

James J. Martin

Korea Candlestick

by Wendell Wilson

A few months ago, I acquired from Randy Marcotte's collection, a miner's candlestick of the Korean type: steel with distinctively ornate silver wire inlays hammered into the surface. Typically, these candlesticks were made as presentation pieces for American mining engineers and supervisors at the Oriental Consolidated Mining Company (known as the Unsan Mines) in Korea. At least 28 such candlesticks are known, each one unique, and nearly all of them carry names or Korean characters and/or dates in silver. The company had a 400-square-mile mining concession located about 25 miles north-northeast of Anju in what is today North Korea.

This particular candlestick (illustrated as Figure 247 in *Antique Miners' Candlesticks*), is a hefty 13.5 inches long, and carries the lettering "James J. Martin" and "Chiksan Mines, Korea ... 1915," along with duplicate text in Korean characters translating as "James J. Martin, Chiksan gold mine, Korea." (My thanks to Caroline Im at the Perot Museum for that translation).

There is also a stylized crane on the thimble and abstract designs in silver on almost every other part of the surface. Although the thumb lever on many Korea candlesticks is impossible to use as oriented, this one is in a functional position. If I had to pick the most desirable example of all the Korea candlesticks, this would probably be the one, for its abundant text, history and perfect condition. It is also interesting to note that the Chiksan mine was not a property of the Oriental Consolidate Mining Company, and yet they used the same type of candlestick for their presentations. In the early 20th century, the three biggest gold mining centers in Korea were the Chiksan, Suan and Unsan areas.

James Jacob Martin, whose name is on the candlestick, was born in Milton, Iowa, on April 3, 1862, the son of Martha Shawley Rose and Jacob G. Martin, a farmer. His formal education is unknown, but he eventually gained recognition as a prominent placer mining engineer. He and his cousin, J. W. Martin, had at first settled in Siskyou County, in the northern California gold fields, where they spent several years in placer mining along the Klamath River.

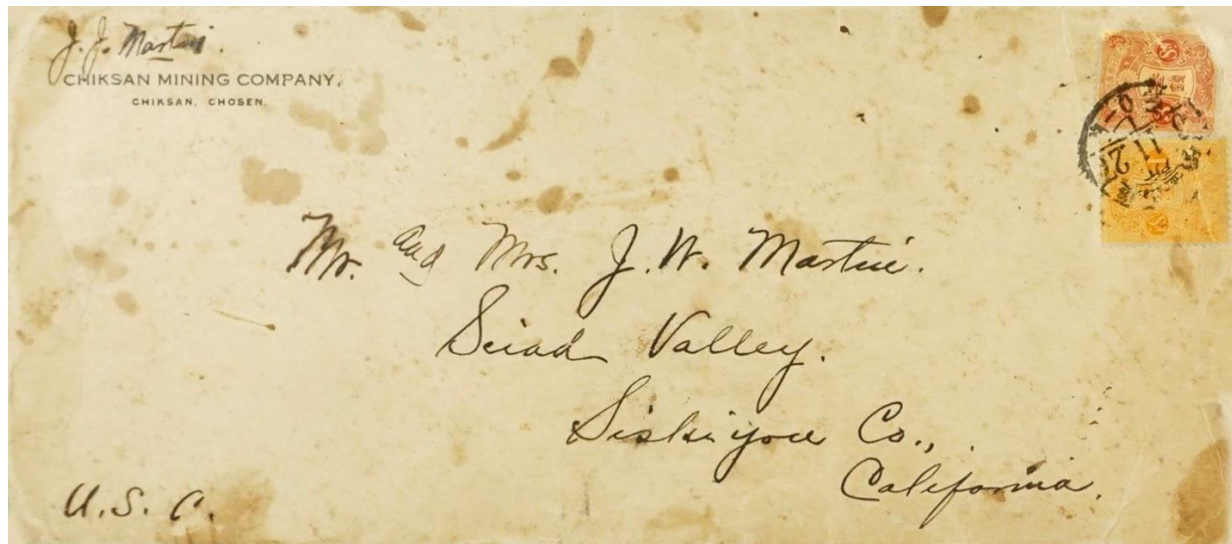
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "James Jacob Martin". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid, with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.



Top side and bottom side



According to his Consular Registration records in Korea, he had then worked as a mining engineer in Barranquilla, Colombia, from 1901 to 1909, during which time he married Irene DeWitt Farley, a widow with two children, in 1905 (1910 Census). They established a home base in Alameda, a suburb of Oakland and just across the bay from San Francisco. He then took a post at the McKee mine in Montana in 1910. “James J. Martin has succeeded R. B. McGinnis as superintendent” [of the McKee mine, Madison County, Montana] (*Engineering and Mining Journal*, May 7, 1910).



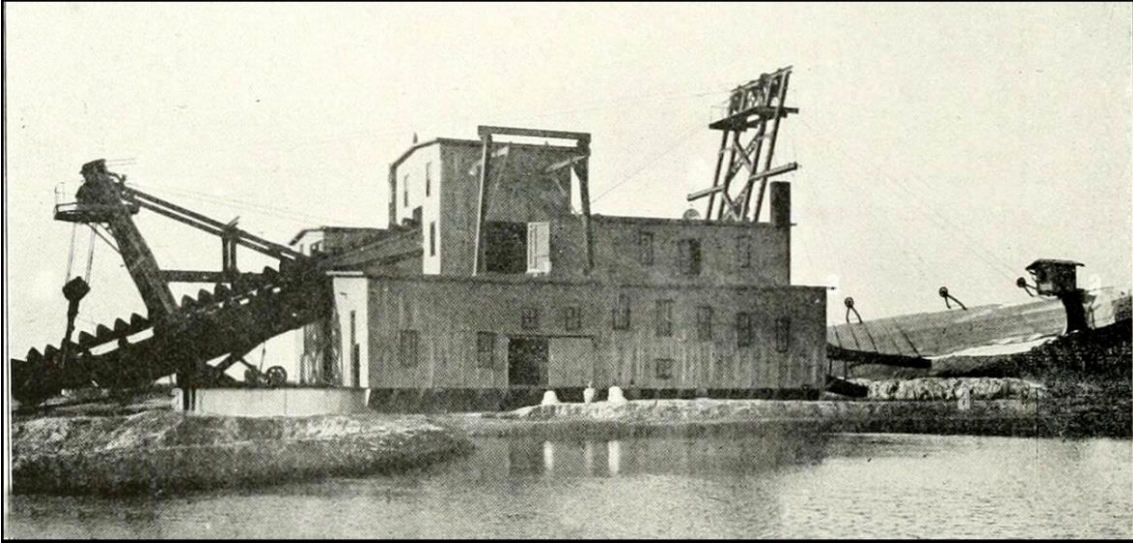
Envelope from a letter mailed by James J. Martin to his cousin, J. W. Martin in 1916. J.W. was a well-know gold dredge operator in northern California

THE MOVE TO KOREA

In December of 1910, Martin was hired by the Collbran & Bostwick Mining Company in Korea as General Manager of the newly established Chiksan Mining Company (in Unsan County), which had been taken over from the Japanese by Americans. *Chiksan*, in the Korean language, means “Gold Mountain.” The *San Francisco Chronicle* for December 4, 1910, made the announcement:

VALUABLE PLACER DISCOVERED IN KOREA

Advices received from Seoul, Korea, November 8th, state that the Collbran-Bostwick Development Company, in operating their Kapsan mining concession, have located there some very rich gold placers. The discovery is so important and extensive that the company has engaged James J. Martin, a leading placer expert of California, under a three-years contract, to conduct a vigorous modern development and working of their placers. Martin has an almost world-wide experience, possesses unusual ability, energy and resourcefulness, and is particularly well-equipped for his task. He will arrive at Kapsan [mine] in January.



Gold dredger at Chiksan, 1920

It was occasionally necessary to acquire more equipment for operating the mine. The *Siskiyou Daily News*, Yreka, California, for June 8, 1916, reported on a particularly large purchase:

FORMER SISKY YOU MINER BUYS DREDGERS FOR KOREA

James J. Martin, formerly of Siskiyou County, passed through Montague last Tuesday on his way to Portland. Mr. Martin is well-known to many in these parts, having been engaged in mining with his cousin J. W. Martin [whose mother lived in Toledo, Washington] for several years along the Klamath [River]. He is now manager for the Chiksan Mining Company who have large mining interests in Korea, and the purpose of his visit to the United States at this time was the purchase of three dredgers for his company. The boats are now being shipped to Korea.

Martin purchased three all-steel Empire Dredges made by the New York Engineering Company. It is interesting to speculate about what troubles they must have gone through in getting three dredging barges across the Pacific Ocean and delivering them overland to the remote mining region of northern Korea!

James and Irene traveled home to San Francisco from the port of Yokohama, Japan (where the mining company offices were located), on Feb. 21, 1916, but returned to Korea for another stint. News reached home in 1917 that he was still on the job in Korea: "James J. Martin is general manager of the Chiksan Mining Company of Yokohama, Japan, which is engaged in gold lode and placer mining at Chiksan, Korea" (*Engineering and Mining Journal*, November 3, 1917).

James renewed his US passport in Korea on December 13, 1918, noting that his wife Irene already possessed her own passport. Two weeks later the couple arrived back in San Francisco, having departed from the port of Kobe, Japan, on December 26, 1918. This was probably just another temporary leave. The Chiksan mine operated under Martin until 1922 when the gold deposit was determined to be exhausted. It is interesting that he arrived in Korea in January 1911, received his

beautiful candlestick dated 1915, and continued in his post there as General Manager until 1922. So what was the occasion in 1915? It was probably the completion of another contract, before he signed up for yet another stint.



James J. Martin
(passport application photo, 1923)

Oddly enough, on the 1920 Alameda census he listed his occupation as “none,” though he went back to Korea and completed his work at the Chiksan mine until it closed in 1922. Eleven years in Korea—His wife Irene was a stalwart spouse indeed to stick with him through so many years away from modern civilization and the comforts of San Francisco life.

With his work in Korea behind him, in 1923 he renewed his passport for travel as a mining engineer back to Colombia and Panama. He may have worked for another seven years in Central and South America, but by the time of the 1930 census he had retired with Irene to their home in Alameda, where they also appear together on the 1940 census.

James J. Martin died in Alameda on October 25, 1941, and is buried there at Mountain View Cemetery.

SELECTED SOURCES

- MILLS, E. (1916) Gold mining in Korea. *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 7 (part I), p. 5-39.
- PALMER, S. J. (1962) American gold mining in Korea's Unsan District. *Pacific Historical Review*, 31 (4), p. 379-391.