

Baldwin and the U.P.

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Frederic E. Baldwin is credited with inventing the first acetylene lamp that could be worn on a miner's cap or helmet. It was first launched in the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania but quickly spread to coal mines throughout all eastern United States. The small lightweight head lamp was attached to the cap by a hook and horizontal cap brace. It was well suited to the low-ceiling working conditions of coal seams. While western "hard rock" metal miners preferred larger hand lamps, one isolated copper mining area in the U. S. saw primary use of a head mounted light source: the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

The miners of Michigan's U. P. preferred a different method of attaching a lamp to the cap. Carried over from its prior use on oil lamps, the mount consisted of a single narrow ⁵/₁₆-inch pointed spade known by historians as the "Michigan spade mount." Virtually all acetylene lamp manufacturers adapted their mounts to meet demand in the U. P., and Baldwin's lamp, marketed by the John Simmons Company, was no exception.



Baldwin mounts showing the classic hook and brace mount compared to the "Michigan Spade."

But Michigan miners had yet another preference for their cap lamps. Wet mines of the area created corrosive conditions, and most Baldwin lamps used in eastern coal mines were sold with a steel reflector. In fact, many photos today from the U. P. show miners wearing cap lamps with no reflector at all, and one may wonder if they simply rusted beyond use.

Baldwin lamps utilized “push-on” reflectors that did not use a threaded tube and nut to secure them to the lamp. As a result, many different reflectors come and go on those found today. However, if one studies the Michigan spade lamps that appear to have a reflector that the lamp was manufactured with, i.e. those with similar aging and surface debris, three styles of reflector emerge. None are steel, none have strikers -- and none are common! The following photos show such lamps with the Michigan spade and atypical reflectors.



Nickel-plated brass reflector with Michigan spade. (Dave Thorpe collection)



Sharp-edged brass reflector with Michigan spade (Tim Town collection).



Rolled-edge brass reflector with Michigan spade (unknown collection). The author has seen three lamps identical to this, and all have a split in the push-on tube which is made of very thin material.