

Nancy Ervin  
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Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path..  
Psalm 119:105

Pictured above are two treasured family heirlooms. They are the lamps my fraternal grandpa and dad clipped onto their caps when they worked in the coalmines of southeastern Ohio. My grandpa started to work in the mines when he was 8 years old and had finished the third reader at the local one-room school. My dad joined him working in the mines when he was fifteen and had finished tenth grade at the high school. My grandpa worked in the mines for over sixty years and my father for nearly twenty years. They stopped digging coal - manual labor using only a pickax - when the veins of coal ran out in those Appalachian hills.

Both men told me that in their early years of working the mines they would enter the mine before the light of day and exit once the light of day was over. Thus, these little lamps produced the only light they saw during what we call working hours until weekends and holidays. As I grew to an age to understand what they did to earn a living, working conditions in the mines had improved - largely because of the efforts of John L. Lewis that led to the formation of unions. However, mining coal was still a dirty, dangerous job resulting in many deaths and poor health conditions for the men who dug the coal. My maternal grandfather, also a coalminer, died of black lung disease caused from the dust created during the mining of coal.

When hand-mining coal, like my relatives did, the advance team would dig a tunnel into the hills and crawl through it looking for veins of coal. Once a vein large enough to mine was discovered, the tunnel would be enlarged, shored up with timbers, railroad ties put down, and coal dug out of the hill with a pickax and placed into railroad flatcars to be delivered to waiting markets.

Before the mines played out, both my grandpa and dad had worked all positions involved in the manual extraction of coal from the southeastern Ohio hills. Young boys and men of small stature were the ones assigned to the advance-team work. Thus, when grandpa and dad started their work in the mines as young boys, each of them was assigned to an advance team and wore one of the little lights shown in the picture while they dug tunnels into the hills.

When I took the photo, I included an apple to give you an idea of the small size of the lamps. The larger lamp measures a little more than 2 inches high and the smaller lamp is 2 inches high. You can see that the body of the lamp holds only a small amount of oil. I think you will agree with me that the light these lamps shed to guide the path of coalminers was extremely small.

Each of the little lamps would have had a wick made from cloth sticking out of its spout. The wick would soak up oil from the small cylinder. The wick would be burned and thus create a tiny point of light. The tiny point of light coming from the lamp on each miner's cap was the only light available to him in the pitch-dark underground. That is, this man-made light was the only visible light available to young workers as they crawled through the tiny tunnels they dug as they moved deeper and deeper into the hills searching for veins of coal.

Today we are fortunate to have abundant light as we do our work. Light abounds in our lives. Whether in our homes or in outside locations, we do our work in places blazing with light. And, just as it did during the lives of my grandfathers and father, the word of God still shines brightest of all - continuing to light our paths and guide our every footstep.

Then grant that I may follow your gleam,  
O glorious Light,  
'Til earthly shadows scatter, and faith is changed to sight;  
'Til raptured saints shall gather upon that shining shore,  
Where Christ, the blessed daystar, shall light them ever more.

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