

# The Trail of the Miner's Candlestick

Ruby T. Scott

*Editors Note: the following was discovered by Jim Lackey in the March 1937 issue of Antiques magazine. We reprint it here as it was originally published, including the following comments of the magazine's skeptical "Editor."*

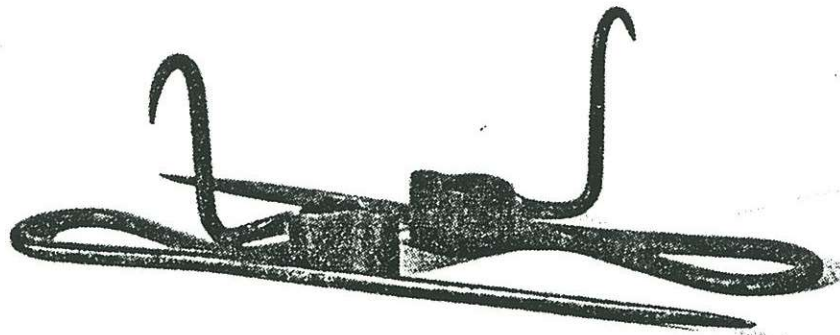
Note. Some gentle readers of Antiques may be shocked by the revelations afforded by the following brief but convincing article. Let us confess that we have hitherto regarded the curious iron weapons described by Miss Scott as contrivances wrought by fairly oldtime blacksmiths. In fact, we suspended acceptance of Miss Scott's article until the author had topped other evidence in the case with the group portrait here reproduced. We have since recalled the log-built abode of a forest ranger in the Canadian Rockies with whom we once found a day's escape from heavy rain and a leaky tent. The one-room establishment boasted a lamp whose precious fuel had to be reserved for periods of reading. Ordinary illumination was provided by candles flickering in iron sockets whose rapierlike shafts were thrust into cracks in the surrounding log walls.

Still, it is fair to enquire whether the candlesticks that played so important a part in the life of the metal miners of the West, even within the past forty years, were originally designed for the purpose that they so well served both in shaft and in shack. Do far earlier prototypes survive? If so, when and where were they made?

— The Editor

Enter almost any secondhand thrift store in almost any town on the western slope of the Rockies, and poke into the box of old iron sure to be reposing in some obscure corner. Each year the findings become fewer, but even yet you stand a fair chance of uncovering a slender piece of twisted ironwork about ten inches long, with a sharp point at one end and a loop at the other. On one side, just below the loop, the iron has been flattened and curved into a circlet of candle diameter; then it recovers its slender shape and rises into a

sharp hook. The aspect of the contrivance suggests a serpent with up-lifted head, ready to strike.



*Fig. 1 Miner's Candlesticks (nineteenth century)*  
*Stamped Varney. Wrought from a continuous strip of iron ingeniously curved, flattened into a collar to accommodate a candle, and then continued in the form of a hook.*

"What's that?" you may ask the shopkeeper. And he will answer, "Oh,

that? That's a miner's candlestick. In the early days out here, every miner carried one. Regular part of

his outfit. Pretty handy, too. This long point he could stick into a bank somewhere, or he could hang the thing over a ledge by the hook, or hand it on his hat if he wanted to. He carried it on his finger by the loop, or hung it from his belt when he wasn't using it. Nobody totes them any more,

though. Oh, maybe, once in a while and old prospector will come in and want one."



As you turn the candlestick over in your hands and observe how perfectly it appears to meet the need which it was intended to satisfy, your interest may grow as mine did when I picked up my first specimen. After that I began to look for other examples and to study what I found.

Miner's candlesticks, I discovered, range from eight to ten or twelve inches in length and vary greatly in workmanship. Some are graceful and quite delicately wrought. Others are rough and heavy. Many are stamped with the maker's name. I have two fine examples marked Varney, and several others with initials.

In my handsomest specimen, the shaft of the hook is hand-wrought in an elaborate sequence of carefully graduated divisions. It is likewise ingeniously pivoted, so that it may be laid flat against the long blade. This piece is not signed; but it is enough to know that its maker was one who enjoyed improving on standard patterns, was ready to add an element of decoration, for no other reason than delight in fine workman-

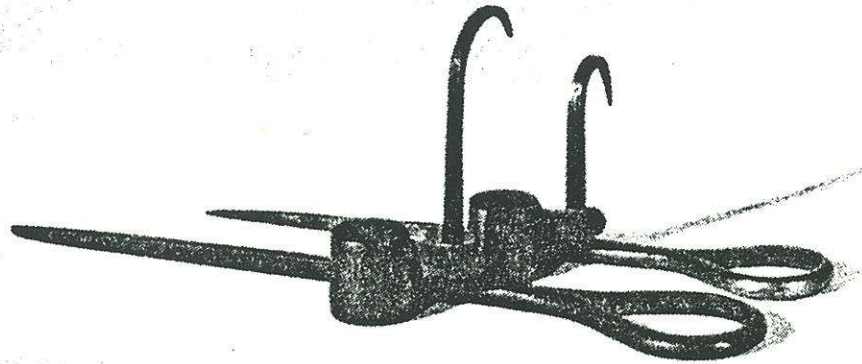
ship. All the other candlesticks in my collection are made in one continuous piece of iron, broadened, or flattened, or curved, or sharpened, as utility required.

I have talked with old miners and examined old photographs. One pic-

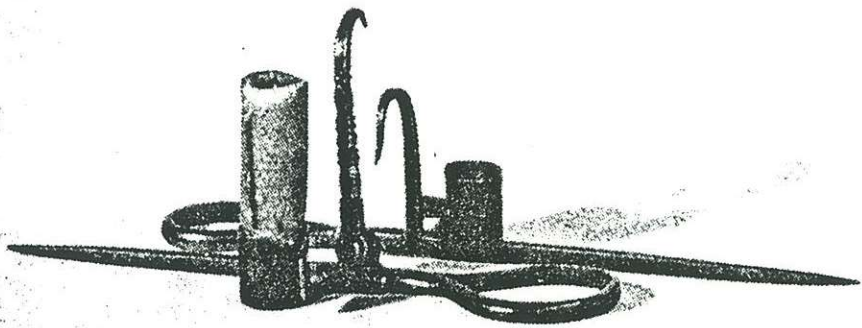
I had thought of these interesting contrivances as identified solely with the old West. Then one day a chance remark set me wondering. I had just purchased several nice specimens in a secondhand store when the proprietor remarked, "I used to get a bigger price than I am asking you for them things. There was a feller come through here every summer from Boston. Give me real money for every three of 'em I could find. No, he wasn't collectin' for himself. Said he sold them back there in Boston. He hasn't been here, though, since the depression." Then, reflectively, "I've always wondered what on earth folks did with them things back there in Boston."

I wondered too. One day, a year later, as I was turning the pages of a popular book on antiques, I found myself staring at the answer. Two sketches, which might have been drawn from my favorite miner's candlestick, confronted me. But yet they were curiously

altered. The ingenious artist had inverted the hook and from it dangled a betty lamp! The accompanying legend (I use the word in both its meanings) read as follows: Candle and "betty" lamp jamb hook.



*Fig. 2 Miner's Candlesticks (nineteenth century)*  
Longer measures 10 1/2 inches; shorter, 7 3/4 inches. The hook portion rises from the shaft.



*Fig. 3 Miner's Candlesticks (nineteenth century)*  
Foreground example has unusual and handsomely wrought hook, pivoted to the main shaft so that it may be laid flat.

ture taken at the Grand Central Mine in Mammoth, Utah, shows a group of miners who have just emerged from their day's work. Several of the men carry one of these candlesticks.





*Fig. 4 Miners and Their Candlesticks*

*Photograph taken in 1896 at the Grand Central Mine, Mammoth, Utah. Many of the men are carrying their candlesticks in their hands. The picture is by special courtesy of Bart Lynch of Grand Junction, Colorado. Mr. Lynch appears in the group, sixth from the left, second row.*

“What did folks do with them things back there in Boston?” Now I know. And with knowledge has come the awful realization of what may be meant by “the romance of antiques”. Must it invariably lead to strange and uncouth marriages? Must the aura of virile romance that surrounds the miner’s candlestick seek added lustre by union with the feeble flicker of a betty? Again, I wonder.



*Fig. 5 Southern Betty or Grease Lamp*

*Used by slaves before the Civil War. Such lamps were frequently, though by no means invariably, equipped with an attachment that could be stuck into a cabin wall or hung over a chair back.*