

# Building Sets of Barber Halves by Peter Shireman

Coin collecting is a great hobby. I began collecting coins when I was 9 or 10 years old. My maternal grandmother is the only relative of mine that collected coins before me. She was born in 1898 in Grampian, PA and saw many changes in our nation's coinage in her lifetime. Among them were Barber halves produced in her early years. Her collection contained about 15 well-worn examples she removed from circulation in the 1950's and 1960's. I began by collecting BU rolls of cents, mostly from 1959 up to 1968 and some circulated type coins. I continued collecting actively until about age 18. I took time off from collecting coins to attend college, go to medical school, and pursue a residency in pathology. As an adult, I came back to my coin interests, when I had time and more money.

There are so many ways one can collect coins and what is right for one person may not be for another. However, there are many collectors that would agree with me that building sets is a fun way to enjoy our fine hobby. Set building is rewarding in many ways, which I will describe in this article. I will discuss my background and approach to collecting, then give some details about set building at different grades, and share my recent success selling a complete set. If you are like me, once you build one set, you may start with a second set, possibly the same type of coins, but often with a different slant, such as a higher grade or different look. You can easily end up with multiple sets (like I did). The ideas I express are certainly applicable to other coin series besides Barber Halves.

## **Barber Half Dollars:**

These coins were made for circulation from 1892-1915 at four different US Mints. The first part of the series saw coins made in Philadelphia, New Orleans and San Francisco, but in 1906 Denver began making these coins, and in 1909 the New Orleans Mint made their last Barber Halves. Thus, a bit of interesting history here; these coins were the first type of half dollar struck in Denver, and the last of the half dollars of the New Orleans Mint. There are a couple of years only two mints made coins and three years that four mints made coins; but in all, 73 different date and mint mark combinations were made. A complete set of Barber Halves generally means having all of these 73 different coins. A very rare variety, the 1892-O micro O half is highly sought after, and many collectors try to obtain an example for their set, but the rarity and cost can be a factor in obtaining one. Most of the best sets of Barber Halves include an example of the micro O variety. I became interested in Barber Halves after seeing a few when I was younger, mostly in really low grades, then eventually finding one in a type set in XF condition. The interest was then kindled.

A problem with coins made in the era of the Barber Halves is they were real "working" coins and saw extensive circulation. Most of the coins became very worn. Not many collectors were saving these coins for several reasons. There weren't that many collectors in those days, a fifty-cent piece was a lot of money for most people just to hold on to, and for many the design was nothing very special (although I like the old Greco-

Roman look to the coins). The most common grade to find a barber half is good or about good. Most are very well worn and many of these older coins have been cleaned, polished or otherwise damaged. Then you are left with only a small number of coins that survive today in high grades from the millions that were minted. For many seasoned Barber Half collectors, the ideal look of a coin is one that has a light battleship grey color with an overall "dirty" look to the surfaces that creates a circulated "cameo" look to

the coin. Surfaces will be smooth with a minimum of bag marks or hits or dings from circulating. One looks for coins with no holes, ground down rims or bends. Given this information, it is amazing that many Barber Halves above VG exist at all. Nice ones are indeed the exception and what advanced collectors seek.

### **AG to G sets**

A set of Barber Halves can be assembled relatively easily in grades of AG to G, but completing the set in any grade of VG or better becomes more of a challenge. From time to time I have been able to purchase complete AG to VG sets on eBay or from a dealer, but in most sets the key coins are AG or worse condition. One of the nice aspects about Barber's design for the half dollars is that the coins still have a good amount of general detail even when extensively worn. There is a great satisfaction in putting a full-rim good set together. This can be accomplished by going to coin shows, coin shops, and through the internet from national dealers and auction sites like eBay. A set of nicely matched coins in good or very good without damaged or cleaned coins is a pretty set and one to be proud of. Sometimes I have bought sets with a few coins that were problems, and have worked to replace them. Constant upgrading can lead to having duplicates that one will either sell, or more likely for me, start additional sets.

### **F to VF sets**

As one builds a set of higher grade such as F and VF, the challenge to find nice examples increases greatly, perhaps exponentially. There are some of the common dates like 1907-D, 1908-D, 1908-O, 1912-D, 1915-D, 1915-S that can be found easily, but once you get past a dozen or two of the more common coins, there are many that are very difficult to find, especially in nice condition. This grade range is less expensive than the higher-grade coins, but with F to VF one gets pretty decent detail not seen in the worn-out grades of AG and G. I have managed to build one complete nice F/VF set and one that is almost complete. These can take years and a lot of effort, and more money than you might think. Given the increased interest in Barber Halves I have seen in the last 10 years, I would find it very hard to put another set together in these grades. Besides, word is out; there are many savvy Barber Half collectors out there and many of the coins are in good homes, solidly placed away. Most of these coins will be raw, but increasing numbers of these coins are finding their way into slab holders.

### **EF to AU sets**

When one reaches the EF to AU condition, the number of surviving and available Barber Halves drops considerably. I think most Barber Half experts would agree that it is easier to assemble an uncirculated set of Barber Halves than in grades of EF 40 to AU 58. Among the coins with appropriately retained detail (technical grade), many have been cleaned, often harshly; polished and damaged coins are all too common, and the remaining nice coins are truly scarce. Since the challenge is much greater, the reward is too. I am aware of very few sets ever put together at this level, and in 2009, had the opportunity to purchase intact, an entire 73 coin set, all graded by PCGS as EF45. This was a most amazing accomplishment! The person who put this set together, Craig Petersen, took years to complete his collection. He did lots of trading with other collectors, made friends and had great experiences finding the coins. I recall well that the last coin he needed in EF 45 was the 1905. It took him a long time to find a suitable 1905 that PCGS would grade as EF 45. I had a small hand in "making coins" that ended up in Craig's set as a few of the coins that he had were once mine. I recall the 1892-S, 1901-O, 1902-O, 1897-O, 1898-O and 1914 were definitely coins I once owned, perhaps others as well. I would buy raw coins at local shows, at national shows, from national dealers, eBay and occasionally at auction. I still try to when I can, but it has been much more difficult to find these coins.

## **Mint State Sets**

In mint state, Halves are uncommon, but most would not consider them rare. Compared to other series such as Walking Liberty Halves, or Standing Liberty Quarters, they are much harder to find uncirculated. However, enough examples are available in mint state that sets can be assembled, and I have done so, beginning around 1994 and continuing even today. I began with MS 63 and MS 64 certified coins as my target, but with the help of a knowledgeable dealer, Harry Laibstain (shameless plug) I was able to target higher grade gem coins and be much more confident about buying the right coins. The confidence of buying selected high-quality coins is important to me, and it should be to you, as well. Buying holders is easy, buying coins that match and exceed the labels is much more complicated. My mint state set is all MS 65 or greater, and the set is currently listed as the number one "current" set on the PCGS registry. I consider the set to be mature, but some possibilities of upgrades remain. I strongly suggest anyone interested in a great set, consider putting together a mint state set of Barber Half dollars. I know Harry has helped build many sets as my trade-in's served to fill slots for others. I invite you to view my set online at the PCGS registry by [clicking here](#).

## **Certification and Encapsulation of Circulated Barber Halves**

It wasn't that common to get circulated Barber Halves certified by PCGS until about 10 years ago. Barber Halves are fairly easy to grade from AG to AU, as there are standard references to help recognize and match the grade of a given coin to photographs. Also, most Barber Halves have not been counterfeited very extensively except for the recent ones from China, and some crudely made older cast coins. Thus, two of the important reasons to get coins certified had not been real issues with circulated Barber Halves. Also, the cost factor enters the equation; most circulated Barber Halves graded less than F12 are of a value that the cost of grading and encapsulating become an economic burden. This is not true of the mint state coins where the cost of certification is a small percentage of the overall value.

We began to see more circulated Barber Halves encapsulated when the 1904-S was recognized as a key and expensive date to obtain in grades over VG, and as time has gone on, other dates have increasingly become graded by third-party graders. I have observed that nice coins graded by PCGS or NGC have brought strong money at auction or by private sale. Coins nice enough to be encapsulated are truly in the minority, and there is strong competition for them among knowledgeable collectors. These coins often sell for more than retail price guides indicate. If one looks up the certified population of Barber Halves for PCGS, the specific grade of EF 45 shows 917 coins for the entire 74 coin series. Don't think for a minute there aren't other examples out there that could be graded, there are, but the distribution of the number of coins currently graded is interesting and provides an important insight about supply. It isn't that hard to grade circulated Barber Halves, but so many of them have problems, that buying certified examples helps ensure that the coin is without major problems. There are some examples that have made it into PCGS or NGC holders that are not nice for the grade. Training your eye or using a knowledgeable dealer as a filter will enhance your set building experience.

## **Conclusion**

Building sets of coins is a common and rewarding way of enjoying the hobby of coin collecting. If one takes time and buys nice examples, at whatever grade or grades fit their budget, they will have fun learning about coins, grading, pricing, availability, and may well make a profit. The Barber Half series offers challenges at many grade levels as do many other series. Generally, the more you put into the collection in terms of time and knowledge, the better you will reap all the benefits of collecting.

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