Nail City Oil Wick Lamp

by Dave Johnson

One of the most unusual brand names to appear on a miners' oilwick cap lamp is the Greer & Laing NAIL CITY. Greer and Laing was a wholesale hardware business in Wheeling, West Virginia. Records in the West Virginia State Archives for the period 1871-85 list Greer & Laing, as "importers and dealers in hardware", with J.R. Greer and A. Laing as proprietors. The Nail City oilwick pictured here is all tinned steel with a double spout. It is a small face lamp with embossed lettering. The embossed lettering, seldom seen in oilwick lamps, is the only feature that really distinguishes it from other oilwicks.

The Nail City brandname comes from the fact that Wheeling, West Virginia was long known as the Nail City . According to a September 14, 1886 report in the Wheeling Intelligencer newspaper; "No city in the United States produced more nails than Wheeling, where the first nail factory began production in 1834". Wheeling manufacturers are recognized as being pioneers in introducing soft steel as a material for making nails rather than iron.

Hand-forged nails date back to Biblical times. Nails have always been in demand by people building with wood. Some blacksmiths specialized in making nails and they were called "Nailers". In many areas of pre-1850 America nails were so scarce (and expensive) that people would burn dilapidated wood buildings just to sift the ashes for iron nails. This was done because pulling the nails would have been time consuming and would have damaged most of them. After the nails were recovered, a blacksmith could easily straighten any nails that had been bent during construction.

Today we still use the term "penny" when referring to the size of a nail. It is believed that this term came into use in the early 1600's in England. The English monetary unit was the Pound Sterling (£) which was divided into Shillings and Pence. The cost of 100 nails in Pence in the 1600's is how we refer to nail sizes to this day. For example, 100 small nails that sold for 4 pence were called 4d nails (4d is the abbreviation of 4 pence). 100 larger nails that sold for 16 pence are 16d nails. And so on. The cut nail made its appearance in the mid-1700s. Thomas Jefferson is known to have

established a nail factory at his Monticello plantation as a way to supplement his income. His nail factory made both hand-forged and cut nails. It would not be until the middle-1800's that cut nails began dominating the marketplace. Cut nails are not actually "cut" they are sheared from steel plate that is the thickness of the nail shank. Although routinely referred to as "square nails", they are not truly square, the cutting machine tapers the nail shank as it is sheared from the steel plate. A second machine forms the head of a cut nail. With the hand-forged nail, all four sides are tapered. With the cut nail, two sides are parallel because they are the thickness of the plate they were sheared from.

Cut nails could be manufactured much faster than individually formed hand-forged nails. As the process was mechanized, the cost per nail decreased. However, cut nail factories employed operators and attendants for each machine so the process was still labor-intensive. Cut nails had their heyday from about 1820 (development of the Type B nail) to 1910, the advent of the wire nail. Wire nails are round. Steel wire is fed into a machine that grips the wire, cuts it, makes the head, and chisels the point, all in one operation. This process is totally mechanized, requiring someone to merely provide maintenance for multiple machines and turn the machines on and off. Each wire nail machine can make thousands of nails per minute.

Wire nails have all but replaced the cut nail. Cut nails are still used but mainly for restoration and masonry work. Though wire nails are cheaper to produce, the cut nail has a holding power of approximately four times that of the modern round nail. Compared on that basis, cut nails are still the better nail. Now you know more than you ever wanted to know about nails, as well as learning about an unusually named oilwick lamp.

Skip Cars

by Dave Thorpe

They are a little odd looking, but when you understand how they are used, skip cars suddenly become collectable too! You can see the rear wheel has an extra smaller rim that extends out from the main wheel. The smaller rim catches another track part-way up the incline which tips the car and dumps the load. These cars were used for both ore and water haulage.