

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,

Breedon's helmet identifies him as an employee of MSHA or the Mine Safety and Health Administration, established in 1977. Before this change, Breedon had been employed by the Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration, which moved mine inspections from the Bureau of Mines to a separate agency in 1973. The 1977 change made mine inspections a part of the Department of Labor and increased mining regulations that had been adopted in 1969 with passage of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act.

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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. 

¹ "Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Mines and Mineral Industries, Bituminous Coal Division, Production, Employees, Fatalities, 1877 to 1964," James Breedon Papers, HHC Detre L&A, gift of Patricia Donati.

² "Survey of Mining report," James Breedon Papers, HHC Detre L&A, gift of Patricia Donati.

Breedon's job meant he often served as a judge at many mine safety and rescue events and promoted and advocated for increased regulation and safety in the workplace. This ribbon is from the National First Aid & Mineral Resource Contest held in 1967 and sponsored by the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines.

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Breedon (back row, third from right) and fellow miners, c. 1955.

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STORY OF DRAMATIC RESCUE is related by members of the Federal Mines inspection team, shown with their supervisor, Thomas J. McDonald, right. In foreground from left are John Hunter, John Kelly, Jennings Breedon, James Hutchens, Everett Turner and Mr. McDonald. The Hutchens-Turner rescue "team" was first to reach the three boys. Mr. Kelly and Mr. Breedon fitted the youths with breathing apparatus for trip out of mine.

"'Never Again' Boys Say After Rescue From Mine," *The Pittsburgh Press*, July 14, 1963. On Thursday, July 11, 1963 three teenage boys in Castle Shannon, Pa., snuck into an abandoned mine and were lost for two days. On Saturday, Breedon (third from left) and a team of federal and state mine inspectors and rescue operators found and extracted the boys safely from the mine.

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