Tonite Powder Company

by Mark Bohannan

In the late 1870's, William Letts Oliver of The California Cap Company became interested in Tonite Powder which was being made by the Cotton Powder Company and imported from England. Arrangements were made with the Cotton Powder Company to build a plant in the United States. On February 26, 1880, the Tonite Powder Company was incorporated in California with a factory erected at Stege. This was the first plant in the United States to make nitrocellulose in commercial quantities for explosives.

The advantages claimed by Tonite Powder over dynamite were that it was cheaper, safer, produced less fumes, and very stable to extreme heat or cold while retaining the strength of dynamite. These claims did not go unchallenged by the dynamite manufacturers, and for the next few years, newspapers contained articles calling attention to the alleged dangerous properties of guncotton and Tonite, its liability to spontaneous explosion, the inferiority of Tonite Powder as compared to dynamite, and the "Dangerous and Insidious Nature of its Fumes."

Fig. 1, June 1882 ad from the Mining and Scientific Press (Herb Dick Collection)

Although these claims were never substantiated, the primary trouble was that with the increasing price of cotton and the decreasing price of glycerine and particularly with the increasing use of graded dynamite, which lowered costs, the manufacture of Tonite Powder could not be done economically. Due to these factors, the factory closed in 1885 and the land and building were later sold to the California Cap Company.

Tonite Powder was a mixture of 52.5 % guncotton and 47.5 % barium nitrate. Cartridges were manufactured in two types, solids and primers, which were about three inches in length. The primers, as illustrated below, were made to securely hold the fuse and cap by means of some copper wires which were attached to the neck of the cartridge. Tonite Powder was to be exploded by using the PATENT DETONATORS especially made for this powder and supplied by the company, instead of ordinary blasting caps.

As far as now known, there are no powder boxes or cartridges in any collection. Also TONITE DETONATORS and ETNA CAPS manufactured by the Tonite Powder Company have not as yet been found. The only items known from this company are the ad (Fig. 1) and information sheet (Fig. 2).

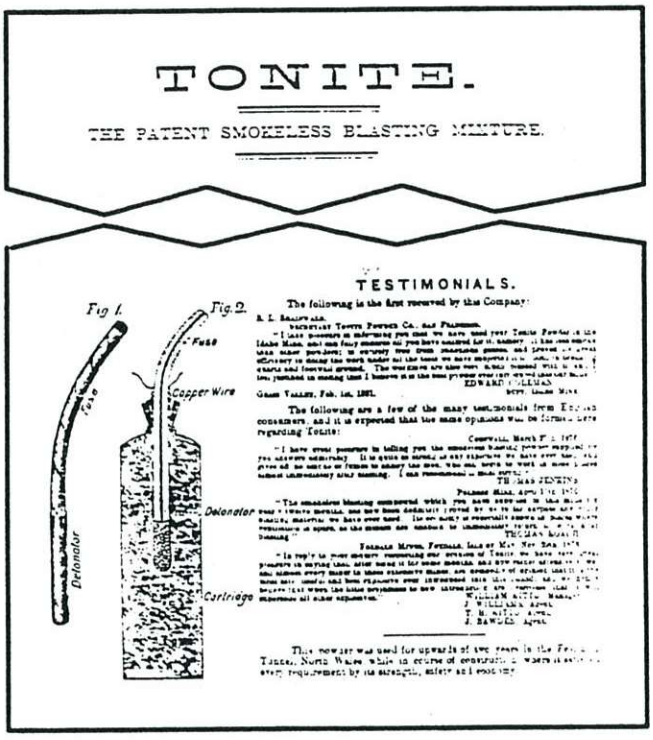

Fig. 2, Part of an instruction sheet which was probably enclosed in the Tonite Powder boxes. (Mark Bohannan collection)