

UNDERGROUND MINE EXPLORING

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The trip to Calico is not a long one. Mark Bohannon and I have made a lot of mine exploring trips, and to find a large untouched mine within a two hour drive is very rare. This area has been hit very hard over the years and I had thought that I had been to most all the major mines within a twenty mile radius. I was wrong. Deric English had come across some very early mining candle boxes, and had mentioned to me that the mine was located in the Calico area. After about a year, Deric finally told me the location of the mine. Deric and his father had been to this mine many times over the years and thought that they had explored it thoroughly. They had made some really neat finds--many very early dynamite boxes, candle boxes, and some early cap tins.

Most of the hard rock mines that I have explored were metal mines, but this was a borate mine. On the first trip to this area, we followed the old railroad grade up to the old mining camp of Borate. We then hiked up to most of the major mines in the area, but could not find any shafts or tunnels to get into the mines. It looked

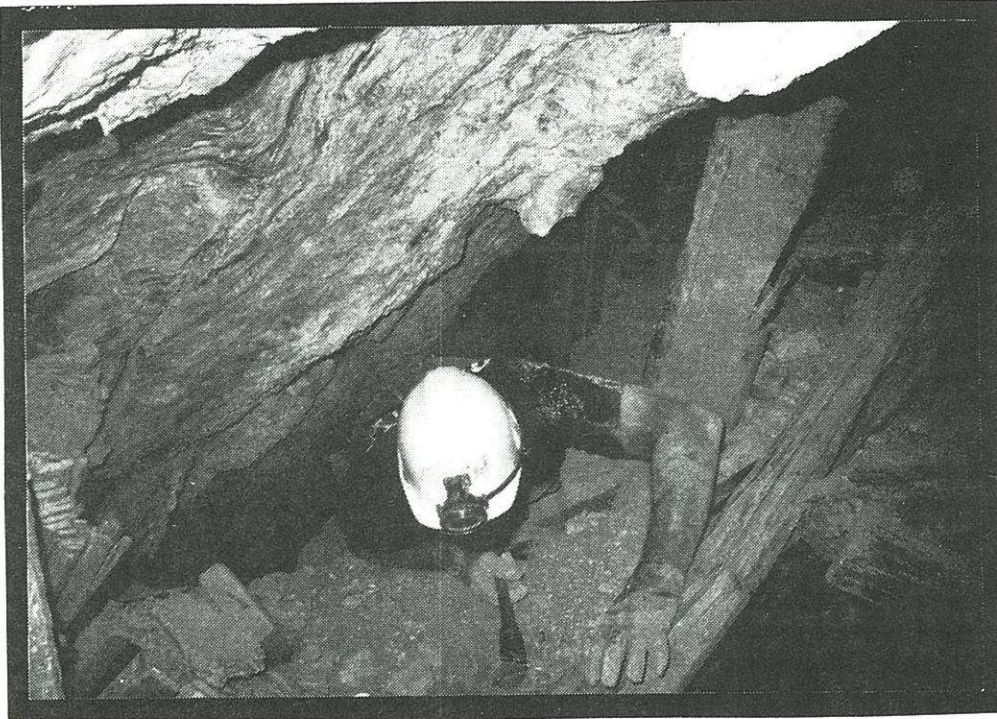
like they had all been bulldozed shut many years ago. Luck was with us and we found a small opening in a very unlikely place. The heavy rains had opened up an incline stope, and we found our way into the mine.

But first, a warning to all you future explorers. Mines are extremely dangerous and are not for the flashlight explorer. Hard hats, three separate sources of light, good climbing rope, permission from the mine owners, and a lot of common sense are a must! I can also tell you, if you can drive right up to the mine and walk right into the tunnel, you will not find anything but beer cans and bat droppings.

The opening to the mine is very small, and a steep incline shaft to the right side of the tunnel seemed the best way down. Old timbers were shattered from the weight of the tons of rock above us. Fifty feet down we found a drift off to the left. We crawled down this low tunnel and on our left side was a wall holding back tons of waste rock. To our surprise, this wall was constructed out of old powder boxes, mining



An underground photograph of some of the artifacts that Mark and I found. Shown are an end and complete early stamped Procter & Gamble candle box, The end to an early lithographed Procter & Gamble candle box, a complete and partial end of a Vigorit powder box, parts to a wooden keg, and the end to a box of one dozen Ham's No. 0 Clipper Tubular Lanterns. Does anyone know what a Clipper Tubular Lantern looks like?



An underground photograph of Mark climbing through one of the caved-in tunnels that we dug out. Areas like these are very dangerous and should be avoided by all but the most experienced mine explorers. Mark and I have close to twenty years experience in underground mine exploration, and even with this experience, it took us many hours to work our way through many parts of this mine.

candle boxes and old nail kegs, most still in excellent condition because of the dry climate and dry dirt. What a great find! Most of this was trash to the miners, but a treasure to us.

This mine was opened in the late 1880's and closed in 1908, so everything was very old and very desirable. This was a great find--and only down fifty feet! But how could we rescue these old antiques without caving in the whole mine on top of us? We decided to explore the whole mine while thinking about it.

We knew that Deric and his father had been to this mine many times, and we did not want to go over the same places they did, so we went to the hardest and most dangerous parts of the mine looking for leads and other areas to explore. After about eight hours and covering miles of old and caved workings, we came to another incline shaft. Mark and I dug through a caved-in tunnel and broke into a whole new mine. No one had been in this section since the mine was closed. We had a field day! We found two California Powder boxes, several early two patent date Giant Powder boxes, many Vigorit Powder boxes, three green labeled Scheniders miners candle boxes and several early stamped Procter & Gamble candle boxes. Carrying our treasures back to the entrance was the greatest feat. We were already tired, the mine is in horrible condition, in many places we had to crawl on our hands and knees over and under broken 12 x 12's.

We have made several trips back and even brought a video camera to tape the mine and some of the finds we made. By our third trip, we had pushed into a third mine. There were several haul shafts along the vein of borate. We have covered about seven miles of workings and the mine maps of the area show at least twice that amount. The water level is at about 300 feet and many leads are badly caved or to dangerous to attempt.

Exploring this mine is a lot like caving, tight squeezes, belly crawls, break-down zones, and some vertical areas. The main difference between caving and mine exploring is, in a cave you cave softly, take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but foot prints. In mine exploring, you bring out trash and artifacts not wanted or usable to the mine owner, and you are preserving a little piece of mining history for others to enjoy.

All of the mines were originally owned by the Pacific Coast Borax Company.

A borate of lime called colemanite was first found in this area in 1882, but serious development of the mines did not occur until 1890 when Francis Marion (Borax) Smith bought the properties. Twelve tons of colemanite a day was mined and hauled of three deep shafts. Although employment in the mines would fluctuate with the demand for borax, in early 1896 there were about 75 men working in these mines. The mines had closed by 1908 because of the decreased demand for borax.