



L. W. HOFFECKER
President of the A. N. A., 1939-1941.

Go tell it on the Franklin Mountains ... L.W. HOFFECKER IS REBORN!

PART 2 OF 4

BY JASON ELWELL

INTRODUCTION

The Old Spanish Trail (El Paso) half dollar is but one of many coins in the Classic Commemorative series. With a single mintage of only 10,000 coins, typically found in uncirculated grades, the Old Spanish Trail half dollar is considered highly desirable. As this coin is a “Key Date”, the Old Spanish Trail half dollar is at the top of most Classic Commemorative “Want Lists”.

Within that spotlight of want and envy, the Old Spanish Trail half dollar has faced more than the lion’s share of criticism. By providing new research, factual evidence, and local insight, Part 2 of “Go Tell it on the Franklin Mountains” will explain the symbolism hidden within the Old Spanish Trail half dollar, what led to its creation, and debunk criticisms against it!

AS WE KNOW IT TODAY

Starting with the obverse of the Old Spanish Trail half dollar, one can read United States of America, E Pluribus Unum and Liberty at the top. Near the bottom rim, moving inward, one can read Half Dollar and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. At the center, a profile of a horned cow is present.



The Old Spanish Trail Commemorative Half Dollar championed by L. W. Hoffecker



Flipping to the reverse, the title for this coin is apparent. Near the top rim, one can read Old Spanish Trail. Near the bottom of the rim, one can read the dates 1535 – 1935. Moving a bit to the right are the initials for Lyman William Hoffecker: L.W.H. At the center, an artistic interpretation of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s historic route sits behind a flowering Yucca.

This general description of the Old Spanish Trail half dollar is where most information stops. Ask yourself, do you really know anything about Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca or why the profile of a horned cow is worthy of a commemorative coin? Have you ever heard of the Narváez Expedition? Do you know why this route was called the Old Spanish Trail? If you said “No”, then here’s your chance to learn all that and so much more.

CABEZA DE VACA AND THE NARVÁEZ EXPEDITION

For those unaware, there was once an expedition that led across an unknown expanse of land now known as the United States and Mexico. This expedition is referred to as the Narváez Expedition and lasted from the years 1526 to 1536.

Beginning in 1526, a man by the name of Pánfilo de Narváez (1478/80-1528) was given license by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (Charles I of Spain) to lead an expedition into La Florida. On June 17, 1527 (Julian), Narváez departed from Spain with a total of five ships and 600 crewmen. After sailing the Atlantic for about six weeks, Narváez and his fleet of ships arrived in Hispaniola. On

the island, 140 ship crewmen abandoned the expedition. Down one third of his crew, Narváez would then sail to Cuba. After arriving in Cuba, a great hurricane sank two expedition ships and killed 60 men. Losing so much in such a brief period, Narváez was forced to rebuild expeditionary numbers back to initial strength and wait out the winter for better weather.

In the spring of 1528, Narváez left Cuba for what is now known as Florida. On April 14, 1528, an expedition of 400 crewmen landed on the coast near present day Tampa Bay, Florida. Narváez along with his Treasurer, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (1490?-1564), led 300 crew ashore and began walking into the Florida wilderness. The ships and remaining onboard crew would sail along the shoreline and followed the on-foot expedition. Eventually both parties arrived in an area now known as Tallahassee, Florida. Sadly, a miscalculation in distance contributed to the deaths of roughly 250 men. To make matters worse, the onshore party was then left for abandonment as the ships that once followed them changed course and set sail for New Spain.

Being stranded, Narváez and Cabeza de Vaca had no choice but to move west. They faced an onslaught of Indian attacks, illness, hunger, and the deaths of many more expedition members. Struggling for survival, Narváez, Cabeza de Vaca, and crew constructed crude makeshift boats to assist in their journey westward. In these “boats” the survivors continued along the Gulf Coast by hugging the shoreline of present-day Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. As misfortune would have it, attempt to stay close to shore was met with hardship. In a storm,



The title page of the written record of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's journey (Image courtesy of University of Texas Arlington)

the leader Narváez was lost to the sea. Washing ashore on a barrier island near present-day Galveston, only Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and three of his crew were known to be alive. Worse yet, they were now naked, as the sea had stolen their clothing, and they became enslaved by a local indigenous tribe.

After much time passed, the four remaining members of the Navárez expedition were able to escape their captors. Walking westward, Cabeza de Vaca and the three men wandered the western desert. By the year 1535, these men are thought to have traveled within a 75 mile area south of present-day El Paso, Texas. By traveling on foot for eight years, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and the three surviving crewmen finally reached the town of Culiacan, near the Pacific coast of Mexico.

In El Paso, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca is known as the first of the Twelve Travelers and is named "The Wanderer". The Twelve Travelers are a group of individuals who navigated the "Pass of the North" and are considered culturally and historically significant to this borderland region.

CATTLE CULTURE

When describing the ways of Texas, life of the vaquero, caballero, and cowboy are often mentioned. Glorified in the arts of music, fashion, and food, these hardened ranch-hands of the past created an agri-

"culture" that is uniquely Texan.

Historically, cattle have been of great economic importance to the United States, Mexico, Texas, and even El Paso. Early cattle trails of Texas were once historic native American routes that were later adopted by the Spanish. These old cattle "trails" linked cow-towns in commerce and tradition. Their use would eventually lead to the creation of the modern highway system.

The earliest history of raising cattle in Texas dates back to 1598 within the Rio Grande Valley. Brought by the Conquistador Don Juan de Oñate as part of his Royal Expedition, cattle were an important source of food and material for the colonization of northern New Spain. With the assistance of cattle culture, Oñate is credited with navigating the "Pass of the North", establishing the first Mission in Socorro, and becoming New Mexico's first Governor. In El Paso, Texas, Don Juan de Oñate is known as the Fifth of the Twelve Travelers and is named "The Conquistador".

In 1680, the El Paso region alone was home to several thousand heads of cattle. In the 1700's, missionary ranches had combined with private enterprises to create a rope-for-hire lifestyle to service a growing cattle industry. By the mid-1800's breeds like the Texas Longhorn, Hereford, and Brahman had adapted rather well to their full sun and semi-arid environment. Now a permanent staple of Texas, these breeds are prized for their heartiness, quality of meat, and skins for leather goods.

Following the railroad expansion of the late 1800s, El Paso was serviced by five different railroad lines. As a major cow-town and railroad hub, El Paso efficiently transported cattle from Chihuahua, Mexico to the outer coastlines of the United States. Today, El Paso continues to be a center for cattle transport through operations at its International Ports of Entry.

WHAT'S IN A "NAME"?

On the reverse of the Old Spanish Trail half dollar, behind the Yucca is an artistic interpretation of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's historic route. As there is no way to know the exact steps Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca took, present-day scholars

are grateful that he documented his journey in a published work. By studying Cabeza de Vaca's narrative, historians can plausibly trace his travels of North and Central America within some level of confidence. That being said, some creative license is at work in the coin's design. If you look closely, the reverse tells more than one story.

As mentioned in a June 2020 TNA News article, Barbara Angus discussed a certain road system that began in Florida and ended in California, known as the "Old Spanish Trail Highway". Adding to her research, it is known that there was an Old Spanish Trail Association, and it existed from approximately 1915 to about 1932. Organizations like the Old Spanish Trail Association were literally paving present-day roadways to the past. In creating the Old Spanish Trail highway system, this association was able to link modern travelers to historic trails and sites. As the conversion from horse to automobile was changing a nation, people could easily travel longer distances for leisurely activities.

Hoffecker, too, was moved by the Age of Automobiles. Documented in El Paso newspapers, L.W. Hoffecker bought a Chalmers "30" five-passenger vehicle (October 5, 1913) and applied for a vehicle license (October 10, 1913). Later, he would become greatly involved in a local automobile club. As both history and travel were of great interest to Hoffecker, their correlation in his design is very evident (April 4, 1935, El Paso Times).

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Now, what if I told you that the Old Spanish Trail half dollar has one final design element that has remained undiscussed for nearly 100 years? While conducting my own research, I was surprised to find that no one else had made this numismatic connection. Quite simply, L.W. Hoffecker and his coin had been (no pun intended) taken at face value.

We all know that Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was the first European explorer of Texas. We also know that Cabeza de Vaca served as Treasurer of the Narváez Expedition. We understand that a Treasurer's responsibility is to study, collect, and disburse money, and we also recognize that numismatists study, collect

(and occasionally disperse) money. By processing this information, I believe that L.W. Hoffeecker's Old Spanish Trail half dollar symbolically celebrates the First Texas (and El Paso) Numismatist. Furthermore, a case could be made that the Old Spanish Trail half dollar pays tribute to the St. Eligius of North America (the Patron Saint of Coin Collectors). As the narrative of the Narváez Expedition documents many interactions between Cabeza de Vaca and local indigenous tribes, it notes that many indigenous people believed that Cabeza de Vaca could heal the sick and had performed miracles. As it seems that many numismatic experts and authors have overlooked these last details, it should stand as a testament to the ingenuity of L.W. Hoffeecker and to how his Old Spanish Trail half dollar can still tell many stories and teach us new things.

COINS PAY FOR MUSEUM

The want for a museum in El Paso can be traced back to at least November 22, 1923. On that day, the local Pioneer Association of El Paso sponsored a charter for a Museum Committee at the County Courthouse. The Women's Club of El Paso also supported this cause. Members of the Pioneer Association are considered integral to the creation of early El Paso. Created in 1904, the Pioneer Association was formed by men who had arrived in El Paso before 1900. Members of the Women's Club are credited with bringing culture and the arts to a "wild and woolly" El Paso. Created in 1894, the Women's Club was formed by women who studied literature and current events of the day.

Those in favor of the Museum Committee charter agreed that someday El Paso would indeed need a museum for scientific, historical, and archeological purposes. Major W. H. Burgess would sit as its chairman. Seven years later, on March 31, 1930, the El Paso Chamber of Commerce would list L.W. Hoffeecker as part of that El Paso Museum Committee.



Pioneer Association El Paso County black ribbon

As a member of the El Paso Museum Committee,

Hoffeecker knew that it would take money to create a public museum in El Paso. There was desire from the public, but the local government said that funds were short. As Hoffeecker was a major local numismatist, he was familiar with the concept of U.S. Commemorative coins. With much help from Representative Thomasson, L.W. Hoffeecker drafted a proposal for the Old Spanish Trail half dollar and submitted it to Congress. Profits from Old Spanish Trail half dollar sales would go to the El Paso Museum Association. The President of the El Paso Museum Association at this time was a Charles Newman, according to an April 17, 1935, El Paso Times article.

L.W. Hoffeecker personally financed numerous trips to the nation's capital out of his own pocket. As neither our modern interstate system nor jet passenger flights were available, Hoffeecker most likely took a combination of trains, propeller aircraft, and early automobiles, as they were the standards of the day. A round trip from El Paso to Washington D.C. is about 4,000 miles. Just imagine traveling that distance many times within just a few short months.

As part of the final approval process, L.W. Hoffeecker made a guarantee to the U. S. government that he would purchase all minted coinage out of pocket at face value and to not return any of it (\$5,000). Hoffeecker also had to pay for the Old Spanish Trail half dollar design sculpture and its dies (\$2,500). In doing so, more funds would be spent.

Then there was the situation with advertising and distribution. Hoffeecker advertised the Old Spanish Trail half dollar in many newspapers and club magazines across the country. Hoffeecker also needed a system to track incoming orders, process payments, pay for postage, and process shipments. Systems such as these require labor, and at one time, Hoffeecker had up to three people working on order fulfillment.

As the city of El Paso was having ongoing issues with creating a museum (location, funding, internal conflict), Hoffeecker would set profits from Old Spanish Trail half dollar coin sales into bonds (\$7,000).

Some museum funds would be used in a joint venture between the city and

county of El Paso and L.W. Hoffeecker. A collection of historic guns was purchased in hopes of someday displaying them. The city and county each paid \$200, and the Museum Committee paid \$500 from Old Spanish Trail half dollar sales.

L.W. Hoffeecker continued to advocate for the preservation of El Paso history. As he was also a member of the Pioneer Association, Hoffeecker was allowed to store relics in the County Courthouse basement. Such items included an ancient Mexican ox cart, the Hart's millstones, an old iron lock and key, and the original door to the Ysleta Mission dated 1530. When a school for the blind was moved into the Courthouse basement, Hoffeecker had to find new storage. Rumor has it that Hoffeecker had to store those items at his residence.

As circumstance would dictate, in 1939, following the death of a William Ward Turney, Iva Guthrie Turney would make a generous donation to the city of El Paso. With the Women's Club of El Paso backing the transition of her home into a museum, assistance from local numismatist L.W. Hoffeecker, and payment of property taxes owed (\$15,000), Mrs. Iva Guthrie Turney transferred ownership of her home to the city of El Paso under the strict condition that her home be used by the public for the arts. When all was settled, the Turney mansion would open as the first public museum in El Paso, Texas.



Turney Mansion - International Museum of Art with Historical Marker at front

THE TURNEY CONNECTION

As advocates who lobbied for the rights of cattle raisers, both William Ward Turney (1861-1939) and Mrs. Iva Guthrie Turney (1872-1960) can be attributed to El Paso's modern livestock industry. After winning the 1892 election for Texas House / District 96, William Turney married Iva Guthrie, and together they moved to El Paso, Texas. Living in El Paso, William Turney served in both the Texas House (1892-1896) and State Senate (1896-1902). He was the Director of the Federal Reserve Bank- El Paso Branch (1918-1925) and later became the first Former Director to sit as Chairman of its Board (1925).

Apart from government, William Turney was Vice President of the American Livestock Association and served twice as President of the Texas Cattle Raisers Association. Mrs. Iva Guthrie Turney was involved with many local organizations and social circles within El Paso (including the Texas Cattle Raisers Association). She would host many elaborate events at the Turney mansion, which included special guests like Fort Bliss General John J. Pershing, the President of Mexico, and local cattlemen of the area.

Built in 1908 by famous architect Henry Trost, the Turney Mansion is now known as the International Museum of Art (not to be confused with the El Paso Art Museum in downtown El Paso). On November 16, 2024, the Turney mansion received an Official Texas Historical Marker. Funding is still provided solely through public donations and is allowed to operate so long as the city does not accrue any costs. *If you would like to visit the International Museum of Art or send a donation, the address is: 1211 Montana Ave., El Paso, TX 79902.*

COMMEMORATIVE CRITICISM

In two brief paragraphs of a 266-page book titled: *Numismatic Art in America*, Cornelius Vermule (Vermule III) made several comments about the Old Spanish Trail half dollar. In writing he stated, "It may be the strongest contestant for the title of least attractive American coin ever manufactured under official auspices between 1793 and the present."



Yucca on Mesa Street in El Paso, Texas

Vermule also wrote: "The reverse, with its blooming yucca tree on the map of one explorer's wandering, is neither attractive nor readily understandable."

If one truly wants to understand the Yucca, one only need to visit the southwest region of Texas and New Mexico. In this desert land, it is easy to understand why the Yucca is so important. For native populations, Yucca was a source of food and medicine. Yucca also had many utilitarian purposes like providing materials for sewing, shelter, and tools. There is also a particular fondness for the Yucca locally, as blooming Yucca flowers decorate El Paso's Franklin Mountains every spring. Now to address comments about "one explorer's wanderings". Well, isn't that kind of the point? As stated earlier, Cabeza de Vaca is known to El Pasoans as "The Wanderer, the First of the Twelve Travelers".

In 10 pages of a 768-page book titled: *Commemorative Coins of the United States: A Complete Encyclopedia*, Q. David Bowers uses what feels like an Alfred Hitchcock-esque tone to tell his story of L.W. Hoffecker and the Old Spanish Trail half dollar. Curious phrases like: "A Cozy Arrangement" and "Hoffecker Dreamed Up the Scheme" gives the audience a feeling that something nefarious took place in the conception of this coin. Nothing about the Old Spanish Trail half dollar program was "cozy". There was no "scheme" in

the works. This coin was created to raise money for a much-needed museum. This coin was created for the collector and by a collector. Being a U.S. commemorative, it is fitting to say this coin was "For the People, by the People".

Commemorative Coins of the United States: A Complete Encyclopedia

also drags L.W. Hoffecker's dying wife, Sara Hoffecker (1889-1954), into publication. Mrs. Hoffecker did write B. Max Mehl a letter (February 27, 1954) responding that there were only 12 Old Spanish Trail half dollar coins available and that her husband was going to keep those coins for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Whatever her reasons, Sara didn't sell to Mr. Mehl and passes away less than six months later (August 13, 1954). Surely, physical and mental decline could have played a role in her answer to Mehl. Maybe Sara Hoffecker just wanted some rest and not to be bothered by Mr. Mehl's hounding over those last few half dollars? Maybe she loved her grandchildren more than Mehl's money? Has your spouse ever just wanted just some rest and not to be bothered by your coin conversations?

Commemorative Coins of the United States: A Complete Encyclopedia

then attempts to connect Sara Hoffecker to an auction that happened over 30 years after her death. As 63 Old Spanish Trail half dollars were not part of a 1954 Mehl Auction, it's quite possible that these coins were originally saved for Hoffecker's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It's also possible that L.W. Hoffecker sold and bought half dollars beyond the date of his wife's letter. Regardless, in February of 1987, Superior Galleries provided an opportunity for surviving family members to let go of many numismatic items, honor the Hoffecker name, and say one last "Goodbye"...

Go Tell it on the Franklin Mountains ... L.W. Hoffecker is Reborn! Part 3 of 4 will give credit to Hoffecker's eyewitness account at the San Francisco mint and expose the unfairness he experienced in his last years (a real eye opener). Be on the lookout for the June issue of TNA News!

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SERIES



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