

# THE TRAIN

**I**t was the summer of 2010, my second year as a full-time officer for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, when I attended my first North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association conference. I began my career in 2003 patrolling Penn's Woods among the deputy ranks, then in 2007 dreams transformed into reality as I was accepted into the Ross Leffler School of Conservation's 27th Cadet Class. Established in 1936, RLSC is the first of its kind training school for Pennsylvania's State Game Wardens. I was introduced to NAWEOA in my first year as a deputy by State Game Wardens Rich Cramer and Mark Allegro (now retired). Both would go on to serve as members of the NAWEOA Executive Board in the decades following. Unfortunately, every time I made plans to attend the annual summer conference prior to 2010, personal or professional obstacles prohibited the experience.

The 2010 NAWEOA summer conference was hosted by Conservation Officers of Pennsylvania Association (COPA), an association made up of officers from the PA Game Commission and PA Fish & Boat Commission. That year, former PGC Executive Director Carl Roe granted every warden in the state the opportunity to attend the conference with the understanding there was plenty of work to be done hosting our brother and sister game wardens from across North America. During the first day of the conference, I quickly learned what the term "comradery" meant. Surrounded by uniformed officers from nearly every US state and Canadian province of North America, it was apparent we all shared the same passion for the profession. We merely accomplished our mission and wildlife management goals in different ways. Donning titles such as Conservation Police Officer, Wildlife Conservation Officer, Wildlife Agent, and State Game Warden, the moniker was obviously the only difference. Many lasting relationships were fostered that week with wardens who have become not only colleagues in investigating wildlife crimes, but some of the closest friends my wife and I have ever made.





# DING

# GAMIE

Starting in 1980, a meeting of sixteen Game Wardens from the US and Canada met with the goal of creating a network for sharing information regarding poaching and poachers on both sides of the border. Thus the annual conference was born. The summer conference is a well-planned event beginning with the opening ceremonies, followed by the officer's march in the host city where a group photo is taken at a memorable landmark. Later, the officer's luncheon commences with various prestigious awards being presented to those top performers in a specific category, nominated by their fellow officers and command staff. As the week progresses, each day has multiple structured training for officers to attend, furthering their professional knowledge. Business meetings and officer exchange programs are also presented to the membership in the main ballroom of the host hotel.

Several social events are a significant part of the itinerary, such as the annual 5K Torch Run/Walk that benefits the North American Game Warden Museum and the popular Warden Skills event. One of the most anticipated nightly social events is the hospitality gathering, where t-shirts and shorts are the dress code in a relaxed atmosphere. Admission to the nightly event is included with the one-time purchase of a "Challenge Coin". Game Wardens grab a cup of their favorite refreshment and sit down with fellow game wardens and their spouses to create the aforementioned once-in-a-lifetime relationships. The evening includes snacks, raffles, games (where permitted), and a litany of wardens bringing bags of trinkets to trade with fellow officers.

Some have been trading these game warden collectibles for so many years they are known as the "go to guys" when wardens are looking for specific items. Retired PA State Game Warden George Wilcox is easy to find in his Hawaiian style shirt and hat, not to mention he's the one with about twenty-five wardens standing around his table of treasures, amassed patches and coins on display. Retired MD Officer Mike Lathroum, another well-known collector, used to pen a column in the International Game Warden Magazine regarding agency patches and the history behind them.



**I HAD PRIOR** knowledge of challenge coins, but without a military background (my life's biggest regret), I educated myself on their origin and meaning. I received my first coin at the 2010 NAWEOA hospitality night. In the earlier days of NAWEOA, patches were the big commodity and, for the most part, still are. However, challenge coins are quickly becoming a favorite amongst traders at the nightly hospitality event. As with everything "game warden", once you get the bug, it's hard to stop. Some collect patches, others seek challenge coins, while many do both. Others prefer relics from their respective agency. There even exists a Facebook page on social media dedicated to trading patches, challenge coins, and anything else inspired by game wardens.

By 2010, in my career as a PA Game Warden, I had amassed boxes of PA Game Commission collectables. One day sorting through items in the attic, my wife Missy (fiancé at the time) asked, "Why do you have all this stuff if it's just stored away in boxes?" I reflected on this great question and decided I would concentrate on a collection I could display and one I actually had the room in our home to pursue - CHALLENGE COINS! I was curious and intrigued by challenge coins. A wide variety of shapes and sizes with, above all, meaning I could share with fellow officers in law enforcement.

Due to our profession, we rarely get to hunt like we did prior to swearing our oath of office and strapping on a gun belt. I enjoy a different kind of hunting now. I carefully aim text messages and



emails while scouting hospitality rooms at the NAWEOA summer conference. I started collecting challenge coins with a list of the 50 states. My personal goal was to secure at least one coin from each. When I learned our Canadian counterparts also

dabbled in challenge coins, my quest widened to possess one from each province. I concentrated on Game Warden coins, as there are infinite coins to represent all forms of law enforcement.

I own a nice collection of State Police coins I have been given by troopers over the years, be it working cases or DUI check-point patrols. In my first year collecting, I secured approximately twenty-five coins. As both interest and collection grew, it was advantageous having a new host for the NAWEOA

summer conference in different parts of North America. For each of the past nine summers, I returned home with at least a dozen new coins. It didn't take long to build my collection.

A major boost in collecting occurred when I was working an illegal turkey case with West Virginia Game Warden Joseph Reed. Wrapping up the investigation, Joey asked, "Hey Larry, does the PA Game Commission have a challenge coin?"

Wait. Did Reed just ask what I thought he asked? I replied, "We sure do!" As a matter of fact, we had four at that time. Joey's West Virginia was one of the coins that eluded my collection.

Reed offered, "Well, I have a West Virginia coin I would love to trade ya!"

Once the investigation had concluded, I called Joey one evening to learn about a couple guys he trades challenge coins with from Louisiana. Coincidentally, another state absent from my collection. Hunter Breed and Josh Harris are Wildlife Agents in Louisiana. A simple text message later, and we were acquainted and trading.

Throughout the next couple months, a trading group of George Wilcox, Joseph Reed, Hunter Breed, Josh Harris and Kentucky's very own Bryan Hill was a nightly text message session. Dan Fagan from Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission later joined the group. Not saying our wives

were as excited about the endeavor as we were, still we soon had collections necessitating four, then five, then six shadow boxes to properly display. What once was a simple quest for 50 states and 13 provinces now became a mentality. If they made it, I wanted it.

Through trading with Josh, I met Bradley Miller, a warden from South Carolina. Miller's collection housed many coins I hadn't seen. To make a story short and sweet, before Josh was big into collecting coins, he had traded a one-of-a-kind Louisiana coin for a few patches. Through a trade Bradley fostered, I now have the rare coin. I frequently remind Josh of its whereabouts.

By the time collecting evolved into a quest for the uncommon or obscure, I had secured over 250 game warden coins. Not to play favorites, but several coins are very near and dear to me. Sentimental ones were earned by deploying my K-9 partner "Storm", others came when conducting investigations for other agencies. Some agencies only present coins as an accommodation for their officers' actions or efforts. Other coins are minted as a bond of comradery amongst our ranks. Either way, I value each on display across the walls in my office.

In 2017, I ran for election to be the Region 7 Director for the NAWEOA



Executive Board. Now, into my second term, the number of contacts I've made through the Officer Association's JReps has been instrumental in finding some of the hard to find coins. Once I exhausted my supply of "traders" (duplicate coins to trade for new ones), I made the decision to design my own coin. I wanted to pay respect to the Investigator position I hold with the PA Game Commission and showcase my K-9 partner "Storm". While the self-designed K-9 piece has helped retrieve a few additional rare coins, I actually prefer the fact I have something personal to share with my fellow game wardens. When wardens summon K-9 Storm to assist in the recovery of evidence, I present them with the coin as a token of my gratitude and appreciation.

This leads to another facet of collecting I thoroughly enjoy, designing challenge coins. I've had the privilege to design two coins for our agencies K-9 Unit and another for our FOP #114 Conservation Police Officers lodge. I developed a base design then solicited ideas from my fellow K-9 handlers and wardens, incorporating those ideas into the final design. I prefer coins measuring 1.75", as they capture the smaller detail quite well. Their uniformity in size lends itself to a neat appearance in any style display box or rack. Other options include smaller coins produced 1.5" to much larger circles. Coins can even be uniquely shaped, taking the form of paw prints, triangles, or rectangles. No matter the outer appearance, I am honored to display coins representing other agencies and associations.

One of collecting's many joys is a daily dash to the mailbox. Some weeks the mailman is your best friend, while others he is a bill-toting disappointment. In the grand scheme of trading, shipping costs are minimal compared to the memories created and personal contacts made.



I can mail approximately ten packages (in the US) for the price of a single round of golf. If trading for a coin is not an option, I try to keep financially realistic and fiscally responsible in what I spend. Some states have used coin sales as a fundraiser

for an officer's memorial or to send officers to the National Police Week Memorial where a fallen colleague is being honored in Washington D.C. Personally, the most I have spent on a single coin is \$50.00. The piece is not only made of silver valued in its true weight, it also served as a fundraiser for an officer association.

Like any hobby, enthusiasts can get carried away, defying practicality and spending an outrageous amount of money for a single coin or patch. This tragic practice sets a precedent for what another must pay for the same collectible.

My two cents, the most a coin costs to make is approximately \$8.00, most fall within the \$2.75 to \$4.00 range. Price points depend on how many were originally made during the first production. Patches are another story.

Pursuing this passion, favorites will undoubtedly surface and there will always be that one coin or patch

seemingly eluding you ... no matter how hard you try to find it. Topping my list of sought after coins is an Alaska State Wildlife Troopers coin made a few years ago. The front of the master-piece boasts blue lettering with a gold badge and edge before a stunning white background. A flip of the coin reveals Alaska's state outline in blue with the agency's crest encompassed with the words, "Guardians of the Last Frontier." The second coin atop my want list is the US Fish & Wildlife K-9 coin. This golden coin, accented in dark blue, has a spot reserved in my display box with the rest of those I treasure from the USFWS.

Perhaps one of you reading this has an extra one of these or knows someone who does! Thus starting the trading game. The reward is not only in the hunt or find, but in the game, dealing trades with friends and colleagues. Mirroring life, sometimes you get what you want, other times it doesn't work out. More than once, I have had the pleasure of securing one of those hard to find coins for a fellow collector that had eluded them for years.

Over the past decade trading coins, I have met several game wardens who I am confident I would never have had the pleasure of knowing otherwise. A number of those individuals have contacted me when an investigation has led them to Pennsylvania. Some have sent

correspondence asking if I have a contact in another state with whom they can communicate. A hidden benefit of the hobby is the ability to assist with or perform investigations for my fellow wardens. In coming years, I hope to add your agency or association's coin to my treasured collection. I will proudly display it well into retirement, reminding me of those who walk the "Thin Green Line" as game wardens. ☺

☞ *By Lawrence R. Hergenroeder  
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