



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



Tommyknocker

CRAAACCKK!

Deep underground in a mine, the sound of creaking timbers and cracking rock meant it was time to bolt for safety! If you made it out before the cave-in, you could thank the tommyknockers for the warning!

Many of Wisconsin's early European miners came from Cornwall, England. They had developed their skills in the coal mines of their homeland. These skills made the Cornish miners highly sought after in the lead-mining territory of southwestern Wisconsin.

When people travel from one place to another, they bring with them many things that help them settle into their new homes. This includes practical things, like quilts and tools, but it also includes things that remind them of home, like pictures and diaries.

Miners also brought their traditions with them. They made the pasties, or meat- and vegetable-filled pies, that they remembered from home. They told stories to remind them of their heritage. One of these stories concerned tiny elves who lived in the mines. The knockers, also called tommyknockers or knockers, were sometimes helpful, and sometimes not.

Cornish miners firmly believed in these small, ugly, wrinkled, underground beings. An angry knocker wasn't something you wanted on your hands. They might steal your tools or cause the vein of lead you were following to suddenly run out. They might even cause a cave-in!

The knockers could also be helpful if you treated them right. After eating lunch, miners often left the crust of their pasty behind for the knockers to eat. Having them in your mine was a good sign because they worked only the best ground. Hearing them might mean you were on the right track to finding mineral riches! Some say the noises the knockers made before a cave-in probably saved many miners' lives.

Today, miners don't believe in the tommyknockers. Science and engineering have helped make mining safer, and the knockers have become another piece of folklore from Wisconsin's past.

Or have they?

CRAAACCKK!

Learn more about tommyknockers and Wisconsin's lead mining past with a virtual visit to [Pendarvis](https://pendarvis.wisconsinhistory.org) in Mineral Point, Wisconsin.

<https://pendarvis.wisconsinhistory.org>

Wisconsin: Our State, Our Story is now available for [free digital download!](#) Discover the history of the Badger state!

<https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15257>