
Preserving Mining History Through Art

By Bob Weldin
Past President, Mining History Association

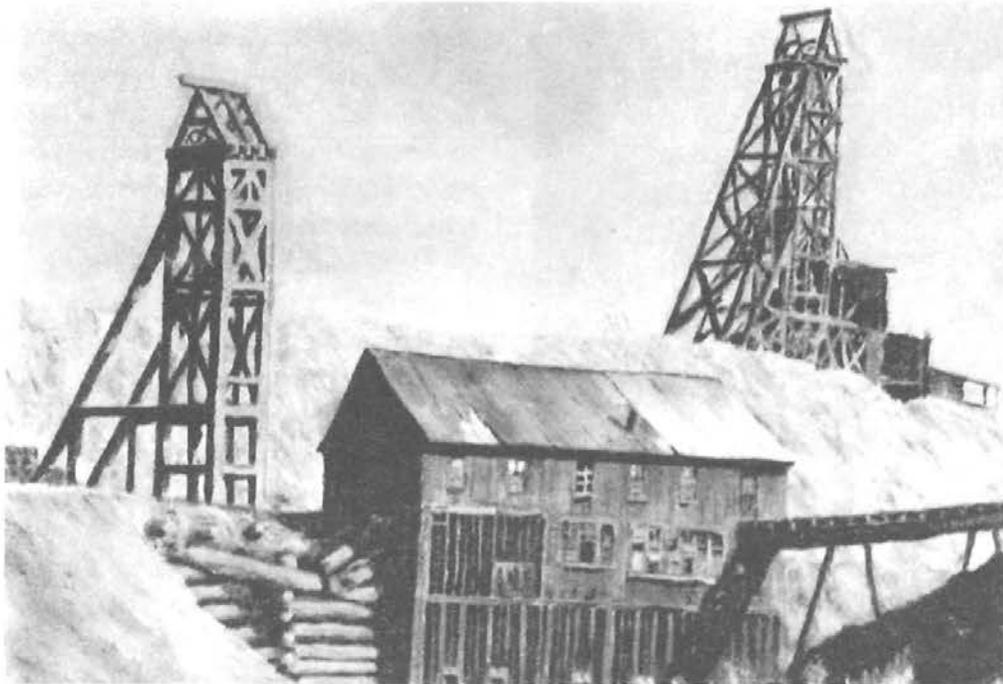
Most members of the Mining History Association (MHA), when asked about their primary interests, respond with the preservation of mining history as one of their choices. When asked about the specifics of preservation, mining historians normally talk about the preservation of documents, mining machinery, or actual mine sites, but they rarely specify mining art.¹

Maybe it took the passing of a friend, mining artist, and active member of the MHA to shock us into recognizing art as a legitimate means of preserving mining history. The first MHA Cherry Hunter Award was posthumously presented to Cherry Hunter in June, 2005, for her

contributions to preserving mining history through art. The award will continue to be presented to deserving artists who have contributed to the accurate and relevant preservation of mining through their art.

So, why am I promoting mining art? My family will tell you that I have little or no artistic ability, and have shown very little interest in the esthetics of art. That is true, but the scientist and the historian in me yearns for the accurate and relevant preservation of mining history, and I see art as a vibrant means for doing just that.

The following is not a comprehensive assessment of mining art. It is, at best, a summary of

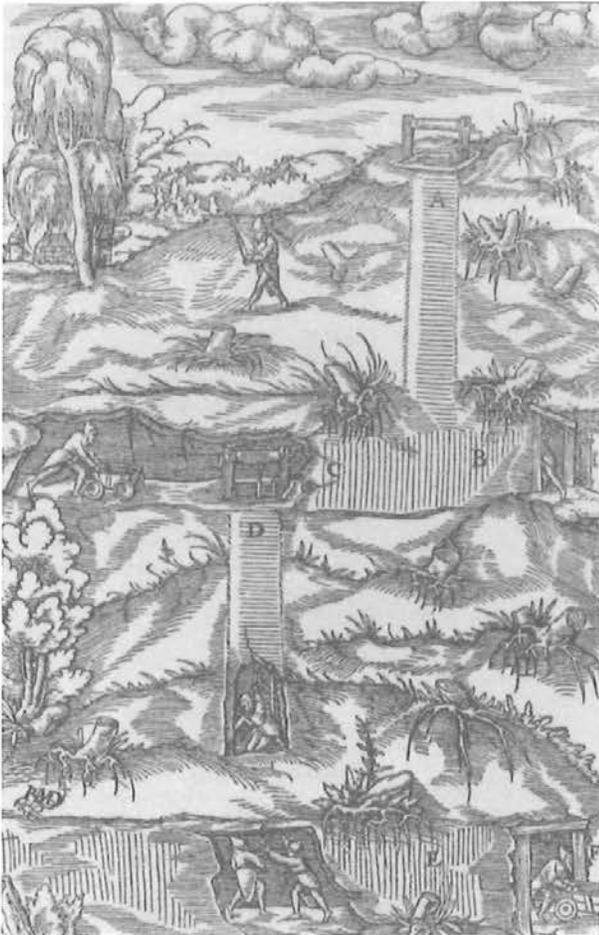


*The Strong and Independence mines, Victor, Colorado, oil painting by Cherry Hunter, 2001
(Courtesy of Ed Hunter)*

how mining art has influenced my perception of mining history.² I see it as a preliminary study and will not be offended if someone wants to expand and improve on it. In fact, I will be delighted and even flattered if a graduate student or mining historian is inspired enough by this discussion to do a more exhaustive study of mining art.

Georgius Agricola's *De Re Metallica*

My earliest experience of mining art occurred in the late 1950s, while attending the University of Idaho's College of Mines. The school did not



*16th century surface exploration with a dowsing rod; cross-section of underground mine with shafts, hoisting, drift, and haulage level.
(Agricola, De Re Metallica, 1556.)*

BOOK VIII.



A—MORTAR. B—UPRIGHT POSTS. C—CROSS-BEAMS. D—STAMPS. E—THEIR HEADS. F—AXLE (CAM-SHAFT). G—TOOTH OF THE STAMP (TAPPET). H—TEETH OF AXLE (CAM).

*16th century milling, crushing, and pulverizing of ore with a water powered stamp mill.
(Agricola, De Re Metallica, 1556.)*

offer a course in mining art history, but its honorary society had Georgius Agricola as one of its icons, and possessed a copy of his book, *De Re Metallica*.³ I must confess that I learned more about sixteenth-century mining by studying Agricola's woodcut illustrations than I did by actually reading his text.

De Re Metallica was first printed in 1556 and translated from its original Latin into English by future president Herbert Hoover and his wife Lou in 1912. Agricola's original was reportedly delayed for a few years because of the intricacies required in preparing the woodcuts needed to print the illustrations. Sketches for them were presumably done by Basilius Wefring and other artists, but it was Agricola who is credited with closely supervising every detail of the great work.

The English translation of *De Re Metallica* is somewhat arduous to read because, although Agricola's native language was German, he prob-



16th century metallurgy
furnace for smelting of ores and concentrates.
(Agricola, *De Re Metallica*, 1556.)

ably felt obligated to write in Latin, that being the intellectual language of his time. Not until 350 years later did anyone take up the onerous task of translating *De Re Metallica* into English.

Agricola, a scientist and top scholar, wrote about medicine and other subjects besides mining. Historically, he is not mentioned in the same intellectual league as Galileo, Newton, and Einstein, but Agricola (1494-1555) was certainly one of the early fathers of scientific thought and reasoning. This in a time when superstition prevailed; when alchemists, soothsayers, and astrologists were considered to have the brilliant

minds. For nearly two hundred years, *De Re Metallica* remained the authoritative text on geology, mining, milling, and metallurgy.

Collecting Mining Art

The persnickety reader will readily observe that I am not following a historical time-line, and may even notice I have skipped a century here and there. That's because this study is based on personal observations over a career that spans the last half century. During one fifteen-year time span, starting in 1989, I dealt in mining antiques and collectables.

This hobby business brought me in contact with hundreds of collectors, some of whom were highly motivated and did serious historical research on their mining artifacts. It is difficult to distinguish a top-notch collector from a mining historian; some historians collect and some collectors do a lot of historical research. Collectors accumulate much mining memorabilia, some of which has artistic elements, such as stock certificates, mine maps, and, of course, prints, drawings, and illustrations from old magazines and mining journals.

Harper's Weekly

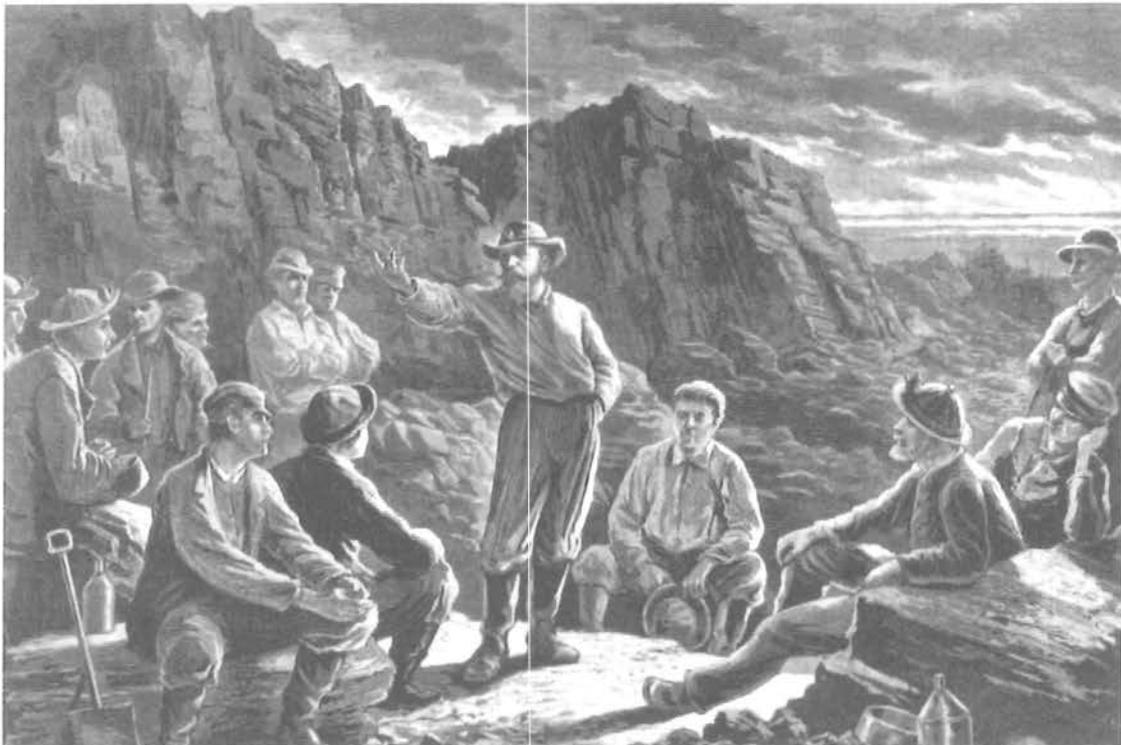
One of the more collectable art forms is the page-sized illustrations found in old magazines like *Harper's Weekly*, the preeminent news and literary journal of the nineteenth century. *Harper's* was published from 1857 until 1916, a time well before television, computers, and many of the other news sources that we have today. A time when artists and print journalists had a profound influence on Americans' perception of the news, and sometimes produced a rather romantic version of mining history.

My collection of *Harper's Weekly* mining prints is predominately the works of a French artist, Paul Frenzeny, who may be best known for his illustrations in Charles Dickens' books. Frenzeny



The Miners' Pay Day (P. Frenzeny, Harper's Weekly, 1873.)

Meeting of The "Molly M'Guire" Men (Frenzeny and Tavernier, Harper's Weekly, 1874.)





Horrors of the Mine—After the Explosion (P. Frenzeny, Harper's Weekly, 1873.)

immigrated to California shortly after the gold rush, along with several other “Bohemian” artists who sold their works to wealthy San Franciscans.⁴ Frenzeny went to work for *Harper's* in the early 1870s. Three examples of his impressionistic art, depicting life in the Pennsylvania coal mines, are shown on these pages.

Stock Certificates

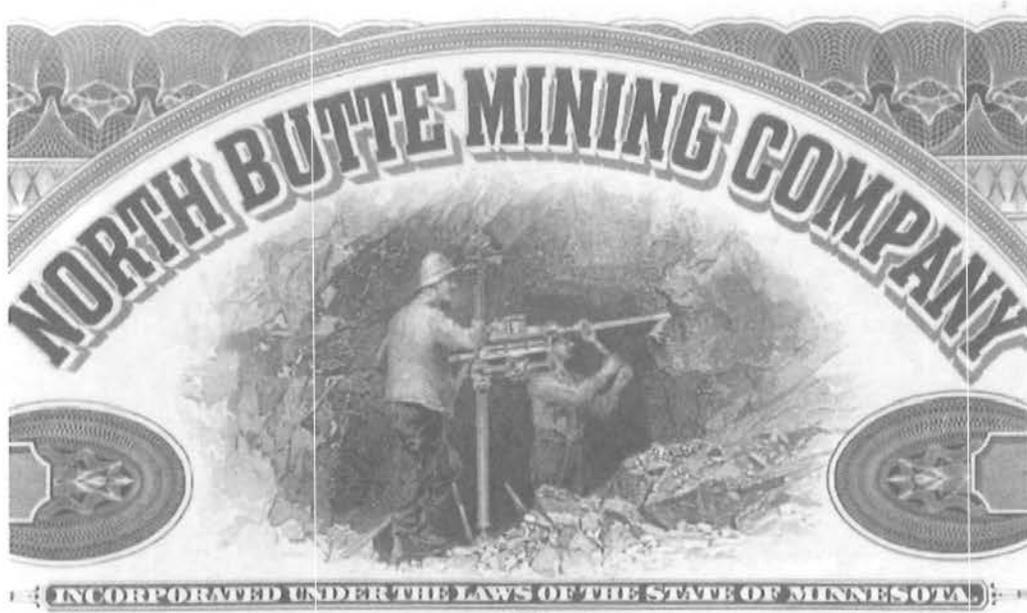
An example of nineteenth- and twentieth-century mining art that fascinates many of us is the illustrations, called vignettes, on mining stock certificates. Some of these vignettes are intricate engravings similar in quality to those on U.S. currency and suggesting a similar purpose: discouraging forgery. The artist or engraver is almost never mentioned on the certificate, but the engraving company almost always is. One such company still operating today, the American Bank Note Company, can trace its beginnings back to 1795.

One can assume that the vignettes were de-

signed to help the company sell stock. Frequently the colors used on mining stock certificates are gold and silver or green, the color of the American “greenback.” Some vignettes are designed to show the latest technology, like the driller appearing on the North Butte Mining Company certificate. Hecla Mining Company chose a vignette of a drilling operation, flanked by allegorical figures representing knowledge and research.

A frequently used vignette is one that shows a highly integrated industrial complex—complete with mine headframe, mill, smelter, refinery, and railroad—like the one on the Bunker Hill Arizona Mining Company certificate. A vignette unique to the Homestake Mining Company shows Native Americans observing the advancing development of the American West, presumably an image used to influence eastern and European investors.

To most collectors, however, the artistry of the vignette is not a major factor in determining the value of a stock certificate. Like most antiques, the primary value depends on age, con-



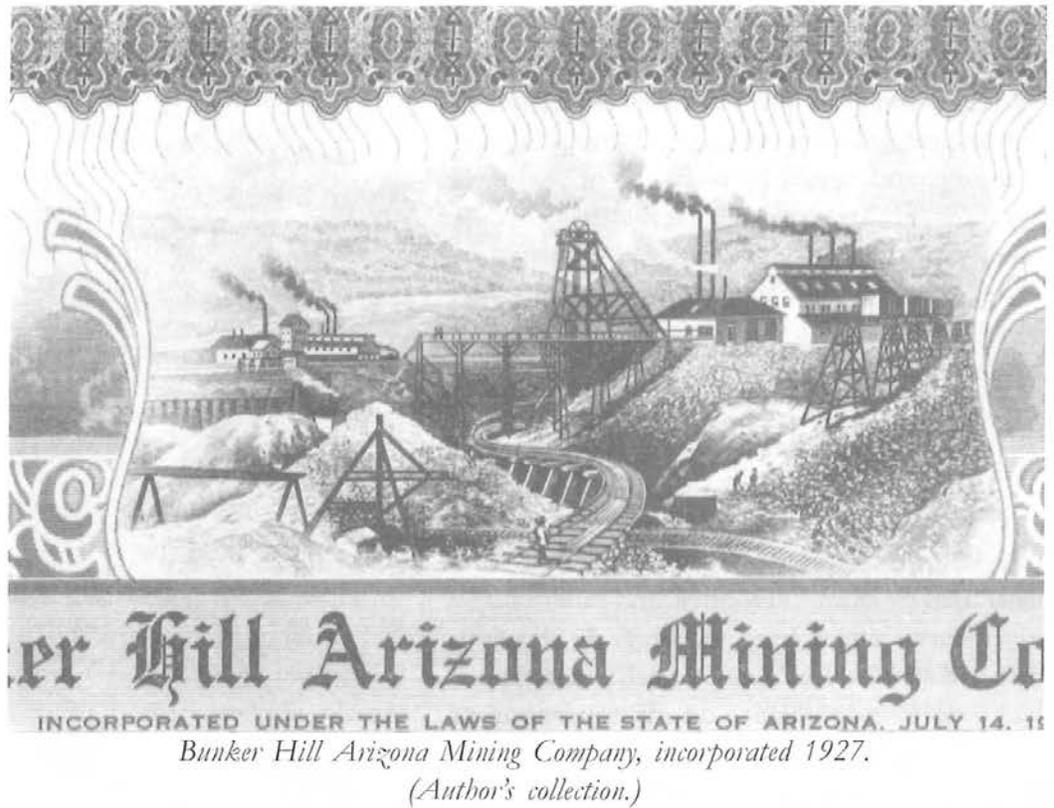
Gift of Carrie E. Hotchkiss

*North Butte Mining Company, incorporated 1905.
(Author's collection.)*

*Hecla Mining Company, incorporated 1898.
(Author's collection.)*



MRS RUBY LEE PRICE



*Homestake Mining Company, incorporated 1877.
(Author's collection.)*



dition, and historical significance. Therefore, collectors and historians are normally looking for the same things: a pre-1900 certificate, issued but uncanceled, representing a famous mining company, and signed by someone of historical significance. Art work may be the “icing on the cake,” but since it typically is not exclusive to, or representative of, the mining company that issued the stock, the vignette may have little historical value.

J. C. (Buck) O'Donnell

Sometime in the mid-1960s, I was given some complimentary advertising pamphlets written and illustrated by Buck O'Donnell, and published by Machinery Center, Inc., and Shaft & Development Machines, Inc.⁵ O'Donnell's illustrations had a profound influence on my conception of late-nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century mining practices. Conversations with old-time min-



The shift boss spotting drill holes to keep the miner from drilling into waste rock. (O'Donnell, The Old Timers, 1966. Courtesy of Gene Skinner.)



The Hand Crank Rock Drill. The crank compresses a spring that, when released, strikes the drill rod penetrating the rock. (Buck O'Donnell, Yesterday's Mining, 1966. Courtesy of Gene Skinner.)

ers have confirmed the accuracy that I attribute to O'Donnell's work.

Art critics, however, may not rank O'Donnell's work very high. Not that O'Donnell would care about their rankings, nor, I suspect, would he be offended if they referred to him as a cartoonist. But I prefer to think of Buck O'Donnell as an excellent illustrator, with an eye for detail, who just happened to have a good sense of humor. It is not uncommon to see his work copied by authors trying to illustrate the complexities of a mining method, a piece of mining equipment, or even the customs and idiosyncrasies of miners.

For example, if you are interested in the history of underground drilling, you should check out two dozen or so illustrations and explanations in O'Donnell's pamphlets. Other subjects that he illustrates historically, in approximate descending order of frequency, are: haulage and



The Windlass. Early hoisting power supplied by brawn and muscle. (O'Donnell, The Old Timers, 1966. Courtesy of Gene Skinner.)

transport, poetry and cartoons, miners' customs and leisure, mucking and loading, hoisting, prospecting, milling, timbering, shaft sinking, safety, underground lighting, blasting, high-grading, and the Cornish pump.

Modern Mining Artists

There are probably many good artists who occasionally do a piece of mining art. That is nice, but those are not the artists I'm looking for. My mining artist has a passion for mining history, a commitment to do the research necessary, and an obsession for authenticity. Usually, those criteria fit someone who has worked in the mining industry, come from a mining family, lived in a mining community, or is a mining historian.

To assure that my mining artist has passed the test for relevancy and accuracy in preserving history, I put a high value on recommendations from members of the MHA, some of whom

submitted pictures and recommendations for my speech and this subsequent article. The first artist to meet our requirements was Cherry Hunter, who did many of her pen and ink drawings, water colors, and oil paintings in Victor and Cripple Creek, Colorado.

In addition to works by Cherry Hunter, Karen and Mark Vendl submitted slides of watercolor paintings by Michael Darr and Virginia Shippey. The Vendls also collect ceramic figurines by artist Zeke Zannoni of Silverton, Colorado. I used a watercolor of the Consolidated Silver Mine, Coeur d'Alene Mining District, to represent some of the work being done by modern illustrators. The painting, by Mary McCann, appears on the cover of a recent book by Fritz Wolff, *A Room For The Summer*, the story of Wolff's college years spent working summers as an underground miner.

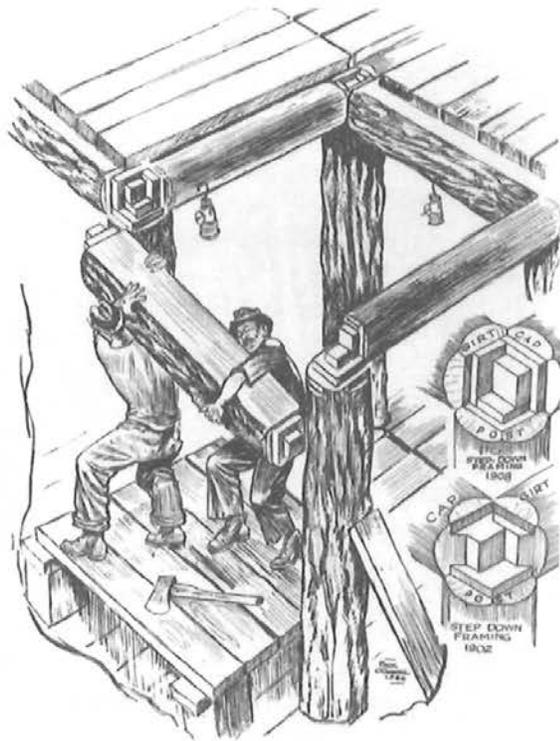
The Mexican Set-Up. The forerunner to our present jackleg drill. (O'Donnell, The Good Old Days, 1968. Author's collection.)



Many of us are impressed with some of the modern mining sculptors who work in metals. For example, the very popular mining sculptor Gary Prazen, who became well known for his accurate bronzes of miners. Two other sculptors in my immediate area of interest are Ken Lonn and Glenn E. Emmons. Both work with steel to create larger-than-life statues.

Ken Lonn studied art at Washington State University before going underground at the Bunker Hill Mine to work as a mechanic. There he secretly studied miners and their equipment until miners became suspicious and accused him of being a spy for management. His work is prominently displayed in the Coeur d'Alene Mining District. Probably his most famous statue, just off I-90 at the Big Creek exit, is a monument to the ninety-one miners killed at the Sun-

Square Set Timbering. Created by Phillip Deidesheimer, superintendent at the Ophir Mine, Comstock Lead, Nevada, in 1861. (O'Donnell, The Old Timers, 1966. Courtesy of Gene Skinner.)



The High Graders. The high-grade boss supervised the mulling and chiseling of high-grade ore. (O'Donnell, Yesterday's Mining, 1966. Courtesy of Gene Skinner.)

shine Mine in 1972.

Glenn Emmons was commissioned to create a statue to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Northwest Mining Association in 1995. His realistic statue of a jack-leg driller, "From the Earth," stands in Riverfront Park near the Spokane Convention Center.

I could go on, but this seems like the right time to ask you for your nominations for a mining artist who deserves the MHA Cherry Hunter Award for the "preservation of mining history through art."⁶

Bob Weldin is a retired branch chief of the U.S. Bureau of Mines and current owner and operator of Miners' Quest. He writes, speaks, and consults on the mineral resources and mines of the northwestern U.S.

Notes:

- ¹ Robert D. Weldin, "Historical Preservation," *Mining History News* 16, no. 1 (Mar. 2005): 1-2.
- ² This article is adapted from a speech given as my presidential luncheon address, "Preservation of Mining History through Art," at the sixteenth annual conference of the Mining History Association, Scranton, PA, 18 June 2005. The first Cherry Hunter Award for the preservation of mining history through art was presented at this meeting.
- ³ Georgius Agricola, *De Re Metallica* (1556), translated from the first Latin edition by Herbert Clark Hoover and Lou Henry Hoover, 1912; reprint: New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950. This reprint includes all 289 of the original sixteenth-century woodcut drawings.
- ⁴ Background information on *Harper's Weekly* and the artist Paul Frenzeny has been obtained from the web sites Google (www.google.com) and The Athenaeum (www.the-athenaeum.org).
- ⁵ The author was able to locate five of the complimentary advertising pamphlets that Buck O'Donnell wrote and illustrated for Machinery Center, Inc., and Shaft & Development Machines, Inc., of Salt Lake City: "Rhymes of the Mines," a collection of humorous tales and anecdotes, 1965, 31 pp.; "A Mucker's Memoirs," 1965, 17 pp.; "Yesterday's Mining," 1966, 22 pp.; "The Old Timers," 1966, 26 pp.; and "The Good Old Days," 1968, 27 pp. These items were published as promotional literature and given away at mining conventions and other venues. The examples presented here are courtesy of private collector Gene Skinner. Letters to these mining machinery companies' last known addresses and phone calls resulted in no response. An internet search yielded no references to J. C. (Buck) O'Donnell, the artist, illustrator, or cartoonist.
- ⁶ Nominations for the MHA's Cherry Hunter Award may be submitted to one of the current members of that awards committee: Karen Vendl, Mark Vendl, Ed Raines, and Bob Weldin.