

History of Country Store Tins

The tin can was patented in 1810 by the English inventor Peter Durand.

The first tin cans were so thick they had to be hammered open. By the 1850's tin had been made much thinner, and by 1870, the first tin can opener was patented by William Lyman.

In 1901, the American Can Company was founded which, at the time, produced 90% of United States tin cans.

The History of Country Store Tins also tells the history of the Country Stores. Before Tin was used for food storage, goods in the Colonial Period

came in plain, simple or even crude packaging. There were no brand names,

and very few had any words or description, due to the fact that most people could not read.

By the 1850's, national brands began to compete with local products on grocer's shelves. As the literacy increased, labels became more colorful,

and containers for medicines, tobacco, and certain food products contained enough words and outrageous claims that they rivaled chapters in books.

The golden age of the country stores was between 1880 and 1940. Colorful tins were everywhere, ranging from very large waist-high coffee tins, to the tiniest tins no higher than an inch. Salesman carried small sample tins from door to door promoting everything from baking powder to sardines.

But during this golden age, the first Piggly Wiggly self-service store opened in Memphis Tennessee, and did away with credit and home delivery, and customers had to pay cash at the end of a checkout line. A & P was another one of the first grocery stores to open in larger cities, and offered more products and cheaper prices.

The country stores then found themselves fighting a war against the chains, in the same way many towns and individual stores fought the onslaught of Wal-Mart chains, years later. 1937 was another landmark year as the first shopping carts entered the grocery store chains. Prior to carts, country stores used to carry wire baskets with swing handles. The customer would provide a list of goods they needed, and the owner of the country store would search the shelves for the items on the list.

Country Store Owners began to band together and post signs that they were family owned and operated, and that their customer service and quality were superior to the ever-expanding grocery chain stores. The use of tin for store products soared, and the Country Stores could not compete in terms of space or money with the chains.

But because of those country stores, there still remains a wealth of sought-after antiques and collectibles. The beauty of those labels, either lithographed or painted directly on the tin, and paper-covered, offers a wonderful variety to the beginning or life-long collector.

Reproductions abound, but are fairly easy to detect. An old can is used, and a reproduction labeled is glued on. It's fairly difficult to find tin cans with intact paper labels, and certainly ones that look just too good to be true, usually are. Another challenge to determining the age of a tin can is that England continues to produce biscuit and cracker tins that resemble the type of can considered an antique or collectible. The usual give-away is the heavy gold-colored and shiny interior, lid, or bottom of the can.

As with many antiques, this is a prime time to buy country tins, as the prices have dropped considerably in the last 15 years, along with many people selling their own prolific collections. There are numerous reference books on the subject of Country Tins; one of my favorites is *Collector's Guide to Country Store Antiques*, mainly because of the wonderful colorful pictures and descriptions. The authors, Don and Carol Raycraft, are well-known for their series of *American Country Antiques* books, which contain many country antique tin items. The internet is full of lists of reference books, individuals, and of course many reproduction dealers which can provide the beginning collector with an excellent look at the variety of paper-labeled cans being reproduced.