

Collecting Coal Covers

by Duane W. Ready

Coal covers are interest to collect because — They are mostly old covers (I have very few rear strike covers in my collection).

- Because they are older, there are quite a few low phone numbers (mainly 3 digit or lower).
- They are nice looking covers and the commercial coal product names are very colorful (Great Heart, Red Parrot, Old Abe, Blank Arrow, Red Feather, Blue Beacon, Sunflower).
- They are especially nice if you have some close affinity with them (as I do).

I recall John Williams who always had a dealer table and was as fair and reasonable as anyone but did place a high value on coal covers (I assume because they aren't around any more).

From the late 1800's to mid-1900's, "coal was king" in Southwestern Pennsylvania where I grew up. During the time, coal powered locomotives, steam ships, steel production, cotton mills, flour mills, the world's machinery, and also heated the homes of the rich and poor. I could write about the coal towns and related patches, the company stores, the coal company strikes, and the many men who died digging coal. I'm going to tell you, though, about my personal relationship with coal.

Many of my family and ancestors were coal miners in and around Fayette County, Pennsylvania. As my grandmother put it, my grandfather "went into the Pits when he was 15 years old." That would have been around 1910. He worked in the mines for 50 years, when he was forced to retire due to company policy. By then, many of the mines had been vertically integrated and owned by the steel companies.

The mines were a dangerous place to work, and he was lucky to leave with only an 8 inch steel bar in his forearm from an accident. And don't play that Tennessee Ernie Ford song "Sixteen Tons" around my grandfather either. In respect for my grandfather, I am not going to repeat the words to the song. Just for the record, my brother worked in the mines, and a lot has changed for the better.

What I remember about coal was that I grew up in a house that was heated by two coal furnaces (they were called 'hetrolas'). There was an opening in the ceiling (it was about 18 inches square with a register covering it) to allow heat to go upstairs. We had a "coal house" at the backyard where coal was coal was stored, and coal buckets on the back porch to bring in the coal. The other relevant aspect of coala furnaces was the ashes that had to be removed daily. You woke up in the morning, and the house was freezing cold since the fires went out overnight (unless someone got up during the night to keep them going).

I see in the latest 'Largest Collections' listing that, as of 1990, Larry Bell had 2,231 coal covers. I have 1,965 and always looking for more.

