



PIERCED TIN LANTERNS

For as long as there have been candles, there have been candle carriers. A candleholder is a type of candle carrier. What happens when someone picks up a candleholder and walks quickly across a room? The unprotected flame is extinguished and the light is lost. Today, this is not a significant problem as matches and portable lighters are readily available. For most of recorded time, however, lighters and matches did not exist. A burning candle needed protection. Lanterns emerged to provide that service.

A typical lantern is a metal box or cylinder with transparent or translucent side panels and a ventilated cover or top. The candle is protected from the elements and the candlelight can pass through the side panels. Mica, a translucent mineral, was first used for the side panels. As glass became readily available and affordable, glass panels became the standard for lanterns. What if glass was not available or was too costly? People used what they had and created what they needed.

Both glass and mica were expensive and scarce in frontier areas. Colonists used tin to solve the problem. In North America, tin was cheap and relatively available from colonial times forward. Tin is malleable and could be easily worked into different shapes. The colonists put a door in the lantern and punched holes in the tin so it could be used for the side panels of the lantern. Primitive punched tin lanterns provided no aesthetic value; they merely protected the flame and provided some light. As their use proliferated, patterns were punched into the tin so that the light provided some decorative effects as well.

Punched tin lanterns appear throughout American history. In the Far West, homesteaders and miners created their own open-sided lanterns from just about any material available. Improved transportation brought canned goods to the most remote areas. By the end of the 19th century, tin cans were abundant and available everywhere. Many people turned them into punched tin lanterns. Miners called theirs "shadowgees."

One of the best examples of tin cans reused in a creative fashion involves Towle's Log Cabin Syrup cans. They were shaped like log cabins. A handle could easily be attached over the "roof" of the can. Removal of one end provided access for the candles and the focus for the light. Punched holes in the sides dissipated heat and provided oxygen for the candle flame. "Shadowgees" provide an excellent example of ingenuity, innovation and adaptation.