

Chas. Hall & Co. Miners' Oil Flask

Milton Ellison

I became interested in mine-related artifacts because of my acquaintance with Mr. Ralph Blankenbeckler of Coeburn, VA. I met him at the local flea market in 1986. He was an avid miners' cap lamp collector and I was collecting coal company store scrip at the time. He mentioned his willingness to trade "scrip" for carbide cap lamps he needed. The search began...but, because of the advanced state of his collection, I had no luck in this endeavor. I did, however, become aware of the many mine-related artifacts available in this area. I also began my own modest collection.

In the summer of 1988, I noticed a man at the flea market, with what I thought was a carbide flask. When he let me examine it more closely, I discovered an unusual closure made for a liquid. I was even more surprised when I read the raised letter writing on the side of the container:

MINERS OIL FLASK
-MFG-
CHAS. HALL & CO.
NORTON, VA.
PAT. July 25, 1905
PAT. March 13, (1903)?

The year in the last line was not legible, so I made a guess when he let me record the information on my notepad. I made a futile attempt to buy, but he had brought it to show someone. I did learn that he got it at the Norton Hardware Company in 1970, when they were closing the business.

I was excited in having found a mining artifact of local origin, but disappointed that I was unable to acquire it. I did have the hope that maybe a quantity of these flasks were still out there somewhere. Also, I was aware that a long time friend had worked at this hardware company and could provide some useful information.

I met with Mr. Clarence Gilliam of Wise, VA. He had worked at the Norton Hardware Co. from 1946 until it closed. He did remember the flasks. They had been



Modified oil-flask. Chas. Hall & Co., Norton, VA.
(author's collection)

stored in the upper levels of the large hardware building and were uncovered by another employee in the 1950's. This employee decided to remarket these flasks as carbide containers. This was done by hack-sawing the top of the flask and placing a plastic galvanized pipe thread protector over the open end. This made the flasks resemble an ordinary "Justrite". Mr. Gilliam, Mr. Eddie Carter, and Mr. Charlie Hughes performed this remanufacturing process. Unfortunately for the collector, many of the flasks were sawn in this manner. According to Mr. Gilliam, approximately 40 to 50 of the

flasks underwent this procedure. I later spoke to Mr. Hughes, who verified the story.

Mr. Gilliam also related that at the time Norton Hardware Company closed, many mining related items were sold. Among them were 300+ oil wick lamps (many brass) offered at 10 cents each. The Norton flask sold for 25 cents and mining needles were sold for \$1 per case. He had purchased some of these items himself, but had sold or given them away over the years. He did, however, show me early copies of the Norton Hardware Co. catalogues, which had the oil flasks pictured.

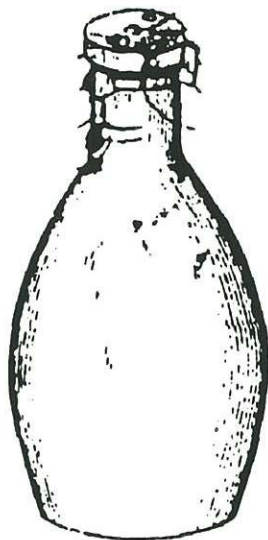
It was to be several more years before I would acquire one of these flasks for my collection. As you might suspect, it would be one of the "sawn-top" varieties. It is sad that so many of these flasks suffered this fate. Especially since the top has the patented closure.

I became interested in the inventor of this flask and decided to research for any available information. Local

records had only incidental references of Charles Hall and his business. They list Charles Hall and Sons as owners. The business was located on the main street of Norton. It seems that in 1906, a fire destroyed the structure. The insurance company was balking on paying the claim. Whether Mr. Hall was able to collect his claim is not clear. What is evident is that the fire and the advent of the carbide lamp put an end to the oil flask business Mr. Hall had begun.

One intriguing question persists concerning Chas. Hall & Co.: was the miners' oil flask the only item the tin ware enterprise manufactured? Personally I doubt it. I believe that other items could have been made. In fact, in Dave Johnson's listing of oil wick lamps, he has an entry under Hall. I asked him recently about this and he said that the Hall oil wick doesn't have the place of origin given. Maybe a comparison of the workmanship of these items could reveal some clues. Also a broad search for other patents held by Mr. Hall could reveal some new information.

795,603. OIL-FLASK. GEORGE GRAHAM, Dorchester, Va., assignor of one-half to William Lovelace, Dorchester, Va. Filed Apr. 17, 1905
Serial No. 255,952.



Claim.—1. A flask comprising a body having a plug provided with apertures, and having a fixed and movable stop, a valve-disk journaled on said plug and having openings adapted to register with the several openings of the plug, and having lugs to engage the stops of the flask.

2. A flask comprising a body having a plug provided with apertures and having below the plug a fixed stop and a movable stop carried by a spring-latch, a valve-disk journaled on said plug and having openings adapted to register with the several openings of the plug, and having lugs to engage the stops of the flask.

Although, I may never find answers to all the questions concerning Chas. Hall & Co. I have had an enjoyable time learning the story I have told thusfar. After all, I believe that is what defines us as collectors. And remember: an undiscovered mining artifact may be coming to a flea market near you soon!

References:

Conversations with:

Clarance Gilliam, Wise, VA.

Charles Hughes, Wise, VA.

Ray Kilgore, Norton, VA.

Dave Johnson, Louisville, KY.

Wise County VA Courthouse Records

Norton Hardware Company Catalogue

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