

VERMONT

*The
Proceedings of the
Vermont Historical Society*

HISTORY



SPRING 1996

VOL. 64, No. 2



Sight Unseen: Tracking the Unexpected

I copied . . . personal records in strange places and under strange conditions. . . . It was one of the biggest rewards of my years of pedaling up to homes where I was just some eccentric claiming to be researching the obscure, largely forgotten copper mines of Orange County.

By COLLAMER M. ABBOTT

To someone who is fascinated by history, the search for documents and artifacts is sometimes the most interesting—and frustrating—part of the experience. When I started researching the copper mines of Vermont as an amateur historian, I was merely curious and started tracking material with no rational plan, only the desire to find answers to my questions and to solve some mysteries.

Not long into my journey, I found mention of an 1859 report on the Ely mine in Vershire by a German engineer, W. Herman Rittler. This was only six years after the Cornish superintendent Thomas Pollard started to exploit the mine economically. Such an early study seemed basic. There were references to it in material preserved by the descendants of Roswell Farnham of Bradford, who had been governor of Vermont and lawyer for the Vermont Copper Mining Company, which ran the Ely mine from 1853 to 1883. But a copy of the report was nowhere to be found. Many years later, when I was exploring a cache of maps, geological reports, laboratory analyses, and other documents of the Elizabeth mine at South Strafford, which had closed in 1958, I came upon Rittler's report loose in a file cabinet of maps, somewhat dog-eared, but whole and with Farnham's familiar signature on the cover. By what devious routes had it traveled from Ely in 1859 to South Strafford in the 1940s?

Other material came to me in equally roundabout ways. After many

years of searching, shunpiking, strokes of good luck, and other people's generosity, I learned, for example, that Isaac Tyson, a pioneer at South Strafford in the 1830s, had kept a journal. That was fairly easy. The family had given it to the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier, so I eventually obtained it on microfilm. But Tyson had also kept a memo book, which was in the possession of a descendant, Rosa Tyson in Strafford, who understandably did not want to let it out of her sight. How to get that?

At this time I was traveling by bicycle from White River Junction to all my sources in Vershire, Strafford, Corinth, Thetford, Bradford, and points between. I had a Rolleiflex camera that did yeoman service copying pictures and documents. Rosa Tyson, who ran the family home as a guest house near the Elizabeth Mine, offered to put me up in an attic room at a ridiculously low price and allowed me to copy the memo book if I could. I planned a three-day trip, which would include a foray into Vershire, and loaded my vehicle.

The little attic room was snug and comfortable, with a table and two windows that gave me even lighting if I propped the memo book up and used my jackknife to hold the pages open. Early one morning, with just the right light, I set up my equipment and copied Isaac Tyson's 1835–1852 memo book—all 268 pages of it—with priceless information scribbled in his own hand about minerals and mines around the world: copper in Cuba, lead in Spain, chromite in Maryland and Turkey, and copper and iron in Vermont.

I copied other personal records in strange places and under strange conditions. I tracked down a diary of a man who worked in the Ely Mine in the very early days. When I rode into the descendant's dooryard on my bicycle, he didn't know me from Adam, but he unquestioningly let me take the diary away to copy. This happened to me more than once. Such generosity and trust always amazed me. It was one of the biggest rewards of my years of pedaling up to homes where I was just some eccentric claiming to be researching the obscure, largely forgotten copper mines of Orange County.

I met a man in Corinth whose father had worked at Pike Hill and who gave me a miner's oil lamp, an object that looked like a one-cup teapot with an elongated spout. Although at this time I had resolved not to collect artifacts because I could not afford to buy them and could not transport heavy objects on my bicycle, I accepted the gift of this rare lamp. The desire, later necessity, to know what hand tools and other equipment of the trade looked like led to other acquisitions and other adventures.

Of course I wasn't always lucky collecting artifacts. In West Fairlee lived Fred Perkins, who had been a "bellboy" at the Ely Mine in 1900–1905, when George Westinghouse engaged in his million-dollar experiments



Mining and refining complex, Ely, Vermont, no date.

with processing and smelting the low-grade ores. Later Fred had worked at the Elizabeth mine in South Strafford, so he himself was a mine of information, and I visited him often, at intervals, so as not to tire him and to let him reflect and collect his memories of the past. One day he brought out an ingot of copper, which he claimed was a product of the Westinghouse experiments at Ely. I gasped: genuine copper from the Ely mine! But I refrained from expressing any desire to own the gem. It was several years later before I casually mentioned it. "Oh, yeah," said Fred. "Feller came along and offered me a dollar for it, so I let him have it." I have been kicking myself ever since.

One day I trekked up Blood Brook in West Fairlee to Sheldon Miller's home, a big, square farmhouse full of heirlooms and artifacts, including some stereopticon pictures I had never seen before and have never seen anywhere else. He generously allowed me to copy them on the granite steps at his back door. Some years later I heard that Miller's treasure-filled home had burned. When I could, I went to visit him. There he was with his hired man, in a trailer home on the lot, saddened but still able to take pride in the registered cattle he raised. I had never seen a house and contents so completely burned. Everything had collapsed into the cellar in ashes and twisted metal—including those precious pictures of which I had copies.

I cultivated a friendship with a woman who knew everybody, not only her contemporaries, because she worked in a local store and as substitute

.....

postmistress, but also their families and ancestors and her own and her husband's mining families. One of her ancestors, Samuel Woolcock, had been a ringleader in the Ely war, the miners' riot of July 1883. She encouraged my acquisitiveness and desire to know the tools of the trade by finding a beautifully preserved oil lamp and two candle holders, one handmade, I'm sure, the other manufactured.

One day when I arrived for a visit, a sandwich, and more tales of the miners, she presented me with a small leather-bound book about 4 by 5 inches. It was the journal of Otto K. Krause, the German dry-goods tycoon who had sunk hundreds of thousands into the Ely mine between 1888 and 1893 at the urging of Francis Michael Frederic Cazin, the German-trained engineer who had temporarily conned the old officers of the Vermont Copper Mining Company out of their property in 1882.

Two other brief stories are of interest for what they reveal about historical research—the frustrations, the uncertainties, the dangers, and the rewards—and the circuitous routes researchers take. From an old engineer who had worked the Elizabeth mine in the 1920s and lived on Long



*"Strafford [Vt.]
Copperas Mines,
Looking In." From a
stereopticon photo-
graph by R. M.
McIntosh, Northfield,
Vermont, no date.*

Island in a magnificent mansion on the waterfront in the 1960s, I learned during a three-day visit that the American Metal Company had financed the work and had made maps and other studies of the site. Soon after, with no real expectations, I sent a query to the giant American Metal Company headquarters in New York City. Back came a reply from some executive: "Yes, we have material, but it is stored deep in another building here in Manhattan. But I will have it looked up." A package came. I opened it and began unfolding brittle old blueprint maps. Then the worst happened: they cracked on the folds. My heart sank. Never had I lost or failed to return pictures I had carried away on my bicycle; now I had ruined priceless records of the American Metal Company! I went ahead and copied the documents, then returned them with an abject apology. An answer came back from that unknown executive in one of the world's biggest mining companies: "It's okay. This happens to old blueprints that are stored in cellars and remote buildings. Don't worry. Glad you found something interesting."

In Chelsea I met, with the help of a relative, a woman whose late husband had had much to do with the mining properties as a lawyer. She offered me some material that might help me, and she did so because she had known my great-grandfather, the first Collamer in my family, when he lived on a farm outside the village in 1912. Now, half a century later, I arranged a trip to the woman's house and took into my hands a box of old pictures and other unique documents. I promised to return everything as soon as possible. "Oh," she said, "You don't need to return these things. You can have them." I thanked her profusely, went away more amazed than ever at what the name *Collamer* could do, and later wrote her a letter to express for the ages my profound appreciation.