

A Motor Car Match Safe

By Neil Shapiro

The earliest first cars (“self-moving carriages”) had no headlights at all since they moved only during the daylight. But by circa 1880, they had headlights in the form of either gas acetylene or oil-fueled lamps. They were like the old gas lamps used in people’s homes and were constructed from a lantern with a reflecting mirror that allowed an unfocused, scattered light to brighten the road ahead.

These primitive lamps were laborious to use: to turn on the headlight, you had to open the acetylene supply valve, then the glass caps of the headlights, and finally to light a torch with a match.

While they were quite popular at the time due to their wind and rain resistance, these acetylene headlamps had to be cleaned often to prevent the buildup of caustic lime – a highly toxic substance. Acetylene lamps proved popular with manufacturers because the flame was resistant to wind and rain. Mirrors were placed behind the flame to focus the light forwards, although the beam itself wasn't particularly focused.

These proto headlights weren’t ideal, but they got the job done, at least until electric headlights made their entrance in 1908 with the introduction of the first carbon-based headlamp bulb to run on battery.

The container that held the matches that ignited the headlights of these motor cars was large as were the matches it contained. Denis Alsford, a match historian, has written that these massive matches would flame for twenty seconds and keep alight in the strongest wind. In the UK they were called “flamers” and “wind vestas.”

One example of a match safe that held unignited massive matches was made by the Commonwealth Silver Co. of California (1905-1920). It measures 4 1/2” long x 2” high x 1/4” thick. It is curved at the back side and has a thumb lift lid, no spring, and a friction fit lid. The striker has a recessed area to apply a piece of roughened paper to a hard inner core.

There is scant research information about the Commonwealth Silver Co. but given the dates of its existence it is reasonable to assume the 1929 depression was the cause of its demise.

For most match safe collectors, the plain silver case with only an elaborately engraved set of initials on the front would not be of great interest, but it is wonderful to have a relic of an early automotive accessory.



Front



Back



Large match & regular size match



striker