Beginner's Corner

19th Century Punching Errors

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In the last installment, we gave you an overview of how dies are made. The vast majority of the process discussed dealt with 20th century die production. This time out we would like to venture further back into the history of the die making process. In doing so, we will examine some of the errors that occurred which produced varieties that could no longer result once the more modern die making procedures were established.

In the earliest days at the U. S. Mint, the galvano described in the last issue was not used. This time period extended from 1792 through 1836. At this time, the Mint did not have any reduction lathes to transfer the design from a galvano to a master hub.

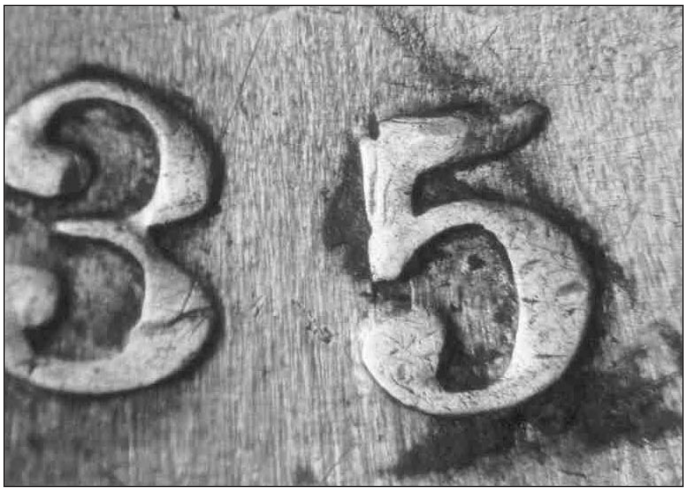
During this period, the master die for a given year was produced by a Mint engraver who carved the central design of a coin right into the face of the master die. When finished, this master die was placed in a hubbing press where it was used to make working hubs. Like the master die, these working hubs contained only the central design elements.

The working hubs were then used in the hubbing press to make working dies. Again, all of these working dies had just the central design elements. The letters, stars and other design elements around the rim were then added by punching them into the individual working dies.

The primary reason that the master die only contained the central design elements was the fact that the hubbing press that was used to make the working hubs and the working dies was a "screw press." With this type of press it wasn't possible to apply enough pressure in the hubbing process to transfer the design elements nearest to the rim of the die. There were also concerns that if errors were made while punching the designs near the rim into the master die, much time would be lost when a new master die would have to be started.

Because the design elements near the rim were hand punched, numerous varieties involving inconsistent spacing of letters, stars, or digits resulted. It also allowed the possibility of differently designed, or different size letters or numerals to appear on coins. To see what I am talking about, just grab your copy of *A Guide Book of United States Coins* (*The Red Book* as it is commonly called) and look through the various denominations during this time period. You will see classic examples of what I am talking about.

Of course, for those of us who are interested in collecting RPD varieties (re-punched date varieties), we are in luck. For all of the design elements around the rim, it frequently required more than one blow with a mallet and a hand-held punch to leave a satisfactory image of that design element in the die. Since the date is one of those design elements around the rim, multiple punches of a digit were frequently needed. If there was some misalignment of the punch and the image in the die when a subsequent punch was being made, the result was a repunched digit in the date.



***1835 50c WRPD-001**: Here we have an 1835 half-dollar which displays a re-punched 5 in the date. The date was one of the last items applied to the working dies during this era.*

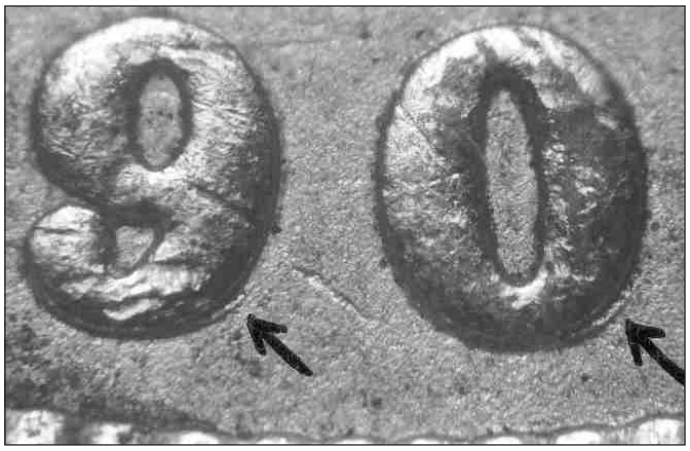
In 1836 the Mint introduced the use of the French Portrait Lathe. This was the point at which the Mint starting using galvanos to produce the designs that would appear on the coins. In 1867 a different Reduction Lathe was obtained known as the Hill Reducing Lathe. Both of these lathes performed the same operation that we described for the Janvier Reduction lathe in the last issue. They cut the design on the galvano into the face of a steel bar that became the master hub. The Janvier Lathe would be introduced in 1907.

With the introduction of the Indian cents, the Mint began placing the letters around the rim of the obverse onto the master die. To avoid the mistakes and inconsistencies that could occur if those letters were punched individually, a single circular punch contained the entire arrangement of letters so that they could all be impressed at one time. At this point the date did not appear on the master die but was still punched into the individual working dies. This was done so that the master die could be used over a period of several years.

Around 1886 the Mint began placing the letters around the rim of the Indian cent on the galvano. When the Janvier Reduction Lathe was introduced in 1907, the first two digits of the date began to appear on the galvano and thus on the master hubs. In 1893 the Mint switched from the screw press to hydraulic hubbing presses eliminating problems that they had in transferring the design elements near the rim during the hubbing process.

Throughout this entire time the date continued to be punched into the individual working dies. This kept open the possibility that repunched dates would occur and Murphy's Law stepped in. Since the errors could happen, they did.

1888 5c WRPD-001*: Proof dies were not exempt from the re-punching errors. This 1888 nickel from Ed Ashline shows re-punching of the first three digits in the date.*



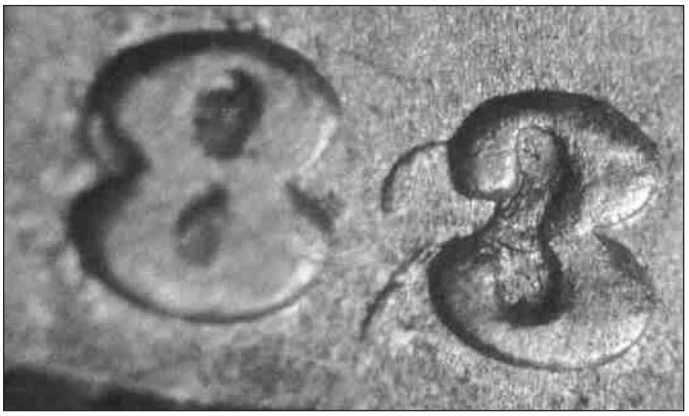
1901 1c WRPD-001*: This 1901 Indian cent in my own collection shows a re-punched 9 and 0 in the date.*

1895 1c WRPD-001 *(photo 1)*

1895 1c WRPD-001 *(photo 2): This 1895 Indian cent from Rodney D. Zabreznik shows a strong re-punched date with the extra digits showing well on the lower 8, 9 and 5. This is a well-documented variety listed as Snow 1, FND-1, Breen 2027, and as FS#1c-011.3 in The Cherrypickers' Guide to Rare Die Varieties.*

The fact that the dates were hand punched into the working dies also allowed another very popular error type to occur. That error is the overdate variety. Overdates occur when two different dates are punched into the same working die. Once again, a journey through the 19th century series in *The Red Book* or in Breen's *Complete Ency-*

clopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins will reveal numerous examples of this type of variety.



***1883 5c WOVD-001**: This 1883 nickel is one of four overdate varieties known for the 1883 nickels. This one is listed by Breen as Breen 2524. It is also listed in Ed Fletcher's book The Shield Five Cent Series as F-08. The Cherrypickers' Guide assigned it the number FS#5c-013.*

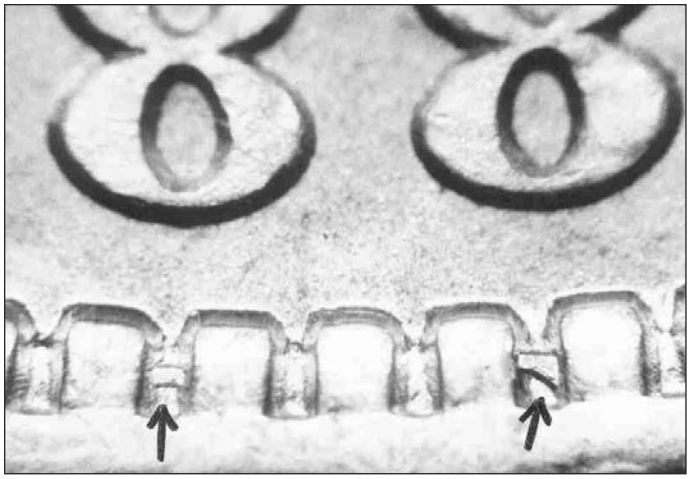
With the introduction of the Lincoln cent in 1909, the Mint started punching the last two digits of the date into the master die rather than in the individual working dies. This pretty much eliminated both the repunched dates and the overdates as they had been produced up until that time.

One other error type resulted in this time frame due to the hand punching of the digits of the date into the working dies. That error has come to be known as the MPD or misplaced date variety.

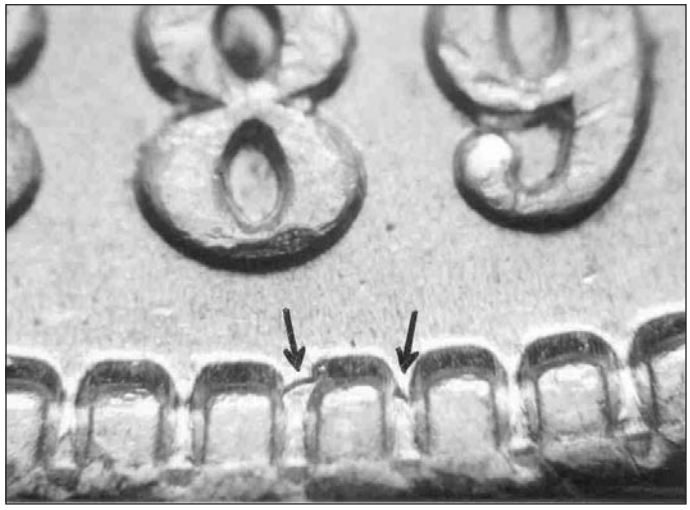
An MPD is a variety where one or more of the digits was punched a significant distance from the location where it was supposed to be punched. Usually the errant digits ended up in the denticles around the rim. Sometimes the misplaced digits ended up being punched into the lower portion of the central design such as the lower bust on the Indian cents.

Specialists still do not agree on a reason for these widely misplaced digits. Whatever the reason, they do make a fascinating new variety type for collectors to pursue.

Kevin Flynn wrote a book entitled *A Collector's Guide to Misplaced Dates*. It is the only reference currently on the market which deals with this variety type exclusively. All MPDs on all denominations known at the time of publication are presented in this reference. It is an absolute must for your numismatic library if you do not yet own a copy.



***1884-O $1 WMPD-001**: This 1884-O dollar submitted by John A. Miller shows apparent digits punched into the denticles. This variety is listed in the Flynn reference as MPD-001.*



1889 $1 WMPD-001: This 1889 dollar was also submitted by John A. Miller. It shows the top of an 8 or a 9 in the denticles below the second 9 of the date.

As you can see, the practice of punching the date into the working dies during the 19th and very early 20th centuries left us with three very desirable variety types to collect. Of the three types, the overdates are the most popular and the most sought after. As a result, they bring the greatest premiums.

The repunched dates are quite popular and the misplaced dates are the "new kid on the block." They too are rapidly gaining in popularity. My guess is that your greatest chance for success at finding any of these varieties would be in the MPD arena since they are relatively new and there aren't a lot of collectors out there looking for them just yet. The knowledgeable collectors are. Don't let them find them all before you get there. Start looking!