

The Franklin Mineral Museum

by Jim Van Fleet

Franklin, New Jersey is one of the most famous mineral localities in the world, boasting many rare minerals found nowhere else. These minerals were brought to light by the mining operations of the NJ Zinc Company, which operated between 1848 and 1954, and the Sterling Hill Mining Company, which operated into the 1980's. For the mining artifact collector, Franklin is also a rarity; one of the few Eastern hard-rock mines, and one which is preserved in memory by a museum.

I visited the Franklin Mineral Museum on the first Sunday in May, the date of their annual Miner's Reunion. I had a chance to talk with John L. (Jack) Baum, the curator, and several other former miners for NJ Zinc, Nick Trofimuk and Paul Silver. They told me a few things about carbide lamps, which they used at Franklin through the early 1950's. When the gaskets on their lamps were lost or got brittle, they replaced them for free -- by taking the gaskets off the compressed air hose couplings on ore cars! The miners owned their own lamps, but the company kept the carbide flasks in the lamp house. They were issued full at the start of each shift, and returned at the end of the working day. Mr Baum remembers "there always seemed to be a blinded miner around, someone who had drilled into a charge or something." The carbide flasks were refilled by a miner known as "Blind Alex."

After the reunion festivities, I spent some time looking at the collection. The museum includes a replica mine with two levels, where you can see original artifacts from the Franklin mine in place. There are more than a dozen different enameled metal signs, several large rock drills with their accessories, and tools of the blasting trade. A display case holds miner's hob-nailed shoes and ice-creepers, horseshoes from the mules used at Franklin, a Drager self-rescue device, blasting cap tins, carbide flasks and tins, some common oil wick and carbide lamps, drill bits, and ore samples.

The surprise comes when one views the mineral collection area of the museum. Here among the beautiful mineral specimens is a display of mine lighting devices. There are 13 very nice safety lamps on permanent loan from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. These include two nickel-plated Hughes Brothers Davy lamps, and two unusual lamps from J. Davis and Sons, Baltimore. There is a unique unmarked safety lamp with a solid brass body with two glass windows, an open gauze above, and a large handle on gimbles (Editor's Note - Probably a Wolf engineer's lamp).

Safety lamps were never used at Franklin, but the collection also includes Western style candleholders, oil wick lamps, and carbide lamps, all of which saw use in the mine's 140 year history. There is a minimum of labeling or interpretive material display with the lamps, but a collector can recognize among the oil wicks a "VL" with a spade mount. Many of the 14 wick lamps on display have the narrow spade mount. Several lamps were adapted for using Sunshine fuel with a copper wire and loop inserted in the spout. The museum's carbide lamps include a Sun-Ray, Lu-Mi-Num, a Baldwin No. 39, and an assortment of Guy's Droppers, Justrites, and Auto-Lites, again with the Michigan spade mount preferred by metal miners.

Steve Sanford, the museum's manager, showed me a corroded carbide lamp water tank which could still be identified as a Simmons lamp. It had been found in the Buckwheat Dump, the quarry behind the museum which was filled with the waste rock from mining operations. Today the dump is usually full of rock hounds with hammers and portable ultraviolet lights, and along with mineral specimens, they still find an occasional drill bit, horseshoe, or lamp part.

I hope the chance to see this collection and search the dump for a small fee will draw some mining artifact collectors. I can recommend the day of the miner's reunion as a real treat. Within a year, this area will be an even more interesting visit with the reopening of the Sterling Hill zinc mine as a mining museum.