

Whither Mining History?

By Erik Nordberg
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As the Mining History Association moves into its second quarter century, it seems a good moment to take stock of our association—where it’s been, what it is doing, and where it is going. I also wondered what the phrase “mining history” really meant to our members and to others outside of our Association. I was inspired to explore this topic by Ron Limbaugh’s address to the 2008 MHA conference in Chisholm, Minnesota, in which he asked similar questions of our organization. The title of this essay harkens to the closing address given by Charles Hyde at the 1998 conference of the Society of Industrial Archaeology, in which he questioned whither (“where”) his organization was heading, if it could whither (“weather”) additional changes, or if might actually whither (“die”) on the vine. In this same vein, I ask MHA members: Whither mining history?¹

Our mission to explore and share the history of mining and metallurgy, though focused on the United States, expands to include other parts of North America and the world. MHA means a lot to our members, many of whom have been involved in the organization for five, ten, or twenty-plus years. I attended my first meeting in 1995 in Nevada City, California, and my spouse, Jane, joined me the following year north of the border in Rossland, British Columbia. The meetings have an amazing breadth of content, the local tours reveal local practice and history, the social events reunite old friends, and the meeting becomes the anchor for many family vacations.

But I didn’t want this essay to simply reflect my observations, my experiences, and my attitudes. So I put together a short questionnaire

to solicit feedback on the future of mining history and the Mining History Association. I must stress that this was a completely non-scientific survey and I made no attempt for it to achieve any form of statistical viability. The survey comprised only ten questions, because that is the maximum number one can include in the free version of the online survey software available from Survey Monkey. I pushed it out to several hundred individuals for whom I had discrete e-mail addresses and I shared the announcement and link freely and publicly through a number of distribution lists. I did not attempt to limit the responses to current MHA members; in fact, I asked folks to push it along to anyone else who might be interested. I received nearly one hundred responses, with about half indicating that they were current MHA members.

The survey asked respondents to share their own impressions about both mining history and the mining industry, observations about how they feel the general public views these topics, and about how MHA can improve knowledge about these topics. Respondents observed that their own experience with mining history was often tied to their own family heritage or to specific places from their childhood or in which they currently reside.

Mining, in the respondents' minds, was (and still is) about hardworking men and women building their lives in regions associated with mineral extraction. At a direct level, it is about technology, industry, jobs, and economic impact. At a more philosophical level, it is an entrée into "big issues" about history, such as work, industrialization, and the conflicts inherent in the move away from an agrarian economy in the United States. Mining and mining history play important roles in tourism, the respondents indicated, particularly in the ways that former mining districts theme a vacation experience for tourists. Although some mentioned the environmental impact of mining, it was not a primary response from the respondents about their own attitudes concerning these

topics.

When people were asked instead to guess how the general public thought about mining and mining history, they provided some similar answers about technology and tourism. But there were some important differences. The general public, they observed, often applies a nostalgic lens to their description of mining history—bearded "Miner 49er" characters with pick axes and gold pans, who drink in olde-tyme saloons wearing floppy hats with folded brims. The respondents also shared descriptions of ghost towns in the Old West, or referenced specific television programs and motion pictures, including *Deadwood* and historic John Ford westerns. One respondent even indicated that many children have their first introduction to mining history themes in "remuddled" mine towns at American amusement parks.

The general public also associates mining and mining history with danger. Mining work involves explosives and heavy equipment, with the underground world proving inherently threatening due to gas, rock falls, and other man-made threats. Mine disasters were mentioned repeatedly, popularized to the average person through news and entertainment outlets, such as those relating to the 2010 Chilean mine collapse that was resolved through the heartfelt leadership of Spanish actor Antonio Banderas.

The most significant difference between respondents' own thoughts and their impressions of general public opinion concerned the environmental impact of mining. When asked to share words, phrases, images, and places that they thought the general public might immediately ascribe to mining, the list was long:

dirty, pollution, strip mining, dangerous, get rid of it, disaster, rape of natural resources, ruining the landscape, destruction, death, dark, accidents, fracking, devastation, black lung, mine collapse, polluted streams, corporate greed, over-

worked/underpaid miners, fat cat mine bosses, labor strife, catastrophe, unforgiving, lost jobs, mine dumps, not in my backyard, ecological disaster, raping the land, crushed to death, mine fires, rickety abandoned buildings, Chilean miners trapped underground, haul roads and dust, uncapped mine shafts, water contamination, Centralia coal fire, dead towns, WV mountain tops, out of control, destroyed.

One person simply wrote “no No NO.”

When asked how the general public felt about the future of the mining industry, most acknowledged a likely desire to reduce both the need for and the activity of mining, at least in North America (“not in my back yard”), to make corporations pay to remediate sites to what they looked like before mining, and to place more emphasis on recycling and renewable energies. Many respondents felt that the general public doesn’t know—or doesn’t want to know—much about mining. Your author accepts that these are simply the observations of a small group of people responding to an online survey, yet these comments do seem to align with prevailing public perceptions about these topics.

The Mining History Association has an obligation to explore, engage, educate, and encourage a richer understanding of mining history as a critical part of American history. The negative opinions that we assume the public associates with mining and mining history themes should be something we respond to openly and directly—both to build more balanced public perspectives, and also to broaden our own exploration of these themes in our conferences, publications, and discourse.

As a nonprofit membership historical association, the MHA must continue to openly and objectively assess its relationship with current mining practice. Although we maintain no direct connection to the mineral extractive in-

dustries, we do benefit from many informal relationships across our two sectors. Many of our conferences include tours of active mining sites or historic sites on company property, with owner-operators waiving fees or providing expert staff as tour guides or both. Local firms often provide cash sponsorship for a meal or other components of a meeting in their district. And, of course, an important percentage of our membership is comprised of individuals either employed by or retired from a mining-related industry. This all reflects an implied acknowledgement that today’s “mining” will be tomorrow’s “mining history.”

This relationship can, however, present some challenges for our Association. Our members should seek to objectively preserve, explore, and share the complex and complicated history of mining in North America. There is no single “truth” about this history, no simple determinist narrative of its direction and outcomes, and certainly no easy assessment of whether mining is “good” or “bad.”

Rather, the content of our conferences, our journal, our newsletter, and even our social media content, should attempt to tease out these varying threads and present them for open discussion and debate, and to use them to educate and inform. There will always be many gray areas, but we should strive to separate our interests to preserve resources and interpret history from some more activist feelings to promote current or future aspects of extractive industries. There are other professional and public organizations charged with such work, many of which welcome MHA’s collaboration in telling the historical components of their continuing story.

This approach encourages us to remain attentive to any pro-industry bias, either conscious or unconscious, that may creep into our discourse. Yes, it is true that “if it can’t be grown, it must be mined.” But our interest in history neither asks nor requires us to be apologists or advocates for an ever-expanding industry with centuries of complicated history. In fact, that interest demands that

we strive to be objective and equally expansive in the topics we engage—everything from company “biographies” to lasting environmental disasters, from the engineering of new extractive technologies to their impact on living wages and dangerous working conditions, and from the rise and fall of a specific district to its role in the push-pull of mass migration across our continent and the entire world. There is also a central irony across our two sectors: that ongoing mining activity is often the largest threat to the preservation of historic sites from earlier eras.

The Mining History Association attracts a wide and varying membership. While some have a connection to the industries whose histories we study, most simply recognize the overarching impact that mining has had on industrial history, labor unionism, economic development, immigration, and the millions of individuals touched in some way by the output of mines over centuries. While there are many aspects of this history to celebrate and promote, objectivity, self-awareness, and conscious assessment of our own attitudes will help to deepen and enrich the outcomes of our collaborative work to come.

When asked what MHA could do better, many survey respondents sought to broaden the reach of our work to more audiences through a wider range of topical content and at a more geographically diverse set of conference locations. There were serious questions about how the Association can reach younger people, both in the K-12 age group and of college age. MHA has had mixed experiences with academics and graduate students at best, perhaps because our current membership encourages and welcomes a wide range of non-academic voices at its conferences. However, survey respondents indicated that graduate students, academic faculty, and other professional scholars can help to more seriously explore the impacts of mining on the environment, industrialization and deindustrialization, labor-management relations, historic preservation, environmental remediation, as well as gender, racial, and ethnic aspects

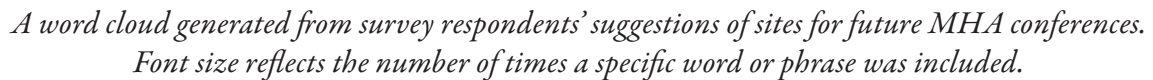
of American history.

The current MHA toolkit includes an annual conference and peer-reviewed journal, a quarterly newsletter, awards programs, social media, and a robust website. The survey suggested improvements to e-mail communication, online payment for dues and registrations, and expansion of our online presence to include more videos and photographs. Respondents indicated a desire to collaborate with other “like-minded organizations,” to consider creation of regional chapters, and the possibility of fall or spring “mini tours” outside of the annual June conference (particularly in some of the desert-located mining districts in the American Southwest). Some of these improvements are already underway and others will be implemented in the months and years to come—largely through volunteer efforts and the participation of our members.

Respondents also had many questions about the selection of sites for our conferences. Over its first twenty-five years, the MHA found its strength in the western mining regions of the United States. This is not surprising, as the region includes some of the most significant, successful, and popular locales in North American mining history, and many of our members have worked in the mining industry in this region. As a result, a larger number of our annual conferences have been held in Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Idaho, and Montana, and we also snuck across the border to Rossland, British Columbia, in 1996.

Several respondents shared concerns about a possible “western bias” resulting from this traditional membership base:

In the end, we have to ask ourselves if we are a true mining history association, trying to visit the classic locales of the North American mineral story, with a mission to explore, engage, educate and encourage the study of mining history broadly . . . or are we merely a western



the confines of “mining” and whether it should include non-metallic commodities such as salt, talc, stone, or petroleum.

There are, however, some numeric and fiscal realities to consider as well. With our membership base in the American West, it is inevitable that conferences held outside of this region will prove a more difficult draw—and more difficult to break even on expenses. At the same time, venues outside the West allow us to engage with local and regional audiences—including more recent, and younger, converts to the mining history field—who help to diversify the content of our conference, our membership, and the collective information that we generate. Much depends on how the MHA measures the “success” of a convention in terms of financial return, number of participants, and impact of the meeting. One survey respondent suggested a three-year cycle, with a meeting in the western United States, a meeting in the eastern United States, and the third in some more exotic locale in Canada, Mexico, or Alaska. Some of this is already in the works, as in 2018

In his 2008 conference address, Ron Limbaugh encouraged our organization to be more proactive in considering significant mining locales it had yet to visit. While he conceded the likely futility of trying to reach consensus on a single rank-order listing of such sites, this ongoing discussion helps to guide our organization. Survey respondents suggested a variety of potential venues, summarized visually above. Some questioned

the Association will return to the Black Hills of South Dakota—a classic locale which hosted our 1993 meeting—and visit Michigan’s Marquette Iron Range in 2019.

Some survey respondents suggested that the MHA create a meeting planning committee or employ a meeting coordinator to proactively identify, select, and run our conferences. And the Association’s current administrative structure and operation poses challenges for focus or change, with most actions of the council decided at the annual meeting, presidents elected for a single year of service, and annual conferences scattered across an entire continent creating challenges to consistent participation. Others feel that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it;” the Association hasn’t necessarily needed dramatic administrative change and, for the time being at least, can continue to approach meeting selection more reactively, reviewing proposals received from different locales around the continent.

As a result, the most crucial factor for selecting our meeting sites in recent years has often been a human one. At a blunt, operational level, we must have a trustworthy volunteer host who can organize the meeting. Although program committees and others have critical roles, MHA conferences almost always rely on a single person, or couple of people, at the heart of the operation. In most cases, these individuals have been members for many years, have attended previous MHA conferences, and anticipate what our organization wants from its annual conference. Although scholarship, tours, and intellectual exchange are important, there is also a hard-to-describe character of an MHA conference that grows from the social events, meals, and activities, as well as the historic

character of the host district and town.

Looking back on the many successful conferences the MHA has held in locations around the continent, I know that the organization will continue to push the envelope and explore more places and stories from North American mining history. As our membership expands and diversifies, new hosts will emerge to lure us to their corner of the continent and the historical gems it holds. Each conference, each issue of our journal, each edition of our newsletter, and each bit of content we add to our web and social media sites creates a new access point for people to learn about the critical impact of mining—both good and bad—and represents an opportunity for the MHA to inform and influence public opinion. Each also presents an opportunity to draw more individuals into membership and enfold them into our warm circle of friends who gather each year to explore a historic mining district, exchange knowledge, and partake in a few local libations.

Whither mining history? In the near term, it will be Deadwood in 2018 and Marquette in 2019. But the Mining History Association should constantly return to thoughts of its mission to explore and share the fascinating and critical history of mining in the United States, North America, and the world. As a membership organization, we must strive to balance the needs and interests of our current members with the greater responsibilities we have to help preserve, interpret, and share these stories with the general public. The way ahead is filled with unmarked shafts and rock falls, but through the efforts of our volunteer members, both present and future, I feel certain that the next twenty-five years hold great promise for the Mining History Association.

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Wayne State University, and at press time was scheduled to defend his dissertation in industrial heritage at Michigan Tech. He and his wife, Jane Nordberg, have been members since 1995 and hosted meetings of the Mining History Association in Houghton, Michigan, in 1997, and in Chisholm, Minnesota, in 2008. Nordberg is a past recipient of MHA's John Townley Award and its Rodman Paul Award.

Note:

1. Limbaugh, "The Mining History Association: Some Thoughts on Future Meetings," *Mining History Journal* 16 (2009): 1-4; Charles K. Hyde, "Whither Industrial Archaeology?" *IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archaeology* 27:1 (2001): 41-4. While this paper reflects remarks made at the MHA Presidential Luncheon on June 11, 2016, in Telluride, Colorado, some content was added subsequent to the conference and appeared in *Mining History News*, the newsletter of the Mining History Association.