

Terre Haute's Boom Town Lamp

by Dave Thorpe

The Wabash and Erie Canal reached Terre Haute, Indiana in 1849, and railroad operations began in 1852. Following the Civil War the city became a major industrial and mining center with steel mills, coal mines, and breweries. During this time it also became known for its gambling and brothels – a wild-west town in eastern U.S.

Luck and superstition have always figured prominently in the culture of gamblers and miners. And so from this milieu, a miner's oil wick lamp was made in Terre Haute bearing the stampmark of a horseshoe, America's most recognized symbol of good luck.



The "Miners Choice" oil wick lamp is deeply stamped with a horseshoe and has two patent dates of July 24 & 31, 1883.

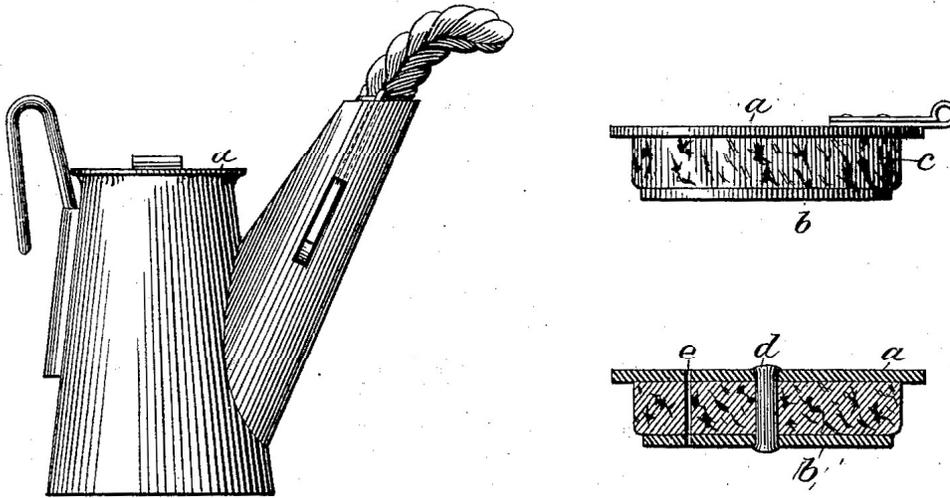
John Deeds held two patents whose dates are stamped into this lamp. The Deeds patent of July 24, 1883 describes a lid made of a cork wafer sandwiched between two metal discs so as to make a tight seal. The lamp shown here has an all-metal door but it is not perforated like most lids. It fits snugly into a font whose inlet is double-reinforced. The July 30, 1883 patent was for a wick raising device.

J. B. DEEDS & W. MACK.

LID FOR MINERS' LAMPS.

No. 281,846.

Patented July 24, 1883.



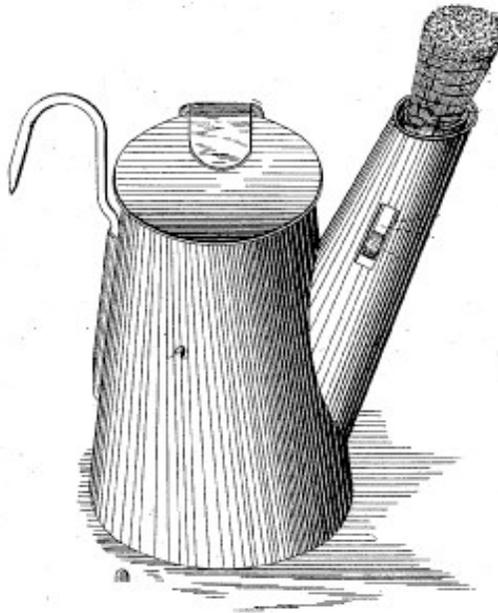
July 24, 1883 patent for a cork wafer in the lid.

J. B. DEEDS.

WICK RAISER FOR LAMPS.

No. 282,282.

Patented July 31, 1883.



July 31, 1883 patent for a wick raising mechanism.

Neither patent materialized on example shown above. The practice of stamping in patent dates that did not belong to a lamp was occasionally used in the mine lamp industry. Perhaps its value was in giving the appearance of propriety.

A Miner's Choice lamp has been found with the patented wick raiser (Jack Schultz collection), and small details vary from lamp to lamp. A Miner's Choice lamp owned by Bob Guthrie does not have a reinforced bottom seam.



Left: Patented wick raiser is present on this lamp owned by Jack Schultz. Right: Note lack of reinforced bottom seam on this lamp owned by Bob Guthrie.

Prohibition (1920-1933) dealt a serious blow to the economy of Terre Haute, closing many breweries and distilleries as well as several glass making companies and entertainment venues. The sin-city that was on its way to becoming another Las Vegas sank into oblivion. Today it is best known for its "correction center" that is the official federal death row. There are surely a few souls in Terre Haute whose last hopes lie in prayers, four-leafed clovers, and horseshoes.