

Joseph F. Thorn

Korea Candlestick

by Wendell Wilson

A few months ago, I acquired a miner's candlestick of the Korean type, that is, steel with silver wire inlays hammered in. Typically, these candlesticks were made as presentations to welcome newly arriving 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.—See *Antique Miners' Candlesticks* (Wilson, 2021). 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 carries the lettering “J. F. Thorn” and “Korea 1906,” and also the Chinese characters for “Unsan, North Side,” as found on at least two other Korea candlesticks. There is also a deer on the thimble and a yin-yang symbol on the thumb lever. That is not much to go on, but after searching for a “James F. Thorn” and a “John F. Thorn” I struck pay dirt with a search for “Joseph F. Thorn” in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for April 20, 1905. It read as follows:

CALIFORNIA ENGINEER IS KILLED IN COREA

Marcus H. Thorn of Mariposa Meets Death in Mine Accident

Joseph F. Thorn, a well-known California mining engineer and superintendent of the Tabowie and Taracol mines of the Oriental Consolidated Mining Company in Corea is on his way to America with the body of his younger brother, Marcus H. Thorn, who was killed about a month ago in Corea in a mine accident. The Thorns are well known in Mariposa County and the remains will be taken there for interment.

Joseph Thorn has been identified with the Oriental Consolidated Mining Company for a long time. Nine months ago, he sent to California for his brother Marcus to take an important position under him at one of the mines.

Joseph Franklin Thorn was born on December 7, 1878, in Mariposa County, California, the son of Mary Elizabeth “Bessie” Collins and Joseph Franklin Pearce Thorne, a gold miner. Thorn's mother Bessie was from a well-known mining family in Cornwall, England, and his father became “one of the best mining men of the West.” Thorn attended the Mariposa County public school until he was 15, then left school to engage in mining with his father. Later, however, he studied mining engineering for two years and also received professional training under private teachers while actively mining.

In 1893 he worked as an apprentice machinist at the Horseshoe mine in Mariposa County, where his father was manager. After completing his two-year apprenticeship there, he took a position at the

Quartz Mountain mine, also managed by his father, for another two years, then left to work for about a year in other mining camps.

In 1898, at the age of 20, Thorn became a protégé of John H. Mackenzie, one of the leading mine engineers of the West. He worked at the Mariposa Grant, a gold mine in Mariposa County, California, serving as a mechanical engineer for about three years, then joined Mackenzie on a trip to British Columbia, where Mackenzie took charge of the Le Roi mine. Thorn was made a shift boss in the mine, and remained there for about a year.

In 1903, at the age of 25, Thorn was selected by Mackenzie to take a position in Korea as a superintendent for the Oriental Consolidated Mining Company, operator of one of the largest gold properties in the world. He served there (under hazardous conditions) until 1906 or early 1907, when he returned to the U.S., receiving the candlestick as a going-away gift.





Joseph F. Thorn candlestick



Buster mine, Idaho

Following his return from Korea, Thorn (now well-experience as a mining engineer) took a position as a superintendent at the Buster mine in the Elk City Mining District of Idaho—another property of Mackenzie and his partners (Bradley, Mackenzie & Riqua), and also investigated other properties on behalf of the company. An article in the *Lewiston [Idaho] Evening Teller* for May 12, 1908, reported on a gold discovery in the Four Mile District in central Idaho, and remarked that Thorn had gone there to check it out:

Mine superintendents, property owners, prospectors and common laborers in this district have contracted the “Four Mile Fever” within the last week, and in all about twenty have gone to the scene of the recent strike in rich quartz. Superintendent Joseph F. Thorn of the Buster mine left yesterday. Six men have left their work in the Buster mine to join the gold seekers.

Another article noted a forthcoming festival that would feature athletic competitions as part of the fun, and Thorn was mentioned as an enthusiastic member of the Buster baseball team.

In November 1908, Thorn married Mary “Minnie” Sweeney of Grand Rapids, Michigan, daughter of a ship’s captain. But the union was short-lived; he married Paula Ann Meyers (born in 1885, she appears on the 1910 and 1930 censuses, but predeceased him).

The following year, Thorn decided move on to other properties. The *Elk City [Idaho] Mining News* for February 20, 1909, reported:

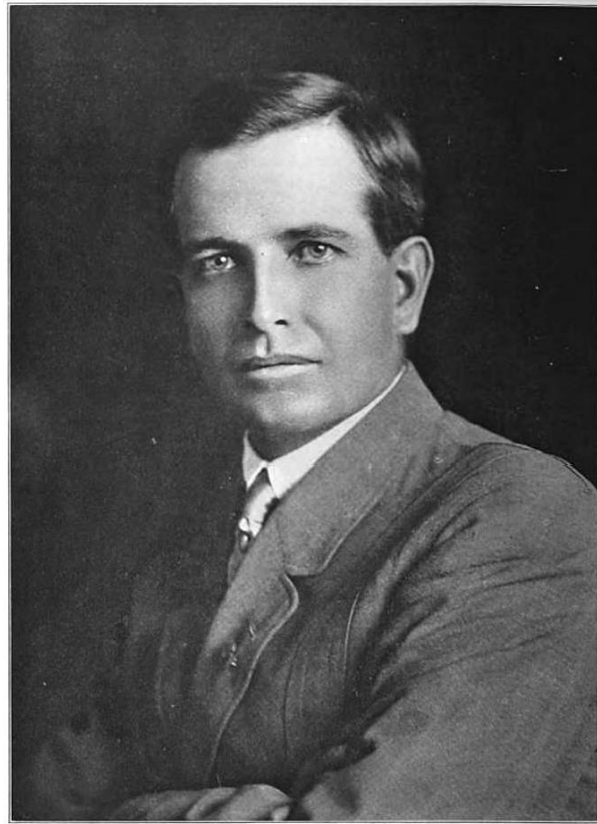
J. F. Thorn Resigns.

Has Made an Enviaible Record at the Buster.

Joseph F. Thorn has resigned as manager of the Buster, and left Thursday for southern Idaho, where he goes to examine some mining property near Boise. Mr. Thorn’s resignation comes as a surprise and will be greatly regretted by everyone in this district. ... Under his management, the mill has never been idle a day since it was started up, 16 months ago, and there is ore enough blocked out to run the mill for a year or more.

Thorn (1910 Census) then served for a year as a mining engineer at the Round Mountain, Nevada, gold mine, an enormous property that is still producing much gold today, including fabulous specimens of crystallized gold. He then took a position in Goldfield, Nevada, as Assistant Manager of the Goldfield Consolidated Mining Company, then in 1911 was promoted to General Manager until 1913, when his departure was regretfully announced by the *Tonopah Daily Bonanza* for March 13, 1913:

A massive silver loving cup, nearly 30 inches in height, and the handsomest specimen of the silversmith’s art that has been seen in southern Nevada, was presented yesterday at Goldfield to Joseph F. Thorn, until lately general superintendent for the Goldfield Consolidated Mines Company, by the staff and employees of the corporation. The cup is beautifully wrought and carved, with cover, and standing upon a solid square base of silver. [I wonder where this marvelous item is today!]



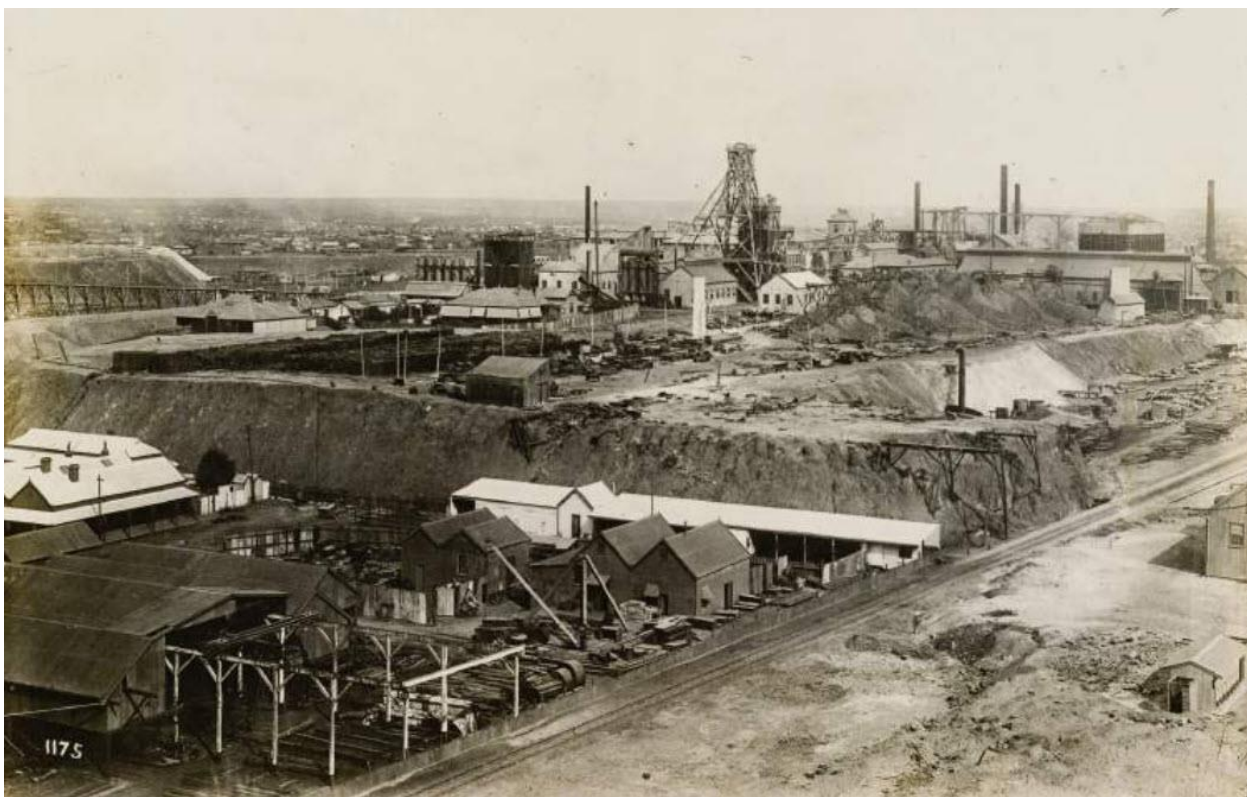
J. F. THORN

(from *International News Service*, 1915)

Joseph F. Thorn

Then it was on to Central America. His 1918 Draft Registration card shows that he was living in San Salvador, working as a mining engineer for the Butters Salvador Mines Company, an organization founded by California mining engineer Charles Butters. (Oddly enough, it gives Thorn's home address as Alameda, California, but his wife was living on Park Avenue in New York City at the time.) Then on to Mexico, as manager for the American Metals Company: a passenger list shows he returned to San Francisco from Mazatlan, Mexico, in October 1919. Moving on again, according to his passport application, as of 1920 he was employed as a mining engineer in Nicaragua, in the gold mines of Chontales Department.

Thorn also had a very successful career in Australia. In 1929 he was recruited to serve as General Manager of the big Lake View and Star mines in Western Australia, a post he held for over 20 years, retiring in 1950 with an impressive record of achievement. By 1930, under his direction, it had become the largest gold producing operation in the state, and by 1932 it was producing gold at *ten times* the 1924 level. The San Francisco City Directory for 1931 lists him as a mining engineer with a residence in Western Australia, and his mother's obituary in 1942 also listed him as living in Australia at the time.



Lake View and Star mines in West Australia

In 1944, Thorn received the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy's Gold Medal "in recognition of eminent services rendered to the mining industry by his contribution to the mining and metallurgical practices as applied to the ores of Western Australia." He was a director of the Western Australia Cement Company in 1938, and of Wiluna Gold Mines Ltd. in 1940. He retired from these positions in 1950, but served as a director of Western Collieries between 1951 and 1955. He was also a vice president of the Chamber of Mines of Western Australia between 1931 and 1949 and its president in 1950. In 1951 he was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) honor by King George VI, "for services to the gold-mining industry in the State of Western Australia." He retired there and died in Millendon (a suburb of Perth), Western Australia, on October 25, 1957—listed as a "retired mining engineer and company director." His remains were returned to California, where he was buried at the Mariposa Masonic Cemetery.

SOURCES

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