

01/17/06 West side board meeting minutes

Vice President Mike Messenger called the meeting to order at 7:30pm.

There was no treasurer's report

Ed presented a bill from Stu Earnst for new locks for the gate at Walker Valley

Bob Pattie reported that the cost of printing the newsletters for last year was about \$1300

Old business

Nominating committee: The West side board needs to nominate a 2nd VP and a secretary. Bob Pattie and Dave Eckert were nominated as trustees

The East side board needs to nominate two trustees

Wagonmaster

Ed Lehman handed out the 2006 field trip schedule

The NW Rockies week long trip will be to Northern California. A side trip to the Oregon sunstone locality is also planned

The gate at Walker Valley was accidentally locked by the DNR and rockhounds could not get in. This has since been corrected. Ed Lehman will lead a work party the weekend of the 21st to clear off some of the overburden in the main pit

New business

Bob Pattie reported that material from Washington was under represented at the Rice Museum in Hillsboro, Oregon. A suggestion was made to send the Mineral Council case of material that is currently stored on the east side to the museum to add to their collection

Meeting adjourned,

Submitted by Glenn Morita, Secretary Pro-Tem

Colorado Rhodonite: So Tough It Was A Millstone by Beth Simmons

Rhodonite, a pink manganese silicate, often occurs as gangue (an unneeded mineral) in silver veins in Colorado. Beautiful massive material from the Fourth of July Vein in the Sunnyside Mine in San Juan County occurred in bodies tens of feet wide and hundreds of feet long! Although commonly called rhodonite, studies made since the 1970's prove that the material really is a closely related manganese silicate mineral called pyroxmangite. Pyroxmangite, or "Rhodonite", from the Sunnyside is dense and fine-grained and was often cut into gemstones.

The "rhodonite" from the Sunnyside contained gold, running from \$25 to \$450 per ton. It also carried silver, lead and zinc. However, like jade, pyroxmangite is very TOUGH material. A stamp weighting a ton would drop down on the "rhodonite" and it would not crumble or shatter. Often, the thrust would knock the "rhodonite" out through the screen, costing a repair shutdown. Early miners were advised to leave the "rhodonite" be.

In 1914, when fine-grinding ball mills came into the San Juan mining district, the Sunnyside Mill installed one. Instead of using the traditional steel balls, the milling men turned their worthless tough gangue mineral to use. They used the beautiful "rhodonite" to grind down the silver ore. After the "rhodonite" proved its worth as a tool, the Sunnyside built a new 500-ton per day mill, and kept 500 men busy night and day. This was the only mine in the world where gold-bearing rhodonite occurred, was mined and then used as a grinding material, releasing its metal values during the process.

Miners would collect specimens of the rhodonite before it went into the mill where it was destined to be ground to pieces. They would pick specimens out of the ore buckets as they came down from the mine over the tramway and throw them over a cliff to the canyon below. Later they retrieved their specimen "lode" from the hideaway place in the deep canyon.

Treasure those pieces of Sunnyside pyroxmangite, a.k.a. "Rhodonite." It could have been mill powder!

Tips and Chips Editor's note: There was a dealer in Tucson selling "Astorite". Astorite turned out to be rhodonite from Silverton, that comes from a mine that was owned by John Jacob Astor. It's a very pretty pink stone, nicely translucent in thin slices, and with good fluorescence. Nothing like giving a fancy new name to an old rock to raise the prices!

From BEMS 01/06, via Golden Spike News, 4/04; via Rocky Trails, 1/04; from Tips & Chips, 4/02

Mexican Opals A Presentation by Bob and Shirley Jimenez

Quite a few years have passed since Shirley and I went on our last trip to the legendary opal mines near the Mexican city of Queretaro, but the thrill of finding our own precious opal in the wildly beautiful mountains in that part of Mexico is as clear as if it was only yesterday. Some of the world's most beautiful opals have come from these mines, known even to the Aztec Indians, who mined opals for many centuries past.

Many often call opals the "Queen of Gems". Few descriptions are adequate to describe the finest opals. Some of the descriptions I have read: "A white, snowy landscape dotted with fireflies of red, gold, blue, purple, and green; a black night streaked with rainbow lightning; the aurora borealis captured in stone". Mysterious, elusive, varied, and delicate, opal has been treasured since ancient times for its unique properties and beauty. Opal that has a color play is usually the opal considered to be precious. No other stone will flash the colors of the rainbow so brilliantly in bright sunlight that the Opal.

The city of Queretaro is the historic capital of the state of Queretaro. It is a lovely colonial city of over 150,000 people. It is an important opal cutting a jewelry center, but it is also a center for manufacturing, transportation, and tourism. Trees, flowers, and graceful Spanish architecture make the main plaza and the downtown area delightful. Several shops on the city square and elsewhere specialize in opals and opal jewelry. Visitors can watch the stonecutters at work, usually with crude machines by our standards, and sometimes with the latest technology in lapidary equipment. As in many of the surrounding small villages, opals can be purchased in traditional bargaining from street vendors, who offer jars of tempting rough opal in water of glycerin. These jars always seem like great bargains, and often some excellent stones can be found in these jars. But the Mexicans know good opal, and they either cut it themselves, or sell it to the Japanese or other buyers at top prices. All in all, it is usually better buying opal in the many shops than on the street.

The mines in the Queretaro area are, for the most part, small to large open pit mines, which are often located on steep slopes of rugged, remote country. Several varieties of opal can be found in this area, not all of which is classified as precious, or opal with play of fire. For Shirley, the "jelly opal" which is quite common in this area, makes outstanding material for faceting, as it is a jelly colored bright stone ranging in color from orange to a bright red. In most cases the bright pockets of opal are firmly embedded in the resistant matrix, rhyolite. The pieces of opal are sometimes mere specks in the matrix, while a small percentage may be several inches across. Pieces with opal patches of around a quarter of an inch are often used for making matrix opal cabochons.

Commercial production mining of the Queretaro opal began in the mid 19th century, and some of the most productive mines have been worked almost continuously since that time. Most miners are native Mexican Indians and usually, entire families are involved in the operation. The men usually do the difficult work of quarrying large chunks of opal bearing rhyolite, which they then break into smaller pieces. The rest of the family breaks these larger chunks into smaller pieces to find the opal. The large amount of matrix leftover is deposited on the outside of these open pit mines as tailings, and are continuously worked to extract small pieces of opal. The Indians frequently sell bottles, jars, boxes, and bags full of the opal matrix to tourists who visit the villages. Many of the Indians stay in the cities to learn how to be cutters and work the opal, making some fine and outstanding jewelry.

Many of the owners of the mines live in Queretaro and have retail stores where clients can come in to buy opals direct from the mines. In these stores, there are some specimens of unusual opals that have been preserved as museum pieces. The most impressive one we saw was the "Lapidaria Queretaro, S.A." owned by Jose Ramirez Loredo. This company also sponsors tours to some of their opal mines. So if you ever go down there, look them up and they will help you experience the thrill of "Mexican Opals".

From Pebble Trails 01/06