

Incandescent Light System Abandoned

by Lynne Belluscio

No this headline wasn't from a recent newspaper, encouraging all of us to replace our incandescent bulbs with the new low energy fluorescent bulbs. This headline was from the *LeRoy Gazette* on October 11, 1893.

The article went on to say that after November 1, the electric light system in the village would be replaced with gas. "This will greatly increase the consumption of gas for already it has been adopted by many of the businessmen along the street who have been buying kerosene." I have to wonder what the residents of LeRoy thought about this change. Certainly those people who had wired their house for electric were not too happy. However, a book that I have on early lighting mentions that throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the brightness of the electric bulb was not very reliable or consistent.

Until the introduction of the tungsten-filament bulb which replaced the carbon filament bulb people had both gas and electric. The lighting fixtures were called gaselier-electoliers. These fixtures had a socket for a light bulb and a stop-cock to regulate the gas. LeRoy switched back and forth between gas and electric a couple of times. (And I thought I was inconvenienced with the new switch between digital television and analog television – but that's a whole different article!)

This last week I spent two mornings at the Wolcott Street School with the fourth graders showing them the early lighting devices we have in the collection. We started with the early "betty" lamp which burned soft grease or oil. It was smoky and didn't give off a good light. Next we looked at a rush lamp which burned a type of grass that was soaked in tallow. The rush light also had a place for a candle. Early candles were made from processed lamb and beef fat called tallow. I asked the kids how many candles would they need to make if they used a candle each day of the year - - "That's a lot of candles."

Dipping candles took a long time, but some people had candle

molds. The one that I showed the kids had six tubes. "So if you had to make 360 candles, how many times would you have to fill the candle mold?" (A little math mixed in with the history is good.)

So then we looked at all the different kinds of candle holders. Each one is a little different and is used in a different way. "Think of all the places in your house that you can use a light bulb – there are floor lamps and desk lamps – chandeliers, sconces, lights in your refrigerator and your stove. There's even a light in the microwave. We certainly do use a lot of light bulbs!" It's hard for the kids to imagine a time when a room was lit with one light bulb.

From candles we moved on to a strange little glass lamp with two wicks sticking out of the top. There was not a glass shade on the top. This was a lamp that almost made an animal become extinct. They all guess what kind of animal and usually after a few hints, someone guesses "whale" and we talk about the importance of whaling in the 1800s and how our need for whale oil to light our houses almost made whales extinct.

So it was important to find another energy source. The question that usually stumps them is "What is petroleum?" But we finally discuss how the discovery of oil changed not only how we lit our houses, but how we lived. From oil comes wax, which replaced tallow candles. From oil comes kerosene which replaced whale oil. (Not to ignore plastic, gasoline and a whole lot of petroleum by products.)

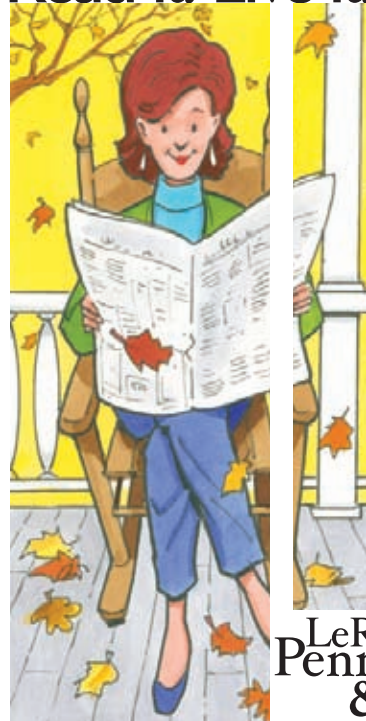
The kids usually recognize the kerosene lamps and kerosene lanterns, but I usually tell them that in the old days they didn't use scented oils for the lanterns. The kerosene smelled and if the wicks weren't trimmed, the soot had to be cleaned from the chimneys – a good job for kids with small hands. A piece of stiff newspaper wadded up and swished around inside would usually do the trick, but your hands would get pretty dirty.



Until the electricity goes off, we take lighting for granted. As I sit in this old school building with the huge big windows that were installed to let in as much light as possible so the school didn't have to pay huge electric or gas bills, I am surrounded by several lights - - all on because we've gotten

used to a much brighter work space. I always ask the kids when they come into the classroom, to turn off the lights. "When you come into your classroom, do you always turn on the lights?" "Yes." "Even on a sunny day?" "Sure." It's probably better for our eyesight.

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