Collecting Buffalo Nickels

by Thomas Coulson



1913 Buffalo Nickel, Type I

The Buffalo Nickel was introduced in 1913 as part of the renaissance of United States coinage that started in 1907 with the Saint Gaudens Twenty Dollar gold issue. The design is the work of James Earl Fraser, a prominent sculptor of the early Twentieth Century. The coin features a realistic American Indian and a Plains bison. The Indian was a composite image of three models. The most notable of these was probably Chief Iron Tail who later in life traveled the World as a performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He was not only a performer in the show, but was also one of Buffalo Bill Cody's closest companions. The general subjects were chosen for their uniquely American flavor; though ironically both had nearly disappeared from the continent by 1913.

The initial design of 1913, called the Type One design is beautiful. The Indian and Buffalo are very detailed. The fields of these Type One coins display a rugged texture which gives them an extra aesthetic appeal. Shortly after these coins entered circulation, however, it became apparent that the denomination "Five Cents" would wear away quickly due to its high relief. The original design was then modified to recess the denomination which offered greater protection from wear. At this time some of the detail was removed from the coin including the unique texture in the field. These new 1913 Type 2 Nickels are still beautiful coins, but lack some of the artistic merit of the original type. Further modifications, though minor, were made in 1916. Well struck Buffalo Nickels are a great example of the artistic work that the early 20th Century coin design renaissance brought.



1913 S Buffalo Nickel, Type II Reverse

The design was instantly popular due to its beauty and has been extensively collected ever since. Though a Nickel in the depression era still had some real purchasing power, it was not so much money for most people to put a few away. Once the series ended in 1938, these coins were quickly removed from circulation by collectors. By the mid to late 1950's, few Buffalo Nickels could be found in commerce; and those were typically worn beyond date recognition.



1938 d over s Buffalo Nickel

Aside from the two principal types of Buffalo Nickel, there are a few very popular varieties that collectors have cherished since their discoveries. The most famous of these is the 1937 D Three Legged Buffalo Nickel. Other popular varieties include the 1918 over 17 D Buffalo Nickel, the 1916 Doubled Die Obverse Nickel, the 1938 D/S Buffalo Nickel, and the 1914/1913 Buffalo Nickel.

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How to Collect Buffalo Nickels -Seven Different Ways

1938 D Nickel

1. The Basic Collection

Buffalo Nickels can be collected on nearly any budget. A collection grading a consistent very good to fine is quite affordable for even a modest budget, if assembled over time. Even in this worn grade, the coins are very attractive and completing the collection will be a sufficient challenge. The 1913-S Type 2 Nickel, and the varieties 1937-D Three Legged Nickel, and the 1918/7 D Nickel will be the most difficult to find for this set. For a collector with more resources, a set in very fine to extremely fine grades will pose a hearty challenge. These coins have wonderful eye appeal with original surfaces and light circulation. Finding coins in the late teens through the mid-twenties with



1937 - D Three Legged Buffalo Nickel

decent strikes can be particularly difficult, but worth the effort. The 1919-D Nickel, 1920-D Nickel, 1924-S Nickel, 1926-D Nickel, 1926-S Nickel and 1927-D Nickel are very hard to find well struck. This grade range represents nice value since it seems that decent coins are far less common than the prices seem to indicate. A mint state Buffalo nickel set is an advanced collection. Mint state key and semi key coins are scarce and enthusiastically pursued when they are available. A collection of these will require significant resources and some patience to find the right coins.

As with any collection, a Buffalo Nickel set can be assembled in stages. In The Complete Guide to Buffalo Nickels, David Lange suggests forming a collection by first completing a date set of nickels and then adding the more expensive (usually branch mint) coins around the date set. This is a great approach because most dates are available in the set at a reasonable price.

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2. The Date Set

Since many of the branch mint Buffalo Nickels are more expensive in high grades, a collector may consider assembling a run of each date issued. A date set consists of 23 different dates and most are reasonably priced even in mint state grades. (Though 'reasonably priced' may mean still a few hundred dollars a piece for the earlier date common mint state specimens.) The Buffalo Nickel is such a beautiful coin; everyone should at least consider acquiring some of them. The date set allows for a structured way to do this without spending a fortune on the series.



1923 Buffalo Nickel



Reverse

3. Hobo Nickels



1913 Type 1 Hobo Nickel

Not long after the introduction of the Buffalo Nickel, artists realized the potential of the coin as a canvas for their inspirations. In the century since, countless artists have altered the coin's features to create unique pieces of

art. Many of the contemporary 'Hobo' nickels were carved by actual hobos. These were made from the 'teens onward through the 'thirties. This was the first generation of Hobo Nickels led by the two most famous artists; 'Bo"- George Washington Hughes and 'Bert'- Bertram Wiegand. The nickels that they and



1913 Hobo Nickel Featuring Theodore Roosevelt

others carved were chiefly designs portraying Hobos and Hobo life. These nickels continued to be carved after the end of the series in 1938. From the 'forties onward until 1980 they were made with new and varying subject matter. After 1980, a new generation of Hobo Nickel carvers emerged. Some of



1919 Hobo Nickel

these artists were copycats of earlier designs. Others have created new, diverse works with sophisticated equipment. Some of the modern designs are remarkably detailed and beautiful. The best works – modern or original – can fetch thousands of dollars. Simple, crude alterations can be had for as little as a few dollars. Most Hobos lie somewhere in between with quality of the work

and its provenance being the determining factors of value. If you are interested in learning more about Hobo Nickels, check out the Original Hobo Nickel Society, www.hobonickels.org.



1913 Type 1 Hobo Nickel

MOBING



A uniquely carved 1971-D Eisenhower Dollar

4. Nic A Date Set

Do you like lottery scratchers? Maybe this form of collecting would appeal to you. There is an acidic solution called Nic A Date that can reveal the date formerly visible on a well worn Buffalo Nickel. It would be a fun exercise to see how many dateless nickels would need to be 'restored' before you have a full collection. Dateless Buffalo Nickels can usually be bought for less than a quarter a piece. The solution is also inexpensive. In fact, there are recipes online to make your own version of the solution. If the pursuit of each date and mint mark in the series is your goal, this is the cheapest way to do it. There will still be challenges to completing such a collection, however. While the earlier dates will be relatively more common, later dates will probably be difficult to find with worn off dates. The 1938-D Nickel, for example, is probably quite rare in dateless condition.

5. Coin Board Set

Some of the first coin albums developed in the late 1920's and early 1930's were in an 11 by 14 inch board format. Buffalo Nickels, being current at the time, were a popular title for these board makers. For collectors that appreciate both the history of the coinage and the history of collecting, the boards make an ideal way to house a collection. Sometimes these boards can be purchased with some of the original coins in them. This can make the collection interesting by adding insight to what coins might have been readily available in circulation at the time. Once complete, the framed boards can make an impressive display for the wall.

6. Proof Buffalo Nickels

Proof Buffalo nickels are enigmatic. The early matte proof Buffalo Nickels (1913 Type I and 1913 Type II to 1916) have an unusual appearance. They are not so lustrous as the business strikes. Coins struck late in a die's life may not display much of the fine granulation characteristic of the matte proof coins. They could sometimes be mistaken for exceptionally well made business strikes. Because they are not flashy like brilliant proofs, their collect-ability and price performance have likely suffered over the years. Even when they were first produced, they were not especially popular with collectors. Some remained unsold at years' end. Some could have been mistakenly spent given



1914 Buffalo Nickel PR66

that well made business strikes can look very similar. These conditions lead to a group of coins that are scarce in pristine condition. While the early proof Buffalo Nickels are definitely an acquired taste, rarity and value can be had by those who can appreciate these coins.

The late date proof Buffalo Nickels issued in 1936 and 1937 differ from their predecessors. The first group of coins struck in 1936 do resemble the earlier coins somewhat, though they are unlikely to be mistaken for business strikes. The later 1936 and 1937 issues have the mirror like fields that collectors associate with modern proof coins. A high end brilliant proof Buffalo Nickel is something to behold; a true work of numismatic art.

These coins are expensive, but a collection of them has only a handful of coins. To complete a set, a collector might save for a while and target a specific date and grade. This could add to the thrill of acquisition by concentrating on many specimens of a particular date in order to find just the right one. Once one date is secured, repeat the process with the next date. If a complete set is too expensive, perhaps a three coin type set would be more attainable. This would include the Type I proof, the Type II proof, and the 1936-37 brilliant proof.

7. Buffaloes on U.S. Coins

A topical collection of Buffaloes on United States coins is an interesting alternative to just collecting the Buffalo Nickel series. In addition to the two types of Buffalo Nickel, there are a variety of coins to collect including a commemorative nickel, quarter, half dollar, dollar, and the gold bullion series. All except the bullion coins are reasonably affordable. The fractional sized bullion coins are pricey compared to their intrinsic value, but none are extremely expensive. Below is a list of United States coins with Buffalo designs.

- 1. Buffalo Nickel, Type 1, 1913 only
- 2. Buffalo Nickel, Type 2, 1913-1938
- 3. Mount Rushmore Commemorative Half Dollar, 1991
- 4. American Buffalo Commemorative Dollar, 2001
- 5. Westward Journey Series Bison Nickel, 2005
- 6. \$50 (one ounce) Gold Buffalo, 2006-Date
- 7. \$25 (half ounce) Gold Buffalo, 2008 only
- 8. \$10 (quarter ounce) Gold Buffalo, 2008 only
- 9. \$5 (tenth ounce) Gold Buffalo, 2008 only
- 10. North Dakota Statehood Quarter, 2006



1991 Mount Rushmore Half Dollar Proof



\$50 One Ounce

2001 Buffalo

Commemorative

Dollar

Gold Buffalo

Read more about Buffalo Nickels

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Westward Iour-

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Close-up 1937 D Three Legged Buffalo Nickel