Howells Mining Drill Co.

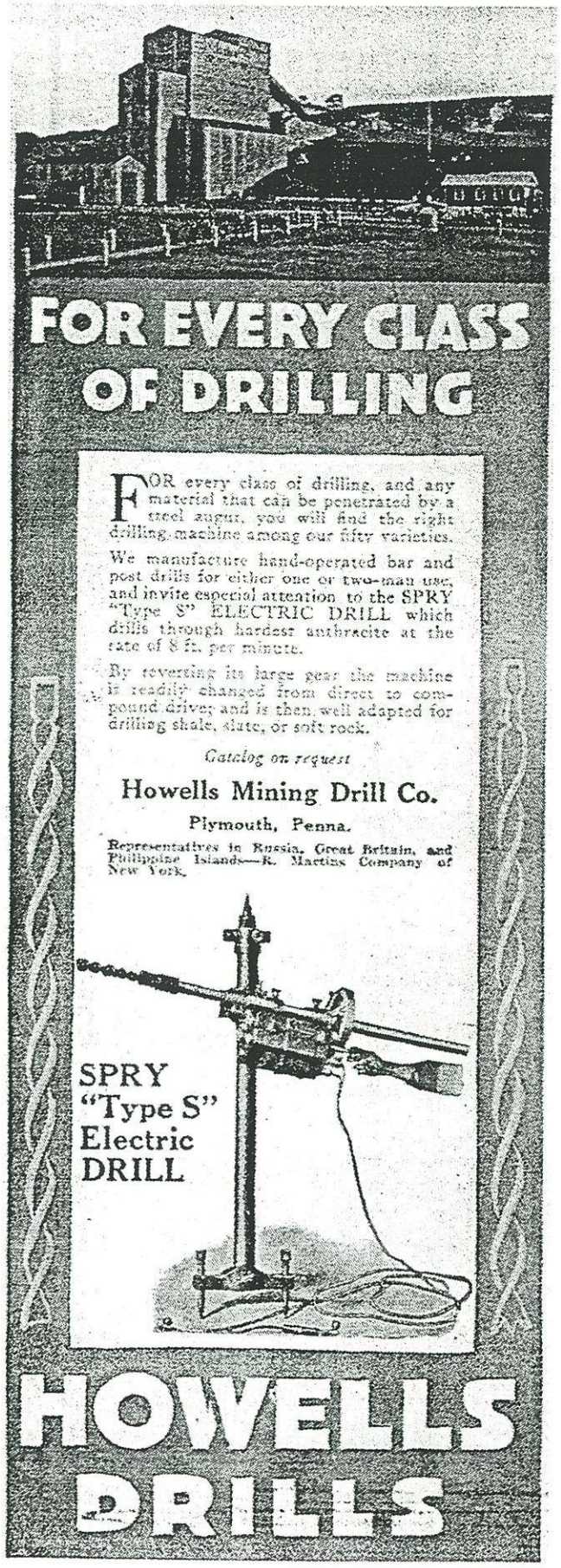
of Plymouth, PA

by Jim Chapman

My original intention in writing this article was to describe an unusual miners' pick head I had acquired locally a couple of months ago. As it turned out, I discovered an interesting history of the manufacturer of this implement: Howells Mining Drill Company of Plymouth, PA.

According to records in the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Howells Mining Drill Company was established in 1878 by John R. Howells, in Plymouth, Luzerne Co., Pennsylvania, no doubt to stake its claim among the other industries eager to contribute to and no doubt invest in the already-burgeoning business of anthracite coal. One of the shareholders of the fledgling company was Daniel K. Spry, Civil War veteran, Plymouth's leading druggist and real-estate entrepreneur, who owned considerable tracts of commercial property in a town already made affluent by the discovery of black diamonds in the area in the early 1800s by the Smith brothers, Abijah and John.

D.K. Spry had a brother, Frederick E. Spry, who in the 1870 census was listed as a tinsmith residing in nearby Scranton. An entry in the 1873 Plymouth City Directory reveals F.E. Spry taking up residence on Main St. in Plymouth as a merchant of hardware and tinware. Miners' oilwick lamps with the F.E. Spry imprint are valued by collectors of mining artifacts for their scarcity as well as their association with early anthracite coal mining in northeastern Pennsylvania.



The reputation of Howells Mining Drill Co. continued to prosper under its present ownership. Howells, however, sold his interest in 1883, the year the company was incorporated. His departure certainly did not cause any decline in the company's productivity. Advertisements taken out in trade publications of the era attest to the company's success in its field. An ad in the Mine Foreman's Pocket Book of 1883, states, "Howells Mining Drill, Still Ahead, Demand Continually Increasing." Ads appearing in circa 1890s issues of Mines and Minerals included unqualified testimonials from officials of large companies eager to take up future orders.

However, as quickly as Howells Mining Drill Co. climbed to the pinnacle of the industry, it's downfall arrived just as quickly. Before discussing the company's demise, I would like to mention a future president and general manager, Franklin B. Spry, who guided the company into its most successful years and who won gratitude from politicians, military leaders, and the nation for service rendered during World War I.

Franklin B. Spry was born in Plymouth, PA, on October 6, 1875, the son of the previously mentioned D.K. Spry and his wife Mary Evans. Franklin Spry attended the local schools and graduated from the prestigious Wyoming Seminary in 1897. Upon graduation, he became associated with the Howells Mining Drill Co. as an apprentice and eventually worked his way through the ranks of journeyman, foreman, superintendent, and eventually general manager. In 1902, at the precocious age of 27, he was elected president of the company while retaining his duties as general manager.

It was because of Spry's business acumen and skills as an inventor that the company reached unprecedented acclaim in the mining community, both among management and laborers. While holding down two titles, Spry continued to develop new and better electric drills and products, becoming known as one of the foremost inventors in his field. The Spry Type "S" Electric Drill was lauded as an especially adaptable drill for penetrating anthracite coal not to mention shale, slate, and soft rock (see illustration). The drill boasted of a boring rate of eight feet per minute through hard anthracite coal—no small feat.

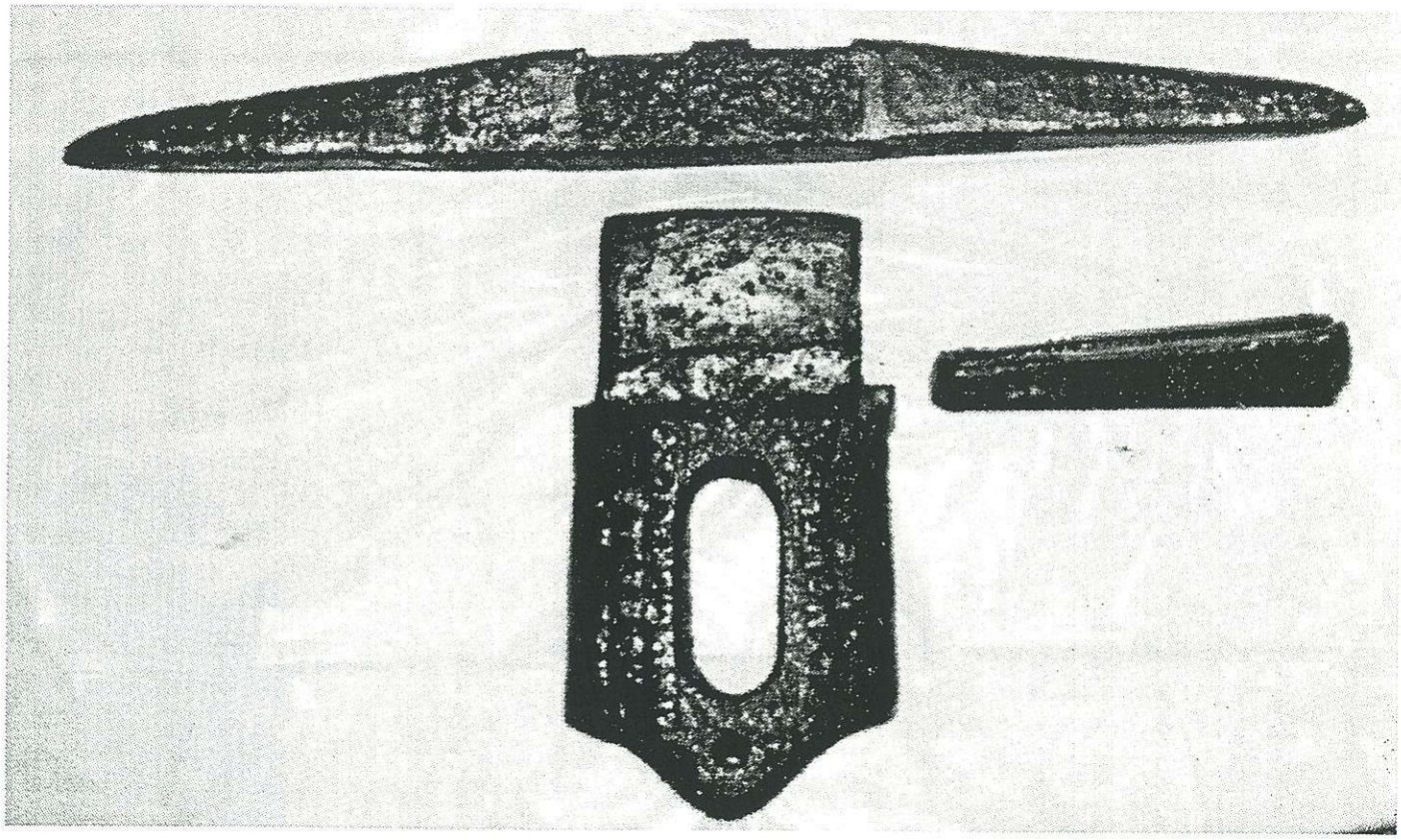
Distributors of Howells drilling equipment could be found in as diverse locations as Great Britain, Russia and the Philippines, testifying that Howells technology was in demand the world over and not just for applications in the coalfields. In addition to its line of drills was a full complement of mining equipment from spads to shovels to miners' caps. However, it was the patented Spry drill that was the company's most successful implement. Indeed, Howells Mining Drill Co. owned the patent for every implement they manufactured.

The year 1917 saw the entry of the United States into the first world war, creating an immediate demand for men and materials to bolster America's contribution to the war effort. This period was to represent the pinnacle of coal production in America, after which saw a decline but short-lived resurgence during World War II. However, the industry would never again witness the output of tonnage as it did when it sent its men to fight at the Western Front. Howells Mining Drill Co. also made its contribution in support of the men at the front. It was this unselfish act that ironically helped lead to the demise of the company.

Early during America's participation in the conflict, Howells Mining Drill Co. converted a large portion of its factory in Plymouth to the production of drills and entrenching tools that the allied war effort desperately needed. The electric drills, trench machines, and massive augers shipped by Howells to France and Belgium churned up the soil of the battlefields to provide American troops and their allies with refuge from enemy machine-gun nests and artillery barrages. Howells equipment even found its way to the Russian front. The employees of Howells Mining Drill Co. took great pride in their contribution to America's war effort. The company offered its services to the government at little or no cost, much to the consternation of its clientele who were forced to take a backseat while waiting to have their orders filled for equipment.

F.B. Spry was a man who put country above profit. His efforts lead to the U.S. government formally honoring Howells Mining Drill Co. with a certificate for meritorious service which read:

"This company willingly did development work gratis and its bids were in some instances 1/5 to 1/6 of its



nearest competitors. Its business methods were of a high order and seldom equalled. It is very gratifying to be enabled to transmit this visible recognition of patriotic war service."

Interestingly, Howells' contribution came as a welcome relief to government officials who were dealing with large scale graft and corruption by other companies that overcharged the government for services rendered. Even in our day, news of contractors overcharging the government for goods and services is shamefully still rampant. As a result of Spry's patriotism, regular clients decided that they could no longer afford to wait and canceled their orders with Howells. Even after the armistice, once-loyal customers continued to give their orders to other manufacturers. As a result, business suffered.

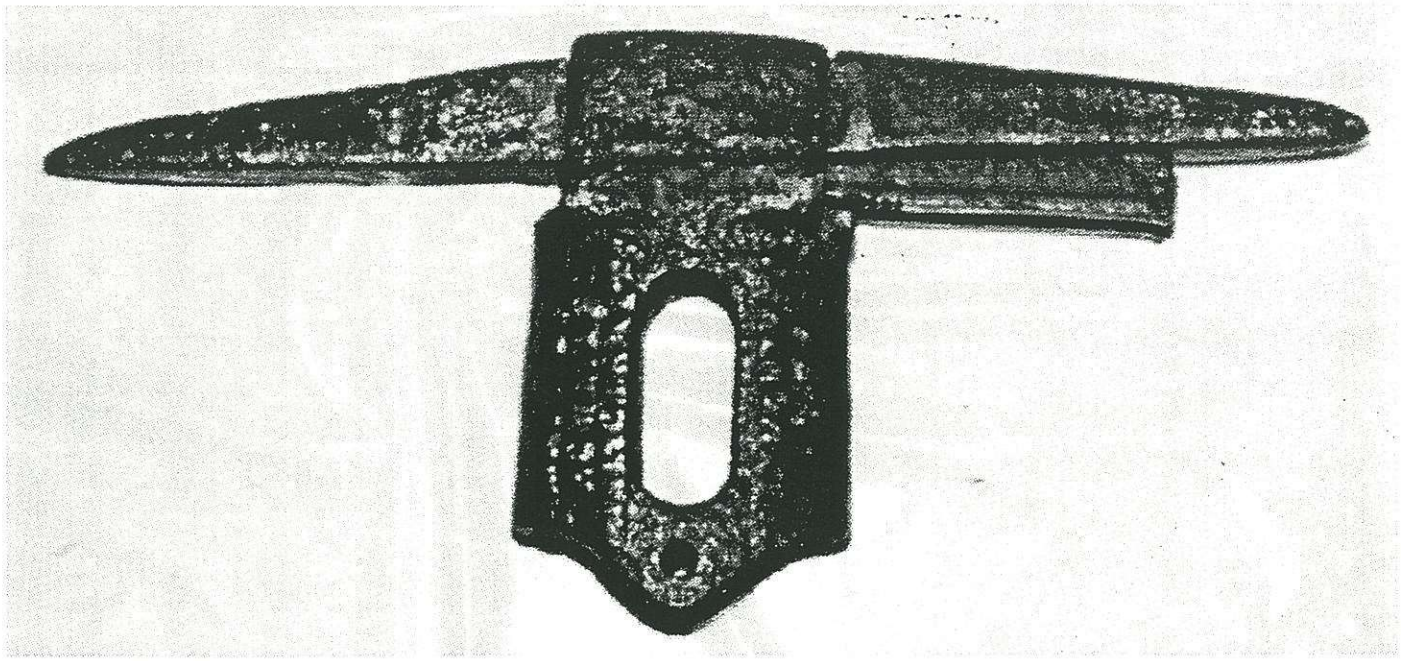
However, one cannot blame Howells' demise entirely on their contribution to the war effort. Alternative fuels, such as gas and oil, began to take the place of coal. Howells Mining Drill Company limped along with the times until its close in the 1960s.

Franklin Spry, the company's guiding force, had died in 1935. The last appearance the company made in the Plymouth City Directory was in 1962, with yet another Spry at the helm, Mae S. Spry.

If you should visit Plymouth, you can still see the former Howells manufacturing plant building, which was taken over by a supply company and since then by a printing company. The repair shop, located several blocks away, has since been torn down, as has been the fate of numerous other structures relating to the coal-mining industry. Though Howells Manufacturing Company is but an echo of a once-thriving coal industry, its contributions to home and country should not be forgotten.

The miners' pick, manufactured by Howells Mining Drill Co. and shown above, consists of three parts: socket, pick head, and wedge (fastener) to secure the pick head to the socket.

The patent for the design, actually for only the pick-head fastener, was granted to William D. Lewis, of Plymouth, on September 2, 1924. Lewis is listed in the Plymouth city directory as a blacksmith employed by Howells Manufacturing Co.



The purpose of the wedge, according to the patent, was to: "firmly lock a blade in its socket, against accidental displacement and which may be readily manipulated for releasing said blade."

Lewis stated in his patent application that the wedge can be used with other types of interchangeable "blades," and is not restricted to use with a pick head, although I have not seen these other applications to which he refers. Shown in the top photograph are the three main parts of this apparatus when it is disassembled.

The photograph above shows the blade secured in the socket by the wedge fastening device. One side of the wedge contains grooves that facilitate in locking the blade in place more securely. (You would definitely not want a situation where the pick head came flying off readily when in use). The wedge could be loosened or tightened "by a knock with a suitable instrument on the appropriate end thereof."

This is the first example of a miner's pick head I have seen with interchangeable parts. My guess is that this was a very useful tool to have on hand especially when the job demanded flexibility in the type of blade required for a task. Other manufacturers may have produced similar pick heads with this same flexibility of use. It would be interesting to know. I'm sure the miner appreciated it.

Sources:

Coal Age (various years)

Copy of U.S. Patent for Pick-head fastener (no. 1,507,494), U.S. Patent Office

Edward L. Phillips, History of Luzerne County and Wilkes-Barre, PA (unpublished typescript located in the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society library)

Mine Foreman's Pocket Book. 1883.

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The Wilkes-Barre Record, May 4, 1920