

The J. W. Stonehouse Sign Company of Victor, Colorado

by Ted Bobrink

The largest maker of mine bell signs and mining related signs was the J. W. Stonehouse Sign Company of Victor, Colorado. In 1863, William Stonehouse opened a sign shop in Chicago and taught his son, James Wesley (known as J. W.) the art of sign painting. The lure of the west drew J. W. away from Chicago in the early 1900's and, as a sign painter, his wanderings brought him to Douglas, Arizona. Here he set up business in a small store proudly announcing, J. W. Stonehouse, painter of good signs.

Not content to stay in one place too long, J. W. left Arizona, followed the mining boom from one area to another, and finally settled in the Victor-Cripple Creek region of Colorado. It was here that the accident prevention sign business was born. The need for safety in the workplace occurred to J. W. when he realized that the miners coming to Colorado from other states were bringing with them different bell signals used to control the hoists that raised and lowered men and materials in the shafts. Because these different bell signals were the cause of numerous accidents, J. W. went to the Colorado Bureau of Mines and emphasized the need for a uniform code of bell signals. J. W. was confident that his persuasive logic would be acted upon. So when the bell system was standardized, he was ready with silk-screened codes on oilcloth. He then sold the bell signs to the mine operators and, hence, the birth of the J. W. Stonehouse mine bell signs we all love to collect today.



A porcelain Stonehouse Colorado station level sign. Blue with white lettering, 9" by 4".



A porcelain Stonehouse Colorado station number call sign. Blue with white lettering, 9" by 6".