Where to find lead

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I guess I should start out by saying that the most common place to find lead is from your local tire store. But how does that lead get to your tire store? There is a rather long process that is involved before it gets to the end user. It must be mined, transported, smelted, alloyed, and then made into the finished product, to be delivered to the end user.

From the government Publication: “Lead and Zinc Deposits of Wisconsin“.

“Lead is also known as Galenite, atomic chart designation PbS: lead 86.6%, sulphur 34.4%, specific gravity 7.4 to 7.6. It is known as Galena, or lead sulfide and the miners usually term it “mineral”. Galenite commonly occurs in the form of crystals, which are usually cubes and less commonly, octahedrons. Sometimes a combination of these two forms is seen. These large crystals, Galenite, sometimes reaches sizes several inches to a foot across and the miners have applied the term “Cog mineral” to such large crystals.”

Many of the Midwest deposits also contain amounts of zinc, iron, arsenic, dolomite and cadmium. Much of the western production of lead is a by-product from silver mining.

In early America, one of the most important lead deposits was found along the Mississippi River. This was known as the Mines of Spain, and was acquired from the Fox and Sac tribes of the area, in the early eighteen hundreds. The Jesuit priests who traveled down the river years before had first mentioned the deposits. The person who arranged with the Indians for mining, was Julian Dubuque. This was the forerunner of things to come, as other miners soon came to the area. They had some tough times though, as they had not made arrangements as Dubuque had, with the Indians. The mining area included Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin as the most productive.

The entire lead region spans approximately 2880 square miles.

At this time, most of the lead ore was transported to the Saint Louis region for smelting. Some individuals would process a certain amount of lead alloy for home use and firearms, however the high sulfur content made it difficult to obtain good results. However, I suspect that they were not quite as demanding as we now are for premium quality bullets.

From our perspective, we have an advantage with lead as it comes from the mine. It already contains a certain amount of arsenic that is impossible to remove in the smelting process. This is good, as we need a certain amount of arsenic for hardening our bullets.

The lead deposits generally lie in limestone formations. They can either be found as cubes, or veins. The lead is many times found in detached masses in fissures. At other times it is bounded to a solid seat, compressed between the cells of the crab as an adult sheet mineral. When found in a detached mass, it is commonly called chunk ore.

The modern smelters generally handle a wide variety of minerals. As mentioned before, much of today’s lead is a byproduct of silver and gold mining. But still it is a significant part of mining production. That used by the military and by sportsmen consumers, amounts to a considerable yearly amount. Lead still finds itself used in many industrial purposes.

If you would go to a smelter today to buy lead, you would find yourself in the predicament of having to buy a 2000 pound minimum lot, as a rule. This gives you the problem, of what to do with 2000 pound chunks of lead! I do have a friend who used to buy 2000 pounds at one time, from the West Helena smelter in Montana. He would use a cutting torch to melt off the lead as needed. Very unhandy, and you have the added expense of the oxygen and acetylene for the torch. Not to mention the problem of hauling.
There are commercial suppliers today, such as Dave Gullo’s Buffalo Arms, and the Antimony Man, Bill Ferguson. From them, you can obtain a lead in smaller amounts, and blended to your specifications. These are also primary resources for pure tin, and of course Bill carries antimony.

As was stated in the beginning, most of us will be able to obtain wheel weights from our local tire stores. For how long, who knows? New EPA restrictions come down every day for the handling and use of lead. As it is, some over overseas countries already restrict the citizens from obtaining lead in this way, and all must be returned to a licensed recycler. I see this coming our way soon on this hemisphere, so would be a good idea to stock up as you can. Already some of the larger tire retailers, are refusing to sell or give lead to home recyclers.

Now, I’ve never heard of this happening in this country, but there are reports from our friends in the Netherlands that some may be resorting to midnight raids on the local Wal-Mart parking lots. There, they sometimes find homeless wheel weights clinging to the wheels of unsuspecting vehicles. And being the kindhearted souls they are, they take them home to give them nice warm lodging. Now, I would certainly never encourage such things. Really!

I can just see it now, the wheel weight commandos, dressed in black, their faces darkened against the moon and the parking lot light. Slowly, they crawl on their bellies alongside the vehicles, popping off the elusive bits of metal with their trusty screwdrivers. The only drawback that I see is that they would be easily spotted, as their pockets would be sagging severely. I’m sure that the tire businesses over there do very good, as I am sure there is a larger rash of unbalanced wheels to contend with.

Another of our friends, who takes a daily walk, commonly finds stray wheel weights along side the roads. He has also trained his wife to help spot them, making this a family proposition.

Another source is recycled lead from shooting ranges. There will be considerable variation in the makeup of this lead, mostly coming from jacketed bullets. This lead will tend to be a bit soft for our purposes, but having this base metal will be a good start towards casting your own bullets. Trap and skeet ranges are not to be overlooked, as they generate thousands of pounds of shot every year. Generally, commercial operators will come in with large vacuum type machines, pick up the shot, and recycle it. The lead you’ll recover here will generally be high in antimony content. You’ll find it good, to mix with other leads.

Don’t overlook your local recycler. Many of these will have scrapped lead, and it generally sells at the current spot price from the London market. In your zeal to collect more lead, avoid the plates from old batteries. There are too many hazardous materials associated with the battery lead to make it worthwhile, or even safe to deal with. Old lead pipe is good, as is cable sheathing. It is still fairly common to find both of these at recyclers.

Other sources may take a little more development.

A plumber that I shoot with is always good for several hundred pounds of lead per year. This bonanza comes in the form of old lead sink traps, lead piping, sometimes lead sheathing from X-ray rooms and the best form, old wiped joints from the old composite sewer piping which is rich in tin as it was made using 50/50 solder.

Another pair of shooters work for the telephone company. One is a line repairman. Occasionally a quantity of cable sheathing ends up in my truck at the range. Both are benchies and shoot those condom bullets so I end up with the lead concession at the range. Occasionally, they’ll tip me off to a place where a contractor is removing lead covered lines for environmental purposes and replacing it with fiber optics. That’s a real bonanza.

Then, don’t forget the railroad. These guys will occasionally come up with lead and yes…babbitt too which is high in tin.

Then there’s the lady at the dentist office who will save the lead foil off X-rays. Not much lead but every little bit helps.
Once word spreads that you’re a bullet caster, lead will beat its way to your door. I was napping on Sunday after being at the range all morning. My wife got a call. A fellow was moving and wanted to get rid of lead so I jumped in the pickup and went over to his place. The end result: seven 5 gallon buckets full of .38 wadcutters from the police range. The rear bumper on my pickup scraped on his driveway and mine on the way home.

Then, there’s the guy who has lead and wants a few bullets. Usually you make out really good on these deals. Help them out. Sometimes, you’ll develop a new lead source.

Then, there are the racecar guys. They’re usually stingy but can be had when they’re cleaning up after building a new car. Lead is used to provide weight on various parts of the car.

So you see, lead is where you find it. Fortunately for us, in this country, we still have a fairly good access to wheel weights, our most common casting alloy. If you are in serious bullet caster, I will certainly encourage you to make a stockpile, as we never know when our supplies will become difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.