

Collecting Underground

by Steve Rush

Yellow eyes glowed steadily back at me in the reflected light from my hard hat lamp. I frowned, somewhat thoughtfully, trying to recall what color George's eyes were. George was somewhere up ahead, having left me to my own devices amid the clutter of old dynamite instructions and cap tin litter. The orbs before me had a sort of baleful look about them, an expression not common to my good friend's face. And now I remembered, George's eyes were brown. His eyes were also somewhat farther from the ground, wed except for that time that involved a shared bottle of C.C.. These pale sparks belonged to some creature that wasn't interested in artifacts or minerals. They appeared interested in me, or my lunch in the day pack. Or me for lunch, with my day pack. Somewhat later, while enduring hoots of derision from George after describing my successful getaway from one monster Ring-tailed, I contemplated an of the ways for one who spends some **time underground**

to be injured or scared towards an early grave. They are many. I began collecting mining artifacts underground way back when I was a youngster of twelve or so. I think it began when my dad, an avid desert rat, pointed out the dark portal of an adit and, in his gentle manner, said " don't let me catch ya goin in there or I'll smack ya a good one". So, of course, I wisely never allowed him to catch me. Weak flashlight in hand, I recall venturing into an inclined shaft near the long gone town of Tumco, California, and spending hours exploring drifts and crosscuts. Bringing out a few rusty items from long ago, I was hooked. Through the seventies and into the eighties, while most of my friends were busy with things that would later help them to forget the seventies and eighties, I put many miles on my old car in search of abandoned mines. My best friend Charlie shared my enthusiasm, so although we went to plenty of places an expert wouldn't have dared venture, we never went alone. In all those years, I enabled myself to pack rat away with lots of old stuff. Stuff I would really like to have back today. Like the candle box full of handles, the old board with the mine crew's names written in carbide soot, the letters and notes from a mill hand about his experiences in the mill, and of course the pair of Can't Bustem overalls with the candlestick in a side pocket. These items resplen-



A nice underground find on a 1996 trip to California.

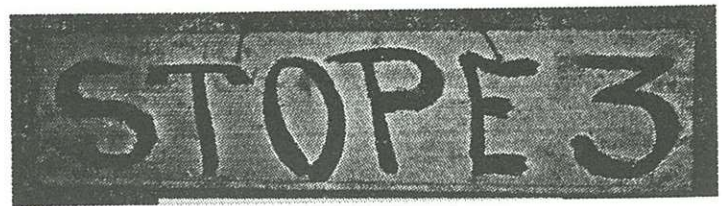


Mines of this type are not a good thing.

dent with history, and many others not remembered, were left by the wayside of long ago moves, or given to friends. I never considered that these items had a real intrinsic value until I met Leo Stambaugh in 1990, and of course ever since then I have been paying tuition to S.U. (Stambaugh University) for the privilege of learning their worth. I still collect underground. I'm much better equipped now than in years past, and know what not to touch (stand alone timbers and loose wall rock for example) and what mines not to go in (about anything with water running from the portal and never into a mine that has lion tracks going in but not out.)

A lot of excellent collecting can also be done on the dump, especially below where the min-

ers tossed their trash. And today, except for a few hundred of us from a population of several million, it is still trash. But collecting underground, particularly in the dry mines, is still what I consider to be a great and exciting hobby. I do not trespass on private property- there are many mines long ago abandoned on BLM (state) land which can be found. I do not vandalize historic buildings. No collectors worthy of the hobby vandalize anything, and in fact, most I know would gladly take the opportunity to turn someone in who they saw doing this. And the Antiquities Law notwithstanding, just about anything you see in a museum or antique shop was at some point rescued from distraction in a land fill or left unseen in a dark corner (or an adit). So, I know it's not a '90's sort of thing to do, not being what you'd call politically correct, but I do it. And a lot of my close collector friends do it, and probably so do you. You can easily be killed or injured underground. It is, however, just as likely that you'll be killed or injured on the drive to the mine itself. Perhaps less likely the mine, more likely the drive. A little common sense will go a long way towards a safe underground venture, most importantly, if you're uncomfortable with it or afraid, don't go! And never go alone. And if you are unlucky enough to be injured, for cripesakes hold yourself responsible, don't get a lawyer, get better, and don't do again what you did that hurt you. The underground's not for everyone, but for those of us who feel confident enough in our abilities, it's a whale of a good time. And the stories that could be written regarding this kind of collecting... 'ol Cap-Tin Bob has scratched the surface. Perhaps I'll hole up (no pun intended) for the winter and pen a couple myself. Good hunting, all!



From a Nevada underground trip.