



The OPAL EXPRESS

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American Opal Society...



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AUGUST 1988

PRESIDENT'S NOTES----All through the year we have members of our society actively representing us at various Gem Shows. Last January Earl and Esther Churchill had a display case at the Orange Coast Mineral and Lapidary Society show as did Dorothea and I. Edith Ostrander of the Founding Chapter demonstrated ~5pal cutting at the South Bay Lapidary Society in Torrance in April. One of our newest members, Linda Rau, did wire-wrapping at the Glendora Gems show. At the Culver City and La Pacifica show, Joe Vezeau, President of the Founding Chapter showed opal carving. Also at La Pacifica, Dorothea and I had a display case. Last month we told you about the Orange County Chapter entering a case in the Orange County Fair. In a combined effort, this case won the blue ribbon in the mixed jewelry class. Contributing to the case were Earl and Esther Churchill, John Hall, Noel Lamkin and the Pattees. Noel engineered the layout and design of the case. In the photography contest, Minerals From a California Mine, Dorothea won First award for her photograph of precious opal in matrix from the Nowak Opal Mine. In future shows, Earl Churchill will demonstrate opal cutting at the Orange Jubilee of Gems in Costa Mesa later this month. Display cases will be entered by the Churchills and the Pattees. Blaine Milliron and Edith will demonstrate opal cutting at our own show in September. Many of our members will have displays of their opal cutting and jewelry work at our show. We are an active club, though few members are doing a lot, we could use still more volunteers to get our name before gem lovers by demonstrating and displaying at the shows. Sorry, I forgot to mention that the Santa Fe Springs Library has invited the Founding Chapter to have a special display during the month of October featuring opal as that month's birthstone.

With deep regret, the Board of Directors accepted Dorothea Pattee's resignation as Executive Secretary as of September 15th. We will soon need a new secretary. If you have had any type of experience and can attend the board meetings in Long Beach, please get in touch with me by phone or write to the P.O. Box. The position is salaried. It pays money, but not much
P.S. Dorothea and I will be demonstrating opal cutting and selling opal and jewelry at the Reno show, August 13th and 14th. If any of our members are in that area, drop by and say "Hello".

The August meeting of the Board of Directors will be held August 25th, 7:30 pm in Long Beach. Any item to be brought before the board must reach the President at least seven days before the meeting

!!!! NEWS FROM THE FOUNDING CHAPTER !!!!!

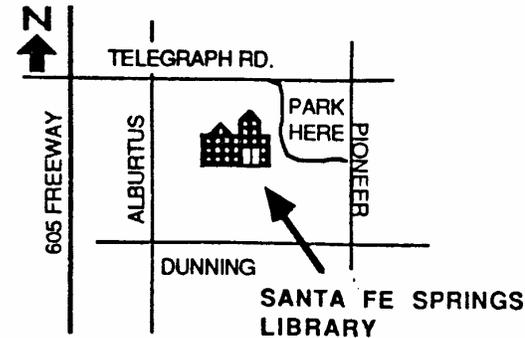
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General Meetings held on the 2nd Thursday at 7:30 PM in the Santa Fe Springs Library, 11700 Telegraph Rd., Santa Fe Springs. See Map.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: Thanks to everyone who made our Opalholics' Bingo Pot Luck Night a big success. In fact, it was so much fun; our board discussed doing it again for our Christmas Party. BUT-- before we have these festivities, don't forget we are all working toward THE BIG SHOW IN SEPTEMBER. Our Chapter has already purchased a some beautiful opals which are being cut by various brave members. These will be sold, either unset, or wire-wrapped at the Show. Hal Breese is coordinating these activities for our club.

And don't forget to plan what you will display in the Santa Fe Springs Library Showcase in October. It's a great way to say thanks to the Library for hosting our meetings, and also to spread our enthusiasm about opals to some prospective members.

Joe Vezeau, President of Founding Chapter

Georgia Smith was one of the lucky ones who got to go to (he Bingo Pot Luck, and she tells us that everyone there were winners -- except for Dick Koch. He wasn't there at all, and so, poor baby, missed THAT FABULOUS PECAN PIE! Too bad, Dick. However, all the other winners, (many of them won more than once) such as Joe Vezeau, Plorence Palas, Bill Means, Rose Huddle, Pat Smith, Harold Umberson, Hal Brees and Smith walked away with some very neat prizes.

Of course this is after everyone pigged out on multiple goodies such as chicken, broccoli casserole, salads, banana bread, Better Than — Cake, Chocolate and that Pecan Pie. (Dick Koch, are you listening?)

Next Meeting is a demonstration of wax work and stone setting by Jo Snyder and Georgia Smith, that irrepressible rock group. Be There!

As promised here are the rules for the Jewelry Design Contest. Andy Guerrette, contest chairman is looking forward to a full case of entries. If you need more information his number is listed on the back cover of the Newsletter. Give him a call.

CALLING ALL JEWELRY DESIGNERS!!!! Now's the time to start planning your entries for the jewelry Design Contest, to be held in conjunction with the annual show.

RULES FOR ENTRIES ARE:

1. Contest is open to Society members only.
2. Each entry is required to feature opal, or be entirely of opal. The finished item is to fit the broad classification of jewelry; personal adornment.
3. Entries are to be brought to the Contest Chairman on Saturday Oct. 24th, between 8:00 and 10:00 am. Each entry must be accompanied by a fee of \$5.00. Entries are limited to three (3) per person. Entrant is responsible for his/her own insurance, though the Society will responsibly handle submitted material.
4. Judging will be by a panel of judges and will take place on Saturday afternoon. Winners will be announced Sunday morning.
5. Entries should remain art display until 4:00 pm on Sunday.
6. Judging will be on the basis of:
OPAL: Quality, color, uniqueness, attractiveness, and appeal.
SETTING: Design, balance, execution and presentation.
7. Prizes are:

FIRST PLACE	Plaque and name on perpetual trophy. Winner will allowed to display said trophy in home or shop for one year.
SECOND PLACE	Plaque.
THIRD PLACE	Plaque.

ORANGE COUNTY CHAPTER NEWS... Brian Franks, Pres. --714-857-2743

Those of you who subscribe to ROCK AND GEM have seen the front cover featuring photos of Brian Franks opals. There are also several articles on opal in the magazine. If you don't have a copy you should get one now. The magazine's opal issue is always delightfully informative.

This month the Chapter will share a potluck dinner at the home of Earl and Esther Churchill. Their phone is listed on the back cover of the newsletter. Please give them a call for directions to find their house and what to bring.

That's Tuesday, August 16th, 7:30 pm. See you there.

Fire opal: Pride of Mexico

by David Federman MJ Executive Editor

"Pssst, want to buy an opal?"

It's not exactly what you'd expect to hear in the thronging tourist thoroughfares of Mexico City as one shops for native wares. But, believe it or not, this silicate is a common street corner commodity throughout the country's tourist areas. And it has been so for years. "I couldn't believe my eyes," says eminent gemologist Cap Beesley about his first trip to Mexico City 20 years ago in search of opal. "Everyone was hustling the stuff."

Few Americans are ready for the sight of opal in profusion during their stays south of the border. That's understandable since the gem is associated with Australia. Nevertheless, while no rival to Australia in terms of production, Mexico has come into its own as an opal source. Indeed, the country's opal is so different from Aussie material that it has earned its own name, fire opal, and its own following.

But don't hope to be shown connoisseur-class material on Mexico City's crowded sidewalks or even in its more private alleys unless you're prepared to spend days looking. The country's street-corner opals are often similar in quality to the street-corner rubies so many GIs brought back home from Thailand during the Vietnam War.

Dealers who specialize in Mexican fire opal, of which there are probably less than half a dozen in America, find their chances of buying the more venerable varieties of this stone much better at the Tucson Gem Show every February and far better yet in Idar Oberstein where savvy German cutters have been importing most of Mexico's best opal rough for decades.

Occasionally, American dealers trek to Mexico's opal mines to bargain directly for the rough. But ever since the U.S. dollar went into free fall against the Deutsche mark in 1985, bidding for rough has become a one-sided arm wrestle in favor of the Germans. Worse, the dollar's decline has roughed up domestic trade in polished stones because now the Japanese have taken a strong yen to this gem. Unless the dollar's rout is reversed, some U.S. dealers fear that fine Mexican fire opal could pretty much vanish from their inventories. That would be a pity.

Great bails of fire

At their best, Mexican fire opals possess either flaming orange or cherry-red body color that is uniform and solid—as opposed to the iridescent streaks, patches or flecks of color in fine Australian opal. If roughs are transparent or sufficiently translucent, they will be faceted rather than cut into cabochons.

This isn't to say that Mexico doesn't produce Australian, like color-play opal suitable for cabochon cutting. According to cutter Uli Mayer, Mayer & Watt, Beverly Hills, Calif., top color-play opals from Mexico rival those from "Down Under" except that the South American variety tend to array their colors against orange, instead of white, backgrounds. Since scarce better-to-fine Mexican color-play cabs in sizes over 2 carats currently command \$200 to \$300 per carat at wholesale in the Japanese market, U.S. jewelers understandably prefer far more abundant and reasonably priced Australian stones.

But when it comes to deep body color opals, whether cabbed or faceted, they have no choice, Mexican stones are the only game in town. At present, it's a game with relatively few stateside players. And if the dollar weakens significantly again, the number of players will only decrease. 'With' lire opal becoming more popular in strong-currency countries like Japan and England, cutters in Idar find they can ask significantly more for stones," explains fire opal specialist Bill Heher, Heher Enterprises,

Trumbull, Conn. "Consequently, the market is shifting more and more abroad because jewelers in this country aren't ready yet to absorb steady price jumps."

No doubt about it, prices for fine fire opal are climbing, easily 40% in the last two years, with most of the gains in the past six or so months. Yet despite its surging cost, the stone still strikes us as affordable, especially in light of its scarcity. The maximum dealer-to-jeweler price we were quoted for top cherry red stones in a 5-carat size was \$200 per carat. More plentiful 1- to 2-carat sizes shouldn't run above \$150 per carat. Pieces with deep fireball oranges from 1 to 2 carats will probably ring in to jewelry stores at under \$125 per carat while those in the same sizes with medium-intensity orange peel colors should carry tags of no more than \$80 per carat.

The crazing factor

Like all opal, the Mexican variety can crack in the course of time. What percentage of stones will be so afflicted is impossible to say.

Fire opal specialists do not deny that crazing is a problem, but they quickly add that the problem is exaggerated. Further, they believe that they effectively circumvent it by subjecting stones to fairly intensive screening.

"First of all, we put stones on a mild heat radiator set at 80 degrees Fahrenheit for ten days," says cutter Mayer. "If problems develop, the stone is rejected."

If problems don't emerge, that doesn't mean the stone is out of the woods, Mayer estimates that around 10% of the stones that make it past this initial heat test will start to crack up during the first stages of cutting, otherwise known as pre-forming. Tiny milky dots or larger spots are generally tell-tale signs that the stone could possibly go to pieces if kept on the wheel. Although Mayer immediately throws away such pieces, there are those who may not be so scrupulous, Beesley remembers being shown some partially formed street corner opals in Mexico that were incompletely cut because cracking had developed while processing them. To disguise cracks, sellers had bathed stones in oil.

As for stones which make it unscathed through cutting, there may be one or two which crack later. But specialists we talked to insist this almost never happens. "I've sold 1,500 stones in the last decade without one problem," says Heher. He attributes his good luck with fire opal to his fastidious selection process of rough material. While not as fortunate as Heher, Mayer, a major processor of fire opal, says screening has, for the most part, spared him from customer complaints. Even so, he takes no chances - "Since troubles occur within a short time after stones leave my inventory, I guarantee every fire opal I sell for one year from date of sale," he says.

Because fire opal, like all opal, is somewhat high strung, it is best to consider it a fragile stone, far more appropriate for use in pendants or earrings. This is not to rule out ring use altogether. But jewelers who sell stones in such settings should feel an ethical obligation to advise customers about the consequences of lackadaisical, everyday wearing.

Everything You Wanted to Know About Caring for Silver Jewelry

NEW YORK—You've just made an investment in some lovely silver jewelry, a necklace perhaps, or a fabulous geometric bangle and matching earrings and ring. Now you're wondering how to keep that silver looking its glowing best—smudge-proof and tarnish-free. Follow the suggestions below and your silver will continue to look as beautiful as the day you bought it:

- Exposure to air and light will cause silver to tarnish. Store your silver in a cool, dry place in a tarnish-preventive pouch or bag or wrapped in a soft piece of felt or cloth;
- Store pieces individually or in a compartmentalized bag so that they don't knock together, promoting scratches;
- Apply hairspray or perfume before you put on your jewelry. The chemicals in perfume and the lacquers in hairspray can both react with the silver to cause unattractive gummy residues or spotting;
- Your environment has an impact on your silver. If you live near the ocean, for example, your silver will tarnish more readily because of the salt and humidity in the air. The same result will occur if you live in a coal-mining area since sulphur oxidizes with the air to produce tarnish. And if you live in a large urban area, the carbon monoxide in the air will also contribute to tarnishing. So don't blame your silver jewelry—just keep in mind that, other than moving to the country, upkeep is the solution to this particular problem;
- There are two steps to caring for silver: cleaning and polishing. Clean with a mild soap-and-water solution, allow water to bead up, and pat dry with a soft cloth. For more stubborn dirt, a jewelry cleaner labeled for silver use is also advisable. A soft chamois or other polishing cloth and a light polishing are usually all that is needed for maintaining silver, if the piece has tarnished, you will need to use a silver dip that removes tarnish. Since these dips are often quite caustic, read the label carefully and if you are unsure about the instructions, consult with your jeweler. There are also several at-home kits for cleaning silver including mini-ultrasonic machines and the like;
- Never rub silver with anything other than a polishing cloth or fine piece of felt. Use of tissue paper or paper towels will cause scratches because of the fibers in these products;
- We are a throwaway culture. Don't treat your silver in the same manner. Remember that even if you clean and polish your pieces regularly, maintenance is still required over the long haul. Every two or three years you should bring your pieces into your jeweler for a thorough cleaning and polishing;
- Properly maintained, silver improves with age and develops a lush patina. And wearing it is the best way for that to occur. So treat your silver jewelry well, care for it properly, and it will reward you with a long life and a lustrous look.

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Safe in the silent rock they sleep,
Remote, unseen;
Far from men's hurried lives they dream
Through ages dark.

The old earth stirs and they are born
In her warm heart,
From blood-red fires they draw their life;
Their colours pulse.

The patient miner comes; he digs,
They hear him move;
Nearer he draws with lamp and pick,
Far down they hide.

Deep in the mine's dark wall they wait;
A sound, a light;
From soft clay beds he takes one up,
At last—it lives I

Beneath its clinging clay it glows,
A burning fire.
Through jet-black heart it flames
With clear red blaze.

The grinding wheel tears off the crust,
Gone is its shield;
The soothing buff restores its sheen;
It smiles secure.

Safely it's set in gold refined,
By fire made pure;
And hung on dainty chain for maid,
Immaculate.

Gently she takes his gift—a stone,
Its flames a-dance;
Proudly she wears her opal heart
At Ballet, Masque.

Deep in its fiery heart they glow
Those colours bright
And on man's hurried dance they shine
Through years of light.

FRANK LEECHMAN

That the beauty of the opal was fully appreciated in the sixteenth century is shown by the words of Cardano, who states that he once bought one of these stones for fifteen gold crowns and found as much pleasure in its possession as he did in that of a diamond that had cost him five hundred crowns.¹¹ Although superstitious beliefs were rather the rule than the exception in Cardano's time, none of the silly fancies regarding the ominous quality of the opal were then current. It was reserved for the nineteenth century to develop these altogether unreasonable—and indeed almost inexplicable—superstitions. The ownership of so fair an object as a fine opal must certainly be a source of pleasure, and hence add to the good fortune of the owner.

¹¹Cardani, "De subtilitate," Basileae, 1560, p. 445.



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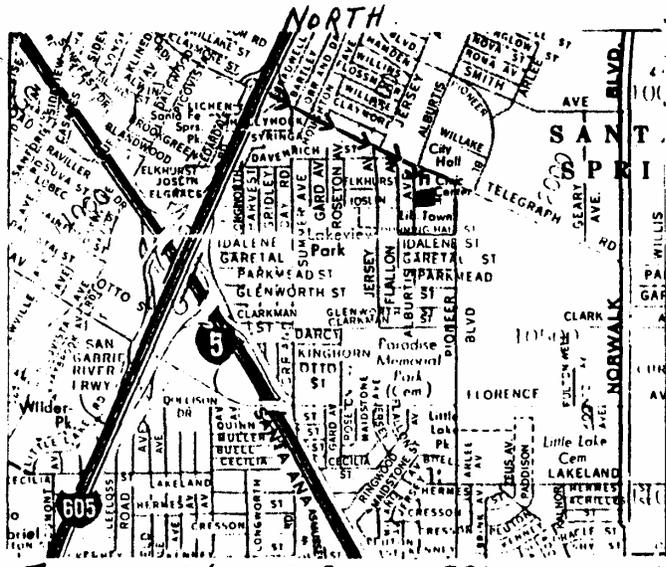
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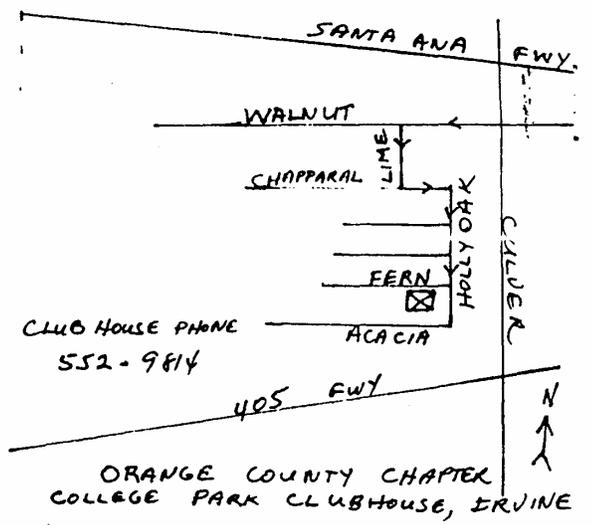
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