The Gabriel Werntz Candlesticks

Wendell Wilson

The standard patented model (9.8 inches as shown; 7.3 inches rearranged for pocket carrying) (Hal Post's example is 10.5 inches long and 8.25 inches stowed.) It was obtained by Leo Stambaugh in 1994 from a Creede miner who lived in Salida after he retired. He had worked at the Bulldog mine. Now in the author's collection.

INTRODUCTION

There are many examples of candlesticks that can be folded up in various ways so as to be conveniently carried in one's pocket. But Gabriel Werntz candlesticks are among the rarest and most mechanically refined examples that can be taken apart into their component pieces. Candlesticks that can be disassembled were probably made mostly for fun, since carrying around a pocketful of loose pieces doesn't seem very appealing. What makes Werntz candlesticks so distinctive is that they are the ONLY ones (with the possible exception of the Henry D. Buys patent) in which all the component parts can be re-assembled tightly into a *different* configuration that can be more easily carried in the pocket.

HIS LIFE

Gabriel ("Gabe") H. Werntz was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, on October 19, 1832, the son of Sarah ("Sally") Brown and William Wallace Werntz, a blacksmith. His roots in Lancaster County go way back, to his great grandfather Johann Georg Werntz, who was born there in 1725. Gabriel, 18 years old, is listed with his family on the 1850 census for Fairview Township, Erie County, Pennsylvania, as a "laborer," but odds are that, as the eldest son, he was busy learning his father's blacksmithing trade.

Around 1866, Werntz elected to move west to pursue his fortune, and settled in the Grizzly Flat area, 23 miles east and a little south of Placerville, California, working there at first as a miner. The 1870 census for the town of Mountain in El Dorado County also lists him as a "steam engineer," probably at a logging operation, as he is rooming in the home of Jefferson Baird, a "lumberman," along with two other lodgers identified as a "logger" and a "teamster." Grizzly Flat was the center of a prosperous logging industry at the time.

The 1880 census lists him as a miner. The *Mining and Scientific Press* reported in 1880 that Gabriel Werntz had just sold the Secret mine at Henry's Diggings in Eldorado County for $5,000; he and his partner, David Brandover, had been working it for gold for 14 years, "under all the disadvantages imaginable." With his winnings, Werntz opened a blacksmith shop in Grizzley Flat, while continuing to dabble in nearby mining properties, such as the Polar Bear, White Bear, and Empire Group.

A daguerreotype photo showing the town of Grizzly Flat ca. 1860 (placer operations in the foreground). Doug Noble collection. Founded in the 1850s and named after a bear the prospectors encountered there, the little town was mostly destroyed by fire in 1866, 1869 and 2021.

Werntz married Ollie McFarlane (who was 26 years his junior) in El Dorado County, California, on December 30, 1879, but she had died by 1899. The 1890 census was unfortunately destroyed by fire, and there is no information about any children they might have had before she died. He is listed as a widower on the 1900 and 1910 censuses, still living in the Grizzly Flat Precinct, and apparently never having remarried. The voter

registration records for 1892 are rather precise: Gabriel Werntz, a blacksmith, was 5 feet 10 inches tall, with a dark complexion, brown eyes, and dark brown hair. He was a Master in the Freemasons, Mount Zion Lodge No. 114, Grizzly Flat.

A story in the *Stockton Evening Mail* (November 27, 1896) recounts how Werntz was returning to Grizzly Flat with some companions after a shooting match, when he encountered Jonathan Camp. The two got into an argument over the Eagle King mine, and when Camp knock him down, Werntz pulled his gun and shot Camp dead. Whether he was prosecuted or not remains unknown. But a 1903 note in the *Folsom Telegraph* states that Werntz was blacksmithing at the Homestead mine near Folsom. He had been taken sick and returned to Placerville. Gabriel Werntz died in Alameda County, California on October 11, 1913, at the age of 81.

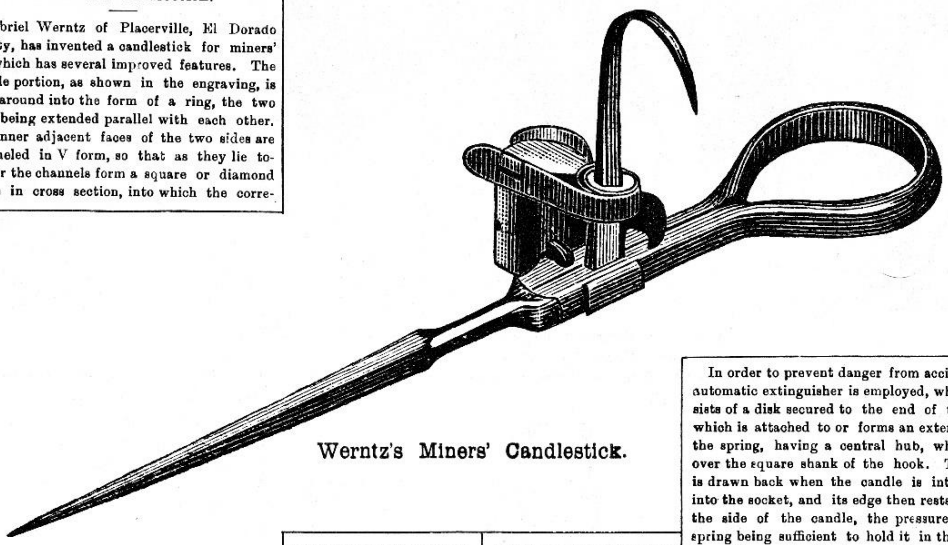
MINING AND SCIENTIFIC PRESS.

An Illustrated Journal of Mining, Popular Science and General News.

BY DEWEY & CO. Publishers. SAN FRANCISCO, SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 1889. VOLUME LVIII. Number 8.

A Miner's Candlestick.

Gabriel Werntz of Placerville, El Dorado county, has invented a candlestick for miners' use which has several improved features. The handle portion, as shown in the engraving, is bent around into the form of a ring, the two ends being extended parallel with each other. The inner adjacent faces of the two sides are channeled in V form, so that as they lie together the channels form a square or diamond shape in cross section, into which the correspondingly shaped inner end or shank of the spear will slide and fit. A hole is made through one of the sides, and a corresponding notch is formed in the shank of the spear, so that a transverse pin or key passing through will hold the spear firmly in place between the two sides. This key is shown as extended upward so as to form the hook, by which the device may be hung up whenever it is more convenient to secure it in this manner than by striking the spear into a wooden beam.



Werntz's Miners' Candlestick.

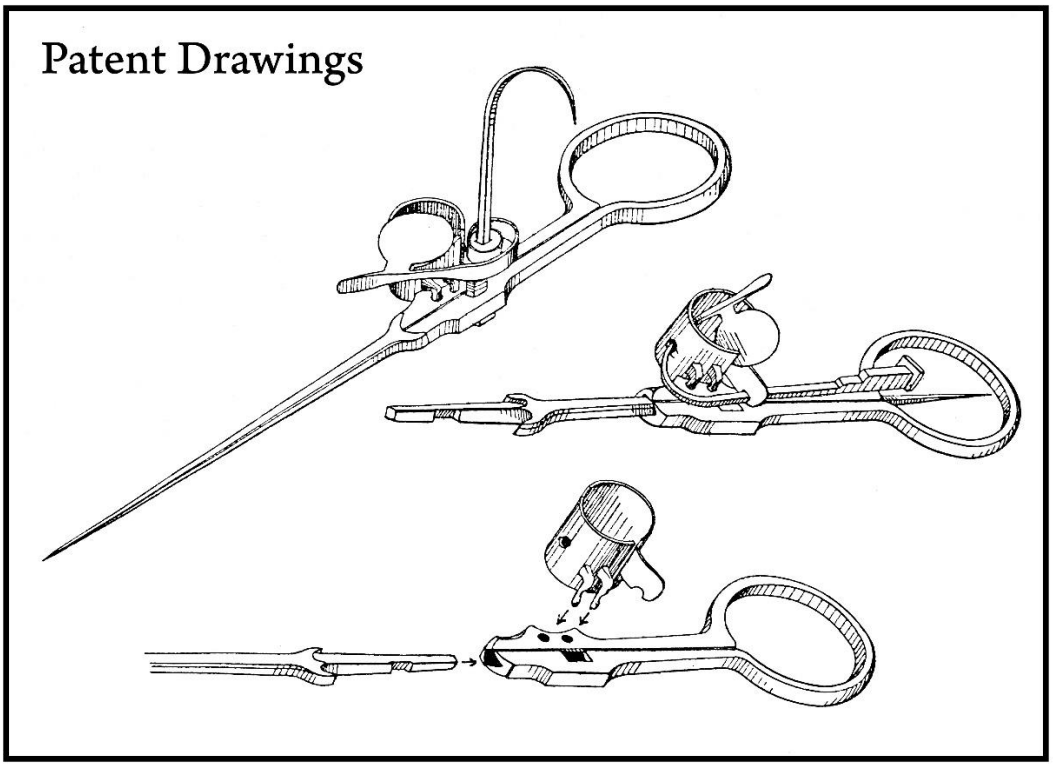
The candle is held in a tubular socket. This socket is made of spring steel bent into cylindrical form and having a projecting thumb-piece upon one side, by which it may be sprung open sufficiently to admit a candle. This socket may either be secured permanently on the side of one of the extensions, or may be provided with lugs, which extend down through one of the sides, passing through the V-shaped channel in that side, and having notches cut in them so that when the spear shank is inserted into its place between the two sides it will engage these notches, and thus lock the candle-holder lugs firmly in place.

The hook, having been inserted into the slot before described, will lock the spear in place, and the whole will be firmly held together. The length of the candle-socket is such that if the candle becomes broken it may be so placed in the socket that the broken place will be held within the length of the socket, and thus keep it in place until the candle is burned down to this point, and so prevent waste.

In order to prevent danger from accident, an automatic extinguisher is employed, which consists of a disk secured to the end of the arm, which is attached to or forms an extension of the spring, having a central hub, which fits over the square shank of the hook. The disk is drawn back when the candle is introduced into the socket, and its edge then rests against the side of the candle, the pressure of the spring being sufficient to hold it in this position with considerable force. When the candle has burned down to the disk, the latter will be forced across the candle, thus cutting it off and extinguishing it, so as to prevent accident. By this construction of the jointed and detachable spear the inventor is enabled to make a candlestick of greater length, so that there is not so much danger of the candle igniting dry wood which may be near it, and when it is desired to carry it away, it is easily separated by removing the key, the extinguishing disk, and reversing the spear, placing the hook and disk upon the handle and holder.

When everything is conveniently packed up it can be put into the pocket and carried away. The inventor is desirous of disposing of the patent rights for the Pacific Coast.

Newspaper advertisement for the Gabriel Werntz patented miner's candlestick, March 2, 1889.



HIS CANDLESTICKS

Gabriel Werntz candlesticks are never signed, but they can be identified by comparison with the beautiful engraving in the 1889 article in *Mining and Scientific Press*, and by the patent drawing associated with the patent date stamped on the snuffer lid (for those candlesticks that have a snuffer). The patent was granted on Christmas Day of 1888 (no. 395,097).

The patented candlestick can be broken down into its five component parts—handle, spike, hook, thimble, and snuffer—and then reassembled into a more compact form for carrying in the pocket. It seems that in practice the snuffer was often lost, discarded or not included in the first place, as it is rare in the few surviving examples.

The Gabriel Werntz patent allowed the spike to be removed and re-inserted backward (with the point protected inside the handle loop) and the hook could be detached and stowed horizontally, with the point protected inside the thimble. The snuffer could be stowed tightly inside the thimble, which was detachable as well, mounted on two pins—though some examples have only one attachment post for the thimble instead of two. Why the thimble was designed to be detachable is unknown, since it is the only part that remains in the same position in both the open and stowed configurations, and without it the stowed configuration cannot be tightly locked.

Al Winters (*Eureka Magazine*, June 2004) described three distinct varieties of the Gabriel Werntz candlesticks, all measuring about 10.6 inches. **(Type A)** A heavy-duty design lacking a candle snuffer (Al Winters suggests this may be a refinement of the patent version, made more robust to stand up better to mine use)**. (Type B)** The standard patent

model with candle snuffer. And **(Type C)** an early, crude, pre-patent variety that has the thimble attached by means of a sliding, dove-tailed brass post; the hook on this one, after being disassembled, is re-secured by a sliding square brass collar.

Types A and B have a raised locking ridge on the inside of the handle neck on one side, allowing the stowed hook to be spring-locked against it to tighten up the stowed configuration. That feature is lacking in the Type C, in which the stowed hook is held in place by a small brass collar.

The three main types of Gabriel Werntz candlesticks, shown in the stowed and working configurations. Al Winter collection.

Type B: Reassembled for pocket-carrying but still loose and not locked. Note raised locking ridge on the handle (arrow)

Type B: The stem of the hook is pressed down over the locking ridge (arrow), tightening it against the thimble lever and also locking the snuffer plate tightly inside the thimble.

The Larry Click example, marked "1889" and "MSC."

The example shown above, from the (now lost) collection of Larry Click, is unusually ornate, with "1889" etched onto the thumb lever and "M S C" (no doubt the owner's initials) etched in Old English letters with scrolling around the thimble.

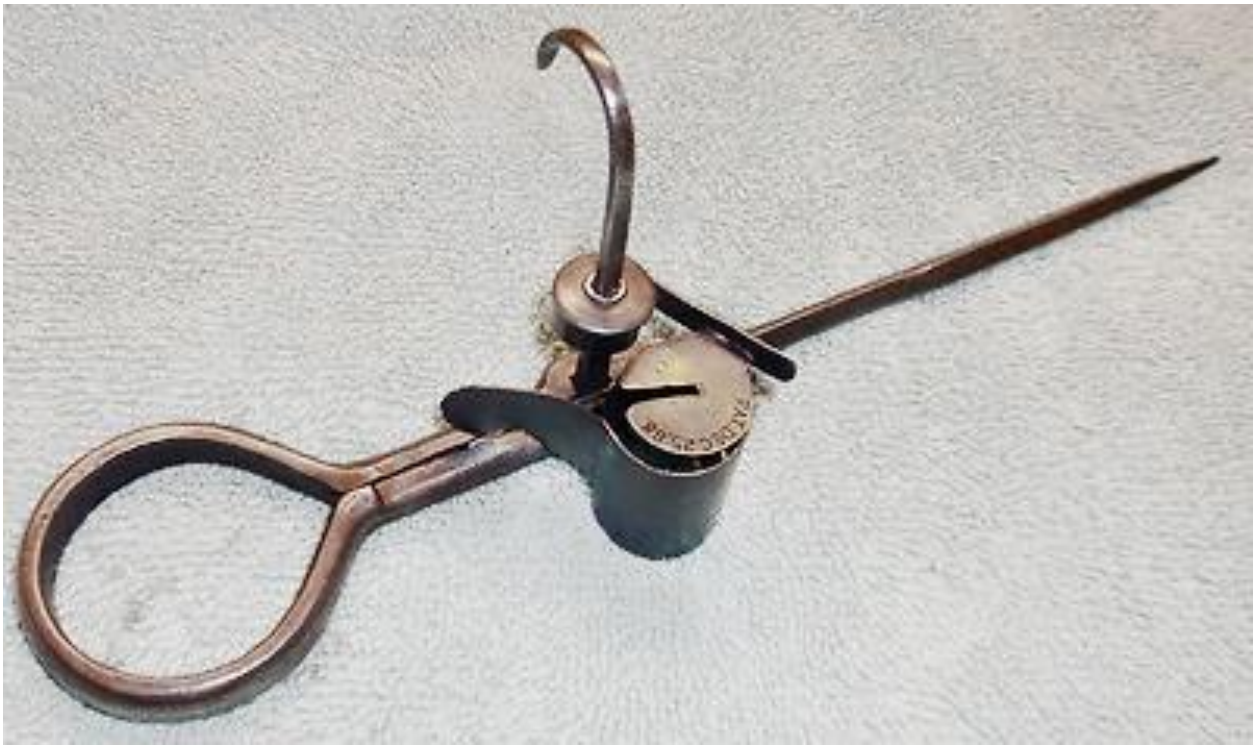
Type B: The candle snuffer consists of a lid stamped "PAT, DEC. 25.88" attached to a coil spring which keeps just enough pressure against the side of a candle, then snaps over it when it has burned down to that point. The intended function of the slot in the lid is unknown.

SNUFFERS

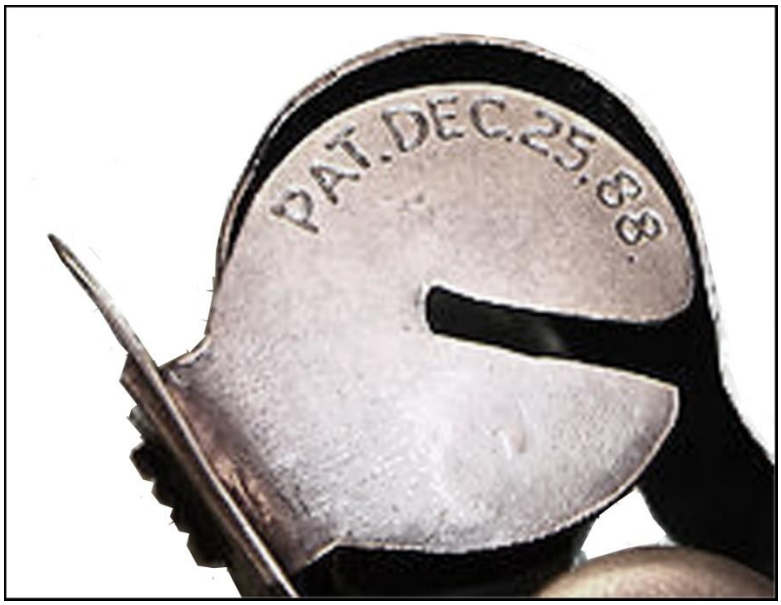
Fewer than six original snuffers are known to have survived. Because they were so commonly lost or discarded, in modern times Roger Peterson manufactured six replacement snuffers to exactly match the originals. Someone else may have made a few as well. A seller (name unknown) on an eBay auction some years ago, whose posting is repeated on Worthpoint, states the following about a Gabriel Werntz candlestick with snuffer that he is offering:

> "The snuffer assembly is the only part of this stick that is not original. The snuffer is carefully recreated (complete with stamped patent date) as only a very few originals exist (less that 6 estimated). There are only five of these reproduced snuffers available, and there is doubt that any more will be made, as they are very difficult to manufacture and somewhat expensive; $400/snuffer. Each snuffer is serialized (this is #3) and is marked with a date of manufacture and the maker's mark, and location (on the underside of the snuffer flap)."

If anyone has one of these numbered and marked reproductions, I hope they will send me a snapshot for inclusion in this article. These reproductions were apparently not made by Roger Peterson, who states that he did not number or date the two he has sold so far (one of which went to Bob Schroth), but he plans to mark the other four he made (which he still has) before letting them go.



Werntz candlestick described on Worthpoint (based on an eBay auction sale) with reproduction snuffer. This candlestick sold for $2500 on August 19, 2013 (but the seller's name is not given)



This is the lid of the Worthpoint reproduction snuffer, said to be marked "#3" on the bottom side. The cutting of the slot is rougher than with original snuffers, and the engraved (rather than gangstamped) lettering is thicker and less precise.

Al Winter's Type B snuffer, no patent date, and no slot. An early version?

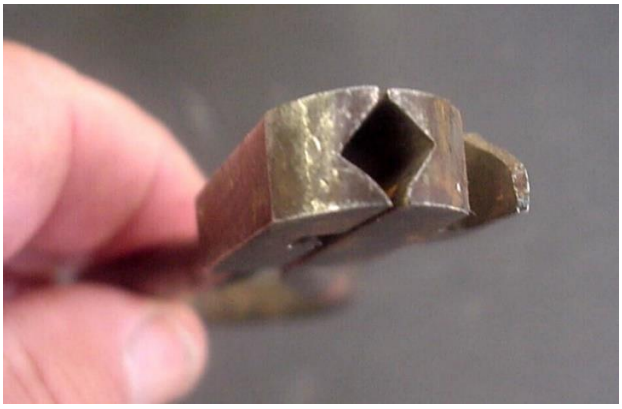
Incidentally, the snuffer that came with Al Winters' Type B stick (shown above) carries no patent date at all and no slot in the lid, suggesting to me that it may be an older version than the stamped, slotted examples.

THIMBLE MOUNTS

An incomplete example of what is probably a Type C is known from a surviving handle (let's call it Type C-2), though the full configuration of the missing parts is unknown. It seems clear from the diagonal orientation of the spike-tang hole in the handle—identical to that of the other known versions—that it is a Werntz model, and that probably the spike was similarly designed to be inserted backwards for stowing. There is a rectangular hole for the hook to be inserted, which probably locked the spike in place as per the patented version. And, typical of Type C, there is no raised locking ridge on the handle. However, there is some variance in how the thimble was attached to the stick, as there is no dove-tail hole or peg hole(s) for it, as in the Al Winters examples. Instead, there is a flange (partially broken off) that somehow captured a mounting post on the thimble.

Type C-2 handle, bottom face. Purchased by the author on eBay in December 2023 for $331. The seller, littlebones in Canon City, Colorado, said "[It] Came from a local estate. Found in the bottom of a toolbox. No other parts were present that I could find."

Type C-2 handle, top face.



Type C-2 handle showing diagonal square hole for insertion of the spike.

Handle neck area of the Type C-2 handle showing broken flange.

The flange connection (above) for attaching the thimble is clearly different from the dovetailed join shown on the Al Winters example of Type-C-1. Types A and B have peg mounts, one peg for Type A and two pegs for Type B:

Type A ***Type B***

The Type C-1 Werntz in the stowed configuration (note dovetailed thimble mount).

The dovetail mount for the Type C-1 thimble

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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