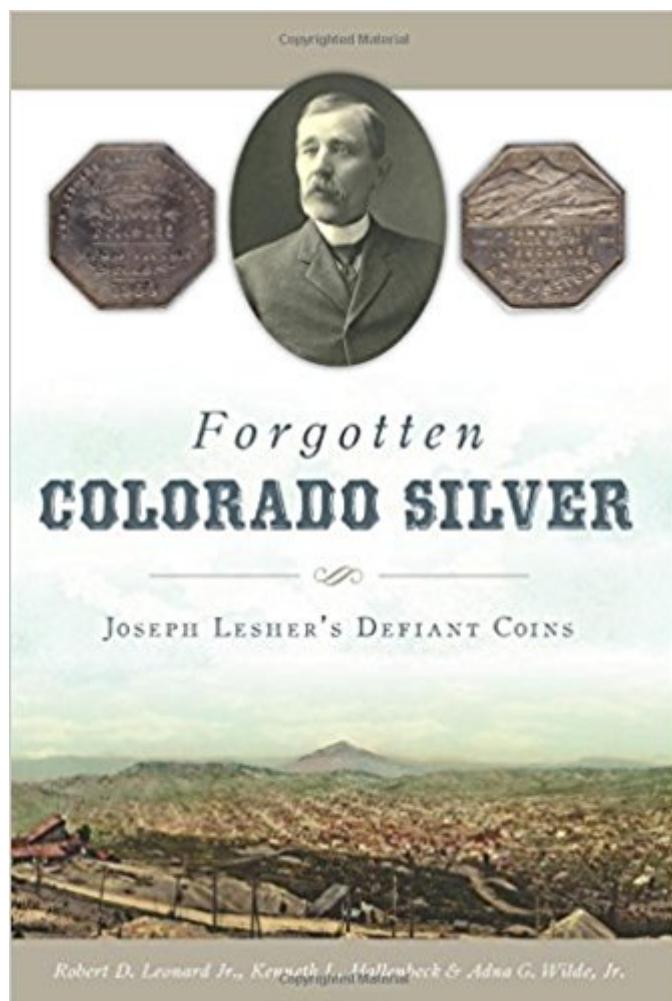


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# **Forgotten Colorado Silver: Joseph Lesher's Defiant Coins**



## **Synopsis**

At the turn of the last century, miner Joseph Lesher attempted to raise the price of silver by privately minting octagonal "Referendum souvenir medal" coins with values of \$1.25 or \$1. They were common in Victor, Cripple Creek, Denver and other places in Colorado in the days after William Jennings Bryan fought unsuccessfully for free silver. Surviving an initial dust-up with the Secret Service, Lesher found a loophole to place them in circulation in 1900 and 1901. Today, coin collectors pay more than \$1,000 for one. This is the story of Joseph Lesher and his audacious private mint, along with the merchants in the mining towns and elsewhere who supported him.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Author of over one hundred numismatic articles and three books, American Numismatic Society fellow Bob Leonard has studied private coinages since the 1960s. Founder of Ken Hallenbeck Coin Gallery, Colorado Springs, Ken Hallenbeck is a past president of the American Numismatic Association. Adna G. Wilde, Jr., also an ANA past president, published a groundbreaking study of Lesher Dollars in 1978, "Lesher Referendum Medals: Where Are They Today?"

Look, anyone with more than a passing interest in the Lesher Referendum Souvenirs is going to buy this book and he should. For, this book, despite flaws, does contain excellent and interesting historical/biographical information that can't be found outside of primary resource material. In other words, a whole lot of time and effort was spent researching this material, primarily through efforts

instigated by one Robert S. Kincaid who is mentioned and given credit in the Preface. Interestingly, his name is not listed as an author while the long-deceased Adna G. Wilde's is, and this detail about epitomizes the messy nature of this project. Physically, the book is octavo-sized and occurs in approximately 128 pps. and is lightly populated with black and white illustrations. It is perfect bound, and printed in USA. I could hardly wait for this book to be released as an up-to-date authoritative reference book about the Leshers is long overdue; the last and best reference being the article by Wilde titled: "Lesher Referendum Medals: Where are They Today?", which, by the way, is essential reading because this book doesn't adequately incorporate the EXTREMELY important data contained in that early, and relatively better, effort. So, let's just clear the board here by stating that this book is not the authoritative Lesher reference the coin world wants and deserves. What is it then? Well, as best as I can determine, it is the new and improved version of all the information gathered by Mr. Kincaid and his agents, sprinkled with a little bit of information from the large number of incomplete surveys and articles that have come before. I think the preface of the book does a pretty good job of describing why this book is constructed as it is: It was the pet project of Mr. Kincaid that nobody dared touch, likely because of the large amount of effort necessary to pull it all together into a coherent account suitable for a book. Eventually, Mr. Kincaid's cajolery won out, and the book project went forward, obviously. Unfortunately, it did so without all of the requisite effort to make this a truly landmark publication. What the book does do is supply an enormous amount of biographical detail about the men, their wives and family, whose names appear on various of the Lesher medals: Lesher, Bumstead, Cohen, Mullen (McMullen, actually), Slusher, Park, Klein, Alexander, Goodspeed, White, et al. This is very interesting stuff, certainly, to those of us fascinated by the medals. Despite my criticism of the book, I have to say that I was OVERAWED by the amount of detail that Kincaid's efforts unearthed. I mean, these folks were able to trace the movements of principal actors to something as trivial as a boarding house stay in states as far afield as Vermont and California. Sadly, the credited authors seem to have decided to simply create some semblance of order out of this material and then publish it with the inclusion of a bare minimum of verifying data from earlier sources. They missed a huge opportunity to tie all of the information contained in the earlier publications to the most recent information available. Folks, no less a figure than Farran Zerbe was a fervent collector and researcher of these medals. In fact, his incredibly prescient 1918 article in *The Numismatist* is the single-most important article on the medals to date (even though the Wilde article that appeared in 1978 contains the most essential data). He created the original numbering system that is still used today (although, the numbers assigned by Hibler and Kappen in *So-Called Dollars* is the more generally accepted identification system). It wasn't just him.

Other HUGE, MAJOR, ICONIC numismatists were also deeply interested in the items, among them B. Max Mehl, John J. Ford Jr. and Adna G. Wilde. In other words, these medals are and should be among the most prized, coveted, and collected of American numismatic items. Thus they deserve a comprehensive, authoritative, reference book that will stand the test of time. Sadly, this is not that book. If this book does contain a bunch of truly interesting and trenchant information, why do I seem disappointed? First of all, the lousy editing is inexcusable. There are numerous sentences scattered throughout the book that include non sequiturs, or read so oddly they need to be reread to become comprehensible. I suspect this was caused when sentences were cut and pasted into the text but not then thoroughly proof-read. Also, very little thought was put in to creating an over-arching narrative. Certainly, nearly all of the elements necessary are included in the book. It is just that nobody seems to have sat down and plotted the trajectory. The result is that the individual chapters of the book read almost like individual articles as might be found in a numismatic journal. Unfortunately, that is not all. The worst sin the authors committed was NOT adequately integrating Adna G. Wilde's data and conclusions into the book. Trust me on this: You have to obtain Wilde's article to immediately understand what I am talking about. Essentially, the authors use Wilde's methodology for calculating Lesher populations (done by using known numbered medals sequences and extrapolating them) but because they neglected to include any information from the original article that explains how Wilde's population conclusions were reached, it makes little sense. The included black & white illustrations are greatly appreciated but inexplicably NONE of the images of the actual Lesher medals are portrayed actual size, even those on page 115 where the text states the two examples illustrated are "shown actual size" (all of the other illustrations note the actual size while being slightly smaller than actual size). Why this is important is that even in life the text on the medals is difficult to read without magnification. As such, some of the medallic reproductions are all but unreadable. This is shocking. Did nobody think to look at a galley proof? Finally, the authors failed to record the presence of a unique, but important, medal that has made its appearance in a minimum of two public auctions within the past 30 years. It is a Lifesaving Award issued in California. An internet search for it, will yield images of it that make it clear why this is an important addition to the Lesher family, even if not issued contemporaneously. Irony of ironies, I still recommend acquiring this book. This is because Kincaid's prodigious research efforts yielded a lot of biographical details of the issuers which definitely enrichen the broth that is the Lesher Referendum medal stew.

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