

Lighting the Way

Driving cattle up the Chisholm Trail was a rough and dangerous task that could take from three to five months to reach the railheads in Kansas. During those months on the trail, the cowboys would spend many a night under the stars as they would rest up for the night. But just because it was night didn't mean there wasn't any work to get done. Cowboys would take shifts to stay up with the cattle to keep an eye on the herds. When it came to lighting the trail at night, a cowboy would turn to an old but reliable piece of technology, the simple lantern. Join us today as we look at some of the lanterns available to the cowboys on the Chisholm Trail, and have a chance to make your own lantern to light your own way on the trail.

Lanterns in the West:

A common tool found throughout homes, hotels, restaurants, and saloons, lanterns were the prime source of lighting for those living on the Texas frontier in the late 19th century. The main principle behind a lantern is that light is generated from a flammable material, and allows for the flame to be contained. Some lanterns would also use reflective materials such as tin to help reflect the light allowing for a greater field of vision in the dark. Lanterns came in all shapes and sizes, with the most popular material used for lighting them being the candle. The candle was the simplest source of light to use, and could easily be produced in an individual's home. This was especially important for those living on the frontier and who did not always have easy access to nearby stores.



The problem with using candles though is that they can easily be extinguished by stray wind and requires multiple candles to be carried, taking up valuable space on the chuck wagon. Beginning in the late 18th century, oil based lantern began to appear throughout the United States, with the original oil coming from whales. By the time of the Chisholm Trail, whale oil had been replaced by kerosene lanterns. However, oil lanterns also posed a problem in that the fuel required special care to transport to prevent a fire starting on the chuck wagon.



Now that we've learned a little bit about the types of lanterns that would have been available to the cowboy, it's your turn to make your own lantern to light up the night at home.

Soda Can Lantern:

Warning: Have an adult assist you with this project as it requires the use of sharp objects!

Materials:

- Aluminum soda can (make sure to keep the tab on the can)
- Utility or pocket knife
- Tea light or electric candle
- Matches (if using tea light)

Making Your Lantern:

- I. Cut a one inch slit below the top of the can and halfway horizontally around the can.
- II. Repeat the same cut as the top one, about one inch from the bottom of the can.
- III. Cut a vertical (straight line up and down) line down the center of the can, connecting the two lines you have already cut.
- IV. Carefully pull open the two flaps out, which should resemble a pair of wings. This will be what reflects the light from the candle
- V. Using the opening tab, tie a piece of string or leather about five inches long through the tab. This will serve as your handle to avoid burning your fingers.
- VI. Place a small candle or tea light on the bottom of the can. If you are using a tea light, carefully light your candle and you are ready to hit the trail!

Once you've finished your lantern, you can add on and make it your own by designing a different carry handle and make sure your favorite soda! If you'd like to show off your candle, please share it with us on our Facebook page. And if you would like to see a video of a soda can lantern being made, check out our YouTube channel.

