

The Dry House and Miners' Baskets

by Dave Johnson

After working a long shift underground, where the miners and their clothes would become quite wet and dirty, miners were faced with the prospect of walking home in all weather conditions. In areas with severe winters a miner's clothes could literally freeze. Imagine working underground for 10 hours, climbing ladders for hundreds or even thousands of feet to reach the surface and then walking home several miles over snow covered roads in freezing weather before you can bathe and change into dry clothes. This is not an experience anyone would look forward to, especially on a regular basis.

The first answer to this problem in both the United States and Europe was for the miners to change their clothes in one of the surface plant buildings and leave their work clothes draped over or hung near steam pipes to dry them. This did not address the issue of bathing. Over time mining companies built facilities in which the miners could change, bathe and leave their clothes to dry. These facilities came to be known by many different names depending upon locale. They were known as the "change house", "miners' dry", "mine dry", "dry house" or just "the dry".

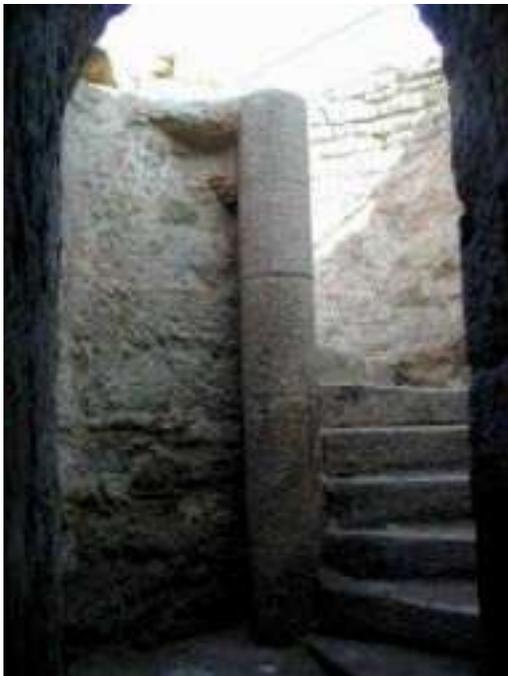
At first they were merely a place for miners to change and leave their clothes between shifts, and miners simply draped their clothes over pipes that ran through the building. There were generally no provisions made for bathing in these early dry houses. At most mines the miners had to walk outside from the shaft to the dry house in all types of weather.

An interesting facility was provided at the Levant Mine in Cornwall England. There they constructed a dry house connected to the man-engine shaft by an underground tunnel and circular stone stairway which allowed the miners to stay out of the weather at this wind-swept seaside mine until they had bathed and changed to dry clothes. This facility was constructed in 1889 with steam pipes running through the building to provide heat for drying the clothes. There were 4 elliptical baths, one in each corner of the building, formed in the concrete floor (see photos). Today the dry building is gone and all that remains is the concrete floor with the baths, the circular stairs and the tunnel. At the time this was a state-of-the-art facility.





The Levant mine, its baths, and the circular stairwells leading to the tunnel.



In the U.S. changing and bathing facilities provided by the mining companies was long an issue between labor and management, especially in the coal mining industry. The miners demanded facilities and the mine owners rejected those demands based on perceived cost. At some mines changing and bathing facilities were not provided until the 1940s. Bathing at home after a long day underground was no easy task as company houses had no running water until well into the 20th Century and water hauled from a well or hand pump had to be heated on the stove.

When facilities were finally provided, the concept of hanging the clothes from the ceiling where air could circulate through and dry them came into practice. At first just some hooks hung from chains were used. These were followed by more elaborate devices which included hooks and a basket, tray, or box in which to place personal items. These baskets could be raised or lowered by a chain and then locked in place with a padlock so that no one else had access to them, thus allowing for some security from theft. The drill went something this – the miner arrived at the mine for his shift, he went to the dry house and lowered his basket, he changed into his diggers and hung his street clothes, when he returned to the dry after his shift he changed out of his diggers, he bathed, changed into his street clothes and then raised his diggers to dry. At the next shift the process was repeated.

In searching for information for this article I was unable to find a single old photo of the interior of a mine dry. In all my 30+ years of collecting I only recall seeing one photo of the interior of a mine dry with all the baskets hanging from the ceiling. When I first started collecting in the mid-1960s I can recall going into several old dry houses in the Michigan Copper Country and the Gogebic Iron Range after the mines had closed and seeing hundreds of these baskets still hanging in place. If only I had thought to take some photos then.



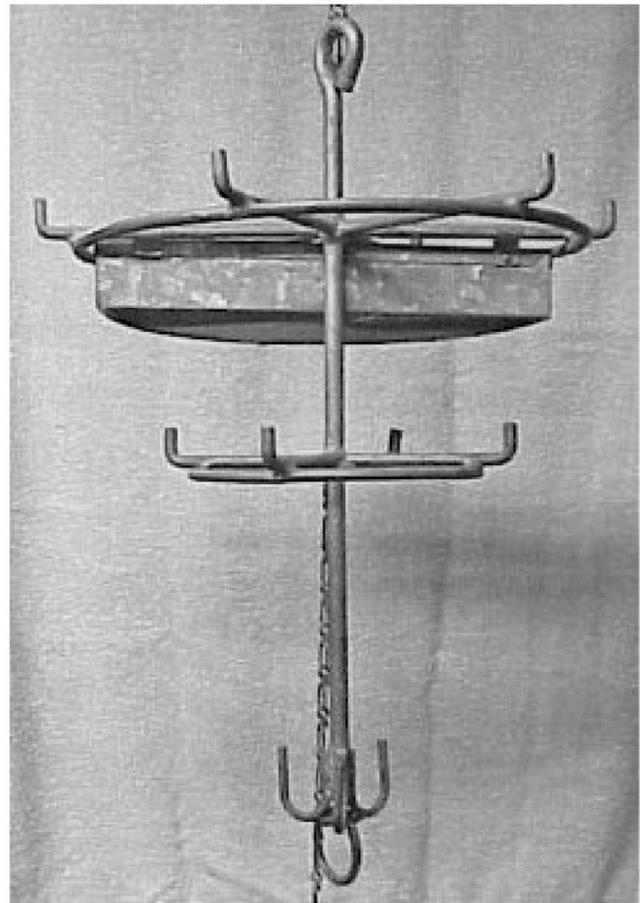
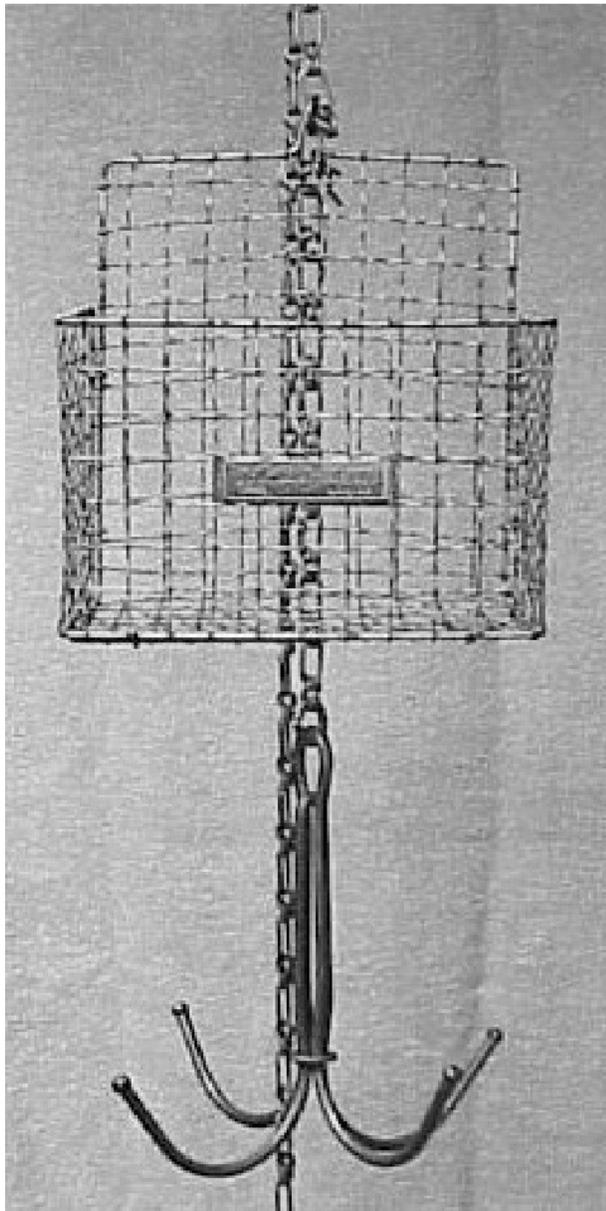
This brings us to another mining collectible - the baskets used in the dry houses. These baskets are as much a mining artifact as just about anything else we collect. They were manufactured in a multitude of shapes and sizes – round, square, oval. These have actually found more favor as a decorator item than as a mining artifact. They are used in bathrooms as towel racks and soap dishes, and in kitchens to hold and hang utensils.

Pictured here are numerous examples of these baskets from several mining areas in the United States and from Europe. Notice that the baskets from Europe are all of a similar design, while those from the U.S. appear in a greater array of configurations.

US Baskets



Left: Illinois basket tag with basket underneath.

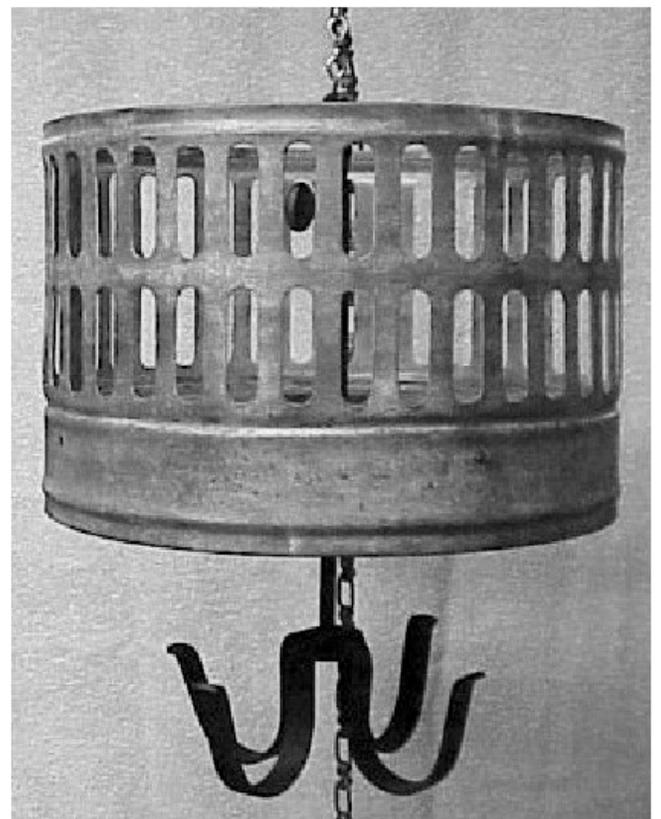
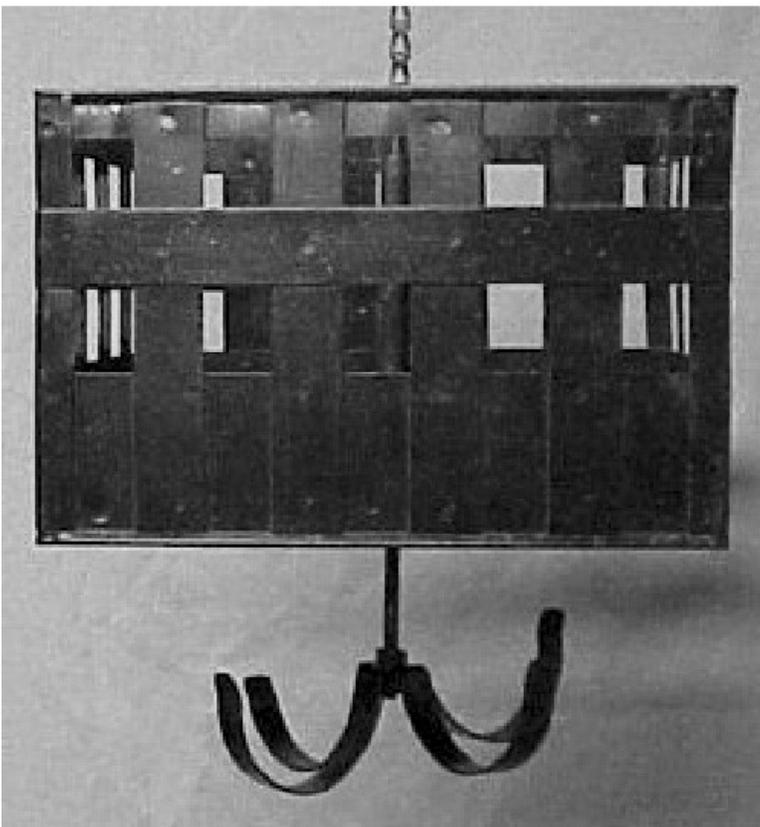


Above: Michigan basket.



Above and right: Safety First Supply Co. tag and basket.

Below: Two other Pennsylvania baskets.





Two baskets from West Virginia.

European Baskets



