

The Copper Queen Mine Lamp

by Ted Bobrink

In 1912, the Copper Queen Consolidated Mining Company was having a difficult time convincing the miners to convert from their candlesticks and candles to the new carbide lamp. Carbide was considered less expensive as a source of light than the use of candles and much safer in regards to starting underground mine fires. Underground fires had been a real problem in the Bisbee Mining District due to the extensive use of square-set timbering. A burning candle left in a candlestick unattended in a square set stope could melt down and fall to the wooden floor below causing a fire that might shut the mine down for months. Such a fire could certainly trap or kill miners just from the smoke of a fire hundreds of feet below or above them.

Miners had been using candles with their own personal candlesticks for over thirty years in the Bisbee mines and resented the mining company's attempt to force them to change to the carbide lamp. Just the fact that they had to buy the lamps themselves at a cost of over four times that of a candlestick didn't make the change any easier. The Copper Queen Mining Company knew their miners were putting up a big fuss and decided to try to ease the situation by ordering 500 special Justrite cast aluminum hand lamps with the name "Copper Queen" instead of the usual name, "Little Giant" cast into the left side of the lamp.

Today, the Copper Queen hand lamp is the most sought after hand lamp in the United States. Even collectors who only collect cap lamps consider the Copper Queen a real prize to own. Many collectors consider the Copper Queen to be somewhat rare, but not impossible to acquire, especially in the western states. There are several things to look for when collecting the Justrite Copper Queen Lamp. The round brass water door is held in place by a strong coiled spring attached inside the water chamber. To add water to the lamp, you had to lift the water door up and over to one side. The fact that the spring was inside the water chamber made it vulnerable to corrosion and caused it to often break. Therefore, about half of the Copper Queens and Little Giants found have a missing or repaired water door. The burner tube with its burner tip and screw on wind screen are almost never found complete. It seems the burner tip didn't hold up well so the miners had to improvise as best they could. Thus one will find a variety of hand made burner tips on the Copper Queen.

If you own a complete Copper Queen lamp or even one with one or both of the problems mentioned above, consider yourself lucky. You own the one and only known carbide miner's lamp that was named after a specific mining company.

