

# Collecting National Commemorative Medals

Commemorative medals sponsored by private organizations and struck by the United States Mint present a challenge to collectors who seek beauty and history.

by Howard Turner  
ANA 37309



Years ago, to thwart constant robberies of silver bars during shipment, Nevada mining interests hit upon the idea of melting the bars into one big ball that would be too large for thieves to steal and transport. For production of the Nevada Silver Centennial medals, a Panamint ball of silver was shipped to the Philadelphia Mint. (#1)

NATIONAL COMMEMORATIVE MEDALS originally were intended to commemorate persons, places and events of national significance, and many did achieve this goal. These medals came into their own with the first issue in 1940, replacing the sorely missed commemorative coinage whose demise was brought about by abuses of the program. No commemorative coins were struck from 1940 to 1945. From 1946 to 1954 three more were struck—the Iowa Centennial of 1946; the Booker T. Washington commemorative, issued annually from 1946 through 1951; and the Washington-Carver half issued annually from 1951 through 1954. The 28-year gap from 1954 until the striking of the 1982 George Washington commemorative half dollar was filled by the national commemorative medal.

All such medals initially were sponsored by private organizations that had an interest in the event or person honored. They approached Congressmen to help them bring their goals to fruition. Generally, the proposed legislation, besides authorizing the medal, spells out the maximum number that can be struck and the sizes and metals to be used. Cost studies are made, and the sponsor must pay the Mint or put up a bond before production can begin.

Medal bills are considered for approval by two committees of Congress: the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs and the House Committee on Banking and Currency. Congress is guided to a great extent by reports of these committees in voting on bills authorizing commemorative medals. When passed by both Houses of Congress, the bill

MANY YEARS AGO I decided to collect these medals, and it has taken 28 years to obtain at least one specimen of every issue.

.....

goes to the President for his signature. This process gives these U.S. Mint products their status of national commemorative medals.

These medals are not, however, distributed by the Mint. When struck, they are delivered to the sponsoring organization for distribution. The sponsor, therefore, has wide latitude in what is struck, and is not as restricted as by requirements for commemorative coinage. A variety of medal sizes have been authorized and struck:  $\frac{1}{16}$  inch,  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch,  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch, 1 inch,  $\frac{1}{16}$  inch, 2 inch,  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch,  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch and 3 inch. Although the majority of the medals were struck in  $\frac{1}{16}$  and  $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch sizes, many were issued in additional sizes, and a few were issued in just one or more of the other sizes. It is too bad that sizes couldn't have been more standardized, but aesthetics, I'm sure, guided the sponsors, along with suggestions from the designers and engravers of the U.S. Mint.

Metals also run the gamut of gold, platinum, palladium, silver, bronze, gold-plated and golden bronze. Many of the silver are proof issues. Some of the precious-metal strikes were used as presentation pieces or were used to raise money for ongoing works of the sponsoring organization. Some silver pieces were struck with serial numbers on the rims and sold at a premium. Most medals could be purchased, but a few were made solely for presentation.

Many years ago I decided to collect these medals, and it has taken 28 years to obtain at least one specimen of every issue. It was a tremendous challenge. First of all, I had to watch local newspapers, plus coin publications, to find out if a sponsor was trying to get approval for a particular medal. Sometimes years went by before the medal was actually struck, and I had to keep track, often with letters to Congress and the sponsor. Full-page ads seldom offered these issues.

Many other numismatists collect national commemorative medals, and I have corresponded with quite a few, trying to keep them abreast of new issues as they come out. (Some of the earlier issues were listed in *So-Called Dollars* by Harold E. Hibler and Charles V. Kappen.) As there was no central source of information about these pieces, I believe a lot of collectors gave up. One friend in California has the only other complete set I know of and exhibited them at the ANA's Atlanta convention in 1987.

Mintages vary, and some medals were struck in quite small numbers. For many of the medals, only one or two were struck for presentation and, of course, were not available to the general public. However, in most cases, additional numbers were produced for public sale.

Two issues that numbered 2,000 pieces each were never sold but



With the help of Cory Gilliland, curator of the Smithsonian's National Numismatic Collection, I recently was able to track down information about this medal, issued for the Greenwich, Connecticut, Tercentennial in 1940. The obverse shows settlers, landing in a boat, being welcomed by Indians. The surrounding inscription reads **TERCENTENARY OF THE TOWN OF GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT**. In the exergue are the dates 1640-1940. The reverse inscription, in eight lines, reads **AUTHORIZED BY THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA MAY 13 1940**. (#AAI)



The beautiful Century "21" Exposition medal, designed by George Tsutakawa, was sculpted in high relief. The reverse depicts the artist's concept of outer space. (#7)



Actual Size: 2½ inches

In 1969 this medal was struck to mark the 100th anniversary of the completion of the first transcontinental railway. Depicted on the obverse are two engines, Jupiter and #119, of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific, nosing together at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869. The medal often is referred to as the "Golden Spike Commemorative" in reference to the spike used in the 1859 ceremony. Attached to the spike was a bulbous nugget, which was broken off before the ceremonies and made into watch fobs and rings for President Grant, Secretary of State William Seward and several other dignitaries. Fashioned from \$400 worth of gold by San Francisco jewelers, the spike now is displayed at the Stanford University Museum. (#23)

THE ISSUES ARE so diverse that they are very educational. Almost all of the sponsors have some sort of historical background material to help promote their issues.

were awarded to people in the sponsoring organization in recognition of superior service. The smallest number struck was 100; the highest in the thousands.

You can find national commemorative medals at many coin shops, but most dealers have not the slightest idea what they are, how many were minted or what they are worth. If you see one you want and the price seems high, make a reasonable offer below the marked price and you will probably get it. Also, many individuals advertise medals in the classified section of coin publications, and most are usually fairly priced.

The challenge of obtaining many of the issues was a true test of my dedication to the task and gave me untold hours of pleasure. The issues are so diverse that they are very educational. Almost all of the sponsors have some sort of historical background material to help promote their issues. Many of them are of regional interest, giving everyone the opportunity to learn of people, places and events nationwide.

With the revival of the Mint's commemorative coinage program, interest in national commemorative medals may slacken. Commemorative coins must have national appeal; however, a plethora of regional topics remain for national commemorative medals. I feel that Congress will not promiscuously put its stamp of approval on every commemorative coin proposal brought before it. Therefore, there should be room for this medal series to continue.

### National Commemorative Medals

THE FOLLOWING IS a listing and brief description of national commemorative medals, condensed from my articles "Commemorative Medals Struck at the U.S. Mint," which appeared in the July 1968, September 1977 and November 1985 issues of *The Numismatist*. I recently located two more medals, numbers AA1 and 44, and have included them here.

#### AA1. Greenwich, Connecticut, Tercentennial

1940; bronze; 1<sup>22</sup>/<sub>100</sub> inches; 2,500 struck.

#### A1. 200th Anniversary of the State of New York

1954; bronze and sterling silver; 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches; 4,000 and 1,250 minted, respectively. Fifty .900 fine gold proof medals also were minted.

#### B1. 120th Anniversary of Texas' Declaration of Independence

1956; bronze; 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches; 2,000 authorized.

#### C1. Louis Dembitz Brandeis Centennial Year

1956; bronze; 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches; 3,000 minted. Twenty gold medals also were struck for presentation.

**1. Nevada Silver Centennial**

1959; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 1,000 minted.

**2. Rush to the Rockies Centennial/Opening of the United States**

**Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado**

1959; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 10,000 minted.

**3. Pony Express Centennial**

1960; bronze and .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 50,000 and 5,000 minted, respectively. Three thousand medals were struck in high-relief, 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch silver and box-numbered. Of these, 32 were presented to officers and directors of the National Pony Express Centennial Association.

**4. Kansas Statehood Centennial**

1961; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 20,000 minted.

**5. Pony Express Termination Centennial**

1961; bronze and .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 15,000 and 3,000 minted, respectively. One thousand 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch, .900 fine silver medals were struck as presentation pieces for each of the 1,000 riders who participated in the centennial rerun of the actual Pony Express route. One thousand 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch, silver termination medals were offered to the general public at \$30 each.

**6. 250th Anniversary of Mobile, Alabama**

1961; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 5,000 minted.

**7. Century "21" Exposition**

1962; golden bronze and .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 15,000 and 2,000 minted, respectively.

**8. West Virginia Centennial**

1963; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 200,000 and 12,000 (proof) minted, respectively.

**9. 250th Anniversary of Birth of Padre Junipero Serra**

1963; bronze and .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 2,000 and 10,000 minted, respectively. The Office of Domestic Gold and Silver Operations allowed five gold medals to be struck for presentation to President Lyndon Johnson, Pope Paul VI, Generalissimo Franco, Serra International and for loan to California museums. An additional 25 pieces were struck in platinum and sold for \$750 each.

**10. Nevada Statehood Centennial**

1964; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 20,000 minted (including 5,000 proofs).

**11. General Douglas MacArthur**

1962; bronze; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 10,000 minted. In addition, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch bronze medals were struck and given to those donating \$1,000 to the MacArthur Memorial Foundation.

**A12. 50th Anniversary of the First Union Health Center**

1964; bronze; 3 inches; 2,000 minted. A 3-inch silver medal was struck for presentation purposes.

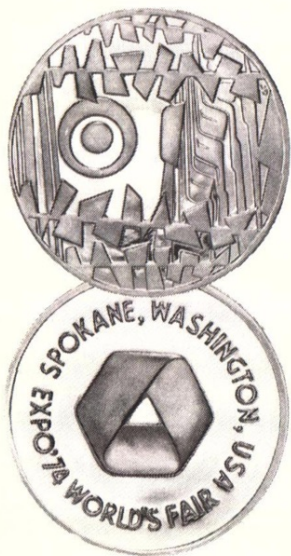


Actual Size: 3 inches

**A bronze replica of the gold medal presented to Walt Disney's widow was given as a token of appreciation to each contributor of \$100 or more to the California Institute of the Arts. The portrait of Disney on the obverse was designed and sculpted by Blaine Gibson; the likenesses of Mickey Mouse and other famous Disney cartoon characters on the reverse were designed by Bob Moore and executed by Joe Kaba. (#29)**



The South Carolina Tricentennial medal was sculpted by well-known artist Enrique Monjo. (#31)



Commemorating the 1974 International Exposition on Environment at Spokane, Washington, this medal was struck by a private manufacturer using dies produced by the U.S. Mint. The obverse was designed by George Tsutakawa, a internationally prominent sculptor known for his fountains. (#38)

**12. Saint Louis Bicentennial**

1964; bronze and .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 10,000 and 15,000 minted, respectively.

**13. Liberty Series: Federal Hall National Memorial**

1965; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 5,000 minted. Medals in this series also were produced in 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch bronze.

**14. Liberty Series: American Museum of Immigration**

1965; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 5,000 minted. Medals in this series also were produced in 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch bronze.

**15. Liberty Series: Castle Clinton National Monument**

1965; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 5,000 minted. Medals in this series also were produced in 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch bronze.

**16. American Numismatic Association Diamond Anniversary**

1966; bronze; 3 inches; 50,000 authorized—3,000 minted. Thirty 3-inch silver medals were struck for presentation to elected and appointed ANA officers and to high-ranking government and treasury officials.

**17. 25th Anniversary of U.S. Navy Seabees/U.S. Navy Civil Engineers Corps Centennial**

1967; bronze and silver; 3 inches and 1 $\frac{5}{16}$ -inches, respectively; 100,000 total authorized.

**18. 50th Anniversary of the Federal Land Bank**

1967; golden bronze; 3 inches; 2,000 authorized.

**19. Alaska Purchase Centennial**

1967; bronze, silver and platinum; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; 100,000 authorized—10,000 struck in silver, the balance in bronze. The first 2,500 silver medals were serially numbered. In addition, platinum medals were sold on a reservation-only basis at \$500 each, only within the State of Alaska.

**20. Liberty Series: Ellis Island National Shrine**

1967; .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$ -inches; 5,000. Medals in this series also were produced in 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch bronze. In addition, seven gold medals were struck for presentation purposes.

**A21. 50th Anniversary of the Diplomatic Courier Service**

1968; bronze and sterling silver; 3 inches; 4,000 and 1,000 minted, respectively. The medal originally was struck in 3-inch bronze and sold as U.S. Mint item #658. However, the U.S. Diplomatic Service subsequently sponsored the issue described above.

**21. 250th Anniversary of San Antonio/HemisFair '68**

1968; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{5}{16}$  inches; approximately 10,000 and 8,000 minted, respectively. The first 5,000 silver medals were serially numbered. Six gold medals also were struck for presentation to President Lyndon Johnson, Texas Governor Connally, Senators Ralph Yarborough and John Tower, Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez and San Antonio Mayor Walter M. McAllister Sr.

**22. 200th Anniversary of San Diego**

1969; bronze and silver; 36,500 and 55,000 in a 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch size, respectively, and 29,500 and 1,000 in a 3-inch size, respectively.

**23. 100th Anniversary of the First Transcontinental Rail Route  
(Golden Spike Commemorative)**

1969; bronze and silver; 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch bronze and silver, 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch bronze; 500,000 authorized.

**24. Father Marquette Tercentenary**

1968; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 4,000 and 200 minted, respectively. Five medals were struck in gold for presentation purposes.

**25. Memphis, Tennessee, Sesquicentennial**

1969; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 100,000 authorized. First issue, 10,000 silver minted; second issue, 10,000 silver minted bearing the mark MSII.

**26. Dartmouth College Bicentennial**

1969; bronze and gold; 3 inches; 5,000 and 2 minted, respectively.

**27. Winston Churchill "Iron Curtain" Memorial**

1969; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 95,000 bronze authorized, 5,000 silver minted. One 3-inch gold medal was presented to Westminster College.

**28. Wichita, Kansas, Centennial Medal**

1969; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 9,000 and 3,500 minted, respectively. The first 1,500 silver medals are serially numbered. Numbers 2 through 100 were auctioned on a mail-bid basis. Serial number 1 was presented to President Nixon on July 11, 1969.

**29. Walt Disney Commemorative**

1969; bronze; 3 inches; 100,000 authorized. One 3-inch gold medal was struck for presentation to Disney's widow. One 3-inch bronze medal was given to each contributor of \$100 or more to California Institute of Fine Arts.

**30. Alabama Sesquicentennial**

1969; bronze and sterling silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 10,000 and 2,500 minted, respectively. The sterling silver medals are serially numbered.

**31. South Carolina Tricentennial**

1970; bronze and silver; 300 3-inch silver, 3,000 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch silver, 3,000 3-inch bronze, 3,000 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch bronze. Both sizes of silver and the 3-inch bronze medals were serially numbered.

**32. American Fisheries Society Centennial**

1970; bronze and silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 100,000 authorized—first issue, 1,900 and 100 minted, respectively.

**33. Ohio Northern University Centennial**

1971; bronze and .900 fine silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 16,000 authorized—1,000 and 2,000 minted, respectively.

**34. Stone Mountain Memorial Dedication**

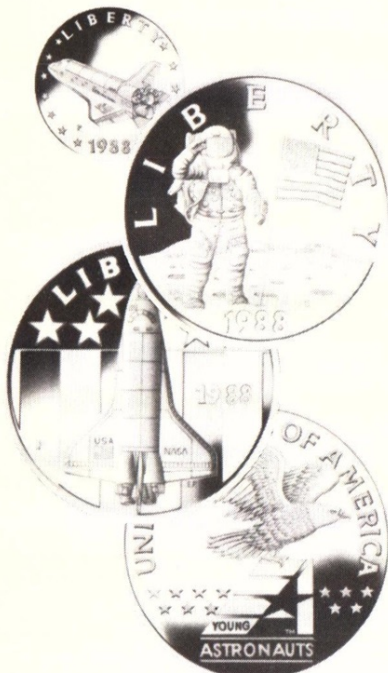
1970; bronze and silver; 3 inches and 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches. These medals were sold as



The Jim Thorpe medal was struck for the Oklahoma Athletic Hall of Fame Commission. Thorpe, winner of the decathlon and pentathlon in the 1912 Olympics, was the only man ever to win both events. Proceeds from sale of the medals were earmarked for restoration of Jim Thorpe's name in the Olympian record book and to return his awards to the United States and Oklahoma; creation of the Jim Thorpe Organization to honor the nation's outstanding athletes; and construction of a national headquarters for the latter organization. (#40)



The San Francisco Cable Car Centennial medal was the first national commemorative medal to be struck at the San Francisco Mint. (#39)



Authorized by Congress on May 12, 1986, by Public Law 99-295 and struck in 1988, the America in Space medals were sponsored by the non-profit Young Astronaut Program, which was created by President Reagan to "kindle the spirit of scientific inquiry and adventure among the youth of America." Congress authorized a total of 750,000 medals. They were sold in three-piece sets comprising one each in gold, silver and bronze, and in two-piece sets of one silver and one bronze. The gold medal also was sold individually. Obverses of the medals were designed by members of the Young Astronaut Program—(from top) the gold medal by Brian Kachel, the silver medal by Essan Ni, and the bronze medal by Erac Priestes. The common reverse (bottom) is the work of Robert Ahlcrona. (#44)

matched and numbered sets of one medal of each size and composition. No more than 4,000 sets were minted—initial order, 500 sets minted. In addition, the large and small silver could be ordered separately. No more than 4,000 of each size of silver coins were struck for individual sale—initial order, 1,500 of each size minted.

**35. Anniversary of Birth of Jose Antonio Navarro**

1971; bronze and .925 fine silver; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 1,800 and 200 minted, respectively.

**36. Roberto Walker Clemente**

1972; bronze and plated bronze; 3 inches and 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches, respectively; 200,000 authorized. One gold medal was presented to Clemente's widow.

**37. 175th Anniversary of the U.S. Frigate *Constellation***

1972; silver and bronze; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch and 3-inch silver, 3-inch bronze; 15,000 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch silver, 400 3-inch silver; 2,000 3-inch bronze.

**38. Expo '74**

1974; .999 fine silver and bronze; 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches; mintage unknown.

**39. San Francisco Cable Car Centennial**

1973; .925 silver and bronze; 3 inches and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches; mintage unknown. Two gold medals were struck, one of which was presented to President Ford and the other designated for permanent display in the San Francisco archives.

**40. Jim Thorpe**

1973; silver and bronze; 3 inches and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches; 100,000 authorized. Fifty 3-inch gold medals were to be minted, as were some in 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch gold. Platinum and palladium issues were also planned.

**41. Colorado Centennial—United States Bicentennial**

1976; bronze, .900 fine silver, gold plate and gold; 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches; 250,000 authorized—41,000, 20,200, 5,000 and 100 minted, respectively.

**42. Anniversary of Birth of Charles Carroll—Declaration of Independence Bicentennial**

1976; bronze; 2 inches; 50,000 authorized—2,000 minted.

**43. U.S. Capitol Historical Society 1977/78**

1977; bronze, sterling silver and gold; 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch and 3-inch bronze and sterling silver, 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch gold; gold mintage limited to 4,000.

**44. America in Space**

1988; bronze, .900 fine silver and .900 fine gold; 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches and  $\frac{8}{100}$  inch, respectively; 250,000 of each metal minted. Medals sold in three-piece sets comprising one of each metal, or as a two-piece set comprising one silver and one bronze. The gold medal also was sold separately. •

*An ANA member since 1960, Howard L. Turner specializes in commemorative medals and is a member of the Token and Medal Society. His first installment of "Commemorative Medals Struck at the U.S. Mint" (July 1968) earned him a Heath Literary Award; the second and third parts of the series appeared in the September 1977 and November 1985 issues.*