

EXPLOSIVE CONTROL TOKENS

COLLECTABLE FOSSILS FROM AMERICA'S COAL MINING INDUSTRY

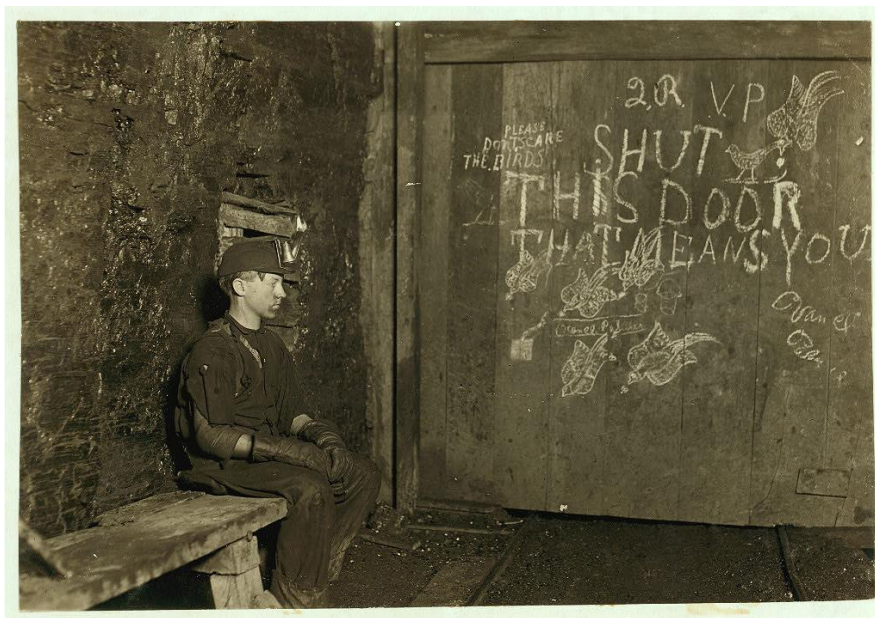
By: Todd R. Sciore

The extraction of coal for use as an energy source dates back thousands of years and due to its wide availability, it became the fossil fuel of choice during the industrial revolution powering the steam engines of both trains and ships. Coal mining took root in The United States in the 18th century and, despite protests from environmental groups and a push towards “green energy”, its use continues today. Various regions of the U.S. have coal mining operations with the States of Wyoming, West Virginia and Kentucky being major producers (the latter two States are in a geographic region known as Appalachia which is often referred to as “coal country” due to the number of mines and level of economic reliance on the industry). In fact, many small towns in West Virginia originally sprang up around the mines as the mining companies provided housing and sold goods at company run stores.



Company Houses in Kempton, West Virginia (early 1900's)

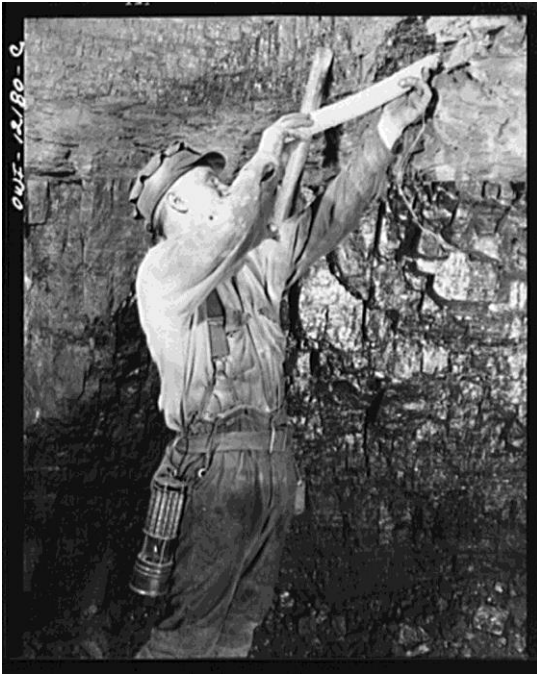
Many of these towns were cash poor as the coal companies, in their roles of employer, monetary authority, landlord and retailer, paid their workers in scrip or tokens that were only redeemable at the company store. The mining companies, like their glass factory cousins in the Northeastern United States, often took advantage of their monopoly like status by charging higher prices for goods than an independent grocer would most likely charge. As such, this practice by spawned the lyric “I owe my soul to the company store” in the early country music hit song Sixteen Tons. In addition, rent for company supplied housing was often deducted from the miner’s pay as well. Coal companies also employed a number of children who worked as “trappers” or “drivers” for as little as \$0.75 or \$1.00 per day for a ten hour shift.



A young “trapper” boy in a West Virginia coal mine (early 1900’s)

While many collectors are familiar with the various forms of company store scrip, explosive control tokens offer a unique and small subset of coal mining related exonomia. As can be expected, companies limited the distribution of explosive devices (detonators, fuses, powder, etc...) in an attempt to both control inventory costs and reduce the potential for mishap on the job site. The employees

whose daily job function required the use of explosives were provided with specific tokens which were then presented to the inventory “keeper” in exchange for the items and quantities noted therein.



A coal miner placing a detonation charge



A token good for “one stick of powder”

As a testament to the dangers of coal mining, April 28, 2014 marks the 100th anniversary of one of the largest coal mine disasters in both West Virginian and American history. The accident took place in the early afternoon in the small Appalachian town of Eccles, West Virginia and occurred in the interconnected Number 5 and 6 mines of the New River Collieries Company (a colliery is coal mine and all of its related, buildings and equipment). The death toll has been estimated at 183 souls reportedly including both employees and, in a tragic twist of irony, a life insurance salesman who arrived at the mine just prior to the blast in an attempt to solicit business from the miners. Morticians from a neighboring town were brought in to set up on site and the level of destruction was so overwhelming that it wasn't until roughly a month later that all of the bodies that could be recovered were. A subsequent study into the cause of the accident revealed that, in an effort to save time, a subcontractor

inadvertently destabilized the mine's ventilation which led to a dangerous and highly flammable methane gas build up. The gas was then ignited by an open lamp that was in standard use for lighting at the time.



The tokens featured here are from the Crab Orchard Improvement Co., who took over mining the Eccles site several years after New River Collieries Company and like their predecessor, Crab Orchard also had a disaster occur in the Number 5 & 6 mines. On March 8, 1926 an explosion caused by the ignition of gas from an electrical arc resulted in the death of 19 men. The fatality count would have

been higher had it not been for some quick thinking and resourceful miners who were able to barricade themselves below ground and ration out their food supply until they could be rescued. Today a memorial stands in Eccles in honor of the miners who lost their lives in both the 1914 and 1926 accidents. For collectors, explosive control tokens not only serve as an interesting and tangible link to America's past, they sometimes also represent the only collectables available for towns that were both too small and too rural for a national bank.



Miners in the early 1900's in Gary, West Virginia

Research Sources

Publications:

Eccles Mine Explosions- Paul H. Rakes,-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia. 13 September 2013.
www.wvencyclopedia.org

Web sites:

<http://www.wvcoalhistory.com>

www.wikipedia.org

<http://www.halslamppost.com>

<http://www.novanumismatics.com>

www.wvgenweb.org

Images:

(Token images) – the author’s personal collection.

(photographs)- The U.S. Library Of Congress archives