

Coin Commentary

Our Opinions on All Things Numismatic

March 2, 2011: In Memory of My Friend Steve Tanenbaum

I am in shock.

My longtime friend, token and medal dealer extraordinaire Steve Tanenbaum, is no longer with us.

That fact is simply unbelievable to me. He was killed last month in an utterly senseless way by someone he did not know. He was 62 years old, healthy and likely had many more years to live. It angers me when I think about how he died, however, I wish instead to focus on his life.

Steve became a full time dealer in 1981. I believe prior to that he was an executive high in the ranks of the Xerox Corporation. But he was always a collector first, aggressively but quietly building world-class collections in about 30 areas (his number, not mine) of numismatics.

I first met Steve in 1991 and came to know him very well in business. Over time we became good friends. And in all of my dealings with him during that time (and we did a lot of business together and spoke often through the years), three things stand out in my mind:

- **I think Steve was about the most honest guy I've ever met in my life**

Steve drove a hard bargain, but when the negotiations were through it was all about being fair and following through, even if he could have cut corners to make a few extra dollars. Such a thing would never even occur to him.

- **He had an encyclopedic knowledge of many, many obscure areas of numismatics**

To say that a person is deeply knowledgeable about Token and Medal collecting is akin to saying a person has memorized most of Wikipedia, but that was Steve. Which made him the #1 go-to-guy in the nation for answering questions on all areas of exonumia. In fact, I have some obscure Goetz medals on my desk right now that I had planned to ask him about, but of course I can't do that now.

- **Steve had a maddening habit of always taking the opposite side of anything I said**

When I think about this I cannot help but smile. I spoke with Steve quite often, and fondly recall several marathon phone conversations about coins, medals, colonials, running a coin business, collecting philosophies, inventory management, etc. But pretty much without fail, he would say the opposite of what I did. When I first got to know him, I was a bit put off by this conversational style. After I knew him for a while (and began to notice that he did it with

nearly every topic I brought up—from the important to the trivial) I realized that he wasn't just "messing with me". It was simply the way he spoke. I attribute it to his living in Brooklyn all those years:

Brooklynite #1: "*Wow – what a nice day today!*"

Brooklynite #2: "*Eh, I've seen better.*"

Steve's legacy will live on for a long, long time, in the fond memories of those who knew him, and in the exonumia he sold through the years. Most collectors who have any tokens and medals in their collection probably have items that went through Steve's hands, even if they don't realize it. His tiny, voluminous, precise writing on 2x2 coin holders – often in 2 colors – likely exist in collections in the tens of thousands.

I attended Steve's memorial service, held just north of NYC, and am glad I went. Many people in the crowd got up and spoke about what Steve meant to them, sharing amusing stories, and tales of his quiet generosity. His family—whom I had never met before—were all intelligent, funny, and genuinely nice people, just as I pictured they would be.

I'm not sure there are any lessons to be learned from Steve's death. Except perhaps that you never know when your time is up, so you must treat everyone you meet as you wish to be treated. And you must live each day as if it were your last.

Paul Bosco, one of Steve's token and medal dealer friends said at the memorial service: "We had Steve for 62 years. That's not nothing, you know!" He is right, of course.

I knew Steve Tanenbaum for over 2 decades. I wish I had known him longer. And I will miss him very much.

DW

Dave Wnuck

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