

The LittleKnown 1930s Couple That Made Sleep Better for All of Us

By Paige Towers • September 6, 2016 at 12:35pm

SHARE ON FACEBOOK TWEET TUMBLR EMAIL

Sleep masks haven't just saturated the market, they've nearly drowned it. They dangle from the duffels of savvy travelers and adorn the faces of those flying first class; search for them online and you'll be met with everything from standard eye wraps to luxurious silk models meant to reduce undereye bags to techedout masks — the companies behind which claim can help you cure jet lag or even lucid dream. *Sigh.*

But while the market for sleep masks has become a bit complicated, the origins of the sleep mask go back to a much simpler time — the early 1930s.

In a May 1931 edition of Popular Science,

a short article titled,

“New Eye Mask Shields Sleeper From Light”

introduces the product to consumers for the first time. (And just to give you a taste of the era, an article a few pages prior informs readers, “Why Savages Are Healthy.”)

<http://vanwinkles.com/whocreatedthesleepmask> 1/6

11/10/2016 The LittleKnown 1930s Couple That Made Sleep Better for All of Us | Van Winkle's

<http://www.popsoci.com/archive>

Based on the article, it turns out that restless sleep and insomnia due to travel and “modern lighting systems” were a concern nearly a century ago as well.

<http://vanwinkles.com/whocreatedthesleepmask> 2/6

11/10/2016 The LittleKnown 1930s Couple That Made Sleep Better for All of Us | Van Winkle's
<http://vanwinkles.com/whocreatedthesleepmask> 3/6

11/10/2016 The LittleKnown 1930s Couple That Made Sleep Better for All of Us | Van Winkle's

<http://www.popsoci.com/archive>

So who created this "new 'sleep mask' designed especially for the purpose of a shading a sleeper's eyes?"

didn't include any sources so we did a little digging, and the inventors appear to be Edward and Elsie Hemphill, a married couple from California. They filed for a U.S. patent for their in 1930 and were approved in 1933. The photo featured in the article matches the figures they provided with their patent claim and their 'sleep eye shade' is the only mask of its kind that applied for a patent in this time period.

<http://vanwinkles.com/whocreatedthesleepmask> 4/6

Popular Science

“Sleep eye shade”

Popular Science

11/10/2016 The LittleKnown 1930s Couple That Made Sleep Better for All of Us | Van Winkle's

<https://www.google.com/patents>

The Hemphill's claim states that, "this invention relates to an eye shield designed primarily for use by persons while sleeping so that their rest will not be disturbed by light rays.

<http://vanwinkles.com/whocreatedthesleepmask> 5/6

The shield can also be used while taking light treatments whereby the eyes will be protected from the light rays.” (Light treatments

, which were far different than the light therapy used to help treat everything from sleep issues to seasonal affective disorder, were popular in the early 1900s and basically asked people to sit beneath bright bulbs. It was prescribed for everything from lupus to pneumonia to acne, although — much like modern tanning beds

— they’ve now been linked to skin cancer.)

Funny enough, while improvements and small touches have been made to the mask, the design hasn’t evolved much: the only thing that deviates from the basic modern sleep mask is that annoyinglooking extra strap that fits under the ear.

Yet, despite its feature in the ‘sleep shade’ didn’t really seem to take off until the ’60s and ’70s. This is perhaps due to a choice made by the famous costume designer, to style Audrey Hepburn in a trimmed with eyelashes and gold ribbon for

. After that, the ‘eye shade’ was no longer just for shielding the eyes; it was marketed to women as something that could block out light and allow them to be Hepburnstyle fabulous while snoozing.

<http://vanwinkles.com/whocreatedthesleepmask> 6/6

Popular Science,

Edith Head, teal sleep mask Breakfast at Tiffany’s

In any case, let’s all thank the Hemphills for bringing it into existence. How else would we pass out on planes?