

**MYTH:** Using a Kerosene Lamp as a heat source in which to dry plates over or heat them up during the plate varnishing procedure is both unauthentic and “dirty”. The proper and authentic appliance to use is a Spirit Lamp.

This is truly a whacky one that requires a lot of ignorance and self delusion to buy into. But, still many do. True, some old manuals speak solely of the Spirit Lamp, which is also known as an Alcohol Burner or Alcohol Lamp, as the heat source. Towler’s 1864 “Silver Sunbeam” is one and it was regarded as the most complete manual of its day. But, it also warns that you can all too easily set a freshly varnished plate on fire if you get it too close to the hard to see blue flame. Set a plate on fire, even for an instant, and the image surface will be badly defaced. There’s no fix after that. And you will eventually set a plate on fire no matter how careful you might think you are. Usually, it’s the best one of the day! Also, a Spirit Lamp’s rather pin point flame can crack a glass plate if you get it too close. Again, it will probably be your most beautiful Ambrotype of the day. On into the 19<sup>th</sup> century wet-plate era, one can find many appliances offered to take the place of the wicked little “Spirit Lamp”: Sheet Iron racks with gas jet burner heat sources, big ones you set on a room heater stove, or small light tin ones heated by a “Coal Oil Lamp”. What’s a “Coal Oil Lamp”, you might ask? That’s just 19<sup>th</sup> century lingo for an ordinary Kerosene Lamp. This seems to trip some modern narrow minds up who then believe a Kerosene Lamp must be some sort of 20<sup>th</sup> century invention because they never see it mentioned in any 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. The fact is Coal Oil, Oil Lamp, and Kerosene Lamp are all the same thing! Trask’s 1870’s manual, “The Practical Ferrotypier”, speaks of using a Coal Oil Lamp for a heat source. Well then, some might say, they never used them during the Civil War! I say, why not, as they had them by that time. A standard size Kerosene Lamp with a three quarters inch wide wick gives out a nice even broad heat from its glass chimney that is ideal for drying and varnishing any plate, be it metal or glass. It is virtually impossible to set a plate on fire with it! I never have in the decades I’ve used one nor have any of my hundreds of students set a plate on fire with one. It is also a very lovely and relaxing light to work by. One thing it is definitely not is “dirty”. If you keep it properly maintained and the flame not turned up too high it will burn very cleanly without a trace of smoke. You can buy your Kerosene Lamp or, as they are more often labeled, “Oil Lamp”, at most home supply stores or even places like the big box discount department stores or several mail order sources. Lehman’s Hardware has a huge line of them. Always, the same place will have bottles of nice colored and scented “Lamp Oil” for sale to, but, plain Kerosene works just as well and is a lot cheaper. Check your local gas station to see if they pump it. Oh, yeah, one more thing, for 8 by 10 or bigger size plates you will need two or more lamps side by side to give the flow of heat needed to do the job well.

**OTHER HEAT SOURCE OPTIONS:** Some devoted and inspired “Spirit Lamp” users have side stepped some of the fire hazard issues pretty much by putting the Spirit Lamp in the bottom of a 6 inch metal tube with holes or slits near its bottom to allow a good flow of air to the flame. With one of these set-ups, you cannot get too close to the flame and set any plates on fire and it also helps to gather the heat and send it out in a broader more uniform way. So, no risk of cracking a glass plate, either. The only drawback from this sort of set-up is that inevitably you or someone will grab the tube not realizing it can get scorching hot

and they totally fry the ends of their fingers! If you go the tube route be sure to make a nice wide base attached to it, as they tip over or get knocked over way too easy otherwise. Now, if you don't care about the old time look at all and are not into flames, you can use a Coleman Catalytic propane canister heater to good effect as a heat source to dry and varnish your plates over. And, if you really, really don't give a rat's ass about being "authentic" or even sounding authentic, you can use a hand held "electric hair blow dryer" to heat your plates with. No dangerous flame there, either, but I think I heard it from someone who heard it from someone who heard it from someone that it was "dirty"?