

Museum New: An Empire built on Meal Tickets

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We've all said it at one time or another: "If big government would just keep its nose out of our business, we would be a lot better off!" Thomas W. Peirce probably said the same thing, especially after the passage of the Coinage Act of 1873. That fateful bit of legislation took the United States off of the "silver" standard and put the nation on the "gold" standard. In other words, silver coins were dethroned as currency and gold was the new king.



The problem for Mr. Peirce (besides having a very strange spelling for his surname) was that he was trying to build a railroad, the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway (GH&SA), and a severe shortage of small change due to the Coinage Act was causing grief for his workers. In a day when wages were less than a dollar a day and making change was a necessity, Peirce was having difficulty making payroll and his workers were having trouble paying for meals and lodging. It was a perplexing problem.

Peirce came up with a very ingenious solution ... he would create his own coins and convince local businessmen that they were literally "as good as gold." His coins were stamped from "gutta percha," a latex rubber product that comes from Malaysian trees, that dries quite hard and is very durable. A versatile substance, gutta percha can be used for insulation or inserted into teeth during root canal procedures.

With his personal guarantee and backed by his personal fortune, Peirce's new currency was honored at boarding houses, stores and eating houses across the line (even Sanderson) up until a few years after the railroad was completed in 1883. It is safe to say that the tokens, which were about the size of a quarter and worth 25¢ in trade, were wildly successful and filled a great need. Accounting for inflation, one token would exchange for \$5.82 in 2014 dollars!

The gutta percha tokens were also the first objects on which the famed "Sunset" logo of the Southern Pacific Railroad was used. It was said of Thomas Peirce that he was the only man smart enough to build a railroad with meal tickets.

So, if you are ever digging through great-grannie's trunk and run across a small black coin with the words "Meal Ticket" and "25 Cts." on it, you will be holding an object that built a railroad. (And, if you do find a GH&SA meal token, please let us know at the museum ... we would like to take a few pictures of it!)

Ah ... Yankee ingenuity .. ain't it grand!