

Virgin Territory

By Bob Schroth



Bob Schroth displays the end of a candle box alone deep within a side passage.

I received a phone call about 8:30 PM, one day early last summer. The call was from an old time miner inquiring about my ad in a prospector magazine, offering to map and survey old mining properties. The claim was located about three hours away in the north Mojave desert. He explained that the claim had two Adit entrances, and one shaft opening of an unknown depth. We then worked out the details of what was expected from each of us, and two weeks later we met at the mine site. The mine owner wanted to know the size and depth of the mine. I of course wanted to enter

virgin mining workings, and hopefully recover some neat mining artifacts.

First a disclaimer for all you would be mine explorers. All holes dug into the ground are dangerous. The editors of this magazine do not advocate, encourage, or want anyone to enter any mining workings. Almost all mine properties are owned by some individual, a mining company, or the government. The older the mine the more dangerous it becomes, and vertical shafts like this mine has are the most dangerous. Please keep in mind

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that any mine you can drive right up to will be devoid of all mining artifacts, someone else has already removed them. All you will find are beer cans and bat droppings.



One level was loaded with dynamite boxes.

My first impression of this mine was that the collar of the shaft opening was too unstable, and unsafe to rappel into. I got out a three by five mirror, and directed sunlight down the shaft. We then saw that it was much better down about twenty feet. I rigged up the ropes, and with a top belay, I began to descend to the first level. The history of the area told us that the mine had good production for only one and half years, but had been leased out on two other

occasions. The most productive years were right at the turn of the century, and the possibility of mining candle boxes and other early relics seemed plausible. I was using a three hundred foot (static) climbing rope and I had on all my gear to ascend back up the rope in case of any problems.



Fallen debris and boxes litter an underground tunnel.

It is hard to describe the feeling of hanging on a small rope, dangling over a mine shaft of a depth of over four hundred feet, hoping that you will come to a level or a station before you reach the end of your rope. Luck was with me and at one hundred and twenty-four feet, I was standing on the first station. The timbers were in very good condition. At this point I removed my climbing gear and began to map and explore. In smaller mines like this one, the miners usually open supply boxes and crates close to the station level and this was no exception. About 70 feet down the tunnel there was a small side passage. I found three Hercules Dynamite boxes and some early California Cap tins scattered around on the floor. This was a loading room and the miners would prime the

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powder and use as necessary. The total length on this level was 668 feet with two small leads to the North east. I tied the boxes to a haul rope and had them taken up to the surface. I was a little concerned by the amount of debris falling from the collar of the shaft. I decided to rig another rope at this point, and begin my descent to the next level. The next station was almost 100 feet lower down, also in good condition. Here I found a ladder, and the shaft was divided into two compartments. One is a Manway and the other is a haul shaft. I think once this extended all the way up the shaft to the surface. At some point in time, the wood at the upper levels deteriorated and had fallen down to the bottom of the mine. I again derigged from the rope and



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started to explore. This must have been a main working level, ore car track was in place and I was finding all sorts of trash and relics, even a couple of bottles. I could feel my excitement level rising when I spotted a windlass and some powder box parts, stashed in a wide spot in the tunnel. Thirty more feet and I spotted Two candle boxes, and several powder boxes, right in front of a winze shaft. I climbed down this shaft and then spotted a very neat wooden bucket, about half the size of a fifty-five gallon drum. I have been exploring for about twenty-three years and this is as good as it gets. I put off the mapping, long enough to carry the wooden bucket to the shaft opening. I then carried the boxes and other relics and placed them in the shaft bucket. This was going to be the last trip for the wood bucket, to carry anything out of this mine. To find so many powder boxes in one area I knew that this level was going to be more extensive than the first one. I found another small room where the miners opened boxes and ate their lunch. I spent a lot of time digging around in this area, and it yielded several old food tins, some powder loading instructions, two whole miners wax candles, and six pages from a 1908 Mining and

Scientific Press. This level had a total length of 990 feet, with several small side tunnels. One of these side passages had the Face drilled and ready to be primed, here I found three pieces of hand steel all of different lengths. By this time I had been under ground for about five hours, I thought I had better finish exploring and mapping, so I rappelled down to the next level. Here I found the mine to be in very poor condition. Most of the timbers were shattered from the weight of three hundred feet of rock pressing down on them. It was very spooky crawling around down here, knowing that if something happened to me, I doubt if anyone would be foolish enough to come down to save me. I found a few broken boxes and one cap tin, after 96 feet the passage was blocked by debris, I could go no farther. I broke the label ends out of the boxes and put them in my pack. Then I began the long process of climbing up the rope. This is the hardest part of exploring, for mine and cave explorers. You are already tired and the thought of the long and tedious climb was only dulled by the excitement of the great finds that were made. Over all everyone was happy, I brought up several rock samples for the mine owner. I, got to bring home most of the (trash), as the miner called it.