

# Mining Safety Collectibles

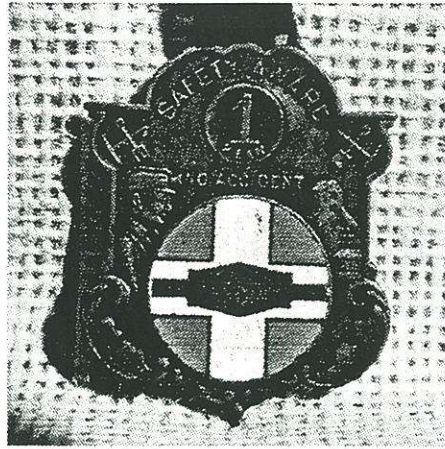
Dave Johnson

Many of us collect mining artifacts in air-conditioned antique malls and feel we are enduring real hardships when we must search for our treasures in large outdoor antique markets on hot summer days before retreating to our climate-controlled cars. Many collectors have no real appreciation for the conditions under which the original owners of their treasures toiled.



*Hanna Coal Co. Silver safety award belt buckle.*

Imagine working as a 19th or early 20th century coal miner. Your already low wages are reduced by the routine shorting of your daily production tonnage by company check weighmen, you are paid in company scrip that must be spent at the company store with its inflated prices, you are forced to live in company owned housing, and in many cases contribute through a forced payroll deduction for a company doctor and bathhouse. You probably have no union and definitely no Workmen's Compensation or paid sick leave. If

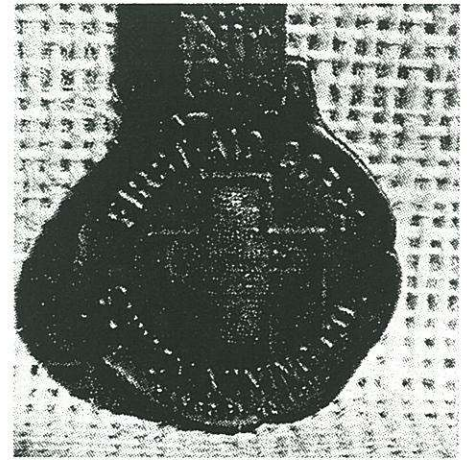


*Pittsburgh Coal Co. safety award.*



*UMWA District 1 Safety Committeeman brass and enamel pin.*

you are injured on the job you receive no pay or benefits beyond what the union or the miner's benevolent society can offer, if one exists. You are an employee-at-will, the company can fire you for any real or imagined offense and you have no recourse. When you lose your job you and your family are evicted from company housing. If you are killed on the job your family is soon evicted from company housing.



*Quincy Mining Co. First-Aid Corps brass and enamel watch fob.*



*Newport Mine (Ironwood, MI) cigarette lighter safety award.*

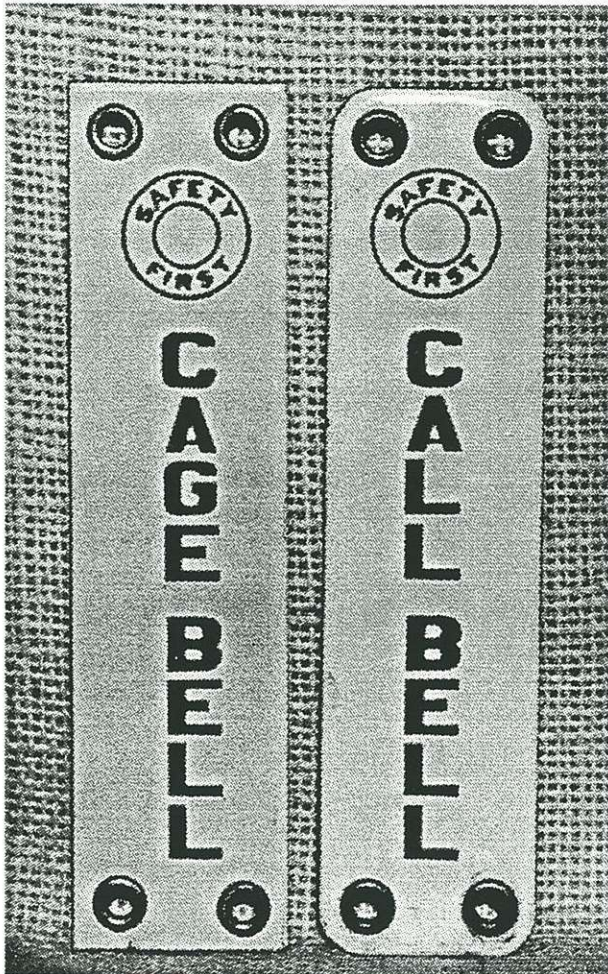
While they had an investment in equipment, tools, mules and horses, mine owners had no real investment in their miners. If one were killed or severely injured they merely hired another, miners were as expendable a commodity as blasting powder, thus the personal safety of the miner was of little concern to mine owners. From the mine owners' perspec-



*Calumet & Hecla Consolidated Copper Co. Safety First Pin.*



*Enamel and brass Illinois Mine Rescue Station Pins.*



*Safety First Porcelain safety signs.*

tive, accidents were to be prevented not because they caused death or injury to individual miners but because they disrupted production and thus adversely impacted profits.

Conditions for hardrock miners were somewhat better during this time period. In many instances they lived in their own or rented houses or bunked in a company boarding house. They were not paid in scrip and while many times there was a company store, they did not have to buy from it. This is not to say that conditions in hardrock mines were good. While hardrock mines did not have the same dangers of methane gas, low ceiling coal veins and coal dust, they shared the danger of underground fires, falling rock, hoisting accidents, drilling accidents, blasting accidents and haulage accidents. Hardrock miners had the equivalent of coal miner's black lung caused by the silica dust generated by "widowmaker" compressed air drills.



Pickands Mather Iron Mining Co. safety award knife.



Back of 1925 International Contest watch fob.



National Coal Association safety award ring from 1917.



Pickands Mather Iron Mining Co. safety award lamp.

Given these dangers, the miner's life was obviously not a safe one. Until mine accidents could be shown to cost more than the cost to prevent them, mine owners had little reason to do so. Although generally subordinated to the wage issue, safety has been an issue championed by unions such as the United Mine Workers, Western Federation



UMWA District 12 safety pin.



Front of 1953 National First-Aid & Mine Rescue Contest watch fob.



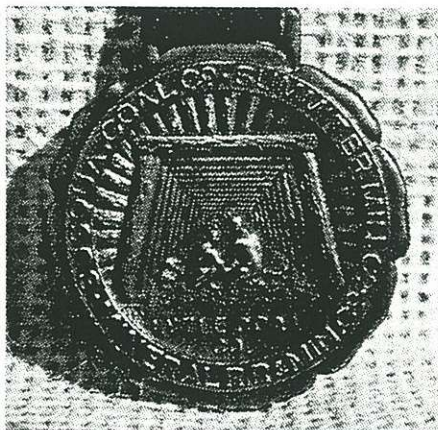
Back of 1929 International First-Aid & Mine Rescue contest watch fob.



Front of 1929 International First-Aid & Mine Rescue contest watch fob.



Back of 1961 International Contest watch fob.



Lytle Coal Co. Brass watch fob showing two miners administering first-aid to a third mines.

of Miners, Progressive Mine Workers and other smaller mine unions since their inception. Basically three things led to an increased awareness of safety by all parties concerned: 1) pressure from unions, 2) National and State laws, 3) a realization by mine owners that some safety measures were in their best interest.

This new found awareness of, and interest in, safety led to many innovative ways to get the safety message to miners, many of whom were prone to take shortcuts that saved them time and energy but could ultimately take their life. Since most coal miners were not paid for "dead work" such as placing shoring timbers they were reluctant to install more than what they thought they could get by with, as were hardrock miners working under the contract and tribute systems.

Safety related collectibles are a field of collecting of their own within the larger field of mining collectibles.

There was the SAFETY FIRST campaign that started in the teens (see accompanying photos) with its signage. Safety awards were presented to miners in the form of watch fobs, pins, lamps, coffee cups, cigarette lighters, pocket knives and rings. Local, State, and National first-aid and mine rescue contests were held at regular intervals to encourage mine safety and mine disaster preparedness. There are a large number of different collectibles related to mine safety available to collectors but few of the items are commonly found today.