
Car lighter socket and plug

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We've covered a number of car hacks here, but I feel like the absolute best hack in all of motoring history has been ignored. It's something that's become so common, so mundane, that we forget just how incredibly clever it really is: the cigarette lighter 12V power outlet.

Let's just take a moment to really think through why this is such a brilliant hack. Let's start by breaking down exactly

what that round hole in our car dashes really is. It starts with a filthy (but admittedly cool-looking) habit.

Smoking was once so incredibly common, so expected of everyone, that smoking-related equipment showed up on everything. Some of the first visual-display computers designed by the Navy to track missiles, for example, had ashtrays built in. It was the one vice you could almost guarantee everyone succumbed to, and as a result, they were a common option in cars.

Early ones had a heating element connected by an extendible cord, but these were ungainly and awkward — getting the cord reeled back in couldn't have always been easy. Getting rid of that cord was key, and the earliest patent I found that seems to have achieved this design was filed on October 2, 1919 — the birthday of both my sister and Mahatma Gandhi.

The fundamental design of this 'cigar lighter' should be familiar to pretty much anyone who's been in a car the last half-century: a cylindrical socket, with a removable knob-ended lighter, comprised of a heating element at the business end. The details of this design differ from more modern ones, but the principle is the same: in the socket, 12V from the car's electrical system heats an element to incandescence, and that element is removed, and placed in contact with the cigarette, lighting it.

The important part here is that in this design, a small cylindrical hole is installed in the dash with 12V of delicious electricity flowing into it. Later designs eventually adopted a coiled heating element, spring-out action, and eventually standardized the size, but the basic concept is the same.

By 1956, Casco's cigarette lighter design was the one that became standardized. Designed by Lawrence Fenn, I wish I could say I was able to find out exactly why this particular design (there were many others, from the late 20s into the early 50s) was the one that stuck, but like so many details, nobody seems to have documented this surprisingly important decision.

Once the same fundamental lighter system was in almost all cars (at least in the US) the stage was set for the most amazing hack ever. Like the selection of the Casco socket, I wish I had a name or an exact date to go with the creation of this incredible innovation.

I've been looking around for over a year, off and on, to try and find exactly who came up with the amazing idea of using the cigarette lighter socket for something other than lighting cigarettes, and I'm sad to say I haven't found who that mad genius was. I have a reasonable idea of what the first accessory was to actually use a cigarette lighter jack, though. I think it was likely a spotlight.

Hand-held or A-pillar mounted spotlights — the kind you usually only see on cop cars today — were once a really popular accessory in the US. Part of this was likely because back in the 50s, there were many more areas of the country without good street lighting, and a steerable light was probably a good idea for reading street signs or looking around for wolves or keeping the ghosts at bay when you were out in the middle of pitch blackness with only a pair of crappy

6V lights to guide you.

Based on what I can find on eBay, these spotlights seem to be the earliest common car accessories to use the cigarette lighter socket. The plugs vary a lot in looks, but they're all generally a familiar shape and size to what we'd recognize today. And, aside from blowing out that 6V bulb with modern 12V, they'd all fit in the power socket of pretty much any car made today.

As a plug design, the standard car 12V plug (as first codified in the 1960 ANSI/SAE J563 standard) is kind of terrible. It's a huge plug, the socket is a big, open hole, way too accepting of fingers or other appendages, and it's generally clumsy and ungainly. But it's also staggeringly beautiful and elegant when you think that it manages to recharge your iPhone from something that was designed to set a tube of weeds on fire near your face.

I still would love to find the actual engineer who first realized there was a convenient way to tap 12V and ground right from a car's dashboard without a screwdriver or clips or tape. That's one of those amazing leaps of imagination that managed to spawn an entire sub-industry. Right after those early spotlights came electric shavers, and then soon after that an explosion of waffle irons and coffee makers and microwaves and so much more. Even really stupid things.

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So, if anyone has a lead on just who this brilliant engineer may have been, please, say something in the comments. I'd love to try and popularize their name as the official name for that 12V/lighter socket. It doesn't really have a good name as it is right now.

And even if you don't know, the next time you plug that awkward, dildo-shaped plug into that huge open cylinder, take a moment and reflect on just how fucking clever one anonymous engineer was, so many decades ago.