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ON THE LIGHTER SIDE

LIGHTING THE SPARK:

10 Collectors Share Their Stories



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FOUNDED IN 1984 - THE LONGEST RUNNING
LIGHTER COLLECTING COMMUNITY IN THE WORLD!



Editor's Notes

By Bill Calkins

As a second-generation lighter collector and OTLS member, it is truly an honor to both serve on the board and create content for this newsletter. While attending the convention in Cleveland this year, I was able to meet a handful of active members and see some excellent lighters. Of course, I left with some new additions to my collection. But what I took away from the convention went far beyond a few little fire starters. The passion our club has for the history of vintage and antique lighters is evident and the relationships created through this shared passion are strong—some decades old. This is the same energy and camaraderie that will keep our club strong and growing into the future. I'm proud to be a part of it.

For this newsletter, I tried to capture some of the passion mentioned above.

In **"Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories,"** I asked 10 collectors (six OTLS members and four non-members) four questions to bring different perspectives to the table in an effort to find some commonality amongst our diverse collector group. Perhaps some of the answers will resonate with you. I think you'll be interested in how newer collectors approach the hobby and similarly, how established collectors maintain interest over years or decades on the hunt for unique pieces to add to already-impressive collections.

One of the first lighter types I collected are what I call rope/wick lighters (although they are called by many different names.) Examples exist from as far back as the late 19th Century and they are still made today and commonly used by hikers and survivalists. Proving useful for significantly more than a century, these lighters have stood the test of time and for good reason. I do not profess to be an expert on rope lighters but did some research and feel **"The Timeless Appeal of Rope/Wick Lighters"** will be of interest. I welcome any comments, corrections, constructive criticisms and photos from your collection. Feel free to contact me via email: williamdc1976@gmail.com.

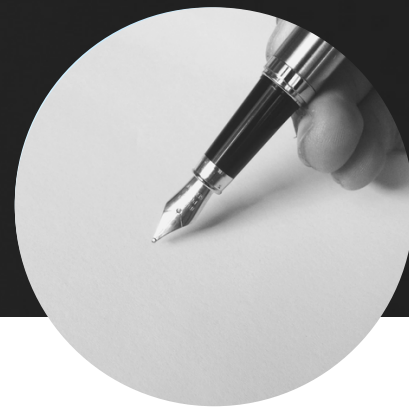
More than half of my collection consists of Ronson petrol lighters spanning about 60 years. I particularly like cigarette case/lighter combinations ... and Ronson made A LOT of them over the years. I also enjoy collecting different examples of service kits, of which Ronson also produced a good number. From what I've learned, some were offered to dealers and others were sold to the public. From small to large, and including a wide range of components, service kits are an interesting part of Ronson's history and distribution model. Find out more in **"Ronson Lighter Accessory Kits: Companions of a Smoking Era."**

Newsletter Update

Before closing this editor's note, let me inform you of a change to the publication schedule of this newsletter. Moving forward, the newsletter will be published quarterly. However, watch for some shorter articles and communications direct to your email inbox during months without a newsletter. Also, keep your eye on the OTLS Facebook Group for engaging content, opportunities to share stories and photos and themes suggested by group administrators to encourage even greater communication and community engagement.


Bill Calkins

A Letter to Judith



Dear Judith,

When we first met around 1990, I had recently joined OTLS and was a new enthusiastic lighter collector that knew very little about lighters. You encouraged me to come to a small gathering of collectors in Atlanta. I do not recall the names of the other folks there, but I do remember that you took me under your wing and made sure that I was treated fairly as I showed off and sold some of the lighters that I had brought in a shoe box. That weekend I learned what a vital part of the lighter community you were!

The OTLS newsletters were informative, and I was very glad that I had joined the club so I could soak up the knowledge that they provided. I remember going to my first convention in Las Vegas. I shipped every lighter that I owned to that show including a half-dozen used Ronson Crowns. You (and others) were quick to teach me that it was not cost effective to ship these nearly worthless lighters! I believe it was at that convention that I learned that you collected “people lighters”. As I reflect on that now, it makes perfect sense—you were a “people person”.

Every day of the week you either called, emailed or texted OTLS members. Not just to discuss lighters, but often just to ask how they were doing and to stay connected. I, along with many others, will miss those calls.

Not only were you the co-founder of the club back in 1983 (with John Cuevas), but you were its backbone for over 40 years! When the newsletter needed more articles or photos, it was you who hopped on the phone to ask (often beg) members to make a submission. Each Spring you would call and email members and encourage them to attend the June convention. Often it was this encouragement that made a difference in the overall attendance.

When we talked, you often spoke of your family and how proud you were of your children and grandchildren. I enjoyed hearing about the annual trips that you would take with your best friend, Betsy Lyons, with whom you had worked with in Dallas. She was your world travel partner and personal assistant at many OTLS conventions. Since your move to Albuquerque, the stories shifted to how helpful your brother David had been.

Judith, you are missed by me and many others! Rest in Peace Lighter Queen.

Sincerely,

John Elster

Ronson Lighter Accessory Kits: Companions of a Smoking Era



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

When collectors think of Ronson, we usually picture elegant Touch Tips, iconic Standards or the sleek and functional Whirlwind—but behind every working Ronson lighter once stood an unsung hero: the Ronson Lighter Accessory Kit. These boxed sets of tools, flints, wicks and maintenance parts were the lifeline that kept millions of Ronson lighters sparking flawlessly for decades.

Ronson began producing lighter maintenance accessories in the 1920s, shortly after the company transitioned from the Art Metal Works of Newark, New Jersey, into a global leader in lighter manufacturing and design. Early models required regular upkeep, especially as lighter fuel and flints of the time tended to clog or degrade quickly.

To ensure reliability—and keep customers loyal—Ronson developed small service kits that included everything needed to maintain a lighter at home. Packaged in compact tins or cardboard boxes, these kits often contained replacement flints, wicks, fuel wadding, small screwdrivers, cleaning brushes and other maintenance tools.



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Ronson Lighter Accessory Kits: Companions of a Smoking Era



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Continued from previous page

The earliest Ronson accessory kits, dating from the late 1920s through the 1930s, reflected the company's origins in precision metalwork. Many came in embossed metal tins with enameled or lithographed logos, often accompanied by fold-out instruction brochures. The kits for early lighters included brass wick tubes, cotton wadding and small metal-tipped screwdrivers for fuel chamber access.

By the 1940s, as Ronson lighters became even more common and were even used regularly by soldiers during World War II, the kits were adapted for rugged use. Wartime versions were often simplified, with fewer decorative elements but included durable contents designed to handle field repairs and inconsistent fuel quality.



After the war, in the 1950s, Ronson refined both the form and function of their kits. The packaging became more consumer-oriented, using paperboard boxes, reflecting postwar aesthetics. These sets often bore slogans such as "Keep Your Ronson Young Forever" and "Use Only Genuine Ronson Parts," emphasizing maintenance as part of the ownership experience.

I really like the industrial functionality of early service kits—an example of utility—and of course the design of service kits reflects Ronson's attention to aesthetics.

Looking at examples in my own collection and adding in some internet research, here's a rough timeline of how Ronson's accessory kits evolved alongside its lighter line.

1930s–1940s: Early kits often came in nickel-plated metal tins with the Ronson logo and "World's Greatest Lighter." They included cotton wicks, brass tools and instruction sheets.

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Ronson Lighter Accessory Kits: Companions of a Smoking Era



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

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1950s–1960s: As the company introduced butane models like the Varaflame in the mid-50s, kits shifted toward pressurized fuel cartridges, replacement flints in branded cello packs, and occasionally O-rings or nozzle cleaners for gas valves. These mid-century kits often featured bright red-and-gold packaging with Ronson's logo.



1970s–1980s: The final years of widespread kit production reflected changing habits. As disposable lighters rose in popularity, Ronson sold combo packs—fuel plus flints, often hanging-card style—for the few refillable-lighter users who remained.

Ronson accessory kits were aimed at a wide range of users:

- Soldiers and business travelers who needed dependable maintenance away from home.
- Everyday smokers who valued the economy of maintaining a lighter rather than replacing it.

For collectors like us, Ronson accessory kits offer a fascinating look at the support culture that once surrounded everyday objects. Complete kits—especially those still sealed with original contents—are pretty uncommon.

Their appeal follows the current collectability of other sealed and packaged vintage items and nostalgia for a time when even simple items like flints came packaged like luxury goods.

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Ronson Lighter Accessory Kits: Companions of a Smoking Era



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Continued from previous page

Among the most interesting elements of Ronson's accessory history are the flint packages themselves. Over the decades, Ronson released dozens of variations in both material and design.



Iconic Ronsonol fuel bottles and cans are an excellent addition to any vintage lighter collection. Over the years, Ronson sold a wide variety of volumes, shapes and sizes. In the 1930s and 1940s, Ronson sold fuel in glass bottles, with embossed logos and screw-on caps for precision refilling and some early examples even came with miniature funnels or droppers.

By the 1950s, the company introduced the famous yellow Ronsonol metal squeeze bottle, featuring a tapered “bird beak” nozzle and the flame logo. This design was a revolution in lighter maintenance—easy to use, portable and safe. Later, the yellow plastic bottle made its debut and is still sold today.

Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Every lighter collector has a story to tell — that first flick of the flint, a favorite find, a connection to history, or a dream for what could come next. In this special feature, we asked ten passionate collectors from our community four simple questions:

1. Why did you start collecting?
2. What's your favorite lighter in your collection?
3. What's your best flea market or junk shop find?
4. If you could design a new lighter with vintage style, what would it be?

The answers, as you'll see, are as unique as the collections themselves. From the nostalgic glow of a Zippo advertising lighter to the thrill of uncovering a rare Ronson prototype, these stories remind us why we love this hobby—for the history, the hunt and the friendships forged along the way.

Roman Zubarev—Collecting since 2009



When did you start collecting lighters and why?

I started collecting in 2009, right as I was graduating college with a degree in marketing. My career has always revolved around that world, from my early days at an advertising agency working with national brands to my role at Target today. Collecting lets me blend my personal and professional passions, bridging the old and the new. While I love almost all lighters, my heart belongs to Zippo advertisers—those nostalgic pieces that showcase iconic brands from the 1950s through the 1970s.

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

Choosing one favorite is tough, but my 1975 Campbell's Zippo is right at the top. That simple can of soup, made famous by Andy Warhol, blends pop culture and hometown pride — Campbell's headquarters are just across the river from me in New Jersey.

What's your best flea market find?

It's tough finding lighters "in the wild" in my area, but I once scored a WWII-era black crackle Zippo in excellent shape for just \$50 at a military surplus store.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

My dream lighter would combine three key elements: a windproof body, one-step operation, and ample space for advertising — the perfect mix of form, function, and nostalgia.

Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Continued from previous page

Peter Malouf—Collecting since 2024

When did you start collecting lighters and why?

I started in May 2024 after seeing a social media video of a lighter restoration. As a dermatologist and Mohs surgeon, I've always worked with my hands, and the craftsmanship of that trench art lighter really drew me in.

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

One of my top favorites is a Louis Kuppenheim 1928 Art Deco enamel lift-arm lighter with a matching cigarette case. It's an exquisite piece in near-mint condition and a treasure from one of the world's most knowledgeable collectors



What's your best flea market find?

During lunch in Cleburne, Texas, I wandered into an antique shop and found a near-perfect 1938 Kremer & Bayer Weltz nder for \$18.00. It was a true surprise find.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

I'd create an 18k gold push-button "Triplex" Imperator-style lighter with a jet pipe and striker — combining precision engineering with elegance.

Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Continued from previous page

John Elster—Collecting since 1988

When did you start collecting lighters and why?

I began accumulating lighters at 15, but truly started collecting at 23. My first real swap meet with OTLS opened my eyes to the world of collecting. Back then, flea markets were full of treasures — I once bought two dozen WW2 Dunhill Service lighters in one day!

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

I love mint-in-box flat advertising lighters—their colorful graphics and pristine condition always catch my eye.



What's your best flea market find?

A 1967 Kennecott Copper Zippo for \$8, which I later sold for \$700.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

I'd reimagine the Ronson Touch-Tip—a timeless design that deserves a modern revival.

Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

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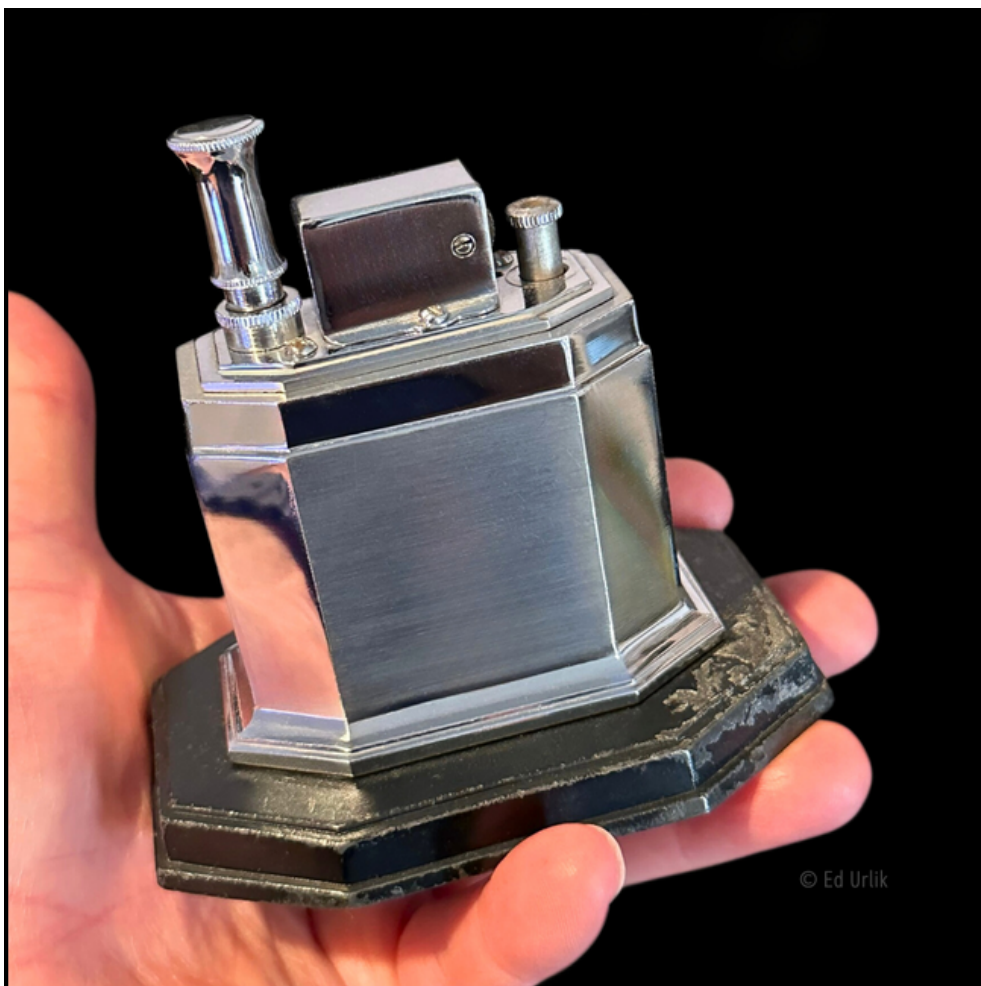
Ed Urlik—Collecting since 1987

When did you start collecting lighters and why?

I began collecting antiques and Art Deco pieces in the late 1980s, and lighters naturally fit that passion. Meeting Urban Cummings at a show in California and hearing him talk about Ronson sealed the deal. I was hooked!

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

One standout is a completely hand-made Ronson Touch-Tip “Octette” prototype from around 1934—the earliest known version of that design. It was built entirely by hand, right down to the screws.



© Ed Urlik

What’s your best flea market find?

At the Rose Bowl Flea Market in the early 1990s, I found a Dunhill aluminum “Book” Silent Flame lighter for \$75—a model no one had seen before. It ended up helping fund my growing Ronson collection!

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

It would have to include a wand and mechanism inspired by the Touch-Tip. Some designs are simply too good to improve upon.

Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Continued from previous page

Ramzi Bader—Collecting since 2010

When did you start collecting lighters and why?

About 15 years ago at the Rose Bowl Flea Market, my wife spotted a lighter like one from her parents' home. Fixing it sparked my passion, and I've since restored thousands.

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

The French Desarmeuax "DO" lighter. It's rare, beautifully engineered and art deco in design. I hunted for years to complete the trio of sizes.

What's your best flea market find?

A Ronson Lion Striker missing its wand—\$20 and worth every penny.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

A sterling silver push-button lighter with engine turned Art Deco details and a vertical linear rasp—elegant and mechanical perfection.



Greg Ryman—Collecting since 1960

When did you start collecting lighters and why?

At 15, I bought three Zippo-like lighters from a dispenser for 50 cents—borrowing a quarter from my dad. I was hooked by the magic of fire and simple mechanics.

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

I'm partial to novelty lighters, especially MIOJ pieces. My decades-long quest to complete a set of Statue of Liberty-themed lighters is one of my proudest.

What's your best flea market find?

A Ronson Jr. Bartender for \$20 and a blood-red VW by Baier for \$90—both beloved parts of my collection.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

A transparent lighter showing all its internals—vintage charm with visible mechanics.

Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Continued from previous page

Dave Shipman—Collecting since 2021



When did you start collecting lighters and why?

After a back injury left me laid up, I found solace in collecting Ronson Touch-Tips and Zippos. What began as a distraction became a passion, with help and guidance from other collectors like Mike Post.

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

A Zippo featuring my late brother's military insignia, gifted to me by fellow collector Bill Calkins. It's priceless to me and a reminder of the kindness in this community.

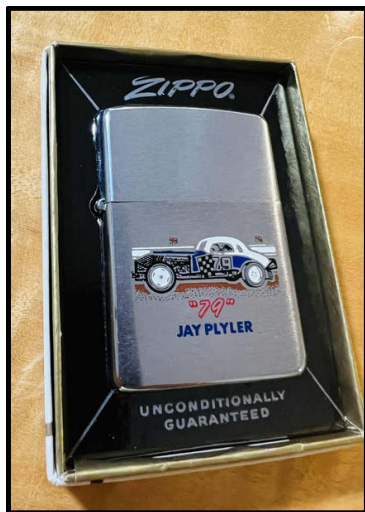
What's your best flea market find?

None yet ... I've had better luck online and through friends.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

A black-and-chrome Art Deco design—classy, bold, and timeless.

Dan DeMato — Collecting since 2016



When did you start collecting lighters and why?

When my dad passed, I found his 1968 Zippo Sportsman fisherman lighter and decided to track down the other models—only from 1968. Now I have more than 700 Zippos from that single year!

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

My mint-in-box 1968 Jay Plyler racecar Zippo. Only five were made for Jay and his team, and the design is based directly on a photo of him celebrating a win.

What's your best flea market find?

My son spotted a 1946 three-barrel Zippo priced at \$12. I'd walked right past it—proof that sometimes the next generation has the sharper eye.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

An old-school "etch and paint" Zippo with a 48-color palette wheel design—pure vintage artistry.

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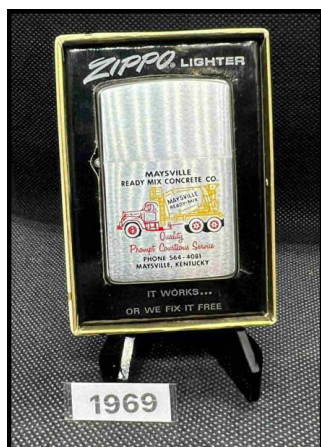
Lighting the Spark: Collectors Share Their Stories



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

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Bobby Joe Hunt—Collecting since 2018



When did you start collecting lighters and why?

I started in late 2018 or early 2019. I'd always carried a Zippo and still have my first.

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

A 1969 Maysville Ready Mix Zippo—local to me, the year I was born, and tied to my dad's career driving for that company.

What's your best flea market find?

A 1943–45 black crackle Zippo from a big Springfield, Ohio show.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

I'd bring back the three-barrel design—simple, solid, and classic.

Alastair Longhurst—Collecting since 2019



When did you start collecting lighters and why?

I started collecting in 2019 because my wife Janice suggested I get a hobby. Little did she know what that was going to result in!

What is the history behind your favorite lighter?

My favourite lighter is a personalized Zippo showing myself and two fellow collectors. It represents the amazing friendships that have been found around the world through collecting Zippo lighters.

What's your best flea market find?

Best find was a Towmotor company Zippo—very early in my collecting on eBay as you don't find a flint in flea markets or junk shops here. It came through eBay UK. It is mint and job-related through working in warehouses for nearly 40 years.

If you could design a new vintage-style lighter...

This final question is more thought provoking. It would be a 1935 or 1941 Zippo design with a dedication to friendship.

Closing Thoughts

Every collector has their spark—a story, a memory, a connection. Whether it's a gleaming Art Deco masterpiece or a \$20 flea market find, these lighters tell stories of ingenuity, nostalgia and community. And in every flame, there's a reflection of the collector who adds it to his or her collection.

The Timeless Appeal of Rope/Wick Lighters



Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Few utilitarian objects embody the intersection of design, function and history as effectively as rope/wick lighters—also known as foxhole lighters, sailor lighters and “trench” lighters (although most are certainly not what I would consider trench art). Originally made out of necessity, these durable lighters evolved through wartime innovation and postwar design and craftsmanship, becoming interesting collectible examples of material culture.

Origins in the Trenches

From my research, rope/wick lighter evolved from late 19th century designs and became popular (though quite utilitarian) during World War I, when soldiers required a dependable means of ignition for cigarettes, pipes and campfires while on the battlefield in wet, windy and unpredictable conditions. Conventional paper matches were unreliable in wind and rain, prompting troops to improvise alternatives using spent bullet casings, brass tubing and other flint mechanisms.

These improvised devices usually included a cotton or hemp rope wick that, when struck by a flint wheel, produced a slow-burning ember capable of repeated use without the need for fuel. The simplicity and efficiency of the design combined mechanical ingenuity with wartime practicality.



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The Timeless Appeal of Rope/Wick Lighters



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Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Post-war Civilian Accessories

Following WW1, trench lighter designs became commercial products. Manufacturers across Europe, Japan and the United States began producing standardized versions that seemed to be inspired by the handmade models referenced above. Many examples from France are commonly included in collections, featuring intricate designs and including a seemingly endless range of shapes and sizes as shown in the photos.

By World War II, rope/wick lighters had become common among both military personnel and civilians, even with many windproof petrol lighters dominating the market. Typically fabricated from brass or steel, these old-school lighters featured hybrid wind-resistant designs and even removable wicks.



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The Timeless Appeal of Rope/Wick Lighters



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Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Maritime Uses

Besides wartime use, rope/wick lighters were indispensable to sailors who needed lighters resistant to wind and moisture. The slow-burning ember could be maintained and re-lit without an open flame—an advantage in both storms and confined conditions aboard ships where fire would be a liability. Naval variants were often crafted from brass or copper to resist corrosion and examples can be found with engraved ship names or insignias.



Mechanism & Function

Rope/wick lighters operate quite simply:

- A flint wheel generates sparks to ignite a cotton, hemp or jute wick.
- The resulting ember can be used to light tobacco or other materials.
- Retracting the rope into the case extinguishes the ember. Many examples include a small ball-shaped “plug” that is attached to the rope end with a hook and can be removed and adjusted as the wick burns down.

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The Timeless Appeal of Rope/Wick Lighters

Articles

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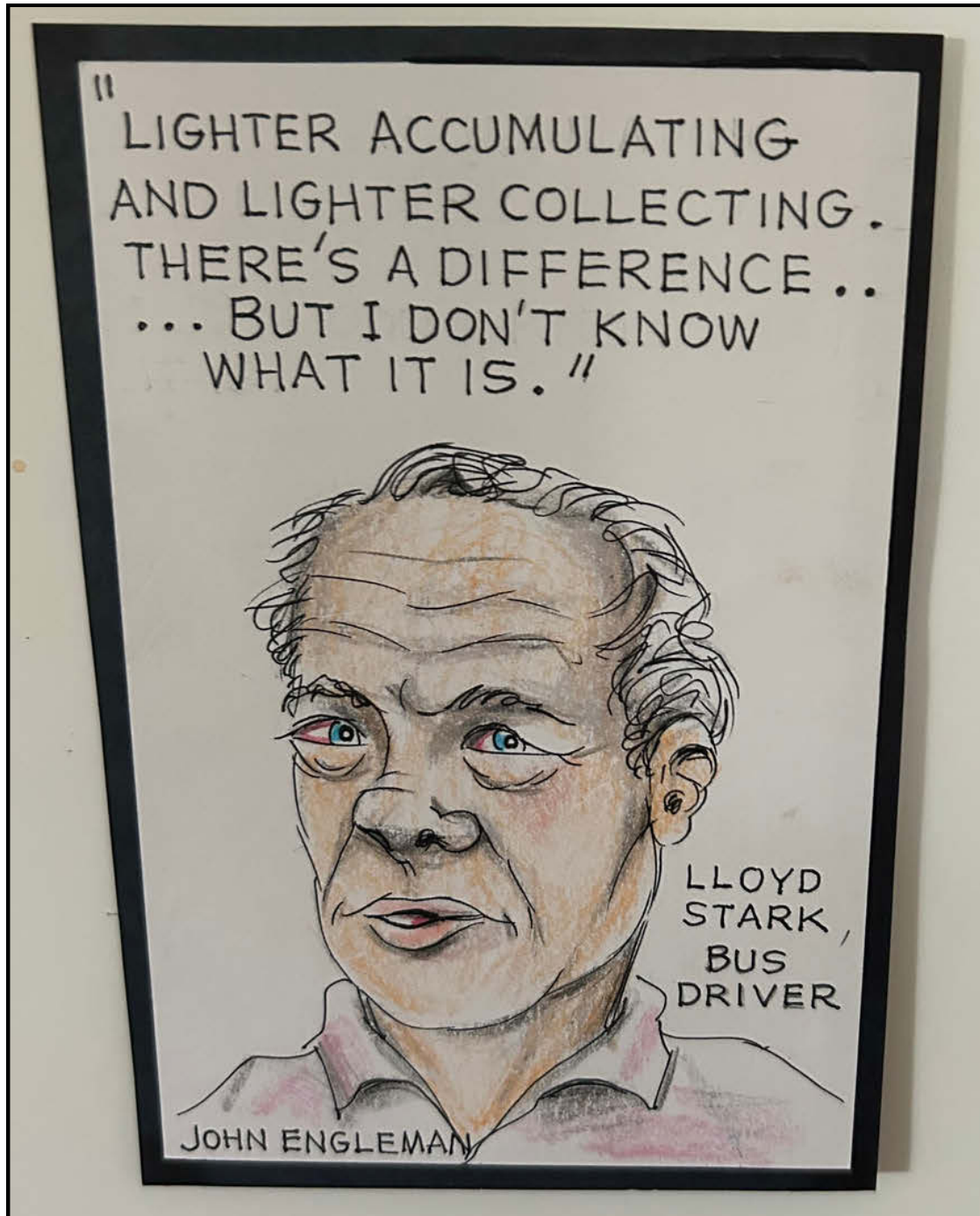
Contributed By: Bill Calkins

Their reusability and durability made them valuable in field and maritime settings—as well as civilian use—illustrating the enduring practicality of such simple technology. In modern times, rope/wick lighters are excellent for camping and survivalist uses. If you need a lighter that will last for many years and doesn't require fluid, a rope/wick lighter is ideal.



Caricature

Contributed by John Engleman



Classified Ads

FREE

Wanted: Unfired 1988 OtLS Convention Lighter. Please contact Glenn @ glenngrush@aol.com

Remember there are still a few of the 2024 Convention Lighters for sale! Please order from Rob Giarretta. Rob523@aol.com

OTLS Convention Lighters for sale. Lot of 40 lighters, 1st thru 36th conventions, plus 2 non-convention years, a second finish from 1998 convention and an OTLS Original 1932 Replica Zippo. Selling as one lot. Contact Kenneth Burk at Klburk43@gmail.com

Interested in buying Mint in the Box Flat Advertising Lighters (that I do not currently have). Please send photos and prices to John Elster at Jresce@aol.com

Need Zippo lighter Boxes. Boxes made before 1986. Not plastic, only the paper or cardboard boxes. Call me at 609-805-8386 or email/text at smstolar3@gmail.com

Zippo insert repairs, cams and cam springs, flint tube replacement, and flint wheel replacement. Each repair replacement is \$ 5.00 per item. Return postage also required. Tom Prylinski 2123 e. 42nd. St. Erie, PA 16510. Email Pyrotjp@twc.com.

WANTED: Nudie lighters/naughty lighters, adult lighters, joke lighters, the naughtier the better! Contact Bill at (323) 829-9191.

700 Zippo Lighter collection for sale. Years range from late 1950's to 2000's. Some sets included. I am not interested in cherry picking but very interested in someone buying them in bulk for re sale and they'll be priced accordingly. Contact Kenneth Burk at Klburk43@gmail.com

I'm looking for a couple of the state series lighters that were produced in the mid-1950s by companies such as Swan, ATC, Continental, Master Craft, etc. The states I am in search of include Connecticut, Vermont, Rhode Island, North Dakota, Maryland, and some of the individual city ones (i.e. New York, Chicago, San Fran). I'm willing to entertain trades or cash for any of these. Please email seagrist@gmail.com or call/text 772 559 0515 with photos and prices/trade requests.

The Thorens Lighter Book is Here

This book is a Hard Cover, full size Coffee Table book with over 200 high gloss color pages containing over 400 pictures and illustrations, weighing a hefty 3.8lb . This is a must have for all lighter collectors, Art Deco lovers and all those who appreciate history.

Priced at \$175 per copy plus \$15 s/h in the USA.S/H costs to other countries will be quoted upon request. To order your copy please email ramzi@etp-inc.com or call/text (909)407-0248

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