

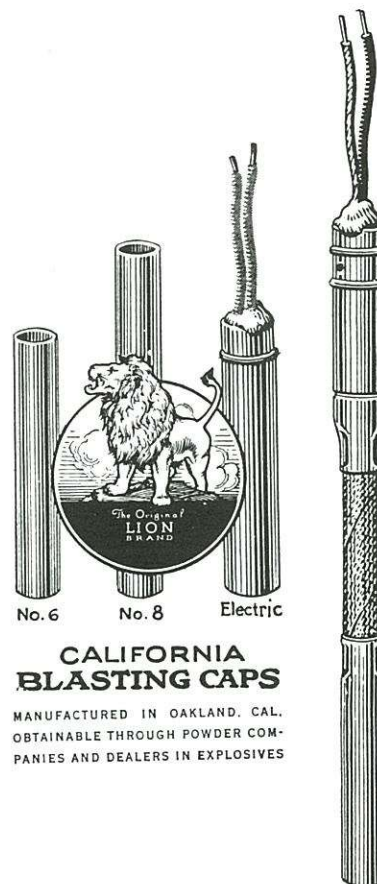
The California Cap Company

by Bob Schroth

A staple of western mining prior to the 1870's was black powder which was used in cutting mining tunnels and blasting out large stopes. By 1875, dynamite came into widespread use and replaced black powder as the primary blasting agent in mining. Dynamite had to be exploded with small copper blasting caps which were developed by Alfred Nobel as a means of detonating nitroglycerine based high explosives. In 1867, he patented a copper shell filled with fulminate of mercury which became the standard blasting cap for many years.¹

In April 1880, William L. Oliver and Freeborn J. Fletter built a small factory in Stege (near Oakland), California, and that became the birth place of the California Cap Company. The company soon became the primary supplier of blasting caps for the western mines for several decades, while Metallic Cap Mfg. dominated the eastern markets.¹

Metallic Cap Mfg. Co. was a member in the Gunpowder Trade Association which was formed in 1872 to regulate the competition in the powder industry. In 1880, the Association divided the U.S. with a neutral belt, consisting of Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. The states west of the neutral belt were the province of California Cap Co. and the California Powder Works. The states east of the neutral belt were controlled by the Metallic Cap Mfg. Co. and the Du Pont Powder Co., the oldest and largest explosives manufacturer in America. When Du Pont offered to buy out Metallic Cap Mfg. in 1908, they also made a similar offer to California Cap Co. The Metallic Cap Mfg. Co. sold out immediately and became Metallic Cap Mfg. Works, but Mr. Oliver of California Cap attempted to improve the terms of his offer in the sixty days he was given to consider it. Oliver then capitulated, but Du Pont refused to hold up their end of the deal, claiming anti-trust problems. Undaunted, California Cap Co. went on manufacturing blasting caps and their cap tins.¹

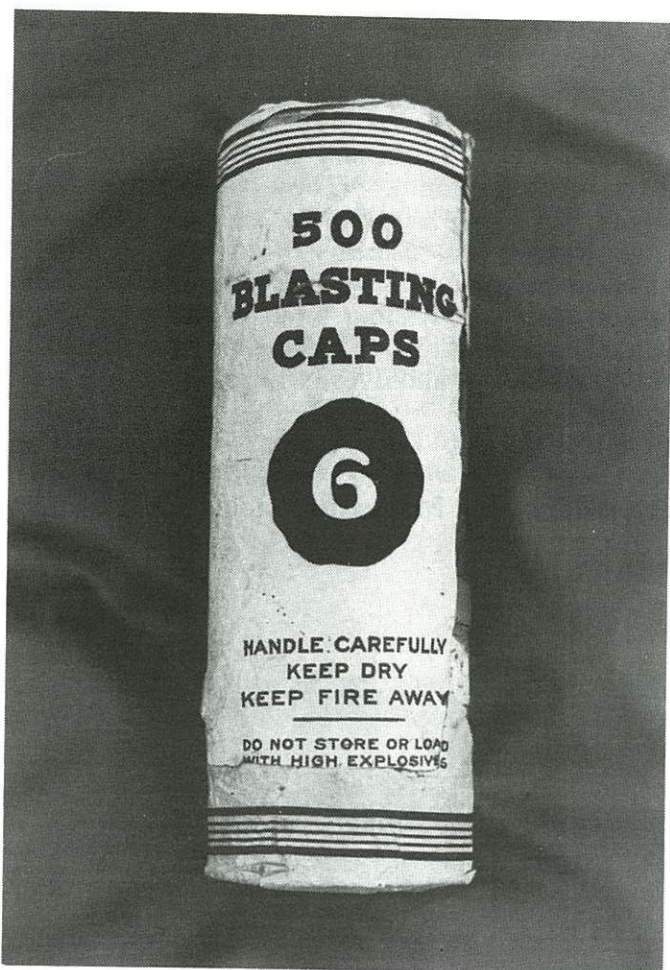


Old advertising is all that remains of this company today. The last dated advertising I have seen for California Cap Co. is 1946. By this time their belt driven presses and other equipment were considered obsolete by current standards. Unable to maintain a competitive edge with Du Pont and Atlas, they officially went out of business May 15, 1947.² Interestingly, their capability in the making of blasting wire surpassed their competitors. Atlas was eager to obtain their equipment and expertise in this area when the company dissolved.²

Of all the cap tins collected, California Cap Co. must have the most variations in styles, sizes, and labels. Their blasting caps were packed in actual metal cap tins far longer than the other manufacturers. During World War II the government did not allow metal to be used in the manufacture of non-essential items. While other cap tin manufacturers stopped using metal containers, California Cap Co. continued to sell caps in metal tins through a loop-hole arrangement with the Pacific Can Co. This company was allowed to recycle scrap metal for use in making cans. California Cap

Co. simply loaned them their presses, then purchased the finished tins at a very low price.²

Dry chemical explosives, which are easy to pour but unstable, were used by most powder companies.² California Cap Co., however, added 5% water to their compound, which made it slower to pour, but eliminated the need for protective barricades to limit accidental explosion damages associated with the dry explosives. Once made, the caps were stored in a "dry house" for two days to remove the moisture. Both the slow pouring and need for drying added considerable time to the manufacturing, and was a contributing factor in California Cap Co.'s demise.



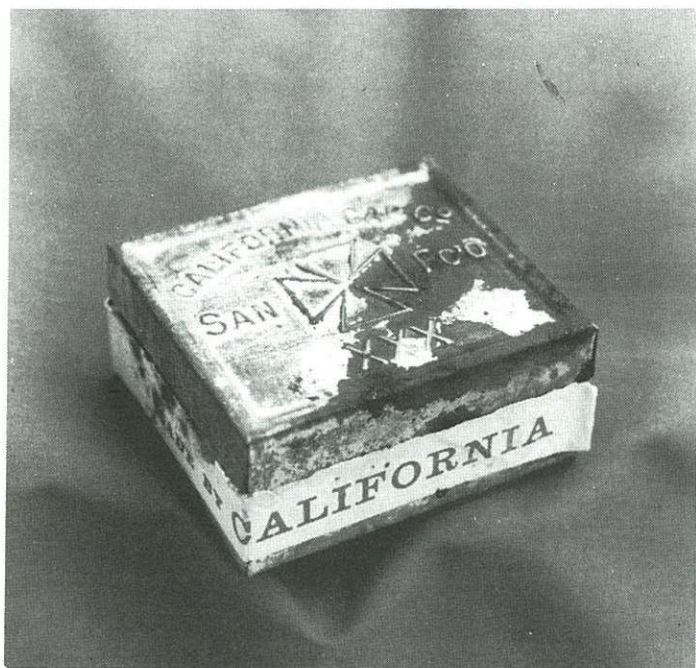
Five 100-cap tins stacked and wrapped together.

After drying, the 100-cap size tins were labeled and wrapped in packages of five tins (see photo above). Finally, these five-packs were placed into wood cases under the various competitive markings including Apache, Atlas, Du Pont, Giant, Hercules, and Trojan.² These wooden boxes are extremely rare today, since the cap tins were always unpacked above ground, and the cases usually burned. All California Cap tins are of plain unpainted tin; only the paper labels are of different color and lettering.



An early California Cap Co. tin.

California Cap Co.'s first tin was a square box embossed with three X's. This tin was wrapped with a white paper label with blue writing. Later, they changed to a round cylinder with an embossed lid, again with an XXX or XXXX marking. Some of the embossed lids are stamped "California Cap Co. San Fc'o" on the lid while others have "California Cap Co. San Francisco." Andy Martin, who probably has the largest collection of California Cap tins in existence, speculates that the change from abbreviated "San Fc'o" to the full "San Francisco" took place after the 1906 earthquake.



Early pre-1906 "Fc'o" tin.

A temporary label tin which has no embossing reads:

A Temporary Label

The dies for stamping trade mark on our covers were destroyed in San Francisco's fire. The contents of this box are our standard goods as are indicated on the side label.

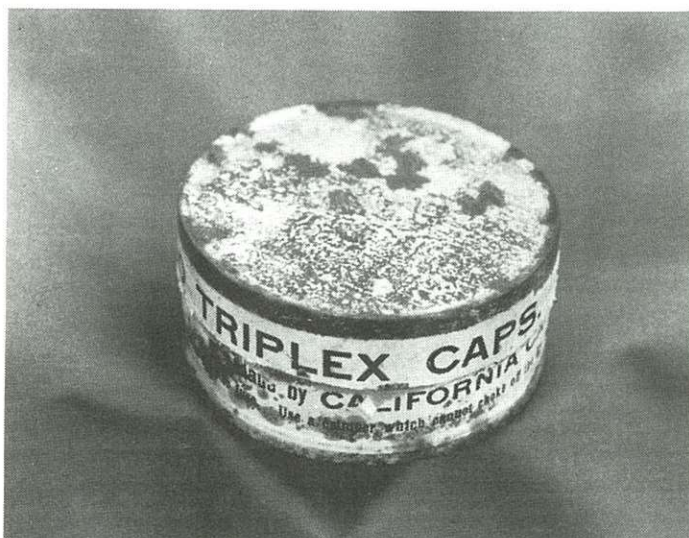
California Cap Company



The Temporary Label tin.

Other desirable embossed lid stampings are:

1. Lion standing on hind legs.
2. Lion standing on all fours.
3. Large star with five X's around it.

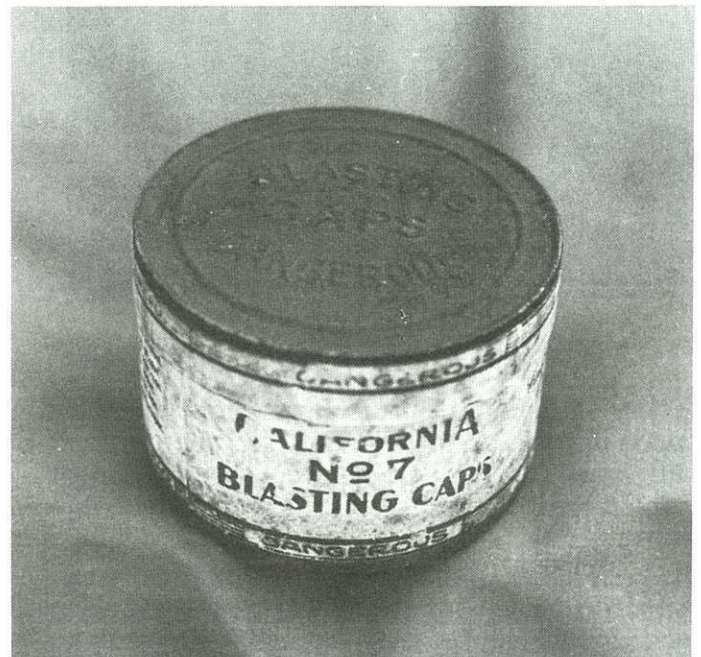


Triplex tin with non-embossed lid.

I recently acquired a 25 count #7 California Cap tin. It is round and has a brown paper label with the lion standing on all four legs. Until this tin was found, no other #7 California Cap tins were known.³ Then I was lucky enough to locate and acquire a 100 count #7 California Cap tin (see below left). It has "Blasting Caps - Dangerous" embossed on the lid and a paper label stating it was packed expressly for Trojan Powder Co. Any #7 blasting cap tin is desirable, as they saw only limited use. The #6 and #8 strengths were, by far, the most popular among miners.

References:

1. *The A B C of Mining*, Charles A. Bramble.
2. *Visit to California Cap Company's Plant*, April 10 1947.. Two employees of Atlas (Reynolds Experimental Laboratory, Reynolds, PA) visited California Cap Co. in February 1947 to consider the purchase of equipment. They were given an interesting tour of the facility and described the various manufacturing processes...this original report was recently found and submitted by Curtis Kremer during the Fall of 1991. Mr. Kremer, an active historian and collector of blasting artifacts, is currently an employee of Atlas (now I.C.I.), and lives in Lebanon, PA.
3. *The Blasting Cap Tin Catalog*, Andy Martin.
4. *Persimmon Hill Magazine*, article by William J. Felchner.



Rare 100 count No 7 cap tin.