



BY THE LIGHT OF THE COAL-OIL LAMP

MARVEL HENNING



By The Light Of The Coal-Oil Lamp

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*To all my family & friends who make my life
a joy and support me in my endeavours.*

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By The Light Of The Coal-Oil Lamp

Ever since man discovered fire he has been trying to capture the light from it to dispel some darkness and extend daytime activities into the night. When night life was limited to the light from the fire that warmed the home, a way was needed to make light portable, and the first source was a rag or wick or piece of hide in a dish of animal fat or oil. The result was messy, smelly and smoky and not very effective. Then someone discovered that a string or wick in hardened wax produced a candle that was easier to transport and less smoky or hazardous than a burning brand of wood or pitch. Now came the chore of producing these candles in number; so melted wax was poured into tin or stone molds with a wick suspended inside. Heating wax can be dangerous, and the cleaning of hardened wax from dripping candles time consuming; besides candle light, no matter how romantic sounding is not very effective for reading or fine work.

Next, someone put candles in perforated cans to protect them from being snuffed by wind, and from there they graduated to

glass chimneys that kept out the breeze and let out the light.

From these enclosed candles we progressed to lanterns with a bail handle and fuel tank enclosed below the wick, with a crank for lowering or raising the wick for more or less light. These were a vast improvement in safety and portability. From them developed the kerosene lamp in many models, some with tin tanks, and some with glass bowls in simple or elaborate design like stem glasses. Some small models had a frame with a metal reflector behind the glass, and could be hung on the wall or set upon a sconce or dresser. These were popular bedroom models. The light at best was mellow and soft, better than any candles. Many a school child did homework at a kitchen table by light of these lamps, while others read the weekly newspapers such as Family Herald, Canadian Countryman or Free Press Weekly. Since a lot of shopping was done by mail order catalogue, many hours were spent pouring over the latest in fashions, and necessities of life offered in these catalogues.

Coal-oil lamps had their chores required for their upkeep to keep them burning as brightly as possible. The wicks were trimmed daily so that an even flame resulted, with no long threads to burn higher and smoke the chimney. The chimneys themselves were cleaned daily, either with soap and water or with dampened crumpled newspaper, and dried with a fresh page of same. This produced a shiny, streak-free glass. Then the fuel tanks had to be refilled daily – a simple chore with a glass bowl, but with the metal tanks one invariably overflowed

failures are few and far between, and electricity so widespread that only in the most remote areas is it not available. Some people are at a loss to know what to do without light at the flick of a switch!

The era of the coal-oil lamp has almost passed away, although many are used as “unique” decorations for special effects, and some still as necessity in really remote areas. The lamps are prized highly by antique dealers and collectors, as you will note their price at auctions, etc. However, to many rural people the lamp was a way of life and many the quilt, the knitting, the reading and writing has been accomplished by people who lived by the light of the coal-oil lamp.

Snow swirls in stinging pellets,

Driven by a furious wind:

Lamplight, kitchen, mealtime,

Beckons one to come within.

~

bottom of the bowl that seals it when in use.

All of the above go into the reservoir and each piece washed thoroughly, rinsed with scalding water, and then dried individually. The discs are assembled in order and placed on a large “safety pin” for that purpose and spread apart to air, the remaining parts stored in the bowl returned to its place on the machine. When needed, the entire thing is re-assembled (reverse of dismantling) beginning with the rubber ring in the bottom groove, and is ready for use once more. The whole process can be accomplished in a half hour, including wiping down the machine base with a damp cloth. Then the milk pails are washed and scalded as well for the next milking. One pail in particular needs meticulous cleaning: it is the “strainer pail”; it is a regular pail with a half moon cover over about one third of the top. The cover incorporates a fine mesh strainer surrounded by a pouring lip; it strains out any bits of debris such as chaff, or occasional hair from the cows.



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The Last Word

This journey into memory lane has been a refreshing one for me. We are molded by circumstances and environment; a farmer is committed to the land; it is part of his existence; hands that toil about the dirt have a special feeling for growing things. The trees that shade us, warm us, store water for the soil are like friends and allies; the animals under our husbandry are friends as well, serving us willingly, aiming to please, feeling our joys, our rebuffs, our sorrows. The ground we lovingly prepare for plants produces plants that respond to our care with luxurious growth, and plentiful harvest that only a son of the soil can understand.

Our past years encompassed a lot of hard labour, difficult times, tiring hours, but we gained a contentment and sense of accomplishment that was unshakeable. According to statistics and average life styles we were poor to the point of poverty, underprivileged, but we didn't know that. How could we miss what we never had? We had ample food, perhaps not of the greatest variety, and a roof over our heads, albeit that it wasn't

fancy or large, but most houses kept the elements at bay.

We had clothes to wear, perhaps not in the latest fashion, but serviceable, and practical. We had friends and neighbours that cared about each other's welfare and would vie for just chance to help out in times of emergency, and a sense of belonging in a community that does not exist today.

The old one-room schools produced the average number of scholars that moved on to higher learning and to occupations of importance, some bordering on fame. In all, we had a well-rounded life that taught moral and social values of which I am proud to be a part; a vanishing way of life.

Perhaps my meanderings have brought back similar memories to others, and enlightened a new generation to ways they have never witnessed, and perhaps find hard to believe; may never understand.

All names and places are real; all events actually took place.

I have enjoyed, no, loved my way of life; I would pass on what I have learned from experience to any who are interested.

In the words of Robert Browning in his poem "Andrea del Sorto", "I regret little, I would change still less."



About The Author

Marvel Henning was raised on a small farm lying between Stoney Lake and Little Cedar Lake (now Julian). She still resides there in the area now known as Woodview. She is an accomplished writer, columnist, artist, woodworker, naturalist & musician. In her spare time, she managed to raise six children. Marvel is a columnist for the local paper in Lakefield, Ontario (now the Lakefield Herald). Her column “The Nail Keg” has been a favourite among readers since 1963. Marvel’s first book *Country Born* (a compilation of poetry and prose) was published in 1976. *By The Light Of The Coal-Oil Lamp* is Marvel’s second book.

“Aptly named, she is a marvel to her family, friends, and all who have ever had the good fortune to meet her.”

– Betty James

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