

# Van Adestine Knives, II

## More Treasures From Little Wolf, Wis.

By: Helmut W. Sakschek



**U.S. MILITARY FIGHTING KNIVES**

**HAND FORGED HUNTING KNIVES**



**AND OTHER TRESURES**





Mr. R. A. VanAdestine

*Robert A. Van Adestine with his knife display.*

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**2011 Expanded Edition**

This 2011 Expanded Edition contains over three times as many examples of Robert Van Adestine's creations than the First 2008 Soft Cover Edition. It shows many very rare knives and other unique items that until now were totally unknown.

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First Hard Cover Edition

Limited Printing

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my friend Frank Binder. It was Frank's excitement about the Van Adestine knives made by his ancestors, that spilled into my life and inspired the passion to seek out more information and find out more about them. Although Frank had passed away by the time this book was less than half completed, his praise about what he saw kept me diligent to see it through to the end. His narratives to me about the history and the making of these special knives, accounts for much of the information contained herein. I miss Frank every day.

I also dedicate this book to Robert Mueller and Walter Pommerenke, who were two other very close friends of mine and Frank's. They have now joined Frank.

This book is also dedicated to all the other unsung custom knife makers who contributed their efforts to supplying fighting knives to our WWII Soldiers, and hunting knives to our woodsmen. And to the collectors that will study, enjoy, and continue to discover more Van Adestine treasures in the future.

## **Information Wanted**

Anyone having additional information about Van Adestine knives and / or examples of items stamped with the maker's mark: "A.J. VANADrSTIN," please contact this Author. I would like to add the information to my continuing study. For a personal response please include a self addressed stamped envelope.

Van Adestine Knife Info  
PO Box 3  
Neenah, WI 54957-0003



*#5 Drop-point Hunter*



## Acknowledgements

Special THANKS and credit is given to the following people that have inspired me, added to my knowledge base, helped in researching, and aided in acquiring examples of Van Adestine knives and related items; Frank Binder, who I miss every day. Robert Conroy, a new friend, who I wish I had met 20 years earlier. Without his help this Expanded Edition would not have been possible. Bill Wright, who helped me to obtain my very first Van Adestine knife and who also introduced me to Robert Conroy.

To those that helped me acquire specific examples for my study, I thank; Ryan Conroy, Earl Eder, Lowell Feather, Howard Oertel, Glen Doman, Robert Baldwin, Bill Handrich, Stewart Krause, and others.

For history, information, photos, and ever continuing encouragement, I thank Dan VanAdestine; Major Louis Chow, Jerry Teesdale, Stan Nelson, Dr. Michael Rosek, Joe Minskey, Perry Drinkwine, Dan Vander Linden, Nick Van Egmond, Jim Bauer, and many others; you know who you are.



*#9 Fishing Knife*



*#3 Skinning Knife*

## **Preface**

I first met Frank Binder over 36 years ago when I became a member of the Appleton Rifle & Pistol Club in Appleton, Wisconsin. Francis Joseph Binder III was born on December 28, 1942 to Francis Joseph and Alice (Van Adestine) Binder II in Manawa, Wisconsin.

Over the years, Frank and I became very good friends. We shared interests in firearms, shooting, and hunting, as well as professions in Engineering. Frank was a graduate of the Milwaukee School of Engineering as an Electrical Engineer. This technical background seeded his almost unbearable attention to detail while carrying out his day-to-day adventures. I say “adventures” because Frank could turn the most common task, into the most complicated cluster of meaningful details you could possibly imagine. I really loved that about Frank.

During the course of our too short friendship, Frank once commented to me that his grandfather had made hand-forged fighting knives for U.S. soldiers during WWII. At the time he mentioned it, I paid it little mind as it held no special interest to me then. But later, when he actually showed me a very large double-edge fighting dagger, representing it as an example of the WWII fighting knives that his grandfather had made, I became very interested!

I began to question Frank in great detail. He started to tell the tale of his Great-Grandfather, Andrew Van Adestine, who came to the Manawa area to setup a blacksmith shop in the fledgling town of Little Wolf, Wisconsin. He also told of his Grandfather, Robert Van Adestine, and his knife making skills. These were Frank’s ancestors on his mother’s side. As more and more history about the Van Adestine family was told to me, the more I

became interested and determined to someday tell the story of their unsung accomplishments.

This story gives not the detail of a historical biography of the Van Adestines, rather it shows the making of very unique hand-forged knives by a skilled craftsman. Until now, collectors and historians alike have mainly overlooked these knives. Although a few knife collectors may have owned one of them at one time or another, they knew little about their story or how they were made.

I have tried to include as much detail as I wanted to know about these knives when I first discovered them. Perhaps I've included too much detail for some, and not enough for others, but I have tried to include as much as "I" would have been pleased to find. I have tried to make reasonable assumptions when facts were not known. It is possible errors were made in some interpretations, so I will update this text if and when corrected information is found.

The short history of the Town of Little Wolf is included herein not for historical accuracy, but to give a sense of the times when the Van Adestine blacksmith shop was turning out knives. It will help you understand the simplicity of life during the late 1890s, and the growing complications as time passed into the early 1900s. A time where something made with your hands, gave a sense of accomplishment...something that is little understood today.

As for me, I'm a collector. I started collecting these knives the very moment Frank introduced them to me. I wanted to know more details about them and how they came to be made. Many have said, "If these could only talk, what stories would they tell?" Well, some of these did talk, and I'll tell you what they said.

Helmut W. Sakschek

## **Preface Update 2011**

The continued research over the 4 years following the first 2008 publishing, has led to the discovery of 32 additional examples of Roberts Van Adestine's creations. These additions include 30 more knives ( one being made entirely of wood ) and 2 more accessory items that bear his crescent name stamp. The ongoing research also brings a more insightful perspective to Van Adestine's unsung accomplishments and his unique talents as a pioneering Knife Maker in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With each additional item comes more information about their construction and also the interesting background of some of their owners. Some knew Robert personally, while others had merely met him when purchasing a knife. Some were Robert's close friends and hunting companions, while others had only heard his name casually mentioned as "the Man from Manawa that made knives."

While it is likely a fact that Robert Van Adestine's name will never come to be as recognized as that of Bill Scagel, Bo Randall, Frank Richtig, Ruanna, or Loveless, his name will nevertheless be included in the conversations among knowledgeable knife collectors discussing those pioneering Knife Makers that left their mark on history.

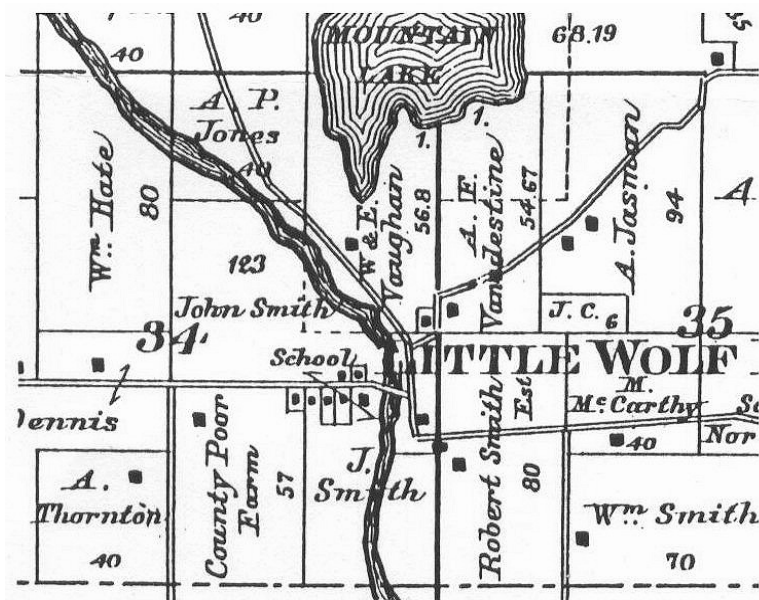
Today, as more Van Adestine Fighting and Hunting Knives are being discovered, they are becoming nearly as plentiful as those of Scagel and Richtig. - Perhaps someday more so. His sales through the VL&A store and catalog attest to his recognition when few other's of the day could not gain a foot-hold. Perhaps Van Adestine lost his place in history only because he could not keep up with the demand for his work. Someday we may know.

Helmut W. Sakschek

## CHAPTER 1 – They Were Made in Little Wolf, Wis.

The Van Adestine knife was born in Little Wolf, Wisconsin around 1895. Before we examine the details of how Van Adestine knives were made, let us take a brief look at the times, the history, and where the knives were born, since the Town of Little Wolf is now only a memory.

In the mid 1800s, a newly settled village was established on the southern border of the township of Little Wolf, Wisconsin. Its small population and modest community spanned both sides of the Little Wolf River.

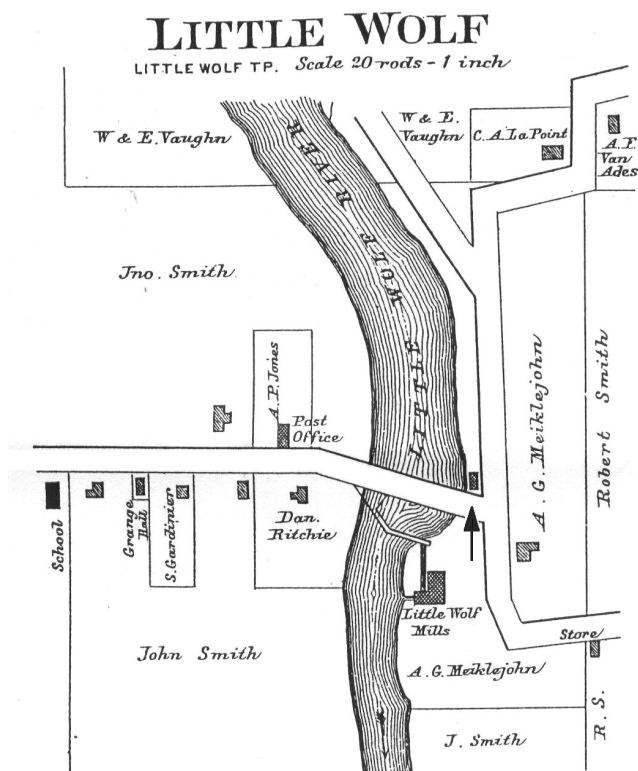


*Little Wolf Township with its meandering river.*

The township covered a six-mile square of Waupaca county that is located in east-central Wisconsin. The survey was begun by Samuel Perrin in 1852 and

completed by Edwin C. Scott 5 years later in 1857. The Little Wolf River was the most recognizable feature of the township that it was named after.

The farmlands there were covered with colorful crops that blanketed the countryside, and rows of trees grew in windbreaks between the farmed fields. Clustered wood lots were scattered throughout the river's meandering path that cut a sweeping S-curve across the middle of the township, dividing it almost exactly in half. The center of the community was marked by the few local businesses that supported the neighboring farms.



*Van Adestine blacksmith shop in Little Wolf, 1870s (arrow)*

The Township was located near the concrete bridge that crossed the Little Wolf River at the intersection of County Highway B and BB. William Goldberg originally settled there in 1848, the same year that Wisconsin became the 30th State in the Union. Goldberg was joined a year later by two businessmen brothers; George E. More and J.P. More. The village grew rather quickly during those early years of the settlement when Goldberg and the Mores built a sawmill there in 1849. A year after that, in 1850, the brothers James and Peter Meikeljohn arrived. In 1853, the Meikeljohn brothers opened a gristmill on the southwest bank of the Little Wolf River very near the site of the sawmill. The gristmill was a "stone-grinder", being so called because the harvested grain was ground between two large revolving stones. The Meikeljohn brothers operated a two-story hotel which stood near the gristmill.

Peter Meikeljohn provided a room in his house for the village's very first teacher, Miss Fortner, to use as a classroom in 1853. In 1857, during Miss Fortner's 4th year, the village built her a schoolhouse. A.P. Jones and Dan Smith each opened grocery stores in 1858. Jack Brickley built the first bridge across the Little Wolf River that same year. Until then, the small growing Village was known as Centerville. After Jack Brickley built a bridge across the Little Wolf River, it was also called Brickley Bridge.

Centerville was on the main mail route between Green Bay and Plover. In 1859, A. P. Jones established a Post Office in Centerville. With the establishment of this new Post Office also came a new name for the town. The town name was changed from Centerville to Little Wolf, named after the township itself.

The location of the Post Office shifted from place to place over the following years. It was located first in one



grocery store, and then the other, and then back again.



*The original Little Wolf Post Office sign still exists.*

The original Little Wolf Post Office sign remains to this day, hanging above the garage door of 81 year old Earl Eder, a nearby farmer whose family settled in the area over one hundred years ago. Today, the Eder farm spans both sides of Eder Road, his family's namesake.

The Meikeljohn hotel at the east end of Little Wolf was the recruitment center for Civil War soldiers in 1860. The Town never grew much bigger during the 1860s, and slowly began to decline during the mid 1870s. The decline continued even though another lumber mill was built further upriver in 1871. In 1872, when the railroad reached New London, all the towns and settlements to the west competed with one another to secure the railroad right-of-way into their towns. The Railroad authorities informed the influential businessmen of Little Wolf that if they could raise \$2,000 the Railroad line would be routed directly through their Town.

Meikeljohn himself contributed \$1,000 with the balance to be raised by the other Town residents. All, including the blacksmith, Andrew Van Adestine, donated to the worthy cause. But unfortunately the Town could not raise the required amount. This resulted in the Railroad

routing its western extension through the Town of Manawa in 1873, instead of to the Town of Little Wolf.

This was a major factor leading to the gradual decline of the town's population. People instead moved to the growing towns of New London and Manawa. One can only wonder if the Town of Little Wolf would still exist today if only it would have been able to raise the money for the railroad to have come there, instead of it going on to Manawa and New London.



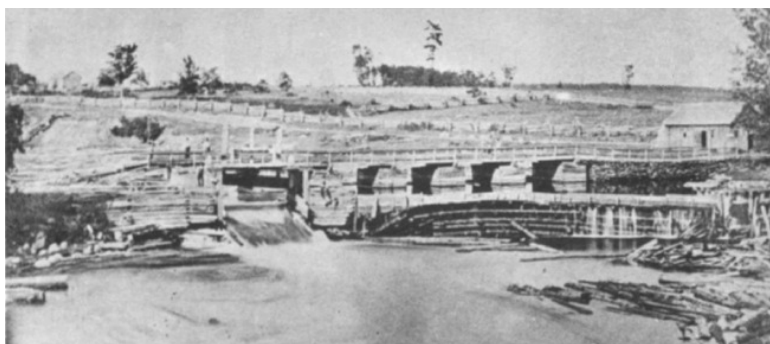
*#6 Chisel-Point Hunter*

## **CHAPTER 2 – Andrew Van Adestine Arrives.**

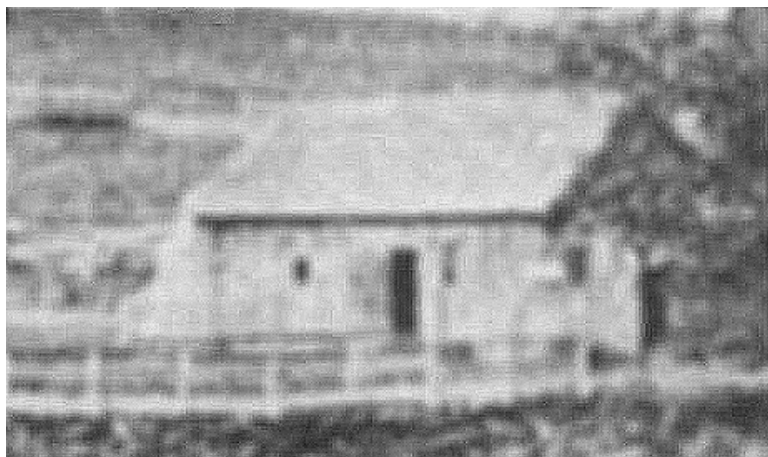
Andrew Fraser Van Adestine was born on Jan. 21, 1847 in Tabusintac, New Brunswick, Canada. It was in 1869 at the age of 22 that he arrived in Shiocton, Wisconsin. Exactly why he left Canada to travel to central Wisconsin is not known. A year later, in 1870, he traveled 25 miles by foot to the Town of Little Wolf in hopes of obtaining employment there at the Meikeljohn mill. Unfortunately he found there were no jobs available. Mr. Meikeljohn, however, learning of his blacksmith skills, helped Andrew Van Adestine establish a small blacksmith shop nearby. His much-needed skills would not only serve the mill but also the rest of the growing community.

The Little Wolf River brought river men through the area for which Van Adestine made pick poles and peaveys. He made many items of wrought iron and wood, and he also performed the more common blacksmith skills such as shoeing horses and repairing wagons. By 1873 Andrew's business was well established so he built a home and started to raise a family. This house still stands today.

Andrew Van Adestine's original blacksmith shop stood just northeast of Brickley's bridge. (at right side of the photo below) Time has slowly erased any indication as to where exactly this blacksmith shop originally stood. Today, only by word of mouth, do we know where it was once located. It is rumored that perhaps the original shop building itself, may still exist as one of the out-buildings on some nearby farm. Only a few rare photographs show up on occasion to remind us of these times now gone.



*Andrew Van Adestine's shop. N.E. end of the bridge. (right)  
(Binder family photo)*



*Andrew Van Adestine's blacksmith shop. (enlarged photo)*

Not too long ago, the ruins of the hotel and the original foundation of the gristmill still remained to show that the village of Little Wolf had once existed long ago, but today even those things are gone.

Andrew Van Adestine's skills and fame as a very competent blacksmith were well known throughout Central