A Brief History Of The Origin and Use Of Coleman Lamps and Lanterns

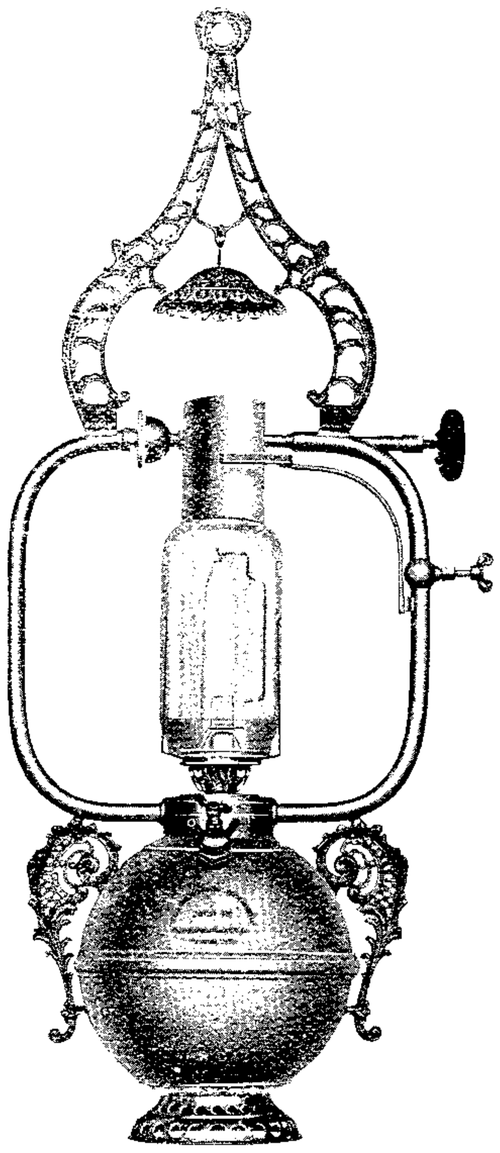
ONE of the great scientific achievements of the 19th century was the invention in 1879 of the incandescent electric light. Yet many years would pass before Edison's marvelous light would benefit rural America. In fact, we were well into the 20th century before small towns and villages experienced dependable electric service.

While millions lived and toiled within small circles of yellowish light from coal oil lamps and lanterns, a Kansas school teacher and part-time salesman discovered a brilliant white light which promised better, sight-saving illumination for everyone beyond the reach of electricity.

The school teacher was William C. Coleman and the light was called the Efficient Lamp. The manufacturer was the Edward Miller Co. of Meriden, CT.

Coleman discovered the lamp in a drugstore window in a small town in Alabama. It burned gasoline. When air was pumped into the lamp's reservoir or fount, and a valve was opened slightly, air pressure forced the fuel into a generator. The generator could be heated with a small alcohol torch. This vaporized the fuel in the generator tube. As the gas vapor escaped through a tiny opening in the generator, it entered a burner where it mixed with air and ignited. The intense heat caused the lamp's mantles to glow brightly.

The mantles, invented in 1885 by Karl Auer Von Welsbach, were made of a loosely woven fabric which had been saturated in mineral salts. By adjusting the kind and amount of chemicals, the mantles would produce a bright white light.



The Arc Lamp was the first gasoline pressure lamp to bear the Coleman name. Originally it was called the "Efficient Lamp."

Convinced that the Efficient lamp would benefit the millions living beyond the reach of electricity, Coleman sought out the owner of the lamp, the Irby-Gilliland Company of Memphis, Tenn., and purchased a number of them. Coleman embarked on a career which was destined to bring him fame and fortune.

Coleman arrived in Kingfisher, Oklahoma Territory, on January 1, 1900, and began calling on the merchants of the small countyseat town. At the end of the first week he had sold only two lamps. It was a painful experience for a determined salesman who believed wholeheartedly in his product. To his chagrin, he learned that an itinerant salesman had preceded him, sold a number of inferior, gravity-fed lamps to the merchants and then left town. One after another the lamps failed. There was no way to repair them.

Then came an inspiration. Coleman realized he must sell light rather than lamps. He would sell a lighting service!

And so, in January, 1900, was born the Hydro-Carbon Light Co. Coleman retraced his steps and offered to rent his lamps for $1 per week, including fuel and service. No light, no pay!

The straightforward offer succeeded. Before long Kingfisher was the best lighted small town in Oklahoma.

Late in 1901, Coleman moved his base of operations to a 16' by 44' store building in Wichita, Kansas. He resumed his lighting service business.

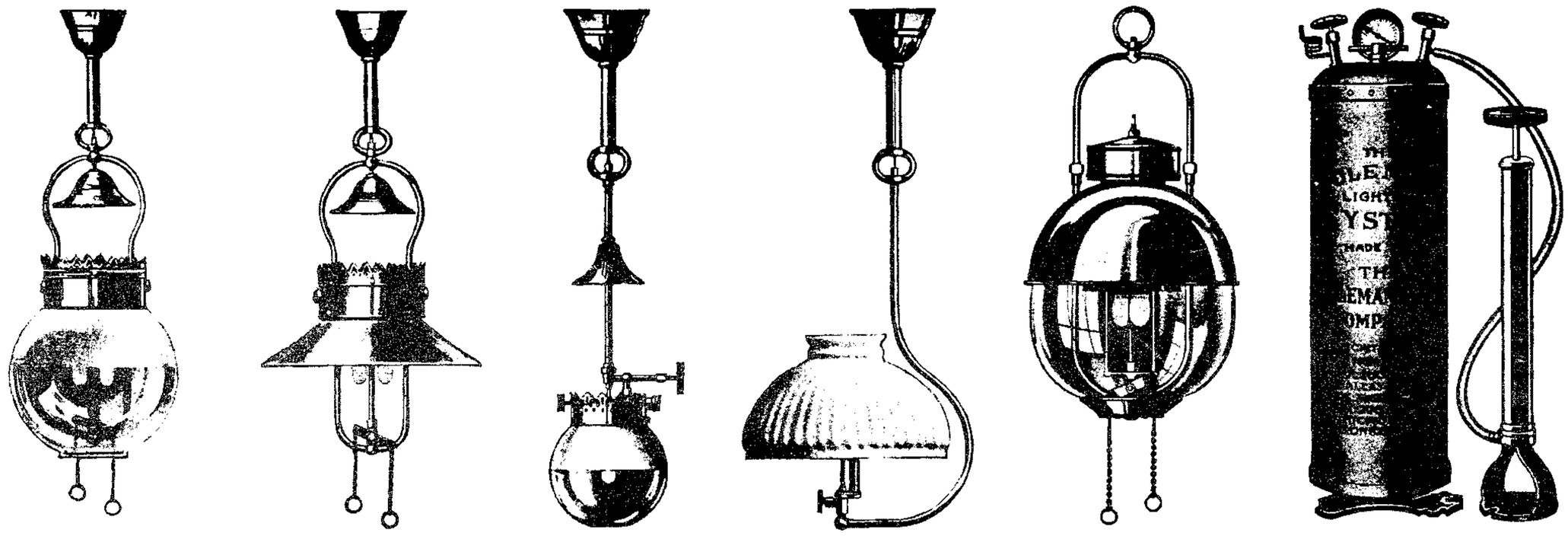
In 1902, Coleman purchased all rights to the Efficient lamp from the Irby-Gilliland Company and set about making improvements in what he had re-named the Coleman Arc Lamp.

The lamp rental business prospered, due in no small part to the owner's ability to demonstrate the superiority of his lamp over other brands. This, combined with his determination to stand behind the product and constantly seek ways to make it even better, built for the Hydro-Carbon Company a lasting reputation for quality and dependability.

Having moved into larger quarters, Coleman determined to manufacture his own lamps and so, for the first time in 1905, the legend "Made in Wichita, Kansas U.S.A." appeared on Coleman lamps.

Daily contact with storekeepers sharpened Coleman's interest in what became known as System Lighting. A System consisted of a central supply tank for fuel and compressed air, a small copper tube or "hollow wire", as it was called, which would conduct the gasoline and air to lighting fixtures suspended from the ceiling or fastened to the wall. The fixtures could be located in series in one large room or used to light several rooms. The arrangement was not unlike an electrical lighting system.

The Coleman System was successful, but Coleman was ever mindful of the need for lamps which were



A few of the many types of Coleman System Lights manufactured between 1905 and 1927. Several lights could be fueled by a small copper tube, called a "hollow wire." The supply line was connected to a fuel tank usually located outside the building. Air pressure was supplied by a hand-operated pump, shown far right. System light next to fuel tank was the forerunner of the Coleman Arc and Air-O-Lite lanterns. Most System Lights were installed in churches, meeting halls and commercial buildings.

portable — lamps which could be used for reading, sewing, cooking, even carried outdoors where chores were often performed in semi-darkness.

The search for a better and brighter portable lamp spanned several years. Finally, in 1908, Coleman was satisfied with his design for a portable lamp. In the following year he received a patent on the Coleman Model R (for "Reading") lamp.

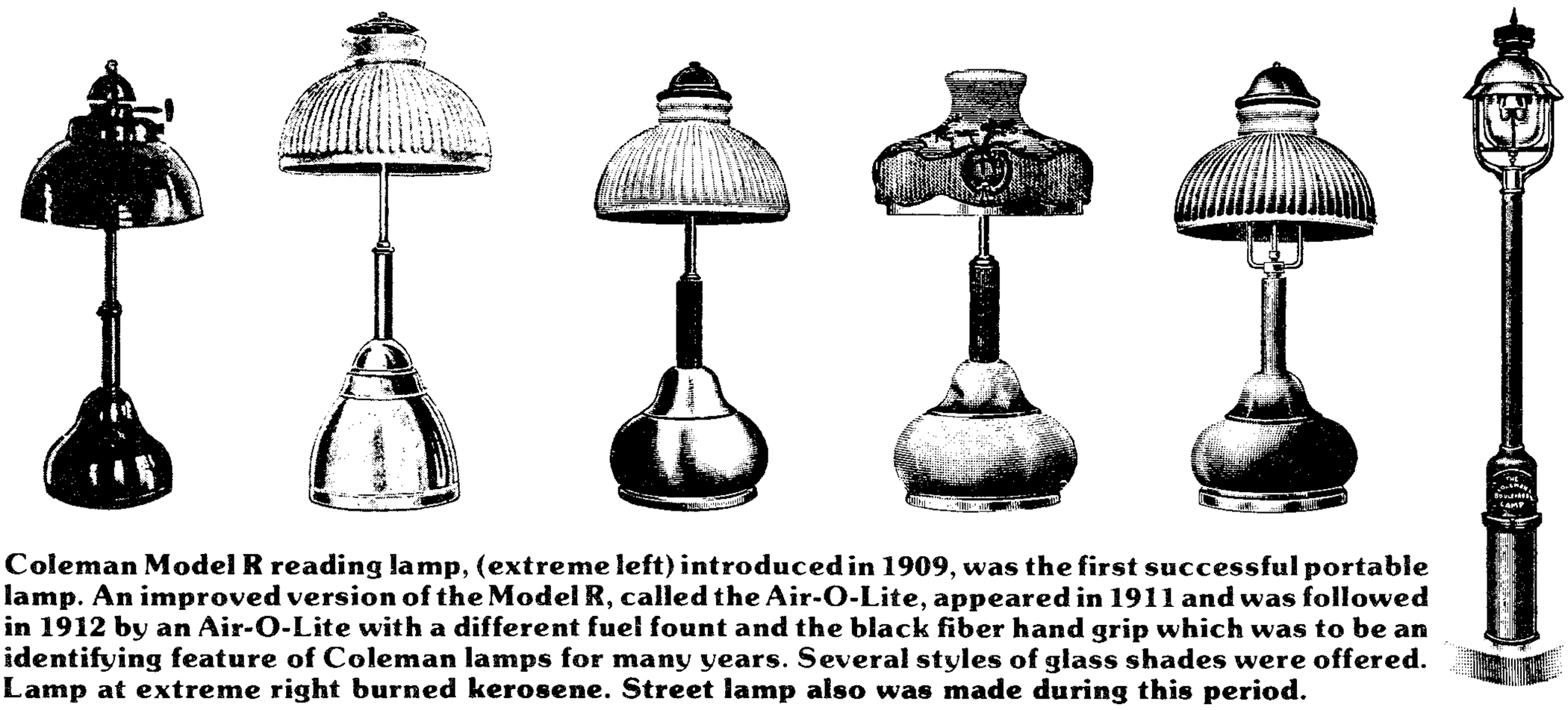
It was fairly simple to light with a small alcohol torch. It was portable or could be suspended by a metal rod from the ceiling. Best of all, its light was many times brighter than ordinary wick-type oil lamps and the common electric light bulbs of the time.

Soon there were many imitations of the Coleman lamp but before they could rival the Model R, Coleman was ready with an improved version which he called the Air-O-I ite.

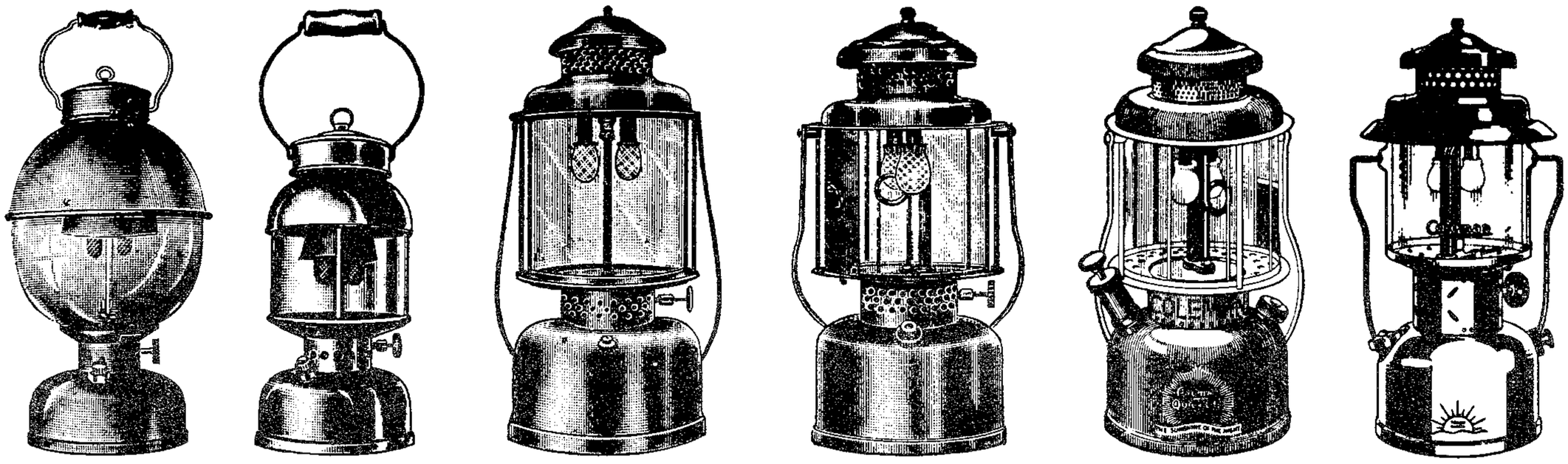
The first Coleman lanterns appeared in 1914 and were adapted from a Coleman System light which had been designed specifically for outdoor use. By adding a two-quart fuel fount and a sturdy bale with handgrip the Arc Lantern could be hung from a post or pole or carried from place to place. It was practically weather-proof and bug proof and would give up to 25 hours of service on a single filling.

Later models (1915-1916) bore the name Air-O-Lantern but the popularity of the larger and somewhat heavier Arc Lantern continued and the original lantern remained in production through 1918.

Encouraged by public acceptance of the portable lamps and lanterns, Coleman and his associates re-doubled their efforts and, in 1916, came up with another innovation, the first match-lighting gasoline pressurized lamps. No longer was it necessary to use a



Coleman Model R reading lamp, (extreme left) introduced in 1909, was the first successful portable lamp. An improved version of the Model R, called the Air-O-Lite, appeared in 1911 and was followed in 1912 by an Air-O-Lite with a different fuel fount and the black fiber hand grip which was to be an identifying feature of Coleman lamps for many years. Several styles of glass shades were offered. Lamp at extreme right burned kerosene. Street lamp also was made during this period.



First of the Coleman outdoor lanterns was the Coleman Arc Lantern made in 1914. Model A and AL torch lighting models (second and third from left) followed closely although the Arc Lantern remained in production for several years. The first Quick-Lite lanterns were made in the latter part of 1916. Production accelerated in 1917 and 1918 and the "Q" models with their "Sunshine of the Night" imprint became known as the great farm lantern. Coleman Instant-Lite models, introduced in 1928 and 1929, featured built-in air pumps and styling characteristic of Coleman lanterns popular today. Founts of brass with nickel plating were standard until 1950. All post war models have porcelain enamel ventilator tops.

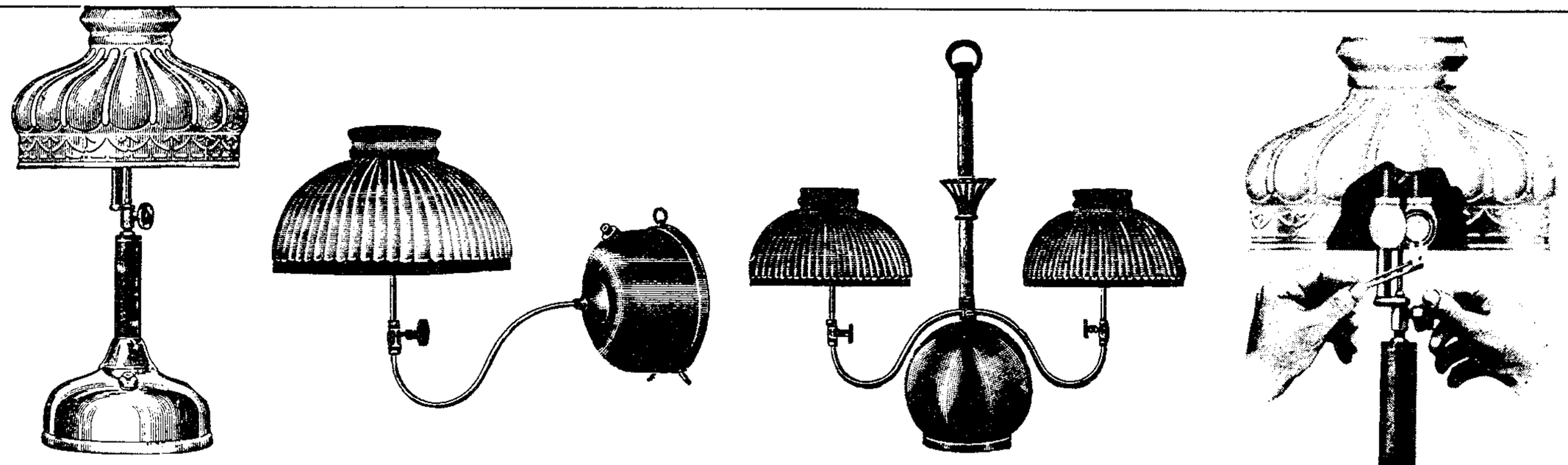
bit of felt, dipped in wood alcohol, ignited and then held against the generator in order to vaporize the fuel.

The new Coleman Quick-Lite, with its distinctive loop in the generator tube and "Sunshine of the Night" symbol, gave off more light than 20 wick-type kerosene lamps or lanterns. There were no wicks to trim or chimneys to clean. They were safe. If a lamp was accidentally dropped or tipped over, the fuel supply was cut off and the light was extinguished automatically. And the Quick-Lites were made to last a lifetime!

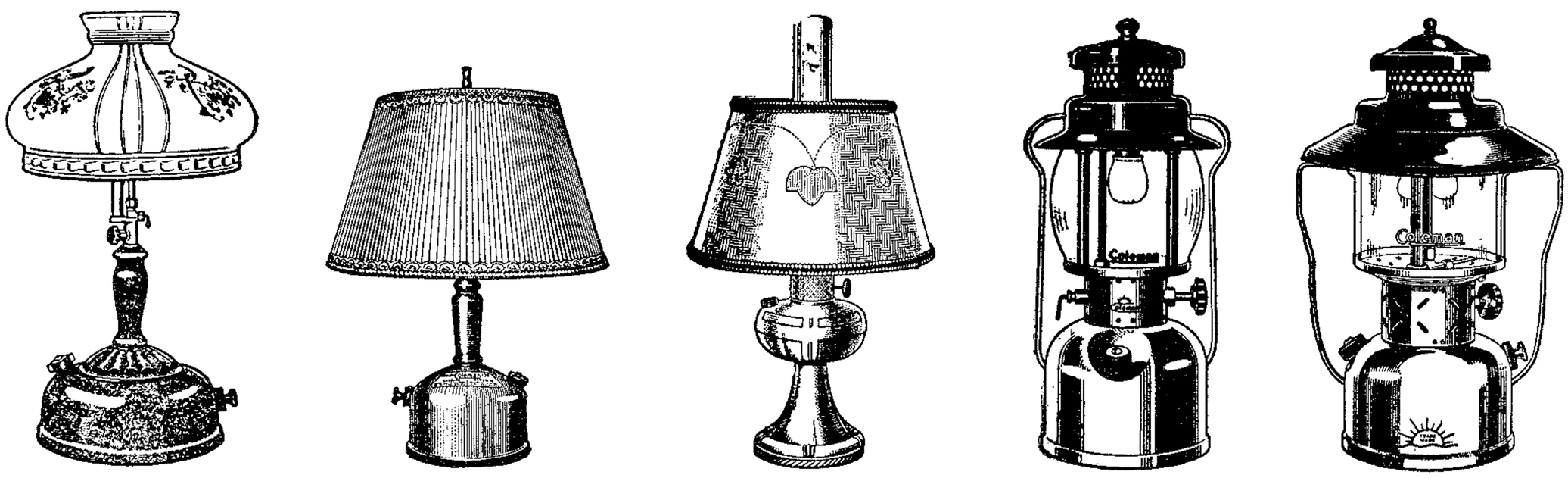
By the mid 1920s, Coleman successes in putting gasoline motor fuel to work led its engineers into several new but related fields of product research. Lamp and lantern burners were adapted for use with hot plates, utility burners, cook stoves and eventually to full-size gasoline ranges with ovens and broilers. The first Coleman camp stoves were introduced in 1923. Other Coleman products made in the '20s were gasoline radiant heaters, domestic water heaters, self-heating irons and a unique utility stove called the Handy Gas Plant.

But the crowning advance of the 1920s was the development of the Coleman instant lighting device. Coleman engineers had been working on the idea for several years and by 1927 had successfully applied the principle to various Coleman products, but the patent on Coleman Instant-Lite was not granted until 1929. Formal recognition of the engineering principle involved was to assure Coleman's continued dominance of the gasoline pressure appliance market.

The fame of Coleman products continued to grow, but the market was changing. Rural electrification was spreading. LP-gas, or "bottle gas" as it often was called, became more available. Sales of gasoline



Coleman Quick-Lite lamps were made between 1916 and 1931. Distinguishing features were black fiber handles, nickel-plated brass founts and the Q-99 generator with a loop in the fuel tube. Models made in 1925 and later had a built-in air pump. There were many types of shades and globes but the white paneled shade (see illustration far left) was the most common. Bracket and chandelier styles could be suspended or used as table lamps. Several million Quick-Lite lamps and lanterns were manufactured. It was possible to update the Quick-Lites by replacing the Q-99 generator with an Instant-Lite generator patented by Coleman in 1929.



With the introduction in 1928 and 1929 of the Coleman Instant-Lite lamps the familiar nickel-plated fount and black fiber handle gave way to a fluted style base, shaped handle and a variety of finishes. Many of the models made in the 1930s were dual fuel lamps and could be fitted with generators for use with gasoline or kerosene. There was even a model with a glass fount, tall chimney and parchment paper shade. This was a wick-type lamp called the Ker-O-Lite and burned kerosene. The late 1930s also saw the first 242 single-mantle lanterns and the familiar 228 model (extreme right) which remained in the line until 1980.

ranges, hot plates, irons and portable heaters were declining. Finally, the outbreak of World War II halted production of civilian goods.

Coleman made an important contribution to the war effort including the development of the famed Pocket Stove which, along with the Jeep, often were cited as the best non-shooting equipment to come out of the war. In all, Coleman produced more than two million burners and lanterns for military use and also made a great many other products and assemblies for the Armed Services.

The war years created a pent-up demand for many of the traditional Coleman products but in time demand again declined. Emphasis turned to products for the rapidly growing leisuretime markets. Coleman answered with an outpouring of literally millions of gas lanterns and portable stoves for campers, fishermen and hunters. Insulated coolers and jugs broadened the market with their strong appeal to picnickers and those who traveled by car. By the mid-1950s Coleman was well on the way to becoming the largest manufacturer of camping gear and a major supplier of products for the leisuretime market.

Although Coleman table lamps have not been manufactured since 1949, the demand for lanterns continues to grow year after year. It and Coleman portable stoves are the keystone of the Coleman enterprise.

From its humble beginnings in 1900, Coleman products have fulfilled basic human needs.

Mr. Coleman's lamp is as viable today as it ever was. Only its useage changes with the passing years.

Lamps

Efficient	1900-1903
Coleman Arc	1903-1918
System Lighting	1905-1927
Reading Lamp (Model R)	1909-1914
Air-O-Lite	1911-1920
Boulevard Street Lamps	1912-1918
Ker-O-Lite (kerosene pressure-type)	1913-1920
Quick-Lite	1916-1931
Ker-O-Lite (wick-type, kerosene)	1939-1941
Instant-Lite	1928-1949

NOTE: *Wichita factories have produced no table lamps since 1949. Limited production of certain models has continued at Coleman Canadian factory as late as 1974.*

Lanterns

Arc Lantern	1914-1918
Air-O-Lantern	1915-1918
Quick-Lite	1916-1931
*Instant-Lite	1928-
*Kerosene pressure-type lanterns	1928-
Butane lanterns	1955-1972
*Propane lanterns	1972-

**These types still being made.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Production dates in the Chronology are approximate. Collectors should be aware that old lamps and lanterns may have been modified through substitution of parts such as generators, shades, fuel reservoirs, chimneys, etc. Persons desiring further information on specific old models of Coleman products are asked to submit photographs, drawings or detailed information. Please do not send the actual product or part without prior notification.*

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Form H-1 Rev.