Robbing the Mints

How Sneak Thieves Have Stolen Uncle Sam's Bullion

A Talk With the Director of the Mint—The Great Robberies at Philadelphia and How They Were Discovered—How James E. Negus Stole a Fortune in Gold and Nuggets—Cochran, the Mint Robber, and His Curious Ways—Queer San Francisco Crimes—Stowing Gold by the Spoonful—How Mint Robbers Escape Punishment—W. M. Macy and His Famous Steal—The Thefts in the Assay Office, Etc.

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Special Correspondence of the News.

WASHINGTON, OCT. 31st, 1896.

I VISITED the mint at Philadelphia last week. It now contains more than $200,000,000, and it has 30,000,000 standard silver dollars in a single vault. The San Francisco mint has, I am told, more than $90,000,000 worth of precious metal stored away, and in the vaults of the mint at New Orleans there are now something like $40,000,000 worth of gold and of silver. During my stay in our Philadelphia treasure house I was shown the different methods by which Uncle Sam guards his hoard. Every atom of gold and silver is watched, and, although the mint has handled more than a billion and a half dollars worth of bullion since it was founded, only a small part has been lost. Still the temptation to theft is great, and every now and then the treasury department finds a shortage in some of the mints or in the government assay offices in different parts of the west. The true details of such thefts seldom get into the newspapers. They are filed away in the recruits of the treasury department and in the minds of the detectives and officials who have aided in exposing the crimes. During the past week I have heard the stories of a number of such robberies, and, in my study of them, I have had access to the records of the treasury, in connection with Hon. R. E. Preston, the director of the mint. Mr. Preston has charge of all the mints in the United States.

He is the chief "watch dog" of Uncle Sam's treasures of gold and silver, and he knows more about the mint, perhaps, than any other man connected with the government. He has been in the employ of the United States treasury for the past forty years, and he is today one of its most efficient officers. You remember how, about two years ago, Henry S. Cochran, the weigh clerk at the Philadelphia mint, stole bars to the value of $115,000 from the gold vault, breaking in bar by bar from a stack of sixteen million dollars' worth of gold bullion, which was there stored away. Mr. Preston was one of the officials who superintended the putting away of that bullion, and he was acting director of the mint at the time that Cochran's theft was discovered. The first great steal in the Philadelphia mint occurred thirty-three years ago, just before Mr. Preston entered the government service, and, curiously enough, that theft was also detected by Cochran who was an under clerk of the robber, and who by exposing his superior got the place of weigh clerk, which he held for forty years, and in which he was at the time his own robbery occurred. During the investigation at Philadelphia the Hon. Cochran, told Mr. Preston, and Mr. Preston repeated it to me today.

STOLE A FORTUNE IN GOLD DUST.

"It was away back in 1853," said the director of the mint, "when a vast amount of gold was coming in from California that the first big robbery occurred. The culprit was James E. Negus, and he was the weigh clerk of the mint. There was at this time no assay office at New York, and all of the gold dust and nuggets were sent by the banks of the different cities to Philadelphia to be reduced to bullion. Negus had the handling of this treasure, and he for a long time carried a systematic stealing from the different deposits sent in. It was his business to take charge of them, weigh them and put them into the vault until they could be melted. By taking a nugget or a pinch of dust from each deposit, he was able to steal thousands of dollars, and he probably carried on his stealings during the whole of the four years that he was in the employ of the mint. Cochran was at this time a boy working in the mint. He acted as Negus' assistant. He was led to suspect that Negus was taking out gold dust and substituting black sand for it in some of the deposits. He took occasion to weigh several deposits when Negus was not present, and found that they were from five to ten ounces short. He went to the superintendent of the mint and charged Negus with the theft. Negus was called up. He confessed, and stated that he had stolen $50,000 worth of gold dust. As you may see from the papers here in the records of the department, the treasury officials believed his confession, but they did not think that he should be arrested, as he had made restitution. He was allowed to go free. Within a few weeks he sailed for Europe, and that was the last that was ever heard of him. There was no cable in those days and the probability is that he carried a goodly amount of gold away with him. The robbery was not from the treasury, but from the banks who sent in the gold, and there was no way of telling just how much he stole.

COCHRAN, THE MINT ROBBER.

"It was in this way that Henry S. Cochran became weigh clerk of the mint," director Preston went on. "He took the place of a thief, and there is no telling how soon he became a thief himself. He told me that he did not steal anything from the mint until after the deposit of that $50,000 in gold bars, but his connection with it must have lasted for more than forty years, and his position was the same as that of Negus. During his whole term of employment he had the confidence of every one. I have a letter here, signed by Daniel Dreppen, who was treasurer of the United States when he was appointed. It is he who advises the appointment, and he describes Henry S. Cochran as honest, able and courteous. Cochran seemed to be crazy for gold. He fell in love with the precious metal, and it is when we found that he had robbed the mint of $115,000 he failed to give up his stealings and he complained bitterly when the money found in his house was taken away. When he was appointed weigh clerk he was about twenty-three years old. When his robbery was discovered he was sixty-three. He was then a deacon in the Presbyterian Church, and was organizing a company for the Salvation Army in the neighborhood in which he lived. He had been married and divorced. He had a grown-up daughter. He appeared to be eminently respectable in every way and still he had been stealing for years."

TWENTY-FIVE TONS OF GOLD.

"How did you come to suspect him of the robbery?" I asked.

"It was through his own actions," replied the director of the mint. "He had, you know, the charge of the vaults which contained the gold bullion. Much of this bullion had been untouched for years. In the vaults from which the robberies were made there were $26,000,000 worth of gold bars. This vault had not been opened for six years. The gold had been brought from the assay office in New York in 1853 and stored away in 1857. I aided in putting it in. The gold bars were piled up crosswise like a railroad tie, and they were arranged, as usual, in a series of racks. When we put the gold in the vaults, we put each unit by itself. Each gold brick has its number, and it is marked so as to the mill to which it belongs, so we can tell just exactly how many pieces of gold there are in a vault, how many each piece is, and just what it weighs. The bullion was weighed twice before it was put in. There were about twenty-five tons of it. I superintended the weighing. I helped to seal the doors of the vault when we were through, and saw that everything was secured. From time to time the vault was inspected, but the seals were intact, and no one had any idea but that the gold was all there. About two years ago Secretary Carlisle gave orders that the bullion be valued. The vault was opened, and more than 400 pounds of gold were missing. We had little trouble in detecting the thief. Cochran had been much excited when I told him of the intention to rate the bullion.

"He objected, and said the gold was so nicely piled up, and was such a beautiful sight to those the visitors, that the government had better bring some of the bullion from New York and show it off. I laughed at this, and Cochran then insinuated that the gold might not all be there. When he found that we really intended to rate the gold, he came over to Washington to see me, thinking there might be yet a chance to stop it. He called at my house here at 4 o'clock one night, and asked if it was really true that the government was going to take the gold out of that vault. I replied, 'Yes.' He said: 'Well, you won't find all the gold there. Some of it is missing. It was never rightly weighed, and it is not there.' It was at this time that I began to suspect him, and I said to myself: 'Well, if any of that gold is lost, I think you know where it is.' A day or so after this we opened the vault, and we found the gold was just $115,000 short. Still, the seals were intact. The steel walls of the vault were unbroken, and there was no sign as to where the gold had gone. Cochran seemed very nervous and upon finding that he was suspected, he confessed that he was the thief. He showed how he had filled the gold out with a crooked wire. He had pulled it down from the pile and drag it to the door of the vault, and then by slightly pushing the door at the bottom he was able to get it through the crack between the door and the floor. He had carried it off bar by bar, in his lunch basket, or in his trousers pocket, and had taken it to his home in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

HE SOLD THE GOLD TO THE MINT.

"What did he do with the gold?" I asked.

"He sold it right back to the mint from which he had stolen it," replied Mr. Preston. "He did not dare to do this without remelting it, and as the gold was so fine that it would be sure to create suspicion. He had at his house a crucible and he remelted the gold, mixing it with silver and lead. This last product he sent to us through the express company, and was able to do so without suspicion. We found out but of the gold in Cochran's house the day he confessed, and we also found $9,000 in gold ring-dust. It was a curious lump, it was honeycombed with secret chests, and it was in these that the money was found. Cochran kept up his stealing to the last. The day the weighing was completed Cochran came down early. He was more lively than at the other times I had seen him. He was the only employe of the mint who had weighed part of the gold. The vault was open, and there was a truck in it loaded with bars of bullion. Cochran, leaning across about, picked up twenty or three bars, and, one at a time, threw them into the ventilator shaft of the vault, so that they fell in between the rear of the vault and the floor above. When he was pressed he told where the gold was, and we got it back. The reminder was put in the vault, and the seals were placed at the door, and we received something from Cochran's property and his bondsmen. Uncle Sam got about $12,000 or $13,000 short from that robbery, and the superintendent of the mint, Colonel Bosbyshell, may have to pay this."

"What did they do with Cochran?" I asked.

"He was tried and sent to the penitentiary for a term of six years and seven months. He is now in prison. He weighed 250 pounds when he was arrested. He does not weigh 150 now, and has lost 100 pounds since his theft was discovered."

"Do you think he was insane?"

"That is a question," replied the director of the mint. "He seemed to be a monomaniac on the subject of gold. He claimed that he had saved the United States millions of dollars by guarding its treasures, and he was indignant when the gold was taken from him. Since that time we have not kept gold bullion in vaults of the mints, and there probably never be a robbery of that kind again.

A LOSS OF $150,000.

"Has Uncle Sam ever lost as much as this in the past?"

"There was little loss in Cochran's case," replied Director Preston. "The money was nearly all recovered. There have, however, been big losses in the past. In 1855, just about the time I entered the treasury department, Uncle Sam lost $150,000 at the San Francisco mint. Some one of the settlements was made, and it was found that this much was short. The melter and refiner claim that this was waste, that it had been lost in the melting, and escaped into the fires. It is a question in some mind whether he did not sell the nuts. At any rate, he was arrested, but not convicted. Short-ly after his trial he left the United States and went to South America. He was drowned there.

"Another curious case in connection with the San Francisco mint," Mr. Preston went on, "occurred just about the close of the war, or about 1865. The melter of the mint, whose name was William Macy, was the brother-in-law of the treasurer of the United States. During one operation the coiner of the mint changed to have delivered gold coin in gold double eagles to the cashier. The cashier credited his books with $100,000, and swore that this was all the coin that had been issued. The result was that there was $50,000 missing. About this same time it was discovered that Macy, the melter, had recorded $50,000 of the mint funds set aside for wages. He acknowledged the stealing of this, but not the other. He happened to have many influential friends, and in some way or other he escaped prosecution. He was discharged from the mint and came east. On his way through Omaha he died, $5,000 in one bank there. He put it in under an assumed name, and was given a certificate of deposit. He lost the certificate, and the bank refused to return the money. He never got it.

$60,000 IN SOMBRILLA.

"There was a queer robbery at San Francisco in 1870, by which a colored night watchman stole $60,000 in gold bullion. It was known that gold was in some way or other being taken out of the mint, but it could not be traced. The detectives finally discovered that Henry Smith, the negro night watchman, had been selling bullion. They arrested him and charged him with taking it from the mint. In the center of the yard they tore out the brick and broke the furniture, and found the gold. They also attacked the yard. They dug the soil over with spades, and found a little furnace in which gold had evidently at some time been melted. This was shown to the watchman, but he said he knew nothing about it. They then went back and dug up a flower bed, in which they had not touched on account of its beauty. It was filled with pansies, and the ground about it was covered with rose bushes and geraniums. They had dug about two feet down into this bed when they found a big earthen pot which was covered at the top with melted wax. Breaking this, they discovered a saucer beneath it, and under this there were seven ounces of yellow gold, worth $60,000. They then went to Smith's house and searched it, and under his bed they found a sombrilla. This had a big dome to it, and in the dome was found $60,000 in gold coin. The watchman discovered the loss, and then, by means of a spoon, ladled out a little gold at a time from the dome of his sombrilla, and carried it to his home. Each spoonful was worth about $20, and he had the precipitate made into ingots by a furnace and crucibles. With these he turned the brick powder into yellow gold by melting it, and he sold the product to the bullion dealers at San Francisco."

HOW MINT ROBBERS ESCAPE PUNISHMENT.

"What was done with this man?" I asked.

"He was arrested, tried and sent to prison," replied Mr. Preston; "but his case was taken on exception to that of the mint robbers of the past. Many of them have escaped punishment. I do not believe in this at all. I think they should be prosecuted and punished to the full extent of the law, and I think the sentence of Cochran was just. Take the case Negus. He confessed to the stealing of $50,000 and was allowed to go free. Macy, the coiner of whom I spoke as stealing $60,000, was not prosecuted. The melter and refiner who was $450,000 short was not convicted, and these have been several other cases of like nature. In one there was a change in the men at San Francisco. The coiner and melter and refiner disappeared all at the bottom of the superintendent, and the wastage was declared. It was a month, however, before a new melter and refiner was appointed. In the meantime there was no work done, and when the new coiner came to be appointed the ladies' vase found to be $70,000 short. No one was ever brought to this crime, and Uncle Sam lost the money.

"Another steal at San Francisco, the perpetrators of which escaped punishment, occurred in the coinage. The assay clerk had a confederate outside and he raised the assay figures on all the bullion brought in by this confederate for sale. If the gold was put at 950 fine he would raise it to 960 or 970, and would then go to the person and tell him that under ordinary circumstances it would have passed all right and the difference would have been credited to waste.

"The melter and refiner in this case, however, was an old coiner, and he saw that he was losing gold. The result was that he examined some of the gold and finally discovered the fraud. It was then found that the assay clerk had changed the reports of the assayer enough to have made $70,000 by doing so. This man's name was James H. Ellis. He was tried but the jury disagreed and Uncle Sam never got a penny back.

"It was the same in the burning of the mint at New Orleans a few years ago. A fire broke out in the cashier's vault between Saturday night and Monday morning, and when it was discovered $600,000 worth of Uncle Sam's currency was out to be found. The cashier was the only man who had the keys of the vault. He shut it up Saturday night and he opened it Monday morning. The vault was lighted by electricity, and there was no chance for any one to have set fire to the building. James M. Dowling, the cashier, was arrested on the suspicion of robbery and of having set fire to the building and then kindled the fire to cover his crime. He was smart enough to employ a regrow of the judge who was to have to defend him, and he was acquitted."

Frank G. Carpenter

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