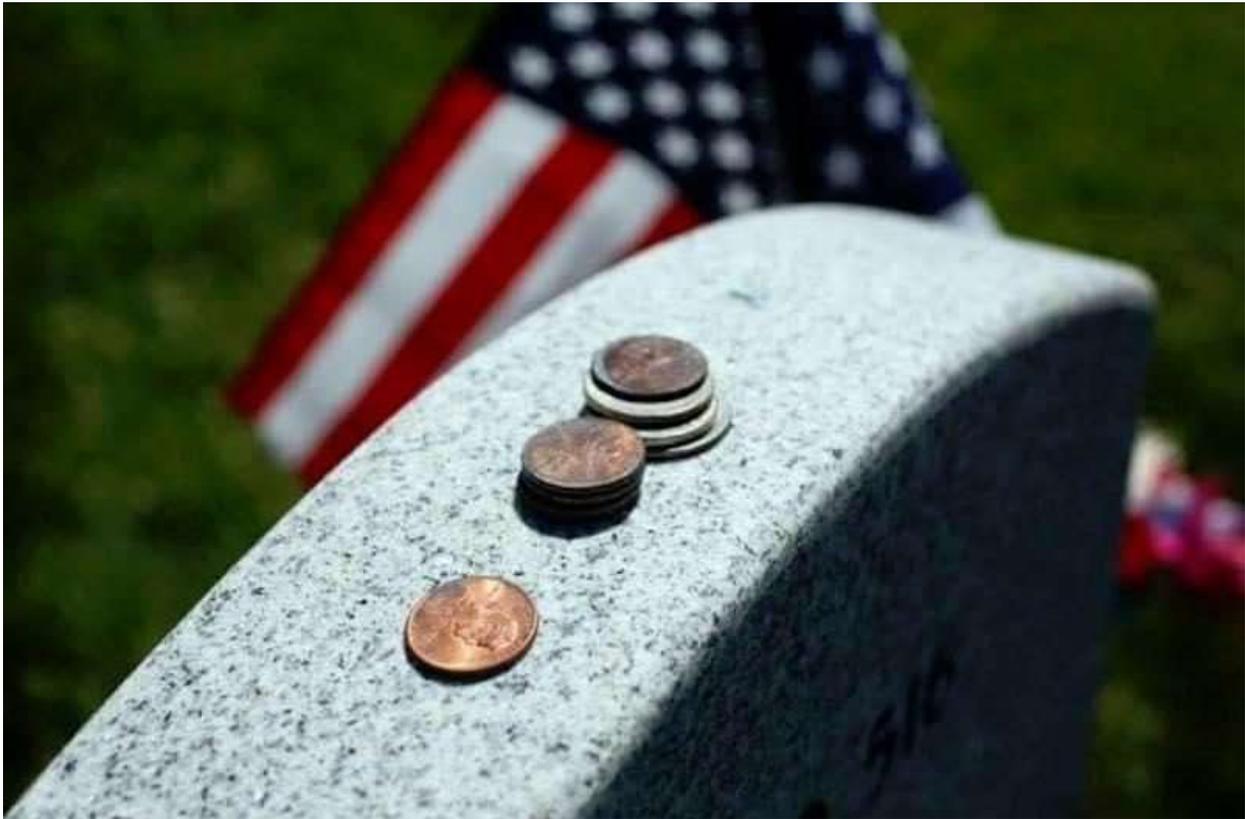


The Practice of Leaving Coins on Headstones

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A casual stroll within the ramparts of a large cemetery could very well divulge a number of headstones containing one or two coins resting upon them which have been left by visitors to that particular grave. There is a significant rationale behind this practice of leaving a coin on the gravestone of those people especially if the individual within the grave happens to be an American military member who died while on duty. You will discover that the connotation surrounding the coins tend to vary depending upon the denomination of coin left at the grave.

Mankind is over-involved in their memento mindset and such activities within the scenario of a final resting place for loved ones has taken place since the very beginning of time. Archaeologists have excavated early burial mounds and have uncovered goods which were to serve the deceased in the next life. Such finds have included tangible items like beads, pottery and even early weapons.

When this particular tradition was born is comparatively unknown nonetheless in our modern era it appears to be emerging once again in frequency. It actually could date back beyond the Roman Empire but due to the increased military deaths within our current times the practice has been revived and it is flourishing in America. Investigation seems to illustrate that the earliest coins discovered date back to the seventh century B.C. During its awakening, societies slowly began to embrace a monetary system where coins were

deemed to be of material value. As such the value coins began to be left within the graves of society's citizens as a tribute towards equipping the departed soul for its adventure in the afterlife.

An exploration of ancient mythology in the diverse cultures of the ancient world provides a quick glimpse into the specific objective of these coins. While reading Greek mythology we find the ferryman of Hades, Charon, mandated an explicit payment in exchange for his skilled services. Knowing such, the friends and relatives would consign in the mouth of the departed money which would be accessible to pay Charon for his services thus allowing the deceased to be ferried across the rivers Acheron and Styx. This act would ultimately permit the delivery of the loved one into the world of the dead as opposed to him wandering the shore for hundreds of years. Later practices in the country of England as well as here in America offered a traditional approach to place pennies on the closed eyes of the deceased. Although the exact objective for this practice was not totally clear we find some followers believe it was to prevent the eyes of the corpse from opening at some future time.

After my retirement from the military I started a lawn service that specialized in cemeteries. It was not uncommon to begin working on one of the local graveyards only to stumble upon an assortment of coins or other small items placed upon the grave markers. These items were left by visitors who made their way to the grave site to offer their respect for the deceased. The Jewish people traditionally would leave a small pebble atop the gravestone merely to show that someone who cared had stopped by. One of the most unusual that I encountered were small toys being placed upon a child's grave showing that he or she had not been forgotten.

Often times like the child's toys mentioned above there are some significant purposes hidden within the gifts which are left. There is some sort of meaning established between the gift and to the person within the grave. For over 20 years, each month an unknown individual would leave a can of Campbell's tomato soup and some change on the plain black granite tombstone which adorned the grave of Andy Warhol. Naturally anyone would easily recognize the relationship of leaving the soup can at the grave however the change remains an unknown issue. The grave of Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson can usually be seen with an assortment of coins, pebbles and maple leaf pins graciously left by visitors. History buffs will recall that it was Pearson who replaced Canada's Red Insignia with that of the now popular Maple Leaf flag.

Research seems to demonstrate that this military related practice first gained popularity during the 1960s when a number of Vietnam-era vets began to notice that coins were being placed on graves of their fallen comrades. This custom became a means by which a veteran could communicate to the family of the deceased that someone had visited their departed loved one's grave – someone who cared. Due to the political diversity of our country during the Vietnam War leaving a coin appeared to be the more appropriate way to relate to the suffering that the family was experiencing rather than contacting the soldier's family and risking any uncomfortable argument relating to the

politics of the Vietnam War. The idea behind the left coin allows one to know and understand something about the people who have come to the grave to pay their respects and in turn left a memento.

The coins which are distributed at the graves represent a message to the living relatives of the deceased soldier informing his or her family that someone has visited their loved ones grave in order to pay their final respects. Leaving a single penny on the gravestone indicates that you visited the grave of the deceased individual. It is unimportant whether you may or may not have known him. On a more personal aspect of this custom, we find that if you leave a nickel it indicates that the entombed person and you trained in the same basic training organization together. In the event you served in the same unit as the military person you leave a dime. The significance of the quarter is very important since it indicates that you were present in the battlefield when that hero died. The quarter could mean that the person who visited the grave had stopped by because they served with the occupant's unit or was present when he lost his life. In some military fields it is not necessarily true that you serve with your own unit. Often times while serving in the Air Force Forward Air Control field I was assigned to various Army units to provide airstrikes in their support. The exact meaning of the coins being left may be vague but it is commonly believed that the coins represented either an entry stake in some heavenly poker game or as a payment for a future beer. One has to remember that gambling was a popular pastime for military members serving in the field overseas.

Over a period of time the coins from the National and State Veteran cemeteries could amount to enough money to assist in maintaining the veterans grave at the cemetery or perhaps to foot the cost for the burial expenses of an indigent veteran.