

Book Review: Hard-Rock Miners The Intermountain West 1860 - 1920

by Len Gaska

Without context, the mining relics we so avidly collect are..... well.... junk! Just pieces of scrap metal with little or no practical value in our daily lives. True, some items such as fancy candlesticks and a few carbide lamps have an artistic or design quality that goes beyond mere relic status. But for the most part, most mining antiques are not things of beauty and were only tools to their original owners.

But add the context of history and the “junk” we collect becomes a part of a story. And there are many facets of history to an item such as a carbide lamp. Who was the inventor? What was his life like? When, where, and how was the lamp manufactured? And finally, what type a person used this artifact and what was their lifestyle? Hard-Rock Miners, The Intermountain West, 1860-1920, by Ronald C. Brown is a history of the lifestyle of the miners of that region in the period in which mining flourished in the western United States. The area covered in the book includes the states of Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada. Instead of focusing on a particular individual, mining district, or mining camp, the book does an excellent job of covering the general lifestyle of the miners of that region and era. Some of the chapter titles are “The Miners’ Towns and Families,” “The Perils and Pleasures of the Miners’ World,” “Earning a Living by Mining,” and “The Need to Organize: The Miner and His Union.” If the reader has any doubts about how rough the life of a miner was, this book should dispel them. But despite the perils and hardships, there is compelling evidence that the miners were a hard-working, proud, and optimistic lot.

The author is clearly sympathetic to the miners of that era, yet gives a balanced history of the labor troubles that led to the formation of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) union in 1893 in Butte, Montana. The portion of the book dealing with labor troubles and the history of the WFM are probably the most interesting parts as that topic alone could fill many volumes.

This book is extensively footnoted and although many of the sources are in archival collections or otherwise difficult to obtain, some of them are readily available. Frank Crampton’s Deep Enough (See review in Eureka!, No 2, p 35) is extensively quoted and is currently in print. The bibliography is also excellent and should prove an invaluable resource to anyone wishing to pursue further reading.

Hard-Rock Miners is available from Robert Fox, Mining History Books, 1235 N. Westfield St., Oshkosh, WI 54901. Write for current price.

U.M.W.A. Ribbon

Deric English sent us a copy of a hard-to-find ribbon.

