

Museums by Jim Van Fleet

In this issue of the MAC newsletter, I would like to begin a regular feature, reviewing the mining artifact collections of museums throughout the U.S. Len Gaska has commented on the love/hate relationship between collectors and museums. And this column is about the part we love; seeing lamps and other artifacts available nowhere else, and finding clues to some of the many mysteries in their history. The best place to start is the largest museum in the U.S., the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

The Smithsonian has been called "the nation's attic," and the National Museum of American History is the attic room where old miners left their gear. The museum's collection of mining items is currently in storage, but can be viewed up close by contacting Mr. Francis Gadsen, the curator of the Agricultural and Natural Resources Division.

With the help of Mr. Gadsen and his assistants, you can don white gloves and start opening drawers. What comes to light is a very large and beautiful collection of safety lamps, both European and American, including several miniatures. There is a good selection of oil wick lamps, and a collection of electric cap lamps. Each of these deserves the attention of a specialist collector, and their own write-up in this column.

I should apologize here for the apparently narrow scope of this review, but the museum's storage area consists of about 120 cabinets, each with two or three drawers full of artifacts. A dedicated mining historian could spend a week in there!

The museum's collection of carbide lamps consists of about 35 cap lamps, 2 half-shift lamps, and 12 hand lamps. Most of the lamps are clean, completed, and beautifully preserved. Some are unfired.

The collection of early Baldwin lamps is the strongest, and includes two of the earliest style pinchwaist cap lamps, with the screw-on water cap/wire feed in the center of the top. There is another early cap lamp with no markings, identifiable from early ads as a Baldwin model 32, as well as a nice Baldwin "lightning bug" model. There are two Baldwin model 36 half-shift lamps, tin with brass fittings, and a larger hand lamp of the same style. These lamps alone have enough interesting and possibly unique features to require their own article in a future issue of MAC.

The other cap lamps in the collection are as follows.

- 1 Pathfinder
- 2 Maple City
- 1 Victor (Justrite)
- 1 Wolf
- 1 vertical Justrite with Michigan (narrow) spade
- 2 common horizontal Justrites
- 12 Common Auto-Lites
- 4 common Guys Droppers

and lastly, a horizontal Grier with a base identical to that of the Hardscog Premier cap lamp pictured in the first issue of the MAC newsletter, having three oblong bumps around the base.

The museum's hand lamps include:

- 4 early Wolf lamps (European style)
- 3 ITP
- 2 Dew-R-Lites

One of the museum's Dew-R-Lites has been extensively modified, with a right angle burner tube mounted on the top, and a reflector that has to be seen to be believed.

The same could be said of the collection as a whole: it should be seen and appreciated by collectors and historians. I am hoping this review will motivate others to make a trip to the Smithsonian and arrange a visit with Mr. Gadsen and the lamps under his care. If you live too damn far away, find a local museum that deserves attention, and submit a review for this column. I know there are many find museum collections in Colorado, Michigan, California, and other states for local collectors to visit. Explain the purpose of your visit and don't be surprised if it opens some doors for you!



Exploder Tokens by Len Gaska

Exploder tokens were issued by coal companies for the controlled distribution of explosives and related items such as fuse, detonators, and squibs. The number of known varieties of exploder tokens is probably less than 300 and many of them are fairly common.

The illustrations below were copied without permission from Edkins Catalogue of United States Coal Company Store Scrip, Volumes I and II. For more information on the collecting of exploder tokens and coal company scrip, contact the National Scrip Collectors Association, PO Box 29, Fayetteville, WV 25840.

