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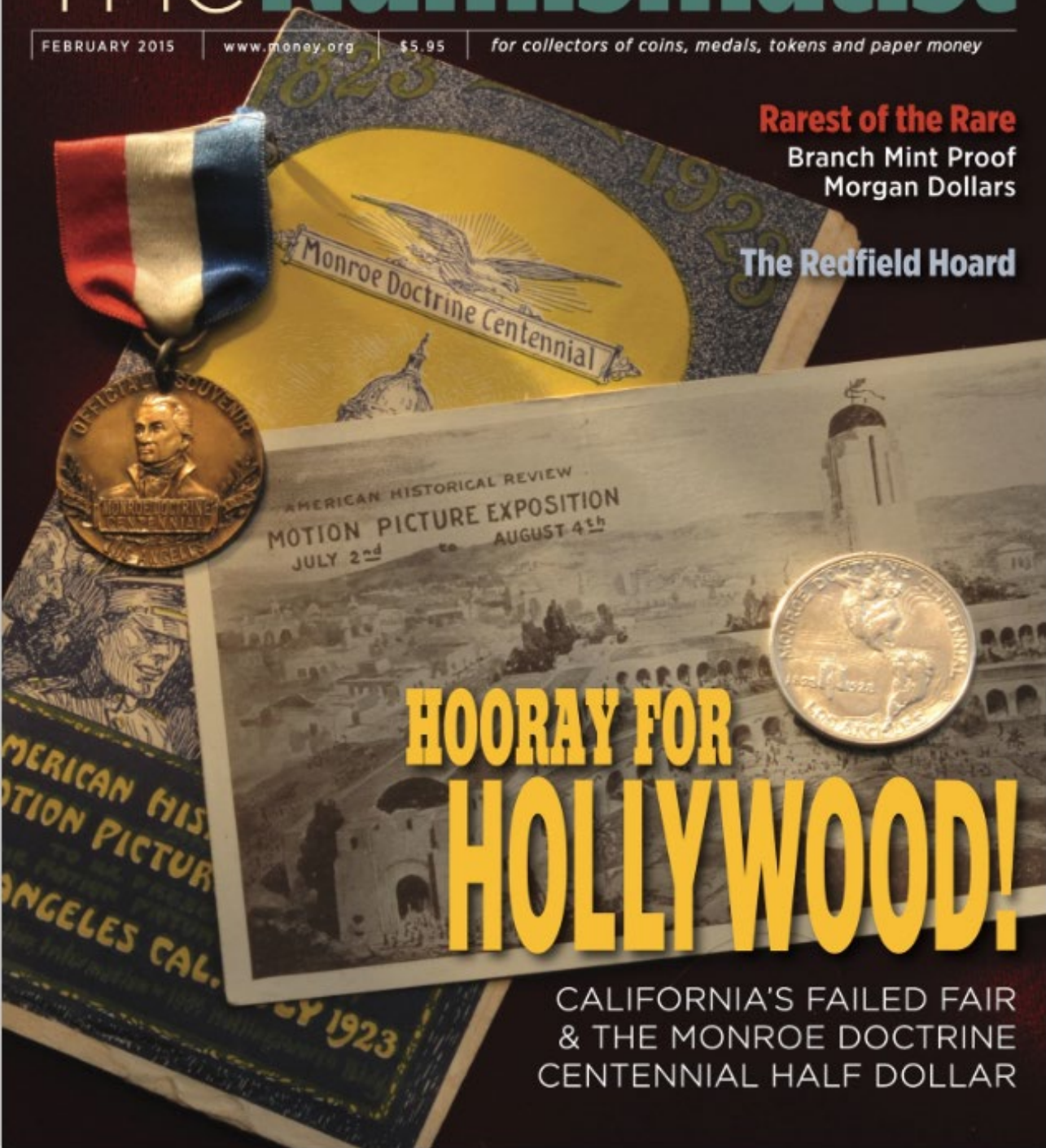
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Rarest of the Rare

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HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD!

CALIFORNIA'S FAILED FAIR
& THE MONROE DOCTRINE
CENTENNIAL HALF DOLLAR

Hooray for HOLLYWOOD!



PHOTO: MICHAEL GAROFALO/ROBERT E. KELLEY

PHOTO: MICHAEL GAROFALO

Commemorative half dollars and a handful of souvenir badges and tokens mark the 1923 Monroe Doctrine Centennial and Motion Picture Exposition.

NUMISMATISTS MAY RECALL that, in 1923, a commemorative half dollar was struck by the United States Mint to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine, an American foreign policy established to prevent European powers from expanding their colonies and otherwise interfering in North and South America. The coin depicts the conjoined busts of Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, with a beautiful and cleverly de-

signed rendering of the Western Hemisphere on the reverse. But how many of you know that the official name of the event was the “Monroe Doctrine Centennial and American Historical Review and Motion Picture Exposition?”

The coin is relatively common, as more than 274,000 were distributed, but its intended purpose is not so clear. Indeed, the two events were not related, but the centennial presented itself at a time when Hollywood was trying desperately to

The link between the coin and the American movie industry was weak, even by Hollywood standards.

PICTOS: ANA; ILLUSTRATIONS: NEEL, COHEN & MICHAEL GARDINALE

**Monroe
Centennial**

**American Historical
Revue and Motion
Picture Exposition**

Will be Held in
Los Angeles, California
from
July 2 to August 4, 1923

THIS celebration has been planned by leaders of the great motion picture industry, approved by the Federal Government and the State of California, endorsed by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and other prominent Southern California organizations to commemorate the enunciation of the famous Monroe Doctrine that has preserved the integrity of the American continents for the last hundred years.

Side-Lights of the Exposition

A PICTURESQUE city of quaint streets and striking views, patterned after the pueblos of the Latin countries, has been erected to house the Exposition exhibits and historical pageants.

A series of spectacles depicting the most important events in the history of the Western world since 1492, will be presented during the thirty-four days of the celebration.

The motion picture industry is co-operating to present "The Location," wherein the history and development of cinema art will be revealed to the thousands of visitors to the festival.

President Warren G. Harding, members of his cabinet, a Congressional delegation and diplomatic emissaries from practically all of the Latin-American republics plan to attend the premiere.

More than \$1,000,000 already has been expended in preparation for the Exposition.

A Monroe Centennial half-dollar, authorized by the President, has been issued to serve as a souvenir of the Exposition and to commemorate the regard in which President James Monroe is held. Three hundred thousand of these coins are now being distributed throughout the United States.

The new Los Angeles Coliseum, the largest in the world, with a seating capacity of 80,000, is to be utilized in presenting the historical pageants of the mammoth celebration.

A number of historical exhibits, including many possessions of President James Monroe and President Andrew Jackson, will be displayed by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The Sculptors' Guild of Los Angeles, headed by David Edstrom, noted sculptor and writer, will present an exhibit of many of the world's most famous collections of sculpture.

Under the direction of a women's committee, headed by leading California club women, a series of days devoted to Education, Literature, Art, Civic Welfare and Music will be observed.



▲ A FLYER DESCRIBES THE EVENT and the 1923-S commemorative half dollar (left) in glowing terms.

Actual Size: 162 x 170mm (flyer, top right) & 30.6mm (half dollar)



shed its bad image. Luel Marzola reported in her 2012 article "Hollywood's Lost World's Fair: The Failure of the Motion Picture Exposition of 1923" that Los Angeles wanted to use the exposition "to announce itself as a key metropolis in modern America, as Chicago (1892-93) and San Francisco (1915) before it had done."

With the backing of influential friends in Congress, and all the power, might and unparalleled storytelling ability of Hollywood, it is surprising the American Historical Revue and Motion Picture Exposition isn't better known. Marzola proposed that "the inability of the film studios to work together as a united industry ultimately led to the failure of the exposition."

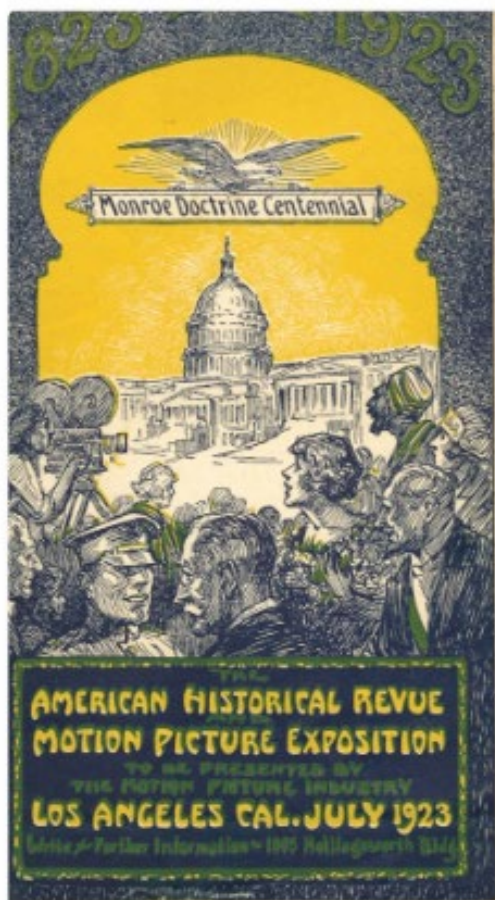
The link between the coin and the American movie industry was weak, even by Hollywood standards. The legislation calling for the coin's production mentioned nothing about the connection. According to Don Taxay's 1967 *Illustrated History of U.S. Commemorative Coinage*, on December 18, 1922, Congressman Walter Franklin Lineberger (R-California) "introduced a bill to authorize a Monroe Doctrine (Centennial) commemorative half dollar. He spoke at length about how the Doctrine prevented France, England and Russia from trying to acquire California prior to its annexation."

A Rocky Start

Even back in the 1920s, Hollywood wielded a great deal of power. Some major motion-picture studios banded together to form the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), whose purpose was to lobby for the exposition, and to encourage studios and stakeholders to support it financially. However, a few large studios (Fox Film Corporation [later

Many studios contributed money and star power to make the exposition a success, among them Paramount Pictures.

PHOTO: MICHAEL SARGIS/AL



▲ A COLORFUL PROMOTIONAL ENVELOPE housed the Monroe Doctrine Centennial half dollar.

Actual Size: 95 x 165mm

20th Century Fox], Vitagraph and others) refused to be involved. At times, it appeared the exposition would have to be cancelled because of a lack of funding.

But, the exposition's tenacious supporters pre-

vailed. In a May 1923 letter to MPPDA President Will Hays, Producer Joseph Schenck wrote that the Hollywood community believed the event would be a financial success, and that it virtually guaranteed investors a profitable return on their money. Schenck and other Hollywood giants, such as Producer/Director Cecil B. DeMille, promoted the exposition at every opportunity and constantly were quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Examiner* and even the venerable *Time* magazine.

While these efforts produced favorable results, America's perception of Hollywood was far from positive. The multiple trials of actor Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle for the death of actress Virginia Rappe and the murder of director William Desmond Taylor produced hundreds of sensational and scandalous headlines that were burned into the public psyche. People doubted Hollywood's ability to reform its image before the exposition opened.



▲ FRANCIS B. DAVISON was named director-general of the exposition. Thirty years earlier, he had served as chief inspector and adjuter of the 1892-93 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Schmoozing for Success

Many studios contributed money and star power to make the exposition a success, among them Paramount Pictures; Warner Brothers; Metro Pictures and Goldwyn Pictures (the precursors of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [MGM] Studios); and Columbia Pictures Corporation. The latter was one of the biggest sponsors of the fair. President and Production Director Harry Cohn was by nature a promoter, and he saw the event as an opportunity to publicize the studio and its stable of stars. He invited carefully chosen local dignitaries, national political figures and important investors to attend the exposition and the parties and historical pageants that featured Columbia celebrities.

To recognize dignitaries for their participation

Lineberger's coinage bill had its share of supporters, but also a number of detractors, among them Congressman Louis Cramton.



PHOTO: MICHAEL GARDNER/ROBERT B. KELLEY

▲ **TIFFANY & CO.** was commissioned by Columbia Pictures to produce a badge for presentation to dignitaries. Suspended from the ribbon was a 1923-S half dollar in a sterling-silver bezel. Only three examples of this piece are known.

Actual Size: 33 x 90.8mm

in the American Historical Revue and Motion Picture Exposition, Columbia commissioned Tiffany & Co. to create a hundred sterling-silver badges, from which were suspended Monroe Doctrine Centennial half dollars. The badge was composed of two bars—one imprinted with the word COLUMBIA, the other with OFFICIAL GUEST; the back of the top bar bore the name TIFFANY & CO. and the word STERLING. The coin was mounted in a bezel and hung from a red-white-and-blue ribbon. These impressive badges are extremely rare and difficult to acquire. (In the last 40 years, I have seen only three.)

An event of this magnitude required a strong leader. The organizers appointed Francis B. Davison (known to all as "FB"), who, 30 years earlier, had served as "chief inspector and adjuster" for the 1892-93 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Assisting Director-General Davison was Exposition President Walter J. Reynolds, who also was secretary of the anti-union Motion Picture Producers Association of Los Angeles. Ultimately, Reynolds had no real influence over the studio executives, and conflicts between him and Davison contributed to Reynolds' resignation before the close of the exposition.

Powerful Friends in Washington

Lineberger's coinage bill had its share of supporters, but also a number of detractors, among them Congressman Louis Cramton (R-Michigan) and Senator Frank Greene (R-Vermont), who voiced strong concerns about "our nation's coinage being sold to harlotry, from year to year." But

Lineberger marshaled his forces, and the bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives on January 24, 1923, and subsequently was approved by the Senate. The legislation was signed into law by President Warren G. Harding.

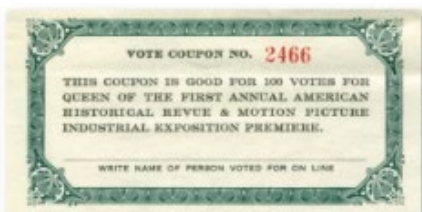
Congress authorized the striking of not more than 300,000 silver 50-cent pieces in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine, stipulating that the coins "shall be



PHOTO: MICHAEL GARDNER



▲ **CHESTER BEACH'S DESIGN** for the reverse of the Monroe Doctrine Centennial half dollar, an enlarged version of which was mounted on the base of the exposition's statue of President James Monroe (top, at its 1923 dedication), bore a strong resemblance to the official seal (right) created by Ralph Beck for the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York.



◀ **THIS BOND-LIKE CERTIFICATE**, with removable coupons on a second page, was presented to exposition patrons. Actual Size: 238.15 x 368.3mm (left)



issued upon request of the Los Angeles Clearing House," a consortium of banks and financial institutions. James Earl Fraser, the pre-eminent sculptor of his day and an experienced coin designer (having created the Indian Head/Buffalo nickel in 1913), was commissioned to design the commemorative.

Because of his unprecedented workload, Fraser engaged the services of sculptor Chester Beach. It was Beach's idea to use female figures on the reverse to personify North and South America. The concept did not go unnoticed by Ralph Beek, designer of the 1901 Pan-American Exposition seal, who complained to the United States Mint and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts that Beach copied his work. Beach, however, claimed ignorance of Beek's design. Ultimately, Beek's plea for an apology fell on deaf ears, though it is obvious his earlier seal influenced Beach, who went on

to design additional commemorative coins and medals for the mint.

In May and June of 1923, the San Francisco Mint struck 274,077 Monroe Doctrine Centennial half dollars, which subsequently were purchased by the Los Angeles Clearing House at face value, plus the cost of making multiple sets of dies (\$1,800). According to Q. David Bowers' *Commemorative Coins of the United States: A Complete Encyclopedia* (1991), the coins were offered to the public for \$1 each and distributed through the Los Angeles Clearing House and nonmember banks, by mail through the Exposition Committee, and by other means, though significant quantities were not sold at the exposition.

Hollywood Hype

The exposition opened on July 2, 1923, and ran for five weeks, but it never lived up to the "buzz" Hollywood had created for it. Coin sales slumped, and the member banks of the Los Angeles Clearing House began releasing the coins into circulation. It has been estimated that less than 10 percent of the mintage was actually sold at the advertised price of \$1 per coin; the remainder circulated at face value.

The media of the day distorted these facts, and news stories, such as this one from the *Los Angeles Times*, painted a rosier picture:

REVUE COINS IN HEAVY DEMAND

—♦—
Half Dollars Sought by All Sections of Country

—♦—
Management Refuses to Send Souvenirs Away

... Monroe Doctrine Centennial half dollars, minted to commemorate the exposition now being conducted in this city, are attracting nation-wide interest among numismatists and coin dealers.

Additional problems plagued the exposition. Within weeks of its opening, receipts trailed

Even Hollywood's biggest motion-picture stars, summoned by the studios to entertain attendees, couldn't save the exposition.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL SARTORI, ROBERT B. KELLEY



▲ THE "OFFICIAL SOUVENIR" was a uniface medal suspended from a ribbon and carrying a left-facing profile of Monroe. Actual Size: 31.3 x 70mm

expenses, and the fair was awash in red ink. As bankruptcy loomed on the horizon, no mention of this was ever made in contemporary newspapers.

Attendance was significantly lower than expected. Even Hollywood's biggest motion-picture stars, summoned by the studios to entertain attendees, couldn't save the exposition. The *Los Angeles Examiner* trumpeted a million visitors, though attendance was closer to 300,000.

One of the final daggers in exposition promoters' hearts was President Harding's highly touted visit. He was scheduled to tour the exposition grounds on Monday, August 6, but while visiting in

California, the president collapsed and died on August 2. This was the final straw, and a pall hung over the remaining days of the fair.

In Hollywood terms, the American Historical Revue and Motion Picture Exposition was a flop. Film studios that exhibited and produced historical films and pageants for the expected throngs incurred significant debts. Many exposition employees were unpaid, as were a number of vendors. Investors lost much of their seed money, and the profits promised them never materialized.

All That Remains

Aside from the commemorative half dollars, a few exposition souvenirs have survived. Among them is a guide book, "Exposition Memories," that extols the exhibits, the film stars in attendance, and the overall grandeur of the event.

The "official souvenir" was a uniface medal bearing a left-facing bust of President James Monroe, suspended from a red-white-and-blue ribbon. These sold for 50 cents each, and dozens are known today.

Acknowledgments

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▲ ON THE OCCASION of the Monroe Doctrine Centennial in 1923, Los Angeles Rubber Stamp Company produced this aluminum token to advertise its business. Actual Size: 34mm

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