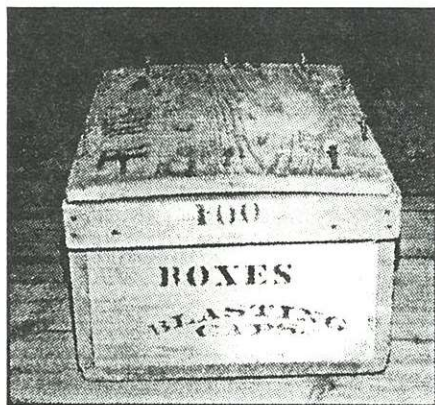


Mystery Box

Deric English & Andy Martin

Those who have experience collecting underground know that several kinds of wooden boxes can be found. The most common are dynamite boxes, while quite a bit rarer are candle boxes. You will also occasionally find a box that held canned goods, or other items that were packed in wood crates. However, it is next to impossible to find boxes that held blasting cap tins. These were rarely taken below in the first place.

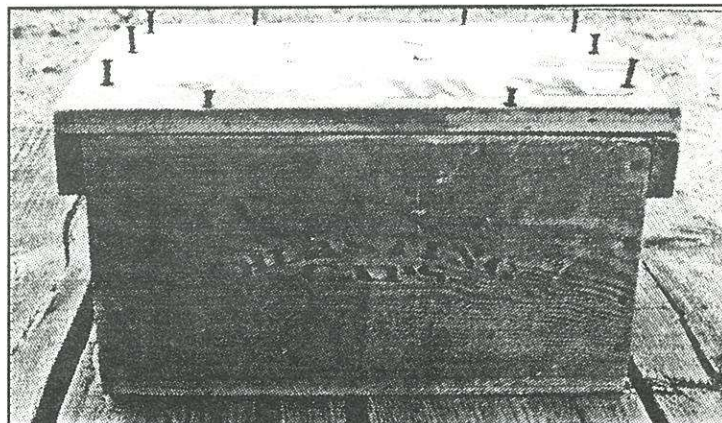
As a long time collector of California Cap Co. (CCC) tins, I (A.M.) have always been on the lookout for their boxes, especially the early ones dating back to the 1880's. Several years ago I turned up a nondescript box in terrible condition. It said "BLASTING CAPS" on four sides, and also said "BOXES XXX" on the ends. There was no hint as to manufacturer. This box was so miserable that it took two or three trips to the mine before I reluctantly hauled it home and stuck it in the "ugly wing" of the collection.



Imagine my surprise when Deric English recently proved that my box was an early California Cap model! The accompanying photos show the sides and top of a box recently found in an abandoned mine by Deric and

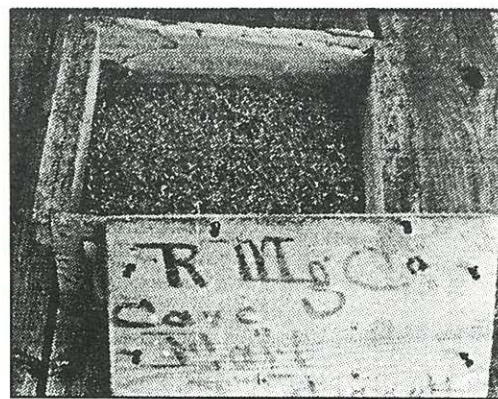
his father Melvin. Unlike my box, Deric's is in near mint condition, and was found still filled with some of the sawdust that was used to cushion the 100 tins packed inside it. The sides of the box are attached with the old "square" nails, while the lid is held on with screws, just like the old time dynamite boxes.

An interesting detail is the two carrying slats on the ends of the box. Each is carved out in the middle, making it easier to keep a good grip. Anyone who dropped a box like this when it was full was apt to find his mining career cut short.



The stenciling on Deric's box reads "BLASTING CAPS" on four sides, and "100 BOXES" on the two ends. Lightly penciled on one end are the words "Cala Cap Co Stege" (Stege was the shipping point for CCC). The writing, and the fact that Deric found the box in California, where CCC pretty much had the market sewn up in the 1880's, make it almost certain that this type of box was the one used by CCC in the early days. It is unfortunate that they did not stencil their name on this box, as they did in later years. A big Maltese cross would also look pretty slick!

Making up for the dull side stenciling is the nifty hand lettered shipping directions on the lid. Deric believes that "R Mg Co" stood for Runover Mining Company, and "Earl" was D.W. Earl, a merchant in the Calico / Daggett area as early as 1883.



It is interesting to conjecture about how this box was used underground. The sawdust in the box and presence of the original lid suggest that it was used to distribute caps, yet it seems unlikely that a full box would be taken underground, where it would be a safety hazard and subject to theft. Perhaps the box was sent into the mine when it was nearly empty, and after the last tin was taken it just lay empty for over 100 years in the isolated drift where Melvin and Deric found it.