which were sold by the Mint to a designated group at face value and then retailed to the public at a premium . In 1935 , through his congressman , he had legislation introduced into the House of Representatives for a commemorative coin in honor of Elgin 's centennial that year . Rovelstad hoped that the proposed coin would both depict and be a source of funds for his memorial to the pioneers . Texas coin dealer L.W. Hoffercker heard of the effort and contacted Rovelstad to offer his assistance ? Hoffercker had been a force behind the Old Spanish Trail half dollar , issued in 1935 and distributed by him .

The bill for the Elgin coin did not pass until 1936 . Hoffercker was able to sell about 20 @,@ 000 coins , four @-@ fifths of the issue : the remaining 5 @,@ 000 were returned to the Mint for melting . Unlike many commemorative coins of that era , the piece was not bought up by dealers and speculators , but was sold directly to collectors at the issue price . Art historian Cornelius Vermeule considered the Elgin coin among the most outstanding American commemoratives .

= = Inception = =

Elgin , Illinois , is located on the Fox River about 30 miles (48 km) west of Chicago . The community was founded in 1835 by James and Hezekiah Gifford , who named it . It became a village in 1847 and a city in 1854 . In the latter year , a watch company was founded there , and the city became well known for the firm 's timepieces ; it also was notable for the production of tools , shoes , wood products , and weekly church bulletins .

Sculptor Trygve Rovelstad (1903 ? 1990) , born to Norwegian immigrants in the United States , sought to erect a statue in his hometown of Elgin as a monument to those pioneers who had settled Illinois . The city leaders approved , and in 1934 , a foundation was laid for the statue in Davidson Park , the site of the Giffords ' first cabin . Rovelstad was unable to raise the money to construct and erect the statue , but having learned of recent commemorative coin issues , decided this would be a good means of funding the statue . The sculptor had a bill introduced in Congress in May 1935 to authorize a half dollar to celebrate Elgin 's centennial and to honor the pioneer . Nevertheless , the bill initially was not considered .

News of the bill appeared in the July 1935 The Numismatist (the journal of the American Numismatic Association [ANA]) , and on July 11 , L.W. Hoffercker wrote to the Elgin Centennial Monumental Committee , inquiring how the coins would be distributed . Hoffercker , an El Paso , Texas , coin dealer , was then leading the committee in his hometown that was selling the Old Spanish Trail half dollar to the public . Although some recent commemoratives had sparked outcry from collectors that speculators had been allowed to buy up quantities of the new issues , Hoffercker would gain praise for equitably distributing the Old Spanish Trail piece .

In the correspondence between the two men , Hoffercker gave Rovelstad a number of tips about how to deal with Congress . Even though the bill was still mired in committee , Hoffercker advised what to do once the bill was signed . He did not know yet that Rovelstad was a sculptor , and wrote to him in September 1935 about the models to be submitted for approval , " These should also be 10 [inches , or 25 @.@ 4 cm] in diameter , and this is where your trouble commences . These sculptors all want to incorporate their own ideas in the design and ask anywhere from \$ 400 @.@ 00 to \$ 1 @,@ 000 @.@ 00 for their work , telling you what trouble it is to get the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts and many other things which do not exist . " Hoffercker also offered to

handle the issue for the committee ; he proposed to advance the money necessary to purchase the new coins from the government and to handle the distribution . He stated that he had enjoyed the distribution of the Old Spanish Trail piece , though he lied to Rovelstad , stating he was not a coin dealer ? the letterhead that Hoffecker used to write to Rovelstad said " Loans and Mortgages " under his name . He also warned Rovelstad , " It would not be good for either of us if the word got out you had disposed of the entire issue to me . "

In October 1935 , Hoffecker made a formal offer , based on the bill , which called for 10 @, @ 000 half dollars : he would pay the Elgin committee \$ 12 @, @ 000 and sell the coins at \$ 2 @. @ 00 each . He would advance the face value of the coins to the Mint , as well as engraving and shipping charges . In selling the coins , he would try to distribute them to as many collectors as possible , leaving dealers and speculators for later . Rovelstad agreed by letter in November .

= = Preparation = =

Illinois Representative Chauncey Reed had introduced the Elgin coin legislation at Rovelstad 's behest , and both the sculptor and Hoffecker worked with him to advance the bill through Congress . In February 1936 , Hoffecker , who had been appointed by ANA President T. James Clarke to lead a committee against abuses in the issuance of commemorative coins , went to Washington , passing through Chicago on his way to visit Rovelstad . The two men had hoped to keep the mintage to 10 @, @ 000 , to be able to sell the coins at a higher price . Congress , however , was not minded to create a low @- @ mintage commemorative , as there had been several issues which had been struck in small numbers only to sell at high prices , and the bill was amended to provide for 25 @, @ 000 half dollars . Hoffecker hoped to lower the number , urging the sculptor to lobby for a decrease . Hoffecker noted it would be much more work to sell 25 @, @ 000 , and they could not command as high a price . There were a large number of commemorative coin bills in Congress in 1936 , and the dealer feared that President Franklin D. Roosevelt would start vetoing them . Hoffecker visited Washington twice more in May , once meeting Rovelstad there , where they lobbied members of Congress .

The bill finally passed , and was signed by President Roosevelt on June 16 , 1936 . The bill required the coins to be struck at a single mint and to bear the date " 1936 " regardless of when they were struck . All 25 @, @ 000 would have to be paid for by the chairman of the Elgin committee (that is , Rovelstad) at one time ; a lesser quantity could not be issued . The pieces were " in commemoration of the one @- @ hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city of Elgin , Illinois , and the erection of the heroic Pioneer Memorial " ? Rovelstad 's statue .

Hoffecker suggested that Rovelstad seek to have the mintage divided among the three mints , but conceded that unless Congress had erred in the enacted language , this gambit was not likely to succeed . He also told Rovelstad to get in touch with Assistant Mint Director Mary M. O 'Reilly and seek to have the coins struck at the Denver Mint , as the closest mint to El Paso , to minimize shipping charges . Nothing came of either proposal ; all of the coins would be struck at the Philadelphia Mint .

After Rovelstad submitted his designs for the coin to the Mint , they were sent to the Commission of Fine Arts for its opinion . The designs arrived on July 15 , 1936 , and were approved two days later , with the request that the head of the pioneer on the obverse , in three @- @ quarter view (facing forward and to one side) as submitted by Rovelstad , be in profile instead . The sculptor complied , and submitted plaster models by mid @- @ August ; photographs were sent to the commission by the Mint on August 15 . Two days later , commission chairman Charles Moore wrote to O 'Reilly , stating that the sculptor member of the commission , Lee Lawrie , had viewed the designs , and complained he could not see what the object was behind the pioneers , and that the gun appeared to be held awkwardly . Lawrie also stated that some of the lettering should be strengthened , but if the Mint director , Nellie Tayloe Ross , was not disturbed by these things , the coin should go forward . Moore indicated that he had no desire to delay the coin , and forwarded the commission 's recommendation , on condition that the Mint do what it could to address these concerns . With the exception of possible work on the lettering , no changes were made .

Once the commission had approved the designs , they were immediately sent to the Medallic Art Company of New York , which reduced the designs to furnish hubs from which coinage dies could be made . In early October 1936 , the Philadelphia Mint struck 25 @, @ 000 coins , with 15 extra for inspection by the 1937 Assay Commission . Rovelstad went to Philadelphia to witness the initiation of production and stayed at the home of Mint Chief Engraver John R. Sinnock . The first ten pieces were handed to the sculptor , who placed them in paper envelopes and took them home to Illinois . According to his wife , Gloria , he was offered a job at the Mint by Sinnock but declined .

= = Design = =

The obverse of the Elgin Centennial half dollar depicts a pioneer , attested to by the legend above him . The bearded visage had been previously sculpted by Rovelstad and appears , slightly modified , as the head of the rifleman on the left of the group on the reverse . The year " 1673 " on the obverse marks the year explorers Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette entered what is now Illinois . Although the coin was issued for Elgin 's centennial , neither the date of founding (1835) nor that of the anniversary appears .

The reverse side depicts a group of pioneers (four adults and a baby in its mother 's arms) . The grouping is a bas relief of the model for the memorial that Rovelstad hoped to build . The child is the second baby to be implied , but not fully seen , on a US coin ? one is sketched with the mother inside the Conestoga wagon on the Oregon Trail Memorial half dollar , first struck in 1926 . One would be more fully depicted on the Roanoke Island half dollar in 1937 . The grouping had also appeared on Rovelstad 's 1935 medal for Elgin 's centennial . Rovelstad placed , both on the medal and on the base for the statue , the words , " To the men who have blazed the trails , who have conquered the soil , and who have built an empire in the land of the Illini . " Inclusion of the various mottos required by statute , such as " In God We Trust " , meant that not even part of this dedication could be placed on the coin . The name of the city was not in the original models that Rovelstad sent Hoffecker for his comments ; the numismatist wrote on July 15 , 1936 , " I would not overlook putting the word ' Elgin ' on your coin , as it would be a good ad for your city " .

Art historian Cornelius Vermeule , in his volume on the artistry of American coins , had high praise for the coin and its sculptor : " it is more difficult to find a more aesthetically satisfying , technically superior commemorative half @-@ dollar than the Elgin , Illinois , Centennial of 1936 . " Vermeule observed that the figures on the reverse appear almost three @-@ dimensional . He noted that the technique of spacing out the letters of the word " Pioneer " above the head presages that used by later Chief Engraver Gilroy Roberts on the obverse of the Kennedy half dollar . According to Vermeule , Rovelstad " has produced one of the major documents of sculptural plasticity and vibrant relief in the series of commemorative coins . His obverse is worthy of a Roman medallion , and his reverse rivals the great Neoclassic dies of England or Bavaria in the nineteenth century . "

= = Release = =

Once the authorizing legislation was enacted , Hoffecker and Rovelstad came to a new agreement . Hoffecker would advance the money for the new coins and pay for the die making and shipping costs , which were the committee 's responsibility under the legislation . The coins would be sold at \$ 1 @. @ 50 each ; Hoffecker would take 35 cents per coin as commission . The coins were to remain on sale through Hoffecker until January 1 , 1937 or until they were sold out , whichever came first . The agreement provided that Hoffecker " use every ethical means known to him to push the sale of these coins " . Coin dealer B. Max Mehl , in his 1937 pamphlet on commemorative coins , stated that he considered the price of \$ 1 @. @ 50 too high when there was an issue of 25 @, @ 000 struck .

On July 1 , 1936 , Hoffecker sent 3 @, @ 500 letters offering the new coins , which had not yet been struck , to people who were on his mailing list or had enquired . He claimed to have 7 @, @ 000 orders already , and urged collectors not to delay . His bank offered to have the coins shipped there and to carry the coins as part of its cash on hand , which would allow him to pay for them as orders

came in , but Hoffecker preferred to pay for the coins at the start . Hoffecker stated in letters that other coin dealers had offered to buy the entire issue , but he had declined . At this time , there was a boom in commemorative coins , and dealers were trying to get all the special issues they could .

The Philadelphia Mint shipped 24 @, @ 990 coins (the authorized mintage less the first ten pieces , which Rovelstad had taken) to Hoffecker on October 7 , 1936 ; they were received in El Paso four days later . Hoffecker wrote to Frank Duffield , editor of The Numismatist , stating that he had the envelopes for already @-@ ordered pieces all prepared , and hoped to mail the last of them out by the evening of October 13 ; the editor commented , " This sounds like real service " . Several hundred pieces had been ordered through banks in Elgin ; they received several consignments and eventually sold over a thousand . The Elgin Watch Company purchased 100 coins .

By November 1936 , 16 @, @ 170 pieces had been sold . Only about 2 @, @ 000 more were sold in the next four months ; Hoffecker 's statement for March 1937 shows 18 @, @ 790 sold with an additional 330 on consignment to the First National Bank of Elgin . Rovelstad had received \$ 8 @, @ 680 @. @ 00 and Hoffecker \$ 6 @, @ 576 @. @ 50 . At this point , discussion turned to what to do with the remaining pieces , some 5 @, @ 620 (a few hundred pieces were given away or otherwise disposed of) . Rovelstad agreed to allow the coin dealer to purchase 250 pieces at \$ 1 each ; he was still selling them in 1948 . Other dealers were uninterested in large purchases as the direct sale to collectors meant that few who wanted and could afford the Elgin coin lacked it . With demand at a standstill , Hoffecker feared that the remaining pieces would wind up in the hands of speculators . Five thousand pieces were returned to the Mint for melting .

= = Aftermath and collecting = =

Rovelstad used the profits from the half dollar to continue work on his statuary group . He sought direct funding from the federal government in 1938 and from the Illinois Legislature the following year ; both attempts failed . Through the half century that followed , he progressed on the statues , and by the time of his death in 1990 , he had completed the group in plaster of Paris , that still needed to be bronzed before display . Shortly before his death , he told his wife , " I 've lived a full life and have no regrets . The Pioneer Memorial is now completed . I 've done all I could . Now it 's up to others to see it erected . I can do no more . " Rovelstad 's tenant , Steve Youngren , established a foundation to raise money to complete the project . It raised \$ 456 @, @ 000 , exceeding the actual cost by nearly ten percent , and the memorial was completed and dedicated in 2001 .

Hoffecker served as president of the ANA from 1939 to 1941 ; he died January 13 , 1955 at the age of 86 . According to the 2014 edition of R.S. Yeoman 's A Guide Book of United States Coins , the Elgin Centennial half dollar lists at \$ 250 in Almost Uncirculated (AU @-@ 50) condition , rising to \$ 550 in near @-@ pristine MS @-@ 66 . According to numismatic historian Q. David Bowers , " nothing untoward was associated with the distribution of the Elgin Centennial half dollars , and certainly at the Illinois end of the deal sculptor Trygve A. Rovelstad 's intentions and ethics were of the highest order . L.W. Hoffecker distributed the pieces in a skillfully orchestrated publicity campaign and did as well as anyone could have done at the time . "