



A Penny Story

by Roger Bertholf

It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that a penny costs more to mint than its one cent value. This has been true for several years, ever since the price of copper—which until 1982 comprised 95% of a penny, although since that time pennies have only been copper plated, and the metal comprises just 2.5% of the coin—rose dramatically around the turn of the century, and in 2008 it cost 1.7 cents to produce a penny.

So if you concluded from the title that this story is only worth one cent, I will point out that it's actually worth nearly twice that.

Some have suggested that pennies should be eliminated from U.S. coinage, and that would seem to make sense (no pun intended); after all, our elected officials in Washington surely understand that losing money is not a prudent fiscal strategy. (Oh, wait. . .) None of the initiatives to eliminate the penny has gained political traction.

There are valid arguments for keeping the penny. Sales tax, for example, would have to be rounded to the nearest nickel, which would increase the cost to either the consumer (if it was rounded up) or decrease tax revenue (if it was rounded down). A few cents' difference on each transaction, multiplied by the total number of transactions that occur in the U.S. on any given day, adds up to a tidy sum.

Maybe people are just too attached to the penny to let it go. Or maybe gasoline retailers can't abide the thought of raising the minimum unit of currency to the nickel, since they've already split the penny into tenths!

But honestly, none of that figured into my decision to rid my life of pennies.

It might have been because I was just too lazy to put loose change in my pocket in the morning, or maybe because it seemed like a painless way to save money, but sometime, around fifteen years ago, I started emptying the coins in my pocket into a jar on my dresser. I think many people do that. After several months, the jar gets full, and I roll up the coins and take them to the bank. It's sort of like a reward for being lazy, and that kind of proposition appeals to me. When my kids got old enough to count, I let them roll up the coins for me, and paid them a 10% commission on the proceeds. They liked that deal, too.

But something bothered me. I wondered whether counting out 50 pennies, carefully inserting them into a paper tube (and often searching the house for a few extra pennies when the roll was just short of fifty) was really worth 50 cents? You only have to count forty nickels per roll, and it's worth two dollars; four times the value for 4/5ths the work! Dimes are annoying, because their size is so out of proportion to their value; they are difficult to find amongst nickels and quarters, and they don't stack easily, but a roll of them is worth five dollars, so the effort is justifiable. Rolls of quarters are premium: same number as nickels, but five times the value, and they're easy to locate because they are the biggest coin. My kids quickly figured out the most effective strategy: roll the quarters first.

Pennies, I decided, had a very high ratio of energy expended to monetary return; they just didn't seem very cost effective, so I lost interest in them.

About fifteen years ago, I decided never to accept pennies in change.

"You can keep the pennies" became my standard response whenever the cashier's fingers went to the right-most bin in the change drawer.

My decision to leave behind pennies was not novel. "Have a penny, leave a penny; need a penny, take a penny" trays appeared on the counters of virtually all convenience stores long before I decided that I no longer had any use for the little coin. I'd observed that the little share-a-penny trays were often empty, though, and I was a little surprised by the reactions I got to what I thought had become common practice.

Most often, my offer was met with a glance, "oh," and a mildly awkward "thanks." Occasionally, I would see a look of confusion, to which I would respond "Life is just too short to carry around pennies." Some got the joke, and others didn't, but I remained steadfast: I just didn't want any pennies in change.

One young lady met my request with a look of disapproval, and remarked "little pennies add up."

She was right. Like just about every youngster, I was taught to save my pennies. "A penny saved is a penny earned" was the sage advice in *Poor Richard's Almanack* (I'll bet that it didn't cost 1.7 cents to produce a penny in Benjamin Franklin's day). "Penny-wise and pound-foolish" is good advice, but seems a little disrespectful of British currency. (Oh, wait. . .) "Penny-pinching" used to connote miserly behavior, but now refers to prudent management of one's personal finances.

So there were moments when my resolve was tested, but I stuck to the plan.

After five years or so, I started noticing something: the cashiers at establishments I frequented (the hospital cafeteria, the coffee shop, various convenience stores) began to recognize me, and no longer offered me pennies. They would say: "I know you don't want the pennies," or "I'll just put the pennies in this tray."

At most of these places, I stopped telling them that they could keep the pennies. Occasionally, they would give me the pennies, and I'd give them back. They would respond "Oh, I forgot—you don't take pennies. Sorry."

I realized that, without any intent to do so, I'd built a reputation among the establishments I frequented, and one by one, the clerks started to recognize me as the "no penny man." By about five years ago, the majority of places where I routinely spend cash knew not to give me any pennies in change.

That struck me as remarkable, because if I'd just said "hello, how are you today?" or "you serve my favorite coffee," or "my name is Roger and I come here often," I don't think any of them would have remembered me. Leaving pennies, however, was somehow memorable. "You can keep the pennies" apparently made an impression.

Then something extraordinary happened: they began to round the price down, giving me the benefit of the residual pennies. In most of the places I frequent, they just round my change up to the nearest five cents. For a while, they would say “You always leave the pennies, so you’ve got a few coming to you,” but more and more often, they just give me the change, rounding it up to the nearest nickel, without comment, and I thank them for the extra pennies.

The observation that strangers, with whom my only interactions have been the exchange of money for a product, would spontaneously, without any obligation, begin to offer me pennies off a price just because I decided years ago not to carry pennies surprised me. I had no altruistic motive—I just didn’t want to roll up pennies—and the sacrifice of a few cents on purchases won’t enshrine anyone in the philanthropic Hall of Fame.

I was curious how much the pennies I’d left behind had cost me over fifteen years, so I did some math. Suppose I average one cash transaction per day (a generous estimate, since I rarely use cash more than once a day, and many days I don’t use cash at all). Statistically, one in five transactions will result in change that is a multiple of five, so no pennies would be involved. Of the 4/5ths of transactions that are not on the nickel, the change will include one, two, three, or four pennies, so the average number of pennies per transaction is two (the average of 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4). Two pennies, times 365 days, times 15 years equals 10,950 pennies, or about \$110 (\$7.33 per year—a meal at McDonald’s).

Then I dug a little deeper. I don’t usually pay cash for any purchase over \$20, and my cash purchases probably average somewhere between \$5 and \$10. (lunch usually costs about \$5 in the hospital cafeteria, coffee is a couple of dollars, and a stop at a convenience store might be closer to \$10). So maybe my average cash transaction is somewhere around \$6.00. Six dollars a day for fifteen years totals a whopping \$32,850! Leaving behind the pennies amounted to 0.3% of all my cash expenses; three parts per thousand, or about one penny for every three dollars I spent.

Three parts per thousand is off the radar in most people’s perceptions. It is equivalent to just over 4 minutes in a day; 7 miles in a trip from Jacksonville to Seattle; 3/4ths of a teaspoon of coffee out of a 1 lb can.

I learned something from the experience: a little giving, over a long time, eventually gets returned, and it doesn’t necessarily matter why you give, it only matters that you give consistently. Leaving behind a few pennies every time you buy something is not going to wreck anyone’s budget, and I don’t expect to recoup the investment, although curiously the balance seemed to start tipping in my favor.

Every day, we interact with others. Some are strangers, some are friends, and some don’t fall into either category. But every time we interact with another person, there is an exchange, and the common currency of that exchange is kindness.

Leaving behind pennies says “I don’t really need these, and someone else might be able to use them.” It’s a gesture that says you are willing to help someone you’ve never met. Insignificant? Maybe, but I learned that it leaves an impression.

Pennies are lowest denomination of monetary exchange in the U.S., but if leaving behind a few of them can influence strangers to recognize the value of sharing, then what if we substitute kindness for the penny tray? What if you are just a little bit kinder to everyone you meet than they are to you?

If you leave a few pennies in the kindness tray every time you meet someone, they will remember you, and one day will return the extra kindness.