

# The Fascinating History of the Dietz Vesta Lantern - Part III

By David Hamilton

The year 1897 was a significant one in the history of the R.E. Dietz Company. A disastrous fire gutted its New York factory on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, and in order to continue lantern production, Dietz purchased the rival Steam Gauge & Lantern Company. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, founder Robert E. Dietz passed away at his summer home on Long Island. His promotion of tubular style lanterns had not only laid the foundation for the success of his company, but it had a major impact on the entire lantern manufacturing industry, as well. It was also during this year that Dietz began to phase out its efforts to market a new tubular hand lantern to railroads. The Dietz Vesta had been introduced in the previous year's catalog, but sales remained weak. Evidently, this unique brakeman's lantern was slightly ahead of its time.

As early as 1895, craftsmen at both the C.T. Ham and R.E. Dietz companies had been engaged in preliminary work on tubular railroad lantern designs. The first patent application for one was filed on July 8, 1895, by Charles Bergener of C.T. Ham. Bergener had been involved in the lantern business for

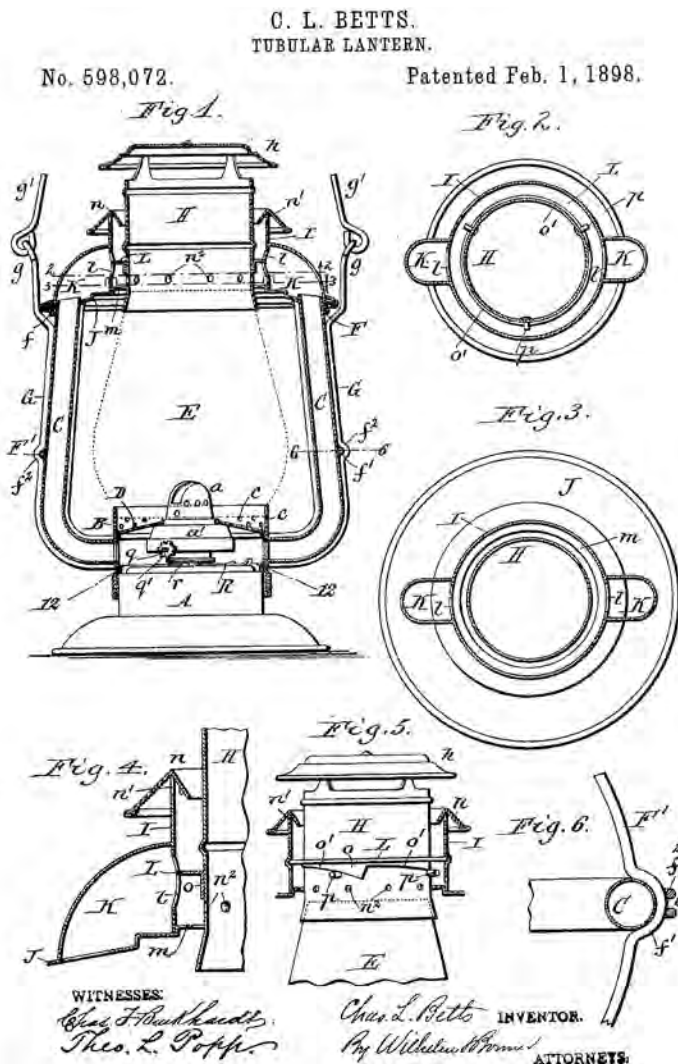


*The first version of the Dietz Vesta tubular brakeman's lantern proved to be unpopular with railroads.*

many years, beginning with Dennis & Wheeler in Chicago, and moving to Rochester, NY when that firm was absorbed by the Steam Gauge & Lantern Company. When Charles Ham left SG&L in 1886, to start his own company, Bergener came along as superintendent. His plan for a tubular railroad lantern combined the features of tubular barn lanterns, and the dead flame brakeman's lanterns that C.T. Ham was selling at the time. Possibly due to the unusual nature of its design, this model was evidently never produced. However, some of Bergener's ideas were later incorporated into Dietz lanterns, as his patent issue date of December 15, 1896 appears on early Dietz Vestas.

On December 30, 1895, Charles L. Betts of R.E. Dietz filed a patent for his version of a tubular railroad lantern. Betts had been developing improvements for Dietz lanterns since 1885, and received literally dozens of patents for his ideas over the course of his long career. His design, for which a patent was eventually issued on February 1, 1898, formed the blueprint for the tubular brakeman's lantern that was introduced as the Dietz Vesta in 1896. However, as noted

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*This 1895 design for a tubular brakeman's lantern by Charles Betts was the basis for future Dietz Vestas.*

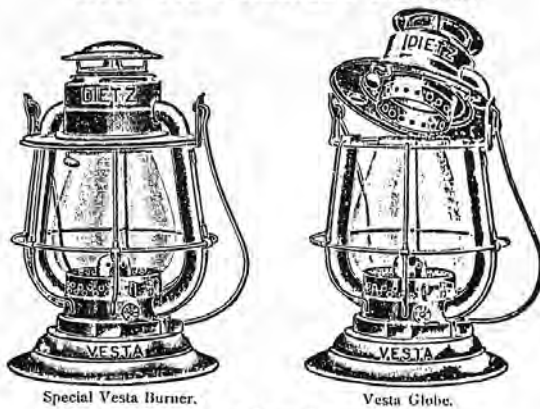
in the previous article in this series, the Vesta's large size and unconventional style evidently proved to be unpopular with railroads. From 1897 through 1900, it was marketed to a variety of other customers, with an emphasis on its durable construction and reliability. Advertisements for the Vesta appeared in magazines such as *American Gardening*, *The Progressive Beekeeper*, and various medical journals. In the 1902 Dietz catalog, the Vesta was no longer listed as a railroad lantern.

However, with an increase in railroad lantern sales, largely due to the 1897 acquisition of SG&L, the idea of a tubular brakeman's lantern remained on the table at Dietz. Even as the Vulcan, Steel Clad, and improved No. 39 railroad lanterns were introduced in 1902, Charles Betts must have been thinking of ways to make the Vesta more appealing for railroad use. On June 22, 1904, he filed a patent application for a tubular railroad lantern which eliminated some of the problems found in the previous model. The improved Vesta was much smaller, and thus lighter in weight, but it retained



Charles L. Betts was the "father" of the Vesta. Dietz photo.

**Dietz  
New Vesta Railroad Lantern.**



Lighted and regulated from the outside.  
 Made on the Tubular Principle (Patented).  
 A Railroad Lantern to burn Kerosene (Coal Oil).  
 For all Railroad Service.  
 A sure light all the time. Will not jar or blow out,  
 Money Saver—Light Giver.

When we introduced the Tubular Lantern 36 years ago, we predicted that it would supersede all others for general use. It has done so. A few years ago we brought out the Acme Car Inspector Lantern, and it has almost entirely taken the place of the smoky torch formerly used. We now predict that our new Vesta Tubular R. R. Lantern (and Lanterns of its type) will, in a short time, displace the ordinary style of R. R. Lantern.

Can be furnished with White, Ruby, Blue or Green Globes.

*The "new" Vesta first appeared in the 1905 Dietz catalog. KL&L Archives / Collection of Richard Barrett.*

the strength and durability of the original. The bell bottom style base also remained, along with its use of kerosene as fuel. To match the smaller size, a unique 4 ¼ inch globe was introduced, in place of the standard No. 39 and Junior globes. Once again offered as a railroad lantern, the "new" Vesta was listed in the 1905 Dietz catalog.

Two variations of this version of the Vesta appear to have been produced, each with a slightly different style top. One made use of a solid crown that was mounted on tabs, creating

a substantial side opening in the smoke dome. On at least one example of this type, the railroad markings were applied in a larger size of type than is found on later Vesta models. The second variation had a "hood" attached to a smaller crown, creating an enclosed smoke dome with top vent openings. Railroad markings found on several examples of this version are of the smaller style that was used on more recent Vesta lanterns. In addition, these Vestas were made with two different bell bottoms: one with a smooth surface, and the other with a ridge about halfway down the base. Each type of bell bottom was interchangeable with the different tops, and examples of each combination have been found.

Based on catalog illustrations, patent drawings, and similarities to the 1896 Vesta, it appears that the first version of the "new" Vesta was the variation with the open smoke

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*The newer (left) and older (right) variations of the "new" bell bottom Dietz Vesta. Collection of Sam Ferrara.*

dome and ridge style bell bottom. The modifications that provided an enclosed smoke dome, and the addition of the now familiar Vesta style lettering, probably took place in mid-1905. Most likely, the change to the smooth base was also made around the same time, to match the style (and therefore utilize the tooling) of other Dietz bell bottom

burned more efficiently than signal oil, and that the tubular design resulted in a brighter and more reliable flame. The new Vesta was about the same size as other brakeman's lanterns on the market, so it was not as cumbersome to use as the previous version. Charles Betts no doubt recognized that he was on the right track with this lantern, and continued to work on improvements to its design.

During 1906, he drew up the plans for another version of the Vesta, which included additional refinements to the smoke dome, and a change from a bell bottom to a wire base. Introduced in the 1907 catalog as the "new Vesta," this lantern would become one of the most successful railroad lanterns ever produced by Dietz. In the next installment, we'll take a closer look at the further development of this interesting lantern.



*Railroad markings on the first variation of the 1905 Vesta were similar to other Dietz lanterns. Sam Ferrara collection.*

lanterns. One example of a Vesta with the enclosed smoke dome is marked for the West Virginia Central & Pittsburgh Ry, which was absorbed by the Western Maryland RR on November 1, 1905. The existence of this lantern would appear to confirm that the change in styles took place before the end of that year.

While some customers were still hesitant to purchase a lantern that burned only kerosene and required a special globe, the new Vesta proved to be more popular than its predecessor. Railroaders soon discovered that kerosene



*Western Maryland RR Vesta with the enclosed top and original style bell bottom. Photo courtesy of Mike Yetter.*



*During mid-1905, the smoke dome was altered, and the familiar Vesta style lettering was added. West Virginia Central & Pittsburgh Ry. Photo courtesy of Mike Yetter.*

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