

Yellow Dog Lanterns: A Brief History

“Yellow Dog Lantern” is the field name for a derrick lamp. These lamps consist of a metal container with two spouts, each holding a cotton wick to absorb the fuel oil. When lit, the lantern produces a very yellow light. According to legend, “yellow dogs” received their name because when burning at night, their flames look like glowing dog eyes from a distance. Other accounts claim the name stems from the fact that a lit derrick lamp casts a dog-like shadow on the ground.

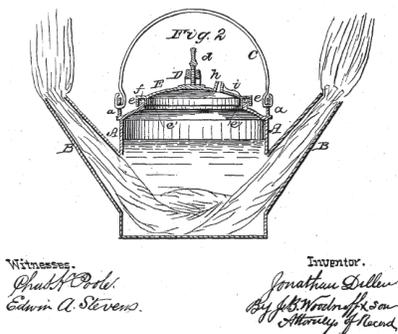


Yellow dog lanterns were used to light areas around oil derricks. Because of the dangerous conditions around oil derricks, proper lighting was very important. However, while darkness itself created a hazard, unsafe lighting, like open flames or ground fires, was also dangerous and could cause the oil derrick to catch fire. Derrick lamps had to be able to withstand a twenty-foot drop to the ground, and had

to utilize crude oil as their fuel source. To prevent spills, the yellow dog lanterns were cast out of heavy metal, often weighing as much as fifteen pounds. As time went on, manufacturers created new safety features, like screw-on lids and end caps for unused spouts.

By the time Edwin L. Drake struck oil in Pennsylvania, lanterns had been in use for thousands of years. The first lamp was probably created from a hollow rock around 70,000 BCE. Terra cotta lamps originated in Greece in the seventh century BCE, and the Greek word ‘lampas,’ meaning ‘torch,’ became the root of the English word ‘lamp.’ Lanterns with multiple spouts have been dated to the eleventh century CE. The first kerosene lamp was invented in Germany in 1853, but these lamps did not become wildly popular until Samuel Kier’s 1850 discovery that kerosene could be distilled from crude oil and Drake’s opening of the U.S. oil industry in 1859.

Yellow dog lanterns could have been born from one of two lamp models: the kerosene lamp or the whale oil lamp. Kerosene lamps were intended for use in homes. They were made from ceramic, glass, or bronze. Whale oil lamps were used on fishing boats and burned whale blubber as fuel. Some – but not all – whale oil lamps had two spouts, but they did not have locking lids to keep the whale blubber inside the reservoir. These lamps were made from heavy tin and riveted along any seams. Kerosene lamps were created slightly before derrick lamps, and whale oil lamps had been used for a long time, but have very little recorded history.



Dillen’s 1870 U.S. Patent

The first official U. S. patent for the derrick lamp was issued May 3, 1870 to Jonathan Dillen. A native of Petroleum Centre, Dillen Pennsylvania, patented a crude design of the ‘Derrick Lamp.’ He claimed his invention related to “hanging-lamps or torches for illuminating places out of doors, especially in and about derricks, and machinery in the oil regions, whereby explosions are more dangerous and destructive to life and property than in most

other places” (“Derrick Lamp”). Hiram Freeman, also from Petroleum Centre, obtained a U. S. patent for his ‘Safety Derrick-Lamp’ in 1872. Freeman’s changes to Dillen’s design included a screw-on lid, screw-on end caps, and removable spouts. In 1877, Dillen was reissued his patent, and it was assigned to John Eaton and E. H. Cole of the Oil Well Supply Company.

Oil Well Supply Co. was the prominent manufacturer of yellow dog lanterns in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The company was founded in 1867 by John Eaton. E. H. Cole and Edward Goodwin Burnham soon joined, and in 1875, the company was called ‘Eaton, Cole, and Burnham Co.’ In 1878, the company’s name changed to Oil Well Supply Co., and by the beginning of the 20th century, it had 75 branch stores supported by eight factories and nine subsidiary shops responsible for repairs. The total number of employees in the company topped 2,000. By 1889, Oil Well Supply Co. was the largest producer of oil-related machinery in the world. The main offices for Oil Well Supply Co. were located in New York City and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Oil Well Supply Co. was not the only manufacturer of yellow dog lanterns. Other producers included: National Supply, Frick & Lindsay Supply Co., Jarecki Manufacturing Co., Boviard & Sefayng Manufacturing, Cyclone Drilling Machine Co., and Alten’s Foundry & Machine Works. There could be many other manufacturers of yellow dog lanterns, however, these companies are hard to identify. Some lanterns had the manufacturing company’s name cast into the metal – this is how lanterns are identified. Therefore, those lanterns with no name cast into them are not easily matched with a manufacturer.

It should come as no surprise that derrick lamps, along with other types of lanterns, started to disappear from everyday use after 1879 – the year of Thomas Edison’s first successful test of the electric light bulb.