

Hobbies

Iowa goes into coin business to pay for its 150th birthday

By Roger Boye

The nation's newest rare-coin dealer—the state of Iowa—is selling a hoard of old half dollars amid suggestions that the coins may be too pricey.

State officials are charging \$500 each for 500 commemorative halves made in 1946 to mark the state's centennial. Proceeds will help to finance Iowa's 150th birthday celebration in 1996.

"Our coins came out of U.S. Mint bags [in 1946], and they probably were handpicked," said Steven F. Miller, Iowa deputy treasurer whose office is helping to coordinate the unusual sale.

Uncle Sam issued 100,000 half dollars in 1946 for Iowa's centennial, and state officials sold most of them that year for \$2.50 each. Iowa also salted away 1,000 coins—500 to support the sesquicentennial in 1996 and 500 for the state's bicentennial in 2046.

The halves being sold this year have been sealed in specially designed plastic holders. Also, each coin is "like new," rating an uncirculated ("mint state") grading classification.

Still, the coins haven't been professionally graded, and collectors won't know the precise condition of the rarities they order. The pros use 11 grade categories for uncirculated coins, ranging from "MS-60" for "mint state typical" to "MS-70" for "mint state perfect."

An Iowa centennial half dollar in MS-60 condition retails for about \$85 on the hobby market, while specimens in MS-67 or better almost always sell for more

than \$500. Thus, some buyers in the Iowa sale will get a "good deal" while others may pay too much, depending on the exact grade of the coin they receive.

In a letter to hobby newspaper Numismatic News, a California collector called on Iowa officials to charge no more than \$150 per coin, adding that it is unlikely all the coins will merit the MS-67 classification.

But Donald L. Carmody, past president of a commemorative-coin society, predicted that Iowa will have no trouble disposing of its coins.

"We are not talking about a commercial venture here," Carmody wrote. "These are hand-picked specimens, preserved by archival standards, and sealed . . . to benefit only the most worthy of causes."

Meanwhile, the Iowa treasurer's office doesn't know how many coin orders to expect in its nationwide sale that began earlier this month. If orders for more than 400 coins are received by Oct. 1, a drawing will be conducted on Oct. 1 to determine which orders to fill. (Officials will reserve 100 of their 500 coins for sale to Iowans.)

To place an order, write to the Sesquicentennial Coin Sale, State Treasurer Michael Fitzgerald, State Capitol Building, First Floor, Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0005. Enclose a U.S. postal money order or a cashier's check for \$510 (price includes \$10 for postage and handling) made payable to the Iowa Centennial Memorial Foundation.

No more than one coin can be ordered per envelope.