

Rolling Pennies

One of the things I do when I finish a term of teaching is to clean the house ferociously. Last summer, I cleaned and painted the bedroom in our basement. You may have seen pictures of this process.

Invariably, deep cleaning reveals many things that were hidden out of sight. Some shelves in the basement bedroom hadn't been cleaned since Adam left home. Among the things I found were two huge jars of pennies. Unfortunately, Canada removed pennies from circulation a few years ago. However, my bank told me that they exchange pennies for other denominations as long as I roll them in penny rollers. The bank gave me a few penny rollers, but I needed many more to roll the pennies in the jars.

Penny rollers are paper cylinders into which you load pennies. Each roll takes fifty pennies. Thus began my search for penny rollers. Coin rollers are available in stores that are called "Dollar Stores" here. The stores might have other names like Dollarama with "dollar" as a part of their name. They sell all kinds of things from AAA batteries to toys to ziplock bags for really cheap.

In the summer, every dollar store I went to had coin rollers for all denominations except pennies. The store clerks said they don't have them. It seemed like penny rollers went the way of the pennies. Those of us who had huge stashes of pennies were out of luck. It seemed like there was no way out except to keep the pennies until they become ancient enough to be sold to numismatologists. Would they buy two full jars? I was beginning to despair and decided to escalate my search for the elusive penny rollers.

In September, we visited Lenore, and I went to dollar stores in Boston at every chance I got, only to be told that they don't have penny rollers. Tim and Lenore were pretty sure that we should be able to find penny rollers, so one time we drove around the town in their search. Tim would drop me off at a dollar store and go around the block while I went in the store. No luck at all. I was becoming quite heartbroken.

When we came back from Boston, another term of teaching started. I kept the two jars in the front porch to remind myself to keep searching for penny rollers. I did at every chance I got.

In December, after the term ended, I cleaned the top floor. To my delight, I found huge stashes of coins of bigger denominations, including US coins. When we went to visit Lenore last week, I rolled the US coins and there was about a hundred dollars!

After we came back to Toronto, I stared at my pennies in despair. I thought I should not give up my search for the blasted penny rollers. In any case, I needed to get coin rollers

for the Canadian coins that I had found in December, so one last trip to dollar stores in the neighborhood I thought. Just one. I set out this morning.

I should actually begin my story here. Many dollar stores are run by desis. The first one I went to had no penny rollers. I bought rollers for dimes and nickels and moved on.

I needed some vegetables, so I was walking to a vegetable store when I spotted the store in the picture.

Ajmer Dollar Discount

“Hmmm” I thought. It seemed highly unlikely they would have what I was looking for, but I went in anyway.

Again, desi-owned. What greeted me was from another world and time. There was an elderly couple, hunched over a transistor that was playing a talk show in Punjabi or some dialect from Northern India. I could understand some words, but not what people were saying. It sounded like a political talk show. People were calling in and talking animatedly about political stuff. The couple, possibly from Pakistan or India, muslims for sure, seemed completely in a far off place. They looked at me as you would look at an intruder, not hostilely but kind of startled. There was a moment of awkward silence as the transistor blasted the talk show.

Finally, the old man, possibly my age, but looked much like nana the last time I saw him (1976), asked me what I wanted. I felt incredibly silly about why I had wandered into the store. Looking for penny rollers? Honestly? Still, I explained to the man what I was looking for. The lady seemed doubtful that they had penny rollers. The man, on the other hand, scratched his head and muttered, “p-e-n-n-y r-o-l-l-e-r-s, hmmm, yes I have them. Please wait.” With that he disappeared deep into the back of the store.

While waiting, I looked around the store. It was crammed with stuff, toys, household items, kitchen stuff, clothes, and many things. Yet the couple seemed quite happy to just hunch over their transistor and listen to voices of another world.



Finally, to my delight, the old man brought out the very last three bags of penny rollers he had kept. Each bag, worth one dollar, had 36 rollers. I bought one bag and ran into the last snag. I had no small money to buy the bag.

I had a \$20 bill on me. The man said in perfect English that they can make change. I got the bag and walked out of the store feeling lightheaded with joy. My long search had ended. Who would have thought that a store named “Ajmer Dollar Discount” would have what I had been looking for months?

The top left picture shows the bag with penny rollers (red), one with nickel rollers (blue) and a small bag of plastic dime rollers.

I got to work immediately on the pennies and rolled out 13 dollars in one sitting.

Packing coins into rollers is very therapeutic and satisfying on many levels. You feel you have taken care of putting money into circulation, money that had been in jars. Besides, you get a lot of time to think about things.

My thoughts were about the couple running Ajmer Dollar Discount. I thought about migrations, displacement, living within a new society yet be not quite a part of that society. I want to start another story about this part.

Coming back to the rolled money.

Grand total of the rolled money was US\$100.00 and C\$ 67.50.

The pennies, the long sordid tale of penny rollers notwithstanding, amounted to \$23.50

If I were teaching, I would make more than this total of almost C\$200.00 in one day. This part also made me think about retiring and not being able to earn as much money as I have been while working. This will also have to be written as another story.

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