



MINERS' CANDLESTICKS

Mining is difficult and dangerous work. Part of the problem is that mining occurs underground, in the dark. Throughout time, the first obstacle for any miner was how to see to work. Miners in ancient Greece and Rome carried clay oil lamps to light their way. After tallow candles appeared, they became the miners' favorites. There were problems with candles, too.

A miner needs both hands to work. He cannot hold a candle in one hand and work with the other. Setting a lamp or a candle on the ground casts shadows on the roof and the walls. Water, ore dust, or a careless miner's boot could easily snuff out the flame. Miners needed a portable, hands-free light source.

Miners' first solution was to fashion a lump of clay that would hold a candle or small lamp to the wall. Around the 1850s, miners began to make simple candleholders from spikes. On one end was a loop for carrying. In the center was a small circle that held the candle. The other end was sharpened so it could be jammed into cracks in the rock wall or into the timbers that held up the roof of the mine. Soon, miners added a small hook that could be used to attach the candleholder to a loop on the miner's cap. Miners could now see and have both hands free to work.

By the 1870s these miners' candlesticks were so popular that they were mass-produced. Miners in the West began to call them "Sticking Tommies" because they resembled an oil lamp called a "Tommy Sticker" that had been used in the fishing industry in the Northeast for many years. Candlesticks remained popular until the carbide lamp replaced candles as the most popular light source in the mines in 1914.