

Riddle Me This, Numismatist

I was recently watching a rerun of the Bill Cosby show where his daughters attempt to stump Theo with the age old riddle of how to make thirty cents using two coins and one is not a nickel. Of course, he feigns to not know the answer and then busts out with a grin stating that he got it. He then produces a quarter and a nickel from his pocket and sets them down as the solution. The girls balk, but of course he states that one coin is a quarter and the other is a nickel. It is a funny and enjoyable moment as Theo wins the bet, but there was a numismatic opportunity missed. To bad one of Theo's brighter friends had not been included in the skit.

As anyone who is acquainted with the Redbook knows this riddle has a few more possible answers. The most obvious would be that one coin is a dime and the other is a twenty cent piece. I did not even need a nickel for that one, and hey don't get me going on the nickel. For again those of us armed with just a little numismatic knowledge know that the name nickel is truly a misnomer since there is more copper in that five cent piece than nickel. If it truly was nickel it would be magnetic like those five cent pieces I find on occasion in my change featuring a beaver on the obverse. Let's stop there since I did digress as we coin collectors often do. Another solution to the riddle would be a half dime and a quarter and being one to get hung up on semantics there is yet another solution. I could also use a half dime and a 25C piece. Though to be truly contemporary with the half dime, I would need to use the larger silver piece that is call a quarter dollar, but not labeled as such (seriously look in your Redbook). It does seem strange to us today, but back then I could as easily (quite possibly more easily) use two eighths of a Spanish milled dollar with my half dime since the former was official sanctioned at the time. Then again is a pie shaped piece of silver truly a coin? Maybe at this point I should stop.

So, it would seem that there are at least four other possible solutions to the riddle using coins. I choose the word seem carefully because as a member of this group of people who call themselves numismatists someone is always slightly cleverer and finds a little obscure fact that you overlooked in your study. In closing, would it have helped the program any to throw in a little numismatic knowledge? Probably not, since if anything it would have brought a blank stare from everyone not to mention the viewing audience and ruin a perfectly good punch line. If anything I guess to those of us with a little knowledge of United States Coinage, the same aha smirk crosses our face though for a completely different reason as Theo solves the riddle.

Well, that is my two cents worth on this riddle and yes, I only need one coin to pay.

James Haney