

For a few businesses, this alternate currency is as good as silver

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Check your pockets. Any American Liberty currency sandwiched between the greenbacks? American what? Here's a hint. They are brown and white, shorter and fatter than the U.S. dollar bill. Pretty, hefty and suggestive of European multicolored money, the Liberty dollars and one Liberty silver coin arrived in my mailbox after I mentioned the issuing group in print (one line in one column).

Issue your own money? Why not? The Continental Congress, various states and individual banks have. Tobacco notes, gold certificates, national bank notes and silver certificates have been issued. So new paper currency is not exactly a new idea. An ambitious one, yes, and this money is nicely designed to boot. But can you spend it?

If you need a bottle of water or a couple of taco-plate meals, yes. If you need to pay the Visa bill or pick up a teddy bear or a Big Mac, no. At least those are the results of an experiment I conducted.

A secret shopper bought water at the Shop 24 convenience store, 213 E. Sixth St., using Liberty dollars and received U.S. coins as change. Same story at El Nopalito, a restaurant at 2809 S. First St. Both merchants are mentioned on <http://www.libertydollar.org/> as Liberty dollar friendly so these were not chance encounters.

At Walgreen's on South Lamar Boulevard, it was checks, plastic or Federal Reserve notes only. No Liberty dollars, no Euros, no kidding. The drive-through at McDonald's would only take U.S. dollars for a Coke and ice cream cone. Bet it is the same if you order supersize fries and pie.

Before you phone the feds and report American-Statesman staff for passing funny money, I checked this out with the Secret Service. (Nothing breaks deadline faster than pausing to spring an arrested co-worker from jail.) The reasoning? Using this money is like bartering. If a retailer agrees to take a chicken or a Chumbawamba CD in exchange for merchandise, that is his business decision. No harm. No foul.

American Liberty dollars are issued by NORFED, the National Organization for the Repeal of the Federal Reserve Act and the Internal Revenue Code. The currency is backed by silver in an Idaho warehouse, according to NORFED leader Bernard von NotHaus. Next time you are in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, check out the Liberty Dollar Warehouse and let me know if the reported 44,000 troy ounces of silver are on view. NORFED claims this amount of silver backs the 440,000 Liberty dollars in circulation.

So what happens after the Liberty dollar hits the register till? Not much. Will a bank take them in the commercial lane? No. El Nopalito manager George Manzo says he gives the bills away as souvenirs and he thinks the silver coins are "good looking." And the bills used at Shop 24 found their way to an employee's personal collection. What's a merchant to do? NORFED redemption centers are located around the country, but the organization says they are not obligated to exchange Liberty dollars for Federal Reserve notes or silver.

Von NotHaus says, "People have over-intellectualized this. Using Liberty dollars is like sex, it is really not that difficult."

Tell that to the outstretched hands at the drive-through.