

## Reflections: Collecting Over the Last 50 Years by Tommy Bish

For want of a better description, I'll just call this a mixture of potpourri and miscellaneous connected with the collecting of mining artifacts, as well as some of the problems encountered along the way in gathering a representative array of both underground and surface "tools of the trade" connected with mining in days of yore.

First, let's go back a few years - like maybe 30 or 40 years to when the "gathering" of old mining artifacts was engaged in by only a very few astute, historically-minded, and downright nice guys. In those days places such as Bodie and Aurora on the Eastern slopes of the High Sierras, and even the then-called "Hooverville" of the San Gabriel mountains of Southern California, were prime locations for plucking good mining artifacts from the surface of the ground. To pay twenty five to fifty cents apiece for miners candlesticks was considered almost outrageous. And folding candlesticks? These sold from a dollar apiece to as much as five bucks a crack!

And carbide cap lamps? Shucks, more than once I've bought a whole nail keg full of 'em for a dollar or so for the whole kaboodle. I guessed that they were worth that as scrap brass. However, as recently as a year or so ago, I purchased another small wooden nail keg full of stuff and had to pay \$25 for it. This keg was filled to overflowing with star drills, carbide cap lamps (mostly junkers) and seventeen miner's candlesticks, most of which were Varneys and a couple of Sholders. My long-time friend, a retired miner of almost 90 years old, told me, when I asked him what he would take for the filled keg, "Well Tommy, I figure that old stuff is worth about twenty five dollars. It's getting hard to find these days." I didn't haggle one bit with him and simply handed over the money.

Some years ago, another friend of mine, who lived in Sutter Creek, California, had purchased the entire contents of an old established mining museum that had closed because the owner had passed away. I won't mention the purchase price because I hate to see grown men cry. In removing the literally tons of mining and gold rush relics from the old building erected in 1852, my friend ventured into the darkness of the ancient basement just to make sure he hadn't missed anything. On a shelf along one aged brick wall he found a waterlogged box containing something like fifteen or so folding miner's candlesticks. All were clearly marked with the VARNEY name and patent. Would you believe that I managed to purchase two of these folders at the then outrageous prices of five bucks apiece? I wasted no time in informing my good friend what a shyster he was, putting an ungodly price on a lousy folding candlestick. I had never paid over a dollar or so for the other four folding Varneys I owned.

Ordinary non-folding beautifully made blacksmith candlestick? If they were priced over a dollar for an especially nice one, they went begging! At that time - and it wasn't all that long ago either - brand new Justrite cap lamps were selling new for slightly over a dollar apiece, finally climbing in price to over \$6 before they were discontinued and replaced by the plastic model which sold for over \$10 apiece.

One thing I have learned over the years is that there are few "experts" in this field and a lot fewer that "know it all." There just ain't no such animal as a "know it all" in any field. Period! This was brought out to me recently when I mentioned to an "expert" that I owned a very rare

25 #6 blasting cap tin by the California Cap Company, and clearly marked as such with a green label with white lettering. In fact, not one but several self-professed experts all but called me a liar. They were adamant that there never was such a thing as a California Cap Company blasting cap tin that held only 25 #6 caps.

Then a fellow collector came to my rescue. Admittedly I was hotter than a two-bit pistol in hell about this time and this collector sent me copies of old California Cap Company advertisements which clearly stated "OUR CAPS ARE AVAILABLE IN TINS OF 100 CAPS. SMALLER QUANTITIES ARE AVAILABLE IN SUITABLE CONTAINERS." I have since acquired a slightly large version of the tin, only this one for 50 #6 blasting caps, and by the California Cap Company. It might be of interest to note that the old gent who gave me this 50 cap tin once worked for the California Cap Company back in the later 1920's and early 1930's. And if this doesn't point out that nobody "knows it all," I don't know what will!

I was recently lent of copy of Issue Number 2, Winter 1989 of the Mining Artifact Collector. On page 2 of the Editor Page(s) is an article concerning collecting that is unsurpassed both in ethics and truth. This "philosophical filler" could easily be applied to any field of collecting, whether it be antique arms, automobiles, or whatever. If every collector had this attitude, what a better world this would be!

And mining relics? Shucks, I call this stuff everything from junk, crud, to trash. Next to gold, I think that rust is the most beautiful, especially if it is a mining artifact. As I recall, I collected some of my best artifacts in the Bodie area about 1939, so figure that out. But I sure as shootin' ain't no expert on this stuff. I will just continue to collect mining relics and enjoy them to my dying day!

[Editors note: Tommy Bish is a published author of seven books and has been published in fourteen national magazines in the fields of treasure hunting, guns, hunting, scuba diving, and placer mining. He has traveled the length and breadth of the western gold country extensively since the late 1930's and currently operates gold dredges on the rivers and streams of the California Mother Lode country.]



SCENES IN THE WHITE PINE MINING DISTRICT, NEVADA.—[SEE PAGE 269.]