

Legal Tender Trap

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One day in May, Shaun Kranish, 22, of Rockford, Ill., and his fiancée then (now wife) Svetlana Dudnik, 24, finished their meal at the Dari Ripple in Walworth, Wis., and tried to pay their bill using Liberty Dollars — silver coins minted by a private company. Minutes later, the Walworth County police showed up, and the couple were arrested on charges including misdemeanor theft.

The Kranishes this month started a blog at libertydollararrest.blogspot.com. The couple insist that they were simply offering to “barter” for their meal, and would have been glad to pay their bill in United States currency, but were never given the chance.

The Gazette, a newspaper in nearby Janesville, reported last week that the legality of Liberty Dollars is in dispute. The United States Mint and the Justice Department say using them as currency is illegal. The man who makes them, Bernard von NotHaus, encourages their use for “barter,” but warns customers that they are not legal tender. Mr. von NotHaus, who describes himself on his Web site (libertydollar.org) as a “monetary architect,” is suing the government for hurting his business by warning people not to use the coins.