

Kentucky man's book gives the history of coal tokens

OWENSBORO (AP) — A retired Owensboro pathologist has written a book he hopes will preserve the history of coal tokens used in place of cash by mine companies in the early 20th century.

Until as late as the 1940s, coal companies across the country paid miners with coal tokens, which could only be used at a store near the mine and owned by the company, Dr. David Orrahood said.

Coal tokens — or flickers — have been documented as early as 1880 and most were out of circulation by the late 1930s.

Orrahood became interested in coal mining history and collecting the coal tokens when his medical practice took him throughout the western Kentucky coal fields.

He said his book, "U.S. Coal Tokens of the Americas," is meant to keep alive the history of the flickers.

"There's very little written about what I've written here," said Orrahood, who dedicated the book to people who died while working in the mines. "What I'm trying to say and the purpose for writing this book is 'they're all gone now.'"

Most people alive today never worked in a coal mine that paid in flickers, Orrahood said. But there are a few who remember their pa-

rents being tied to the company store.

Claude Travis, a retired Muhlenberg County miner, remembers going to the Beech Creek Coal Company Store with his father. A family could buy anything from gasoline to clothes to furniture at a company store, he said. The quality was good, but the prices were a bit higher than regular stores.

If miners wanted to exchange the tokens for cash, they rarely received 100 percent value, Travis said.

"They pretty much had you from start to finish," he said.

More than 20,000 company stores have been documented and one-third of those issued tokens, Orrahood said.

Orrahood, who has tokens from 300 companies in his collection, said his most valuable token was issued by the Green and Barren River Coal Company.

"I know no one gets my Green and Barren River coal token," he said. "I'll die with it."

For each mine it owned, a company issued tokens that ranged in value from 1 cent to \$10.

A coal token's value depends on its rarity, said Frank Westerfield, a coal token dealer. When coal tokens were ruled illegal, many companies dumped them into rivers or coal shafts, Westerfield said.

Asides

Quack Liability

As the Washington lobbyist for trial lawyers, Tommy Boggs is famous for shooting down legal reformers. Now, AP reports, "Tommy Torts" has been fined \$4,000 for violating federal hunting rules. He and his 20 or so guests, including Congressman Billy Ford of Michigan,

shot 182 ducks without ever stopping to collect the birds, according to a wildlife agent. Hmmm, this sure looks like a case of negligence to us, or perhaps joint and several liability, or maybe an opportunity to see if ducks can be given legal standing to sue. Where's the Natural Resources Defense Council when you really need it?

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