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William (Bill) D Bush: Generous Benefactor and Life Fellow

The Powerhouse Museum over the past nearly thirty years has received from a single individual a steady stream of rare and valuable coins and banknotes that eventually totalled thousands in number. That this person was a citizen of the United States living in Vancouver, Washington State made this altruistic activity all the more remarkable. Arriving mainly by mail, the large padded envelopes covered with myriad stamps, eagle-headed airmail stickers, and a distinctive scrawl, opened to reveal a vast array of material spanning the globe, and dating from antiquity through to the present.

Bill Bush was born in Skiatook, Oklahoma in 1925 and was what could only be called a colourful character. Descended from a Cherokee father who was raised on a Reservation, Bill married a number of times though his great love Peg, who predeceased him in 1987, ensured he was the beneficiary of her very prudent financial choices. Characteristically, at the same time he was receiving large sums in dividends, Bill Bush's strong work ethic saw him spend long hours working as a night watchman.

Bill Bush was a great communicator and his frequent letters are testimony to how seriously he considered his relationship with the Museum. Indeed, so numerous were Bill's letters that he streamlined the process through commissioning rubber stamps with the Museum's address; each

individually named for the curator and director! These incredibly personal missives sent in fallow periods between (and never in) donation envelopes, allowed insights into the changing seasons and vagaries of Bill's life—including descriptions of working during cold Portland winter nights, huddled incongruously in his glamorous Cadillac Eldorado coupé. To endure this, while at the same time giving away treasures, is surely the mark of an ultimately philanthropic character:

My purpose has been to give all my life stuff to a museum for educational purposes for children to hopefully learn some history...and not to put a value on any of my properties (F95/372/-04 letter dated 14/11/1993).

Bill Bush developed an emotional attachment to Australia through his many visits here as a Merchant seaman during and after WWII. During his visits to ports around the world Bill Bush collected banknotes, even managing in some ports such as Sydney to arrange with friends working in banks to set aside unusual notes that he would later exchange for face value. Eventually what became an extremely valuable collection would be donated to the Powerhouse but Bill Bush's first involvement with the Museum was in the mid 1960s when he donated a table decorated with Australian 1937 and 1938

Crown coins. This was followed in 1976 by very rare examples of Cocos Island ivory-currency. These two initial gifts unwittingly provided an insight into the eccentric character of Bill Bush who delighted in the unusual and rare; happily resulting in excellent choices of which the Museum and New South Wales are now the custodians.

Following the Cocos Island donation a regular correspondence developed between Pat Boland of the Powerhouse Museum and Bill Bush, which eventuated in 1988 with the gift of his Australian Commonwealth banknote collection (Figures 1 and 2). Prior to this date, the Powerhouse had only two Australian Banknotes and Mr Bush was fittingly made an Honorary Associate. This generous gift precipitated a virtual avalanche of numismatic donations consisting in the main of world banknotes but also ancient, mediaeval and modern coins (Figures 3–6). Spilling from one envelope alone could emerge colourful French colonial banknotes sandwiched between varieties of US cents, spectacular gold *dinars* from the 11th century Jerusalem of the Crusader king, Baldwin I, and a Spanish American silver ‘piece of eight’ from the *Nuestra Senora de Atocha*

wreck, as well as rarities such as the New Zealand overprinted banknotes. A number of these objects have been displayed in the Sydney Mint and the Powerhouse Museum.

An amusing characteristic of Bill Bush’s envelopes was the attached photocopies and research notes sandwiched into plastic pages with an almost impenetrable border of staples. Occasionally these gifts would include duplicate colour photocopies of notes made as a record for him to enjoy but accidentally sent in lieu of the real notes. On these occasions Mr Bush would in due course discover his mistake and the real notes would eventually arrive at the Museum! Such instances poignantly demonstrate that Mr Bush has donated to this Museum his lifetime’s collecting passion, and in such quantities that the processing and valuing is ongoing. The total value of the donation is now valued at over \$500,000 and must surely rank as one of the most altruistic in the history of this Museum. In 2003 Bill Bush was deservedly awarded the Museum’s highest honour as Life Fellow.

Paul Donnelly



Fig. 1. Commonwealth of Australia fifty pounds, 1914–1945, Y421521 (gift of WD Bush 88/1072-600).



Fig. 2. Commonwealth of Australia one-hundred pounds, 1914–1945, Z430766 (gift of WD Bush 88/1072-612).



Fig. 3. Australia cupro-nickel Kookaburra 'Pattern Penny', type 12, 1921 (gift of WD Bush 90/614).



Fig. 4. Jerusalem gold dinar, Baldwin I, c.1100 (gift of WD Bush 95/51/3).



Fig. 5. USA Mint Liberty Nickel, 1888, error struck 20% off-centre (gift of WD Bush 86/1129-19).



Fig. 6. USA Mint cupro-nickel clad copper 'Ike' dollar, Denver 1974, struck through a large piece of metal (gift of WD Bush 86/1129-23).

All images are reproduced courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Photographer of the coins: Sotha Bourn