

VULCAN POWDER CO. 1878-1902

BY ERIC TWITTY

During the 1870's the North American dynamite industry began to blossom. The decade saw many mines and railroads embrace dynamite for blasting hard rock, and the West's dynamite suppliers did a brisk business among a plethora of hard rock mining districts, with prospectors staking new discoveries every season. The potential offered by the expanding Western explosives market was a siren song to venture capitalists, because only two manufacturers, the California Powder Works and the Giant Powder Co. served the region. Explosives pioneer Robert Warren organized the Vulcan Powder Co. in 1878 to take advantage of the lack of competition in the Western dynamite market.

Warren identified Reno, Nevada as the best location for Vulcan because the high desert City was proximal to the Comstock Lode, other mining districts in Nevada, and California's Mother Lode, and it was serviced by the transcontinental Central Pacific and the Virginia & Truckee railroads.

Warren operated his plant in Reno through the fall and into winter manufacturing *Vulcan Powder*, one of North America's first active-base dynamites invented by Warren in the mid-1870's. As the weather cooled, the

plant began experiencing problems with poor nitration and frozen nitroglycerine because of Reno's alpine climate. Making corrections for the cold meant costly renovations to the plant, which spurred Warren to recapitalize and move his operations to San Pablo, east and across the bay from San Francisco, where the climate was conducive to manufacturing nitroglycerine. Vulcan's new plant was generously laid out with plenty of space between sensitive buildings. Nearly each step of the dynamite-making process had its own dedicated structure, and the facility included a power house, a waterfront, storage buildings and offices. In 1880 after the company reached a state of stability, Warren left to involve himself in other high explosives start-ups.

Railroad companies, construction contractors, and placer miners in the West often worked in relatively soft ground not efficiently lasted with dynamite, and they fostered a significant demand for a low-grade heaving explosive stronger than blasting powder and slower than dynamite. Aware of this potential market, in 1881 Orlando Hardy convinced Southern Pacific Railroad officials to back him in his development of such an explosive. Hardy had modeled his product after

Judson Powder, which was a nitroglycerine-coated blasting powder. After discussing his product ideas and marketing strategy with Vulcan officials, they agreed to furnish him with a fully equipped laboratory at the Vulcan Plant. After a period of time, Hardy created a railroad powder under the name of *Improved Judson*, which Vulcan manufactured and sold. Shortly after manufacturing began, Hardy's facility burned down, and Vulcan gave up on Hardy. Hardy borrowed money, bought the defunct Eureka Powder Co. facility next door, renovated it, and carried on his operation there under the name of the Excelsior Powder Works. Vulcan continued to sell a railroad powder packed in kegs throughout the 1880's.

Vulcan hit its peak in the mid-1880's and its dynamite was sold in mining districts throughout Nevada, California and Arizona. The company's most notable customer was the Sutro Tunnel project driven to drain the Comstock Lode.


Competition was heavy between explosives makers in the San Francisco Bay area, and Vulcan was pitted against the California Powder Works, the Giant Powder Co., the California Vigorit Powder Co., and the Safety Nitro Powder Co. The cut-throat competition whittled away at profits among

Bay Area explosives companies, and in response they engaged in meetings from which they quietly forged a cartel in 1884. In 1888 the Vulcan Powder Co. accused some of the cartel's members of violated sales territories and undercutting agreed prices. Feeling betrayed, Vulcan directors withdrew from the cartel and it disintegrated, precipitating a crippling price war. By 1890 the price of dynamite was down from \$.25 to \$.10 per pound, which virtually eliminated profits. Smaller companies such as the Vulcan Powder Co. had a very difficult time fighting the Giant Powder Co. and the California Powder Works both of which were capable of sustaining near-profitless operations. As the Giant Powder Co. and the California Powder Works usurped large portions of the western explosives market, sales for Vulcan began to slow down.

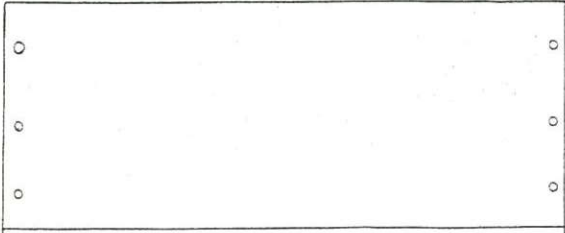
In 1897 Bay Area explosives companies reached another agreement which allotted market portions according to the 1896 sales figures. Of course, in that year the production of the California Powder Works and the Giant Powder Co. Con. was at near-record levels, which gave them a disproportionately high market share, and the smaller Bay Area explosives companies, including Vulcan, received disproportionately low market portions.

ground, the new arrangement brought Vulcan to its knees, which precipitated sale of the company to the California Vigorit Powder Co.

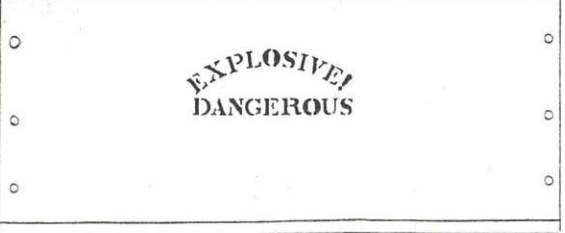
Although Vulcan never produced another case of dynamite, its corporate charter was maintained until 1902.

	<p>THE CONSUMERS' COMPANY.</p> <h2>VULCAN B B AND AJAX.</h2> <p>The Best LOW GRADE EXPLOSIVES in the Market. SUPERIOR TO BLACK OR JUDSON POWDER.</p> <h3>Vulcan Nos. 1, 2 and 3,</h3> <p>The Best NITRO-GLYCERINE POWDERS Manufactured. SPECIAL INDUCEMENTS IN PRICES. AJAX and VULCAN B B POWDERS are Unequaled for Bank Blasting and Railroad Work. Caps and Fuse of all Grades at Bottom Rates.</p> <h2>VULCAN POWDER CO.,</h2> <p>218 California Street, San Francisco, Cal.</p>
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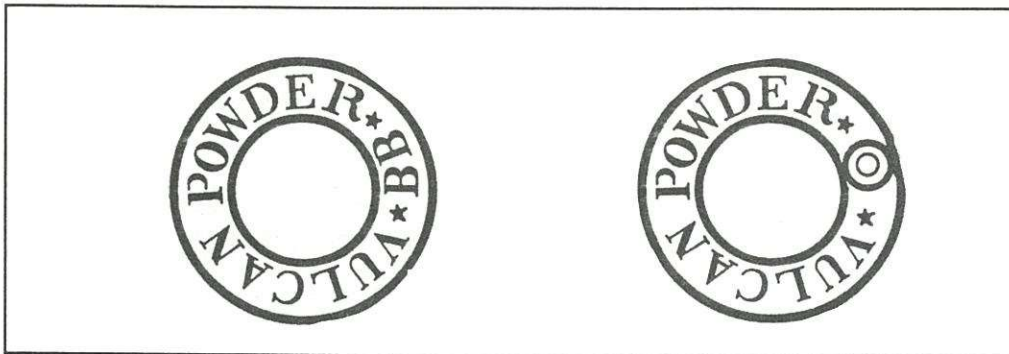
To generate business, Vulcan ran advertisements such as this in mining trade journals through the 1880's. The ads ceased by 1890's, when the company hit financial trouble. The notes Vulcan Nos 1 through 3 as being straight dynamite, and Ajax and Vulcan BB as being railroad powders.

<p>No. 2 VULCAN BLASTING POWDER 7/8 X 8 1/2 inch 50 Lbs Net</p>	<p>No. 2 VULCAN BLASTING POWDER 7/8 X 8 1/2 inch 50 Lbs Net</p>	
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Dynamite Box. Age Range: 1878- late 1880's. Constructed with cut nails. Rarity: several known. Author.

<p>No 1★ VULCAN BLASTING POWDER 7/8 X 8 1/2 inch 50 Lbs Net</p>	<p>Patented May 26, 1868 № 78.312 Reissued Jan. 9, 1883 № 10.267 Patented Nov. 17, 1874 № 157.054 Patented May 24, 1881 № 241.941 Patented June 14, 1881 № 242.893</p>	
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Dynamite Box. Age Range: Mid 1880's- 1890. Constructed with cut nails. Rarity: several known. The patent dates on the box back panel are the same as dates found on Giant and California Powder Works boxes of the same vintage. Author.

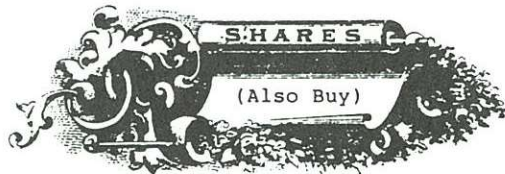


Blasting Powder Keg. Age Range: 1878 - early 1890's. Constructed of steel, and the body has corrugations like most steel kegs. Rarity: One known. Courtesy of Tom Johnson, Elko, Nevada.



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