Up Front

Curator’s Corner
By Emily Ruby, Curator

Making Mines Safer

The extraction of coal from the ground for industrial and home use has been a central part of the story of Western Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh would never have developed into the powerhouse of the Second Industrial Revolution without it, but the miners who spent their lives bringing coal from the seam to the surface are often a forgotten part of the story. The real dangers of this work were made all too obvious in 1907, the deadliest year for coal miners, when 806 miners died in Pennsylvania bituminous mines alone. In subsequent years, a series of high-profile mine disasters led to a call for greater regulation and oversight of the coal industry and the development of safety measures for men who worked underground. A recent donation to the History Center’s collection highlights the increased regulation of the coal industry in the 20th century through the life of mine inspector Jennings Daniel Breedon.

Breedon, born in Richmond, W.V., spent his life in the coal mines in one capacity or another. Like so many other members of his family, Breedon went into the mines in 1946 after serving in the Navy during World War II. After years of coal mining throughout Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia, he became a mine inspector with the Bureau of Mines in 1962. The Bureau had been established in 1910 by the federal government to provide some oversight of the mining industry due to the rising number of mining fatalities, but by the time Breedon joined, federal mine inspections had only been happening for 21 years. Breedon’s career with the Bureau coincided with a time of increased federal regulations of coal mines, the most stringent being the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969. This act increased federal inspections of underground mines from one to four a year and finally gave miners compensation for black lung disease.

Although Breedon still entered the mines and participated in rescue and safety operations, leaving the mines to be an inspector gave him the ability to advance in his career and to use his knowledge to make the workplace safer for others. His years spent as a miner gave him first-hand knowledge and experience in assessing both underground mines and coal processing plants. As he stated in a work report, “Almost all my life has been a continual survey of mining … I have worked under most conditions to be experienced such as slips,
kettlebottoms [mining term for dangerous geological formation found in a mine roof], rolls, horsebacks [a mass of material with a slippery surface shaped like a horse's back], clay veins ... mine gases, low oxygen, etc."

The archival and artifact collection donated offers fascinating insight into the everyday work of a mine inspector and the detailed reporting and training required of a federal mine inspector.
