
“A Leap of Faith” The Early Years of the Mining History Association

by Duane A. Smith

It did not happen clandestinely, in a smoke filled room, in the wee hours of the morning. It happened in broad daylight—well, nearer dusk—in a suite at the Ramada Hotel in Wichita, Kansas, in October of 1988. The “founding fathers” of the Mining History Association were all attending the twenty-eighth annual conference of the Western History Association.

Six of us got together—Mike Ostrogorsky (a prime mover and the one who provided the suite), Clark Spence (the dean of mining historians and the guiding mentor), Ron Brown, Carlos Schwantes, Bob Spude, and myself. From the discussions in that suite—and a lot of leg-work throughout the next twelve months—emerged the Mining History Association.

While Mike has seemingly vanished from the face of the continent, over the years since, the rest

of us have remained active in helping get our “baby” through its teenage years and into young adulthood. Before age creeps over all of us (and minds remember more than actually happened!), and inasmuch as we still have a collective memory about why and how this all occurred, we have decided to record our remembrances. Four of us sat down together at the 1999 Ouray meeting and reminisced on video and tape; Clark jotted down his thoughts earlier.

It all started in the hotel’s main lobby, where we were talking about the idea. Mike suggested that we go up to his suite and carry on the business, as he had done some preliminary work. Only the month before, the second International Mining History Congress had been held in Germany. It fired up Mike, and also Bob, with the idea that we could do something similar over here. So we all climbed five floors, except Bill Greever, who had been with us in



The “founding fathers” relax after the stress of planning the Mining History Association. Left to right: Clark Spence, Duane Smith, Bob Spude, Ron Brown, Mike Ostrogorsky, and Carlos Schwantes. (Courtesy of Duane Smith)

the lobby but did not join in the longer session.

Gay Smith declined the opportunity to gather with us, by that action missing the opportunity to be a "founding mother." That would have made us more gender diverse, but she did take the historic photos of the founders. Perhaps it was symbolic to our topic that only males met there—nineteenth-century mining was mostly masculine. We did not do this intentionally, I hasten to add, before the wrath of our membership lands on our heads!

Before the evening ended, we had discussed many things in a general way. Our hopes and dreams for our special topic came clearly into the open. Certainly, we had all thought this to be a good idea and had even mentioned it before, a time or two, but no action had followed. Now we set out in earnest. Carlos recalled another Mike bequest: "I think Ostrogorsky had rented that suite on his own. I don't think the university had given him any money. That was his contribution to get that big suite there. I remember we had a sofa, or two big sofas." The conversation was quite lively that evening, and myriad topics crossed the table. With a great deal of confidence and optimism, we assumed that we would get the association off and running.

Bob noted Clark's contribution: "As I remember, Clark sort of guided us through it. Every so often, he would say something. He had thought about it obviously, maybe even talked to Rod[man] Paul about it." Everyone at the Ouray gathering agreed that "we had to have Clark" at that first meeting with us. Clark gave us an "aura of legitimacy," because he was a senior, published, and a well-respected member of the historical profession and one of the founders of the WHA. Exhibiting his usual wit, Clark sent along his remembrances of Wichita:

Try as I might, I can't generate anything except fuzzy recollections of the beginnings of the MHA. I recall, of course, the meeting [in] smoke-filled room 501 of the Ramada Hotel. [Actually, I don't think anyone there smoked; but wherever there is a cabal it has to be in a smoke-filled atmosphere.] You [Duane Smith] and Bob Spude were the mainsprings, as I recall. I remember the organizational meeting—

it was at the Tacoma WHA conference the next year—and the first MHA breakfast in Reno in 1990. But as to details, I just can't dredge any of them up (good word, "dredge").

Clark's works on dredges have become classics, so it has been an appropriate word for him.

The spur to our original desire to bring people interested in mining history together had been the recent death of Rodman Paul. He and Clark had been the inspiration for the rest of us, as well as others. It seemed only right that we join to promote mining history and move ahead in the field they helped to establish and nurture so professionally. Not to sound too melancholy about it, but the older mining historians were a passing generation—scholars like Bill Greever, Turpie Jackson, Russ Elliott, and Otis Young. "That was one reason why we wanted to do it. We felt that mining historians were not getting the kind of recognition they needed," said Bob, continuing: "We sensed that if we did not do something we might be too late. Rod Paul had already gone."

As Clark jokingly said later, "When I started, you could have fit the group interested in mining history in a phone booth." That was one of the main things we hoped to accomplish, to increase interest in, and people involved in, mining history. Our goal became to have an association to encourage, promote, and disseminate mining history. We felt we had to build on the foundation laid down by the previous generation of mining historians.

Ron recalled that "one of the things we emphasized at that first meeting was the importance of bringing the industry people—geologists, historians and others—into the association." That point hit a responsive chord among the listeners. By this time, a real concern existed about the focus of the Western History Association. We had all watched what was happening to that organization with alarm. The WHA, which had originally included anybody interested in Western history, was steadily being taken over by academics and "subverted" to their ideas and wishes. Buffs and the public found themselves ignored or bored, or both. We did not want to see that result in any mining history organization and were

determined to avoid it. The richness and quality of the group would depend on the interests and range of people who joined it and participated in the programs—from archaeologists to writers to mining people to the general public.

One of our precise goals was to increase interest in mining history. We wanted more people researching and writing about mining and more people involved in mining history, in all of its aspects. With confidence, a general feeling emerged that there were other interested people out there. We simply needed to find them. We needed to find a niche for those folks who loved and were fascinated by mining history and just wanted to read about it, talk about it, and listen to others present their research on it.

Another lively topic of discussion was the possible purview of the mining association. Would it be just the West? Would it be only the states which had mining? What types of mining would we include or exclude? It was a bit early to come up with conclusive answers, but we finally decided that we did not want to limit ourselves simply to the American West. That left us with another question: What should we call our “baby?” It clearly seemed too early to decide.

The group also realized that an association probably would not go far if we just stayed within the organizational structure of the WHA and held a session or two at the annual meeting. “We knew that the non-academics were not likely to come if we just stayed with the WHA and had a session, because they just wouldn’t come,” commented one of the Ouray group. The idea of having our own meeting caught more than a moment’s attention; this was the ideal goal. Taking this step right then, however, seemed rather premature. Farther off still loomed the idea of a journal. The association would have to crawl first, before it could walk or even think about running!

About an hour and a half after the meeting started, our hopes and ideas had been quite well outlined and at least tentatively considered. It had been a relaxed, exciting time, with growing enthusiasm and a lively discussion of everyone’s thoughts. The six of us now set about to find those “multitudes” that lurked beyond our doors, waiting to enlist in the “cause.” Probably such enthusiasm for mining history had not been shown since the “silver issue” of the last quarter of the nineteenth century aroused miners to a fever pitch!



Folks who attend the Mining History Association’s conventions always enjoy the tours. In this case the tour is of surface works at Tonopah, Nevada, in June of 2000. (Courtesy of the Southwest Center, Fort Lewis College)

Prospecting for interested people at the WHA meeting proved profitable. As Sherlock Holmes exclaimed, "Come Watson, come! The game is afoot." We had struck a rich vein. Starting the next morning, amid a few consultations in the book exhibit, we collected nearly one hundred and fifty names before the Wichita meeting ended. With that large number, our dream took wing. Someone, no one remembers who, said that evening, "this is a leap of faith." It was, would be, and maybe, to some degree, still is. We in the Association can never afford to stand still, praising ourselves on how well we have done or how far we have traveled. We hoped "it would take hold," and, by golly, it did. We spent the following year amassing members and doing a plethora of planning.

At the next conference of the WHA, in Tacoma, Washington, we held an organizational meeting. One hundred ninety interested people had been found who would support the creation of a mining history association. Based on that, plans forged ahead and several committees were formed. Duane Smith was elected provisional chair and Bob Spude provisional secretary, a post which became permanent for Bob at the next meeting. A discussion of dues, officers, and a first annual meeting concluded the Tacoma session.

The first step was to mail out a newsletter to the people whose names we gathered. Some hilarious parties were staged at Bob and Cathy Spude's home, as members got together to staple and address later newsletters. To protect the reputation of the Association, we will drop a discreet curtain of silence over that topic! This first newsletter was free, although we did ask for a \$10 donation to help establish the new organization. The next logical step was to create official membership dues of \$10. That accomplished, by May of 1990, fifty people had paid their dues. The Mining History Association was off and running financially. At this same time, the Center of Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis College was selected as the official archives of the Association. That choice was helped along by the fact that this was Smith's home base. Meanwhile, plans went ahead to further organize the Association and make arrangements for our first "annual" meeting. This

would be held in conjunction with the Western History Association's 1990 conference at Reno, Nevada. It seemed a natural. The new organization would meet at Virginia City, one of the premier mining history sites in the West.

The first two newsletters appeared in May and September of 1990, with news about the association, including the initial slate of elected officers: Clark Spence, president; Russell Elliott, vice-president; Duane Smith, treasurer; Robert Spude, secretary; and an executive council. By the way, how many of you founding members still have your official "founders" membership certificates?

By now a constitution and bylaws for the proposed association were being circulated under the leadership of Bob Spude. Always remembering the goal set at Wichita, "the membership is open to all individuals who express an interest in mining history." The association was and is "dedicated to the study and promotion of mining history." The name Mining History Association gained acceptance.

That meeting at Virginia City was as important to the development of the Mining History Association as the earlier one at Wichita had been. The session held at the 4th Ward School museum—"The Big Bonanza: Mining Historians Look at Their Profession"—featured Spence, Young, Elliott, and Greever, and it set the stage. "That was the key because it proved, if we could go to a mining area and do it on our own that we could get the people there. The number of people who showed up in that room was amazing. We did have an all-star class of speakers." The Ouray participants all agreed on that. The room was packed. There were folks out there interested in the history of mining.

After the session, the Comstock tour continued through Gold Hill, at the Sutro Tunnel, and in the Carson Valley. Photographs, talk, and sightseeing took up the rest of the day. Apparently, some people were completely absorbed, because they nearly missed the last bus back to Reno and the WHA's official hotel. The 4th Ward School Meeting was only one of two mining sessions held at that meeting. Friday morning Ron Brown chaired another session: "The 'Other' Mining History: Coal Mining in the West." This second session showed that we were



Gene Gressley (right), that year's Rodman Paul Award winner, speaks with MHA council member James Fell at the 1994 annual meeting in Golden, Colorado. (Courtesy of the Southwest Center)

not going to limit ourselves just to the precious metals. "Mining universal" would be our theme.

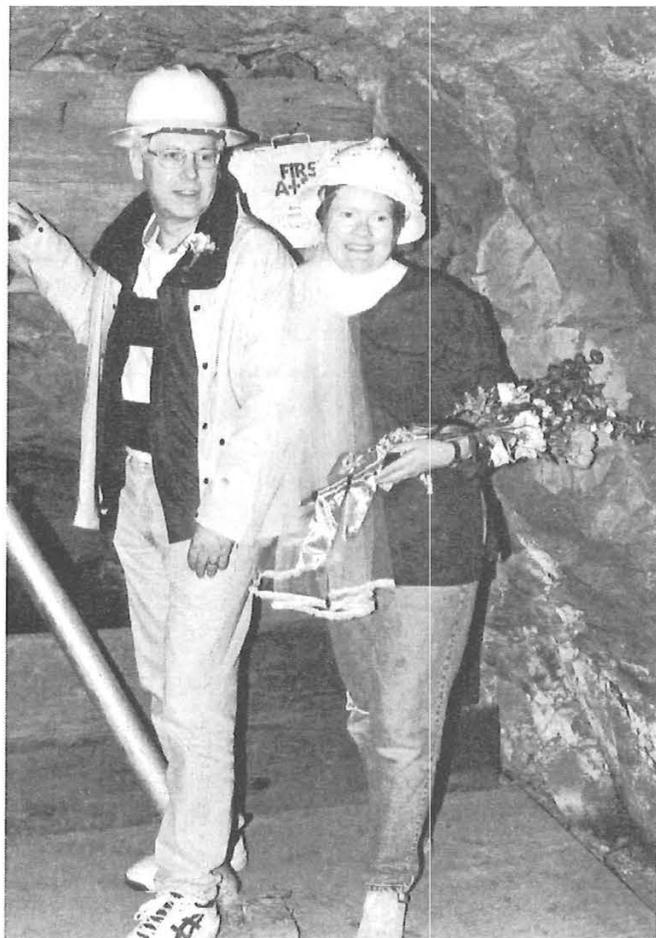
Before that Friday session, in what has become an annual affair, the Association held its first breakfast and business meeting at the WHA convention. An interesting sidelight to that breakfast was that we had asked for a room, but so had the American Society for Environmental History. The WHA's placement of our locations opposite each other was their decision. There existed no plot on our part to subvert our neighbors. Some environmental people came to our breakfast and then, shocked, hurriedly left when they realized whose territory they had trespassed into. What might have happened had these two groups met together in the same room is best left to the reader's imagination. As Carlos pointed out, it has "always been an interesting commentary on the way we are perceived!"

Reno provided the keystone in the organization of the Mining History Association. Bob remembered, "I think it was the Virginia City meeting which was the real test. Putting out the newsletter was not that big of a deal. It was really Virginia City where we got enough interest." "It proved we could go to a mining area and do it on our own. That we could get the people there," the Ouray group agreed.

Where and when to meet next became a topic of considerable discussion. The success of Virginia City showed that, if we traveled to a mining town and district, we could draw people. That settled one issue, and we would continue our journeys to mining towns, even venturing north to Rossland, British Columbia. The timing of the meetings was another matter. We decided a fall meeting would be too close to the WHA. Winter happened not to be a good time to go to most mining districts, and too many activities during the summer caused difficulties in finding an acceptable date. That meant spring, and early June became the consensus. The first solo meeting would be held at the National Mining Museum, amid the mining heritage of Leadville, Colorado.

Three other important developments insured the success of the Mining History Association—the Rodman Paul Award, the annual journal, and the presidency of Stan Dempsey. Rodman Paul's book, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West*, had been the first written survey of American mining history. Everyone in Western history, as Ron reminded us, had come in contact with it. An award in honor of Rodman Paul and his contributions seemed the perfect distinction for the Association to give to those who follow in his footsteps. The inscription on the Rodman W. Paul Award reads: "For Outstanding Contributions to Mining History."

Mrs. Paul was contacted, and she thought it a "brilliant idea." She seemed "obviously very pleased and honored that the award would be in her husband's name." Bob went on to say, "I think there was momentum because of the senior people who lent their names—Bill Greever, Turpie Jackson, Otis Young, Clark Spence, and Russ Elliott—to be honored with the first Rodman Paul awards. So we had the grand old men to immediately recognize and



MHA members do the most interesting things at their annual meetings. Here Mark and Lynn Langenfeld renew their wedding vows underground at Ouray's Bachelor-Syracuse Mine, June, 1999. (Courtesy of Duane Smith)

honor with the award, and that helped get us started with momentum."

The journal was a major step to take in promoting mining history, in providing an outlet for research, and in giving the Association more legitimacy. The venture took a bit of discussion about finances, types of articles, editorship, and related matters. Fortunately, John Townley appeared with his editorial and press experience—and the interest and enthusiasm to volunteer to be the editor. The Association thankfully accepted his offer and, under his guidance, the "journal became a precise journal." It was well edited and accomplished everything the Association had hoped for it. Following John's death, the Association cre-

ated an award in his name to honor the outstanding article appearing in each year's journal. *The Mining History Journal* has appeared annually since 1994. A fascinating assortment of national and international articles have tempted readers over the years, and the Journal has gained in stature every year.

Stan Dempsey's two-year presidency proved a transitional point. As a career mining man and a published mining historian, Stan connected the academic and non-academic groups and his leadership gave the industry confidence in the fledgling organization. Being a lawyer and corporate head, he was concerned about matters such as being sued should an accident happen during a conference or an association-sponsored event. He guided us through the maze of gaining our nonprofit status, and he knows many people in the industry, which has profited the Association immensely. Stan's "hands-on work" with important "nuts and bolts" matters got the organization well established. Some problems were simple, some complex, but all were important to the continued growth and development of the Mining History Association. When he handed on the president's traditional symbol, the geologist's pick, the MHA stood firmly grounded.

Looking back over the past decade, the Ouray four wholeheartedly concurred that "it had been a good time to get started. If we had started twenty



A little heavy lifting never hurt an MHA member. Lead, South Dakota, 1993. (Courtesy of Duane Smith)

years before, they would probably have laughed us out of existence." The time was right. Not only had the Mining History Association gotten off the ground, it had flown through its first decade with amazing results. The MHA has attracted all types of individuals and held their interest. Its conference sessions and journal articles reflect the catholic interests of our members and their enthusiasm for mining history. "We obviously found a big interest in mining history," concluded the Ouray participants.

Nor have we become "stuffy." The tours, meetings, sessions, meals, friendship and fun, and sharing of information have all produced highlights and moments to remember at every conference. Not to mention the first-hand knowledge members have acquired of mining towns and districts, the industry, and the historical knowledge everyone gained as we looked, listened, and toured. It has, the founders concluded, "been a good ten years." The "leap of faith" at Wichita had been amply rewarded. The old guard has nearly all "crossed the great divide," and we have become the "new" old guard, if that is not an oxymoron. Nevertheless, the Wichita six have connected the mining past to the mining future. That heritage will, we hope, stand the test of time.

**The First Decade of the
Mining History Association:**

Presidents:

Clark Spence
Russell Elliott
Stanley Dempsey
Duane Smith
Noel Kirshenbaum
Robert Trennert
Sally Zanjani
Donald Hardesty
Richard Graeme
Richard Francaviglia

Secretary:

Robert Spude

Treasurers:

Duane Smith
Ronald Brown
James Fell

Rodman Paul Award Winners:

Russell Elliot
William Greever
Clark Spence
Otis Young
W. Turrentine Jackson
Merle Wells
Duane Smith
Watson Parker
Gene Gressley
Stanley Dempsey
Robert Spude
Carlos Schwantes
Michael Malone
Jeremy Mouat
Malcolm Rohrbough
Mason Coggin
Stan Paher
Sally Zanjani
Elizabeth Jameson
Don Hardesty
Chris Huggard.
Liston Leyendecker
Fredric Quivik

John Townley Award Winners

Clark Spence
David Wolff
James Bailey
Michael Ripmeester
Paul Kens
Erik Nordberg
Noel Kirshenbaum,
Karen Pickett