

Albert Van Buskirk Homestake Blacksmith

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Albert M. Van Buskirk was an award-winning blacksmith making miners' candlesticks in Lead City, South Dakota, site of the famous Homestake mine. He was born in Grimsby, Canada on June 17, 1857, the son of Elizabeth and Lawrence M. Van Buskirk, a blacksmith; we might logically assume that he learned something of blacksmithing at his father's knee. He married Mary Elizabeth Smith (age 15) in 1876, and together they had at least four children: Dora Olive (1879), Laura (1881), Marcus (1882) and Georganna (1884).

In the 1889 Ontario Directory he is listed as dealing in sewing machines, and on the 1891 census for Tilsonburg, Ontario, he listed his occupation as "farmer," so it's clear that he did not immediately go into the blacksmithing trade. But he moved to Lead, South Dakota sometime between 1887 and 1890, and there found a demand for his blacksmithing skills. As of 1892 he was working (as a blacksmith?) for the Black Hills Quarry company. In 1894 he joined Robert Roney as a blacksmith, advertising as "Van Buskirk & Roney" in the *Daily Deadwood Pioneer-Times*, and together they took over the business on Pine Street previously run by blacksmith Charles Anderson.

Van Buskirk
and Roney,
-SUCCESSORS TO-
CHARLES ANDERSON,
Pine Street. All kinds of BLACKSMITH
work done on short notice, also
◀Wagon Repairers▶
Prices reasonable. All work guaranteed
satisfactory or no charges. Horseshoeing a
specialty. also Miners candlesticks.
LEAD, - SOUTH DAKOTA

Van Buskirk & Roney announced (above; August 13, 1894; the *Lead Daily Call*) that miners' candlesticks were a specialty, and business was soon booming, to the point where Lead City was taking civic pride in his candlestick-making skills. An article in the September 25, 1894 edition of the *Lead Daily Call* stated:

A. Van Buskirk, the Lead blacksmith, has a reputation for making miners' candlesticks second to none in the West. Yesterday he received an order for a sample of his work from Cripple Creek, Colorado, where he has already shipped a number of these candlesticks.

The fame of Lead is gradually spreading, and it will only be a few short years until our town will be known as the Chicago of the Northwest.

Apparently Van Buskirk's candlesticks were very popular with the Homestake miners. In 1896 the Deadwood newspaper wrote:

Van Buskirk & Roney the blacksmiths are doing a land office business in the candlestick line. Orders coming for 156 of the sharp pointed steels were left with them yesterday.

Gold was discovered in the Klondike in August of 1896, launching the Alaska Gold Rush. This was big and tempting news in every American mining community, and Van Buskirk heard the call. On November 10, 1897, he posted the following ad in the *Lead Daily Call*:

A. M. Van Buskirk is advertising his half interest in the Van Buskirk & Roney blacksmith business in this city, and intends leaving for the Klondike in the spring.

The November 27 edition states that he had sold his interest to a Mr. F. Reece (not on the 1900 census). The "Rooney & Reece" blacksmith business is mentioned only once, on June 29, 1898. So it is quite possible that Van Buskirk went to Alaska, but if he did go he didn't stay for long. On June 2, 1898 the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition was held in Omaha, and Van Buskirk displayed "a dozen miners' candlesticks of unique design" as part of the Black Hills exhibit (*Lead Daily Call*, January 3, 1899). Unfortunately, the newspaper article did not say specifically what was so unique about the design, or if the dozen candlesticks were all identical or varied in some way, but Van Buskirk won an award for them. (At that time he was briefly in partnership with Angus McLeod at 22 South Bleeker Street, but the candlesticks were his own work.)

Whatever was special about the design, he made quite a few of them! Shortly after returning from the Exposition (*Lead Daily Call*, February 23-27, 1900), McLeod & Van Buskirk announced:

500 MINERS CANDLESTICKS. As we are going out of the Candlestick business, we will sell our entire stock at 50c each. Now is your time to get one of those celebrated candlesticks, the same as was awarded a Medal and Diploma at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha in 1898. First come first served.

One can't help wondering what their reason was for the close-out sale. Perhaps it was becoming obvious by 1900 that carbide lights (introduced for home use in 1894 and for bicycle lamps in 1896) were going to be far superior for mining use. The offer was not repeated after February 27, so apparently all of the candlesticks were sold.

As of the 1900 census for Lead City, Van Buskirk had taken a new Irish-born wife named Joe Anna Gardner (1878-1963) and was still working as a blacksmith. In 1901, Van Buskirk ("the blacksmith who has made himself famous for his manufacture of the miners' candlesticks which took first premium at the Omaha exposition") dissolved his partnership with Angus McCleod.

On July 5 and 26, 1902, ads in the *Lead Daily-Pioneer Times* stated that he had been a blacksmith in Lead for 15 years, i.e. since 1887; that may have been an exaggeration, or it may be a more accurate date than the 1890 year of immigration he told the census taker in 1900. By 1901 he had become an active member of a local fraternity, the Improved Order of Redmen, Sitting Bull Tribe No. 3. His last ad as a blacksmith in Lead was published in 1902, and there is no sign of him in the city thereafter. Although there were certainly a few other blacksmiths in Lead, none of them ever advertised miners' candlesticks, either before or after Van Buskirk's time there in 1887-1902. In fact, there was no further mention of the devices in local newspapers until 1911, when a local jeweler was commissioned to make a solid gold miner's candlestick for presentation to William Howard Taft during the President's visit.

Van Buskirk moved to Washington State where, as of the 1910 census, he was working as a "house carpenter." He and Joe Anna had a child in Lead in 1900 (it apparently did not survive) and a daughter named Alberta Mabel (1909-1961); but the marriage failed and both mother and daughter were gone by the time of the 1920 census, which found Albert living in Washington with his sister and working as a "factory engineer." He died in McCleary, Washington on March 9, 1929, at the age of 71. By that time he had married his third wife, Lillian.



No candlesticks definitively known to have been made by Van Buskirk have been identified. However, he is by far the best candidate for the maker of a unique folding candlestick pictured above (now in the author's collection). It was handed down through several generations of Homestake miners in the Fitzsimmons family, residents of Lead and Belle Fourche. Leo Stambaugh handled the sale of the family's collection of Homestake memorabilia of various kinds. The elder of the family, Thomas Fitzsimmons, was assumed by the family to have made the candlestick, but only a very skilled blacksmith (not a miner) could have executed the design. The candlestick is marked "PAT'D" but no patent for the mechanism has been found in U.S. or Canadian patent searches. Interestingly, the candlestick is numbered ("No. 144") as if it were part of a series.

The spike is reciprocating, clamped between the two bars extending from the handle. It snaps crisply into place in the open or closed position. The clever part of the design is the hook, mounted on a small steel cube pinned to the side bar so that it can both swivel (to face left or right) and rotate down into the handle. The hook is pinned through the cube slightly off-center, so that it can be tightened securely in the upright position, then loosened by a counter-clockwise twist to rotated it around the other way so it can be folded down into the handle.



Hook in the reverse position for folding down into the handle.

I have never seen this kind of locking mechanism before; it must be the basis of the patent that was applied for and perhaps granted. It *could* also be the "very unique design" that won the Medal in the Trans-Mississippi Exposition.

**The following photo shows the candlestick fully unfolded,
with the hook twisted into the locked position**



SURPRISE NOTE: After the first draft of this article was posted on the Eureka website, Tony Moon recalled that years ago he had one of these folders – except that his was “No. 136.” He purchased it in the late 1980s from a retired antiques dealer in Sutter Creek, California. In 2006 he sold it on eBay, so it’s out there somewhere. Fortunately he still has the photos he used for the eBay posting. Here are two of them: *(Thank you, Tony!)*

