

What Are Scatter Tags?

by Larry Click

Scatter tags are colorful, small foil and cardboard disks with a company name and/or logo on them. The tags were put in coal cars loaded with coal to identify that particular company's coal. As each coal car was loaded under the coal chute, a handful of these tags were thrown into each coal car.

As to why the "Scatter Tags" came into existence--Early on each coal car had a small block of wood attached to its lower corner. As the cars were loaded with coal, a miner would tack a 4x6 card identifying that particular coal company onto the piece of wood. The coal cars would be taken to the loading docks--which was Lambert's Point, Virginia, in my coal mining area--where the loading dock officials would pay the coal company owners for the coal they had received at the docks.

It was easy for a dishonest coal company owner or his employees to remove the paper tags of a competitor off the block of wood and attach one of his to the car. Eventually, there had to be something done to prevent the coal from being stolen. That is when the foil and cardboard scatter tags were invented. The tags were used widely through the 1940's, 1950's and the 1960's. They are made in different shapes, i.e., round, square, oval, cone, octagonal, etc. Some have markings on one side and others have markings on both sides. I have noticed the bituminous coal producers used more of the colorful foil type tags and the Anthracite coal producers appear to have used more cardboard tags. Both types are quickly becoming scarce.

Here are copies of labels from a box of Olga scatter tags I picked up at an auction. Also, a copy of the only advertisement I have seen for scatter tags.

If anyone has any of these tags for sale or trade please contact the author at 1021 North Jefferson Street, Arlington, VA 22205, 1-703-241-3748, e-mail: lick@erols.com.

