Cans

Cans made entirely by machine, with one-piece lids – no caps or vent holes

Cans opened by using a "key" to roll or tear away a metal strip from the top or side

Same as hole-and-cap, but with tiny pin-hole in center of cap to act as a vent during cooking

Can lids have central cap where food was inserted before sealing

Hole-in-cap Closure with Cap Removed

Hole-in-top Evaporated Milk Can with Obvious Drop of Solder Missing

Bands of lead solder much thinner and more-evenly applied

Globby, irregular bands of lead solder along edges and around top, cap, and base of can

Evaporated milk cans almost exclusively of this type by 1920

Sanitary Cans

Commercially available by 1904

Useful for canning food (except milk) in the late 1880s-

1820s-WWI

No vent hole; cans often swelled or burst during cooking

No lead solder

Commercially available by the late 1890s

1866-present (key-wind tapered tins after 1895)

After 1883

Until the 1880s

The ubiquitous "tin" can (many metal cans actually have no tin at all) provides information on both the formation on both the can and what it contained.

The kind of lid or closure a can has will help you identify when it was manufactured and drop of solder missing.

Note that only whole, uncrushed cans should be lightly crushed to see what is inside. If you can't see through the glass, you may want to order a light source to evaluate the contents.

Cans changed size over time, too, and some of these changes provide clues as to their particular use. Particularly true for evaporated or condensed milk cans.

Can Measurements

Example, an evaporated-milk can that is 3 inches in diameter and 3 and 4/16 of an inch tall with a 1 and 1/8 inch cap diameter dates to the period 1875-1885

See IMACS Users Guide 471 - Tin Cans

The side-seam type can be determined by the soldering technique and the shape of the can. Cans with banding or globbing, or with hand-soldered seams, were produced until the late 1880s, with manufacturing by machine starting after that.

Other Can Tidbits

Pocket tobacco tins (most-famously Prince Albert reproductions).

The log-cabin-shaped syrup tin was introduced in 1897 and discontinued after WW II (with modern Sanitary cans).

Tapered tins, like those still used for some brands of corned beef, were first marketed in 1875.

Condensed milk was first canned in the US in 1856, evaporated milk in 1885

The first vacuum-packed coffee (in one-pound cans) was marketed by Hills Brothers in 1903.

The first aerosol cans came out in 1945.

The pull-tab beverage can was introduced in 1962.

Acme Beer Cans ca. 1948

"Church Keys" got smaller over time. These cans date (left to right) 1939, 1951, and 1958.

A "Church-key" Opener

Key-wind Opening, Probably for Fish

Did you know that Calumet Baking Powder dates back to 1889? Check out this web site: http://www.geocities.com/foodedge/timeline.htm