

The Opal Express

American Opal Society
 P.O. Box 382
 Anaheim, CA 92815-0382

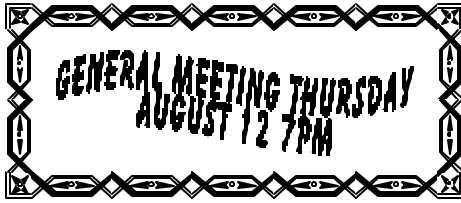


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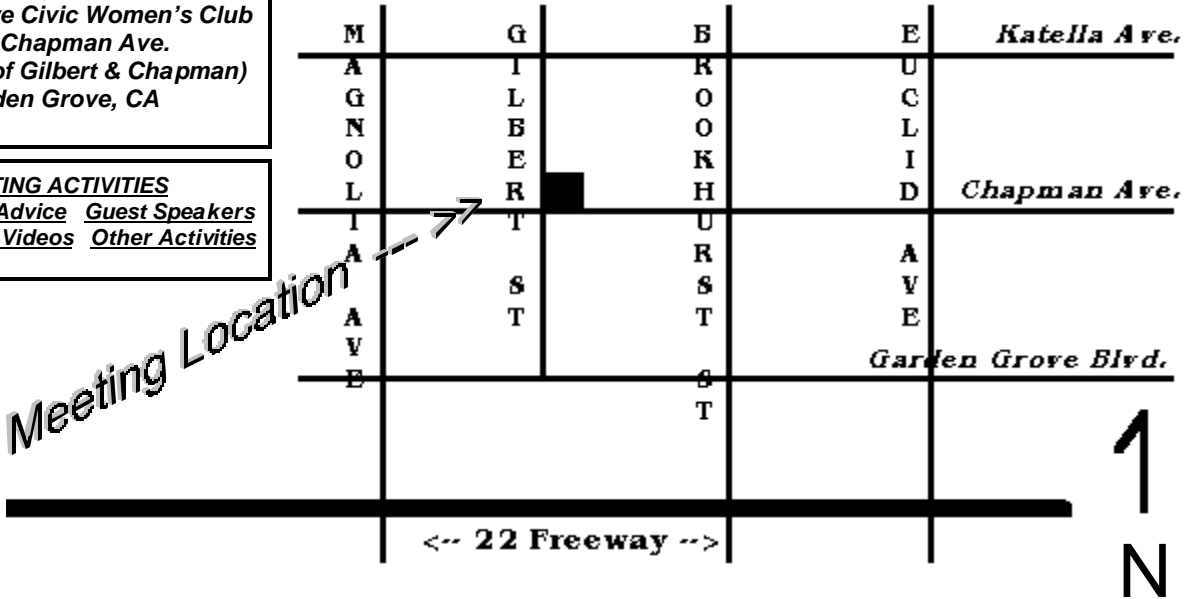
Volume #31 Issue #08 August 1999



TO:

GENERAL MEETINGS —
 2nd Thursday 7:00-9:00 PM
 Garden Grove Civic Women's Club
 9501 Chapman Ave.
 (NE corner of Gilbert & Chapman)
 Garden Grove, CA

MEETING ACTIVITIES
Opal Cutting Advice Guest Speakers
Slide Shows Videos Other Activities



American Opal Society Officers

| | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Carol Bova | President | (818) 845-8610 | email bova@bovagems.com |
| Mike Kowalsky | Vice Pres. | (714) 761-4876 | email mykowalsky@aol.com |
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SHOW THEFT INCIDENT REPORTED

WARNING TO EXCHANGE CLUBS 5/99 by Mary Sharp, South Bay Lapidary & Mineral via CFMS
Newsletter 8/99

At the end of our club's annual gem and mineral show, held recently in Torrance, the entire contents of our display case was stolen from our vehicle while one of us was right there.

Until our show co-chairperson noticed her and forced her to leave the building a woman had been sitting near where we were packing up our case. Later, in the parking lot right next to the building, this same woman came up to the car and, under the pretext of asking directions to the freeway, spread a map out over the windows of the car, occluding any view into the inside. This gave her accomplice just enough time to remove the bag containing the display items from the car without being seen.

While the woman was getting away, to keep anyone from noticing the bag was gone, either that accomplice or a second accomplice came immediately up to our car and began a conversation, warning us to be wary of strangers asking directions because it could be a scam! Then, almost before you could blink, he also was gone. From beginning to end, the entire operation took about two or three minutes.

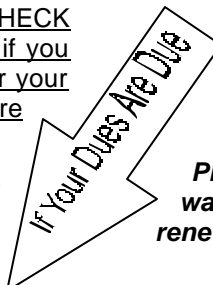
The police said it was very slick and professional and to be glad that it happened in the parking lot, because had the thieves wanted the items badly enough to follow us home it could have been much worse for us. They also said that the chances of our recovering any of the stolen items were almost nil. What really hurt us was not the monetary loss, which was great enough, but that most of the items were precious family heirlooms which no amount of money can ever replace.

We have heard of this happening at other shows, but never dreamed that it would one day happen to us.

Please be alert — nobody is safe.

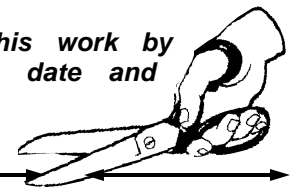
Are Your Dues Due Now? PLEASE CHECK YOUR ADDRESS LABEL or the membership roster if you are listed. If your label shows the current month/year your dues are DUE NOW. If the date is older, your dues are overdue.

Renewal Grace Period of two months will be provided. If your dues are due now you will receive two additional issues of the newsletter. Please note



however that as the system is now set up, if your renewal is not received you will be AUTOMATICALLY dropped from membership thereafter. It is your responsibility to assure your dues are current.

Please help us make this work by watching your expiration date and renewing promptly. Thanks!



DUES RENEWAL FORM

(membership renewal form rev. 1/1/98) d:\ameropal\newstrs\forms\dues_due.pub



American Opal Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 382
Anaheim, CA 92815-0382

Thank you for continuing to support your American Opal Society!!

Make check or money order payable to: American Opal Society, Inc.

Please mail payment and renewal form to the club address at left.

| DUES RENEWAL RATES (select one)** | |
|--|--|
| 1) LOCAL AREA member | \$26.00 <small>(addresses in Los Angeles, Orange, & Riverside counties)</small> |
| 2) CALIFORNIA & USA | \$20.00 <small>(all addresses outside local area counties)</small> |
| 3) FOREIGN | \$30.00 <small>(all addresses outside USA)</small> |
| ** \$5 SENIOR DISCOUNT = Age 65 or over <deduct \$5.00 from above> | |

DEALER LIST: Yes, include my name/address on a list provided to Opal Dealers selling at the most recent Opal Show.

(if yes, please sign or initial here) _____ date _____

without your signature here you will not be included in the dealer info list

MEMBERSHIP ROSTER: Yes, include my name and/or address and/or phone information in a published AOS membership directory...

[Please circle any of these —> **NAME** / **ADDRESS** / **PHONE** if you prefer a partial listing.]

(if yes please sign or initial here) _____ date _____

without your signature here you will not be included in the member roster

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____ APT #: or PO BOX: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

COUNTRY (IF OUTSIDE U.S.) _____

TELEPHONE: Home (_____) _____ : Business (_____) _____

FAX (_____) _____

Please indicate any name or mailing address changes

NAME BADGE ORDER FORM: (OPTIONAL)

Number of badges ordered _____

(\$5.00 EACH - includes engraving)

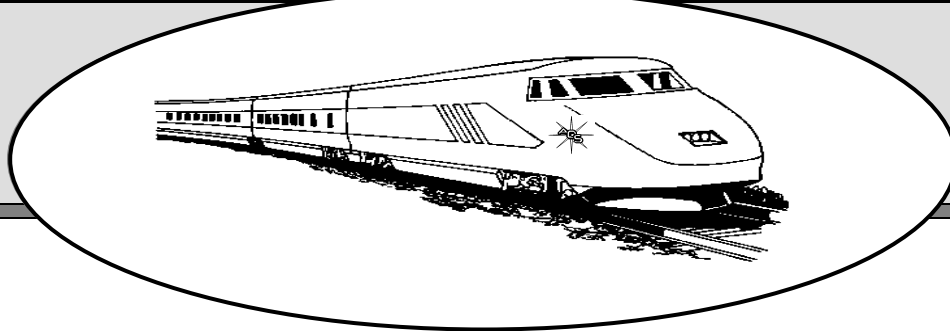
PLEASE PRINT NAME AS YOU WISH IT TO APPEAR ON YOUR BADGE using up to two (2) lines of text for your name, nickname or name of your opal related business.

The Opal Express

AUGUST 2002

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Volume 31, Issue 8



AUSTRALIAN OPAL AT ITS BEST

President's Message from Carol Bova

Hello Opal Folk!

Take a moment and think about opal. Okay... what did you imagine? Your latest stone? Rough, cut? A problem resolved or still to be worked out? Finding an undiscovered vein in a place legal to collect?

If you had one thought to share about opal, what would it be? I'd like to invite each of you to send me your specific thought or imagining and permission to use it to create a fanciful article to be published here in the future. Can't tell you more 'til I see where your thoughts take us!

In the meantime, let me share a few thoughts with you...**The Opal & Gem Show in November** requires a lot of support from the membership, and it's always worked out very well. So it's time to start again to line up those wonderful volunteers who make it all happen. The Board and Show Chairman **Wes Roth** have been working on the mechanics of making a show happen. **Stan McCall's** been busy for months on publicity.

Jay Carey and **Mike Kowalsky** have had the necessary meetings with the hotel to get a contract arranged. **Frann Roth** and **Wes Roth** have been working on contacting dealers and tracking their responses. **Bob Dixon's** helped in a number of areas too. But we would like to start recording the names of those who are interested in making our Opal & Gem show the best ever! Please let a board member know if you are going to be able to take part in the show this year.

If you are online, don't forget to drop by our AOS website at: <http://opalsociety.hypermart.net/>

Jim Pisani and the Website committee have done a great job of creating an online presence for us. We will have a new, permanent web address in the near future... watch for it!

Hope to see you at the August meeting! Carol

The "Flame Queen" was mined on Bald Hill in 1914, not far from where Dunstan mined "Queen of the Earth" in 1908. Phillips, Bradley & Hegarty were the lucky miners who shared the 93 pounds that Ernie Sherman gave them for this collector's piece. Cutting it would have spoilt the unique pattern.

John Landers reported that the architecture MADE this stone! A black nobby as big as the palm of a hand, "Flame" weighed 253 carats. An oval, 2 3/4 inches x 2 1/3 inches, with a dome that a half-crown would not cover, displayed a broad bronze-red flash. The 1/2 inch dome was

(Continued on page 3)



DATES TO REMEMBER

General Meeting
Thurs Aug 12 - 7PM

Board of Directors Meeting
Mon Aug 9 - 7PM

AOS Opal & Gem Show
November 6 - 7

Work Shop Information...

The NEW LOCATION for the Opal Society workshop is now available! It is the lapidary classroom at Walker Jr High School, 8132 Walker St., La Palma, CA 90623

Directions: (Choice of 3 Freeway approaches)

- [1] Exit the 605 at Carson St and proceed east, or
- [2] exit the 5 or 91 Fwy at Valley View and proceed south, or
- [3] exit the 22/405 Freeways at Valley View and proceed north.

Walker Jr HS is on Walker St north of Lincoln Ave. It is on the east side of Walker between Crescent Ave. and La Palma Ave. Drive to the far back of the school to the Lapidary Arts classroom.

Only AOS members may use the equipment and workshop. You will be required to sign a release form as well.

Workshop Schedule on Page 5 shows dates/times and appointment instructions. ☼

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Bob Halahan – Author, Opal Miner, Opalholic

(I think it would be safe to say that if Bob Halahan walked into any room full of people the first words he would properly utter are, "Hello, my name is Bob and I'm an opalholic.")

I first noticed Bob's name when it appeared in archives of old Opal Society members from 2 decades ago. I didn't think much of it one way or the other then, mostly pondered whether Bob was still involved with opal as I had at that time just spoken with another former AOS member, Bill Maison.

A couple of years passed. Then one day out at the Barnett Mine in Opal Canyon, Bob's name came up in conversation with a fellow digger. In talking about Bob Halahan, this fellow mentioned a few intriguing details. Could it be that this was the same person in the old AOS membership roster? Turns out it was! At the time, it seemed the notion of getting an interview might be very informative. Nothing came of that notion until recently when Mike Kowalsky encountered Bob at a local club show. It turns out Bob's spent pretty much his entire life rockhounding and mining opal in a variety of places and that his tales are quite exciting. So it is with great pleasure that I say thank you to Mike Kowalsky and without further ado I would like to present Bob Halahan. –rgm)

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Bob Halahan and I am an opal miner. I know that there are a lot of people in the Opal Society who love opal but have never had the opportunity to go mining. I hope that some of the information that I write about will give them some idea of the different kinds of mining and how we did it. I am now sixty years old and still actively into the mining of this lovely stone.

Mining opal is like opening up a Christmas present. You never know what surprise is waiting for you with the hit of the hammer, or the striking of the pick. Since every opal is different, every opal is a surprise. I was born in a coal mining town in a place called Portage, Pa. in 1938. My dad was a coal miner and always wanted to mine gold. He would tell me stories of some of the lost gold mines.

So as a kid, my father implanted the seed that would eventually lead to my going west and fulfilling those dreams. I came west in 1964 and settled in Santa Monica, CA which is still my current address. It would take me another 14 years before I would bust open my first rock (I was busy raising a family and seeing all the wonderful things that the great southwest had to show me). That was the other seed that my dad implanted in me – a love for the "Old West".

I visited old Indian ruins of the southwest and also the wonderful rock formations of Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, and Arches National Park. As a parent you will pass on to your children things that you love. You will be an influence in their lives. So let us all as parents pass on the beautiful things in life so that we can influence children's lives in a beautiful way.

There are two kinds of opal mining that I was involved in: digging in basalt with a sledge hammer and chisel, and digging in hard clay with a pick and shovel. You may ask which is harder? You would think that digging in basalt would be since we used 12-16 lb. sledge hammers. But any miner will tell you its not the different kinds of equipment that determines how hard it is, but the amount of labor that you put into it. This will also determine how successful you are. As you dig, you learn how to read the rock or the clay and this will give you certain indicators that the opal is saying to you "here I am come and get me." This can only be learned by paying your dues and putting in your time. I always felt that people who write about opal but who have never mined it are missing all the intricate details that can only be learned by being 'out in the field' and mining this wonderful stone.

My brother and I have observed this stone and how it was formed in nature. **I hope that I can pass on some of my knowledge to enlighten the people that really love and admire this stone as much as I do. -Bob** ✨

AUSTRALIAN OPAL AT ITS BEST Part 3

(Continued from page 2)

framed with a high emerald green 3/8 inch band (then electric blue from another angle), thus the appearance of a "Poached Egg", the rather unflattering nickname that was given to "Flame".

In 1916, a Brisbane jeweler submitted the stone to the Queensland Geological Survey. It was established that traces of ginko, a fossil plant (Chinese maiden hair fern), occurring in Jurassic rocks but not in any opal deposits, were impressed on the back of the "Flame Queen".

The asking price for this unusual opal has continued to climb over the years with each change of hands. In 1925, an offer of 2000 pd. was made. In 1948, she was valued at 5000 pd. In 1973, \$US32,000 was paid. In 1980, "Flame" was for sale again at a million dollars! As of 1992, she was back home in Australia - and maybe she's still here - but now crazed and cracked after 84 years of to-ing and fro-ing.

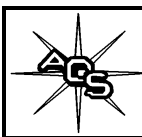
Each Opal Express presents an account of discovery as researched by Barbara Moritz, Secretary of the Ridge Historical Society, in her efforts to unravel the early history of the black opalfields in New South Wales, Australia.

Should you have constructive information, please email:

barbeemitz@yahoo.com

or write to:

Box 1, L/Ridge, Australia 2834. ✨



PLEASE NOTE!!! The American Opal Society assumes no responsibility for injury or damage due to accidents or carelessness. Members and guests assume all risks during club activities.

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(Deadline for items: 15th of the month prior to each issue)

OPAL MINING ADVENTURES – Black Rock Desert Nevada

By Bob Halahan

(for those who are not familiar, the Black Rock Desert is an immense dry lake about 150 miles north and a little east of Reno Nevada –rgm)

The first part of my dream had been fulfilled. Each year I would take my wife and child on a trip through a new state that we had never visited before. We would do this every year and take off a full month to explore all of God's great creations. In 1978, my brother graduated from college and came out west to live.

We joined a rock club and got involved in rock hounding. From there we found out about the Nowak opal mine and decided to give it a shot. After we found our first opal, we threw rocks at the rocks and never looked back. One of the owners of the mine was named Marv. The friendship we formed would last for 20 years, right up to this day.

In 1980 Marv invited Ray Duffield down from the Black Rock Desert to visit his mine. Ray would kill three birds with one stone. He would meet Marv, see the Nowak mine, and take back to the Black Rock two propane refrigerators. In those days, these were worth their weight in gold on the desert. I met Ray at Marv's house and was taken by the size of the opal that was at his Black Rock mine. It was really big compared to what we were getting at Nowak.

I said to Ray, "when are you leaving for the mine?"

"Tomorrow."

"Would you mind if I tagged along?"

"Not at all."

The next morning I left on an adventure that would last for four years. Did you ever go somewhere and feel as though you have gone to another planet? Well that describes the Black Rock. To get to the Black Rock, you head north up 395 to the town of Bridgeport which is located in the High Sierra. Then you go through an area that has beautiful mountain streams. Once you are on the other side of the mountain, the desert starts a short distance east of the Nevada state line. Then you go through a bunch of small spaced out towns until you get to Pyramid Lake, NV. This is where the Piute Indian reservation is located. Another desolate area. I had heard that the government had built them all new homes. When winter came, they ran out of wood, so they burned old rubber tires in the fire place to keep warm. I am not even going to try and imagine what the inside of the house looked like after that.

Just another Indian story. And there's another one on down the line as my story progresses. From Pyramid Lake the highway continues north until you hit the last little town where civilization "stops." It's called Gerlach, NV. Their slogan is, and I got it from one of their flags, "Where The Pavement Ends, And The West Begins."

When I saw that sign in Gerlach, it got me wondering a little. We now had forty miles to go to the mine. A piece of cake I thought. Wrong!

Ray -- "Bob, have you heard about our little desert here?"

"No, but I think I will take my chances and play it by ear."

"O.K. lots of luck."

From that statement I knew I was in for an adventure. To set the scene, the wagons from the 1849 gold rush had crossed

here and a lot of them perished.

"Follow Me." Those were the last of Ray's words that I heard. He put the pedal to the metal and I could see a 25 ft. rooster tail of the Black Rock's dust spring up from behind his wheels. I was mesmerized. All of a sudden it dawned on me that I had to follow him. Off I went. A 25 ft. rooster tail was now coming from my vehicle. WOW! This is great I thought.

In Gerlach, Ray had told me stories of people in cars getting confused and lost on the immense Black Rock dry lake just like the wagon trains did. We were supposed to follow certain landmarks. Since I had never been there before, I was to follow him. Then it happened! He had gotten so far ahead of me that his rooster tail became nothing more than a plume of confusing dust. I visualized all kinds of things happening. I had to make a decision. I had forty miles to go with no land marks or anything. What to do? Then it dawned on me. If I really pushed the pedal all the way down, I could eventually catch up to him and his rooster tail. From my left side I could barely make out the rocks that were going by in a blur. To my right and directly ahead, everything looked like a massive dust storm. Finally, after about ten minutes, I could see the rooster tail shooting up in front of me. I pulled along side of Ray and made sure that I thanked him "Properly" for not waiting.

His response was, "Welcome to the Black Rock Desert, where the pavement ends and the west begins." He got the pavement part all right. He should have added, "a lot of dust too."

For the next 30 miles, we drove side by side on the hard lake bed with our 25 ft. rooster tails shooting straight up in the air. It was quite a sight. I had never experienced anything quite like this before in my entire life. And it was fun! We finally came to the turn off to his mine. We slowed down and exited the "Dirt Freeway" onto an old dirt road. I am now out in the middle of nowhere with this fiend I had just met. 'Why am I here?' I asked myself. 'I don't know,' I answered. One thing seemed sure, I was in for an adventure.

As we ascended the hill, I could see a little cabin tucked away in the corner. "This is it, home sweet home on the Black Rock."

I asked Ray, "how many people live in this forsaken place?"

"There are six of us. Joe the commando; Mr. Jackson the rancher, and his two children; and Tom the caretaker of the Soldiers' Meadow Ranch which is 26 miles straight north as the crow flies."

"How do they exist?" I asked.

"I'm retired, and Joe the commando lives off of people that come and visit him."

I said casually, "I'll bet he doesn't weigh very much from the traffic that I have observed coming this way." In fact he is a little skinny. Haven't seen that many cars come this way, this year.

Mr. Jackson is the only surviving cattle rancher here on the Black Rock. He runs the ranch with his son and daughter. Jokingly I said, "I'll bet the cattle are skinny to, there doesn't seem to be much to eat on this desert for man or beast."

Ray kind of smiled and said, "You got that right. In the morning you will see a herd of wild horses pass this way that will be heading down to the Jackson place to water. Some time if you want, we can mosey over to the Jackson place and say hello."

(Continued on page 5)

Black Rock Desert

(Continued from page 4)

He has some wagons that he has dug up from the desert that were left from the 1849 gold rush. He also knows the grave sights of some of the people that perished on the Black Rock back in '49. But he ain't talking as to their where abouts. Now for Commando Joe. Yeah, he's a little different than the rest of us. He is an intelligent guy, but a little twisted in his thinking. He is out here stocking up and waiting for Armageddon to happen. Been waiting 20 years so far."

After being filled in on what the locals were like, I asked Ray where I could pitch my tent. "Anywhere up there on the hill. Make sure you are sewed up and in your tent by 7."

"Why?" I asked.

"Skeeters by the thousand," he answered.

"Oh? Nothing was said about them when we talked about the Black Rock in California."

"Didn't want to scare you off. Just make sure you are zipped up by 7 and everything will be O.K."

I began to wonder how many more surprises were here for me to enjoy. Then Ray said, "Oh, there's one more thing. If you hear a rattling noise while you're walking down to my place in the morning, don't move."

"Thanks for the advice, see you in the morning —"

(Continued on page 9)

Remember When?

A Look Into Past Newsletter Items

From the [April 1971](#) AOS newsletter

Report of the March 1971 General Meeting guest speaker:

Topic: Spencer Idaho Opal

Speaker: Vincent Falk

Mr. Falk, who has visited Spencer so often it is almost his summer home, described the location (7,000 feet), the area — just west of Yellowstone and some brief geology. The opal, which occurs in this seams in nodules within a rhyolite or clay tube, has spectacular fire to equal the best when handled properly.

Getting the opal out can be as simple as high-grading the dumps — or barring it out with a small sledge and rock chisel.

Mr. Falk emphasized that Spencer opal exhibits its best color when made into triplets. The opal must be ground extremely thin to avoid a blue or milky color when capped. ❁



Workshop schedule

Be sure to check here for workshop schedule updates. The dates listed below are those available to the AOS in our NEW WORKSHOP AT WALKER Jr HIGH SCHOOL. The shop can be opened to members on Monday and Wednesday nights. **Please continue to contact Stan McCall by calling him at Gems & Opals (714) 827-5680 if you plan to attend a shop session.**

August 1999

| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| 29 | 30 | 31 | | | | |

= Available Workshop dates = General Meeting date

WORKSHOP RULES

These rules are effective October 1, 1997. Please see newsletter for monthly shop schedule.

- 1) Shop may only be used by AOS members.
- 2) Shop users must sign liability waiver.
- 3) Shop users must sign in. Shop supervisor will maintain sign-in list and collect usage fees.
- 4) Shop usage fees: effective immediately...
SHOP USAGE FEE IS \$3 PER SESSION.
- 5) To assist us in scheduling, shop sessions need to be reserved in advance. Please contact Stan McCall or any member of the board of directors to reserve shop time.

HELP WANTED
PLEASE READ – YOUR CLUB NEEDS YOU

The positions listed below are presently open and we are seeking volunteers to fill them. Please see what you can do for your club!

1) PROGRAM CHAIR

-this position involves making contact with and scheduling guest speakers and preparing a short article for the newsletter describing upcoming events.

2 MEMBERSHIP BADGE COORDINATOR

-this position involves taking blank badges to the engraver and mailing finished badges when ready.

3) REFRESHMENTS CHAIR

-arrange for or bring refreshments to monthly meetings. Costs are reimbursed by the club.

4) DOOR PRIZE CHAIR

-this is a new position and will involve arranging for door prizes donated by members which may be raffled or given away to those in attendance at monthly meetings.

5) WOODWORKER / CARPENTER

-this position will involve construction of new show cases for club opal displays to be shown at a variety of locations primarily other club shows.

6) SAFETY CHAIR

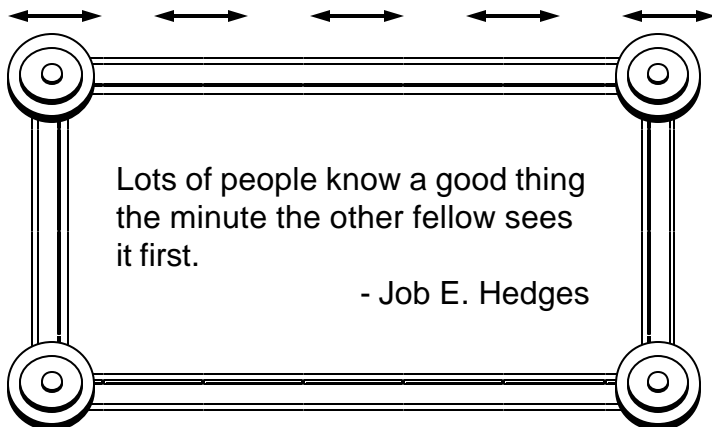
-this position involves preparing a short newsletter article regarding safe practices as a club member during workshop activities, field trips, club meetings etc.

7) HISTORIAN

-this position involves bringing the club history written by John Hall up to the present

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE, if you are skilled in any of the above we NEED your help. If you are not skilled and have a big heart – volunteer anyway, we'll figure something out! A number of people have been doing significantly more than their fair share of the work to the benefit of all members of the club. Let's see if we can even that burden out a bit.

TO VOLUNTEER: Please contact any board member at meetings or by phone, or email.



BOOK review

Black Opal Fossils of Lightning Ridge – Treasures from the Rainbow Billabong

A book review by Barbara McCondra

Author and Illustrator Elizabeth Smith, along with photographer husband Robert Smith, have created a wonderful read that answers many questions posed by fossil enthusiasts for years. They had a passion and curiosity about the "jigsaw zoo" that is buried in the sedimentary layers of the worlds most famous gem black opal field in New South Wales, Australia. In this hardback glossy covered book, they share their exquisite colored photographs of gem opal fossils and information gleaned from years of living and working in those opalfields. Fossil fever is evident on every one of the 112 pages.

Elizabeth writes with a style clearly understood by the lay person using scientific information with prose that entertains and delights the reader. She weaves the progression of efforts to retrieve, save, and study these magnificent gem remnants of Cretaceous creatures into a smoothly read and colorfully described tale.

This a tale of tails, skulls, seeds, and shells identified and classified by experts along with "guessifieds" provided by the miners. Many *how's*, *why's*, and *what's* are answered or hypothesized by informed and accredited paleontologists. The glowing photos speak volumes on their own.

This 8x12 inch book is a significant scientific contribution, a beautiful coffee table book, and a grand adventurous read.

This book can be purchased here in the USA from Ron Vil of Outback Gems:

(602) 992-0952 or redonblack@aol.com for \$US45 plus \$US5 shipping and handling. ☼

Opal Clam Fossils: Questions/Answers

Question: From Lapidary Digest #193 (1/9/99) **Where Do Opalized Clams Come From?**

I got an opalized clam as a gift from someone who went to Australia, but it has no label. Where exactly do they come from?

Answer: From Lapidary Digest #194 (1/15/99)

Opal clams predominately come from an area in Coober Pedy opal fields. Some areas produce larger amounts of clams and others very few. I have a nice collection from large 4 inch down to a tiny 5 mm clam.

Not only clams are available, mussels and a wide variety of other shells and fossils come from this vast opalized area. Unfortunately most of the mussels are not opalized but there are lovely specimens of mussel clusters currently available from many Coober Pedy miners.

The Majority of clam shells are opalized, however only a small percentage contain gem opal. Those shells that do contain top gem opal were in the past sold and cut for jewelry use with no regard to the fossil value. Only recently has the fossil value of a clam become a salable feature. But then not many will pay the high price asked for a top gem opal clam as a specimen when compared to the money one could obtain from cutting the clam. What many people do not realize is that it is illegal to remove from Australia a fossil without consent from the government agency responsible for land care/conservation.

If the fossil is of significant value to AUSTRALIA as a specimen, or a museum wants it, you are out of luck as far as exportation goes. Once you start to carve a clam in order to polish it you do risk lowering the value of the item.

Tricks are to follow the contour of the shell line or what you consider to be the contour, some have a sand type of material mixed within the opal making it difficult to polish once breaking through into this soft sandstone you may have destroyed what value the clam had.

It takes time and many shells to gain the experience to know just where to grind, for if you do cut it wrong the value will plummet. I have seen a beautiful shell, all top crystal opal, sell for over \$US300,000 which would have been very cheap.

There are only so many of these clams available, If you own one, then consider yourself lucky, there will not be many more produced.

In talking to miners these days, clams are mentioned as, oh, I only got 1 this year or I only got 15 or so this year, so as you can see depending upon the miner and of course the area being worked most obtain 1 to 2 figure quantities each year only. Other opalized turret type shells are talked about in 1 every so many years.

Another item worth collecting from this area is the belemites. These come in white opal, honey opal, and gem crystal opal. They are very pretty and make wonderful jewelry items. Again these are just as rare if not more so than the clams. The latest find I had in Africa was an opal deposit where after carving an egg shaped stone it was apparent that we were indeed carving an egg, an opalized egg. It would be about the size and shape

Throughout the Australian opal fields from Coober Pedy to Andamooka to Lightning Ridge to Quilpie areas there are many different fossils of opal content. These are all rare and well worth collecting as over time these can only but become scarce and the value can only but increase.

Regards, Ross Cranwick ☼

Lapidary Digest editor, Hale Sweeney, writes about Ross Cranwick... He (Ross) lives in NZ and knows opals. He left NZ and went to Africa to mine gems and is finally back. Welcome home, Ross. Glad to have you back. hale

Question: From Lapidary Digest #191 (1/2/99) **Questions about an Opalized Clam**

(Hans Durstling begins this note explaining he has obtained a fossil opal clam with an interior of crystal which shows areas of green and blue pinfire inside a patch outer layer)

(Hans writes)...it looks quite attractive as a clam. But yet I'm an opal fiend too, and in my quest for cuttable stones am sorely tempted to cut the clam into two halves say along the juncture where the shells meet...<snip>...If you were in my shoes would you cut it or leave well enough alone? And why?

Cheers & thanks Hans Durstling

Answers: From Lapidary Digest #192 (1/5/99)

(Tim Vogel writes) My suggestion is you run it through a vibratory tumbler for a few minutes watching it very closely. I look every 15 minutes and I do not start with coarse but with a medium grit. You can then see if the fire is all the way through the piece...<snip>...I think you will find the brightest opals are generally ones that replace living material. Look at the fossilized wood and various other pieces and you will see very bright material.

(another writer says)...The very last thing I would do is cut that clam in half. If you cannot possibly live with it as a fossil, I would gently grind off the

outside of the "shell" if you start to see color slow down. These types of opal are usually very bright and very high quality. Take off as much of the white outside of the clam as you can without actually cutting into the color then evaluate what you have...<snip>...If this was mine I would not cut it but it is yours so do what you want but go slow and careful so you don't wind up with a pan full of rock dust.

(Gil Shea offers)...(in the) shell that I have the fire runs up and down through the shell, not across the shell in line with the hinge. If yours does the same cutting it across the hinge area would cost you most anything you were trying to achieve.

(and yet another writes)...I've purchased opalized bivalves in the past, and although the shells of some were replaced by precious opal (with fire) the centers were replaced with hardened mud. This may not be the case with all opalized clams, but I suspect it holds true for the majority of them. Since the opal was not the very best for cutting, nor was it in a very auspicious configuration, I felt that the pieces were much more valuable as fossil specimens than as cut stones.

(and finally)...I had a piece of an opalized clamshell that plagued me for several years. I cut it, and it had a zigzag line of brown running right across the face. The fire was very good, but the line annoyed me. Finally I got more courage mustered up and went at it again. This time I got through the brown seam line (where the two halves of the shell met) and the fire opened up to the best fire I've ever cut. A #4 out of 5 on the Downing scale. The stone was 5 carats, and a killer. ☼

About an opalized clam...

"If you were in my shoes would you cut it or leave well enough alone? And why?"

-Hans Durstling

Yowah Australia – Barbara McCondra's 1997 Opal Symposium presentation

By Russ Madsen

(This article is a review of the presentation given by Barbara McCondra at the 1997 Opal Symposium. While showing slides of Yowah, Australia, Barbara shared details of the region and explained how Yowah opal is found, mined and cut. Video by Mike Kowalsky of Barbara's talk is in the AOS library.)

The Yowah region was originally a sheep ranching area. Miners to this day work the sheep to earn money for fuel and other mining costs. Originally Yowah opal was mined underground. Tunnels were dug to follow the occurrence of nut bands. It is in these layers that opal is found.

The Yowah nuts are ironstone concretions. Some have hollow centers filled with crystal opal. Others remain hollow or are filled with mud. Some are laced with cracks and these can be filled with seams of opal.

There are also many, many layers of nut bands. Not all contain opal. Furthermore, of the bands which contain opal bearing nuts, very few are gem quality. Of 1,000 nuts dug by a miner, only a few will contain opal at all and nuts containing of gem quality opal are only a few of these. The Yowah area is literally paved with cracked open nuts that had no opal.

While the miners of 100 years ago dug underground by candlelight they pushed their diggings (back stow) into finished tunnels. Frequently they would miss a good specimen in the poor light of the candles, and more importantly, the only valuable nuts at that time had solid opal centers.

The fine matrix opal nuts we appreciate so much now were left behind as the digging went forward. It is the opal in the old back stow and pillars that Barbara and others mine today with open cut trenches.

Once an opal bearing Yowah nut is found one must make some decisions. If traces of opal are showing on the surface there is a chance that the entire center may be crystal. If you hit it with a hammer it will shatter. The miners have learned to use an upturned sharpened ax head welded to a support then attached to a workbench. They give the nut a whack while it is rested on the edge of the ax blade and it will usually split evenly with the blow.

Many people ask why not saw the nuts open as this does have a little better chance of preserving any opal that may be found. First, there are THOUSANDS of nuts to be cut and the cost of blades and time to operate the saw are prohibitive. And to get nuts processed in quantity, the splitting method is by far the most common.

Barbara mentioned that each morning in Yowah you hear the sound of generators, then bread machines going off, followed shortly thereafter by the sound of hammers as the previous day's nuts are being cracked all through the town.

"Crackin' time" during the day is when everyone works. Barbara did note that there are more folks sawing now because the price of saw blades has fallen to as little as \$7 per, but a VERY trusted worker is needed to operate the saw.

Formation of Yowah nuts remains a mystery. The nuts ap-

pear to have been deposited in groups by running water as it rolled and tumbled in ancient streams. Then they were buried in sediments which later became solidified. Exactly how the opal solution percolated into the cracks and seams in the nuts is not known.

Present day mining laws prohibit the removal of dirt during mining. Only the nuts may be taken. On one open cut claim, steps had been cut so the owners could walk down into the cut and dig out the exposed nut bands. A man named "Beans" using divining wires insisted repeatedly that there was opal under the steps. The owners didn't believe him and tried to sell the mine. Their efforts were fruitless and they got low on money. So they decided to dig up the steps, found a \$40,000 stone and kept digging. Barbara reports they are continuing to dig their mine and doing quite well to this day.

In answer to a question about the open cut digging process, Barbara noted that the guy with the excavator is nearly always in demand. He will work by the hour or as a partner with the claim holders. If he charges hourly his rate is about \$100 per hour. If he is a partner it is usually for a 50/50 share of whatever is found. He works much faster as a partner.

An interesting feature of the property of daylight was mentioned. Sorting and cracking nuts must be done in the morning to mid day because of the "yellowish" cast of afternoon light. In this light, red color play won't always show as well, if at all. As a seller, it is best to show the opal mornings to mid day for the same reason. If you are a buyer - caveat emptor.

During the earliest days of Yowah opal mining (1890's), seasonal Yowah Creek was the only water source. When it dried up, miners had to carry their diggings as much as a mile to watering holes for the washing and inspection process. In 1911, a bore hole (well) was sunk until it reached hot mineral water. Now miners in the town no longer walk to the watering holes.

Many nuts with potch opal can be attractive. The various colors of potch and matrix as well as the patterns the potch takes can produce very attractive cabochons.

Sometimes the nuts occur in a sort of conglomerate which Barbara terms, "Fruitcake". This consists of numerous opal bearing nuts, often small, and hardened together. The opal may or may not have color play.

"Magpie Potch" is very attractive and consists of black ironstone matrix laced with patterns of light colored or white potch.

Matrix Black opal is the prima donna of the Yowah opal fields.

The unusual formations of matrix, potch, and gem opal produce outstanding opportunities and challenges for lapidaries and jewelers making custom pieces.

"Do-Or-Die" cutting is the term Barbara uses to describe working with Yowah nuts. She states blocking is the key to success. Be aware that a blue layer will sometimes face green from the other side. Under caramel potch one often finds good color. Do some rubbing (sanding) on various sides then saw to block out the opalized segment of a nut. After that, rub some more and adjust angles as the opal

Black Rock Desert

(Continued from page 5)

— I hope!"

I was zipped up by 7, and by 7-05 they were there. I looked at both windows and could see hundreds of skeeters resting on the windows, looking in, and just staring. I turned out the light, said good night to the skeeters and went to sleep. By six o'clock in the morning the sun was beating down on my tent. Time to get up before I cook in here, I thought. As you can see, everyone gets up at six whether they want to or not.

After breakfast Ray took me to the top of the mountain to show me the spring where he gets his water. It was two miles up to the spring. He had strung two miles of PVC from the spring to his house. What a feat, I thought to myself. He had a 12 ft. storage tank by his house that held his water supply. On the top was a kids plastic baseball bat which stood straight up and floated inside the tank. "When that bat disappears, I got to walk to the top of the mountain and check the pipe for a break, all two miles of it." What a hard way to make a living I thought to myself. The people on the Black Rock have a tough row to hoe.

Before I had come to the Black Rock, I had promised Ray to finish off his kitchen and dining room. I was to dry wall and then paint them both. I could only work in the morning. By noon it was 110 degrees. 1980 was a very hot summer and we were there in August which even made it worse. After the work was through, I started to dig.

The opal at Ray's place is formed in a volcanic lava. In some parts of the claim the rock is hard and in other parts it is very soft and broken up. I started to get a small picture of what was going on here. I had never seen basalt that was broken up before. The next day Ray asked me if I wanted to dig on the Preachers claim. "It's just two hoots and a holler down the road from me." To my surprise as I started to take off the overburden, I couldn't find the basalt. I said to myself, "something is wrong here."

Then it happened! As a miner you are always looking for the unusual. I was tunneling and looking for the basalt when the roof caved in. I am probably the only opal miner to get hit in the head with an "opal shower." I picked myself up off the ground, shook off the cobwebs, and to my amazement gleaming in the noon day sun were about 15 opals mixed in with the headache maker. The opal had formed in the basalt. Then some caustic solution had eaten away the rock leaving the opal in a loose dirt compound. I had never seen this before or after. Whatever ate away the rock didn't seem to bother the opal. This fragile opal has strengths and qualities that a lot of people aren't aware of. I will talk about this later — of all the torture tests that we put the opal through and how it has survived them all.

One evening Ray's friend "commando Joe" came a-calling. There he was all dressed up in his military "duds" looking like a reject from the army. He parked his WW II ambulance by the hitchin' post. You may ask, what is a hitchin' post doing on the Black Rock? It's for the Jackson's when they come a-calling on Ray. The "lingo" that I am shooting out at you is the way they talk.

On the sides of the vehicle Joe had strapped picks, shovels,

extra jacks, extra tires, two five gallon water jugs and two five gallon gas jugs. I asked him jokingly, if he needed all that stuff to make it down to Ray's which is 6 miles down the road from him.

He kind of laughed and said, "It all depends on how lucky I am today." I could see by all of this that commando Joe was ready for anything that the Black Rock could dish out. Ray introduced me to Joe and from that time on, we would become good friends. Joe invited the one and only guest on the Black Rock up for breakfast the next morning, that was me. He said the way to find his place is to drive north for about 6 miles then hang a left at Second Street.

For a joke, Ray had a sign at his place saying First Street, and Joe had one saying Second Street. As far as I know those were the only two "street" signs that I ever encountered on the desert. The next morning, I showed up at commando Joe's for breakfast. When I arrived at his place, I was amazed at all the structures that were there. He was really self contained. He had fluorescent lights strung all through his "shack." He had a propane refrigerator and stove. The lights were powered by a bunch of batteries that were hooked up to two solar panels.

After breakfast I asked Joe how he had gotten his water. He had plenty. Two big ponds that were full to the top. "Well it's a long story. When I first arrived here, it was but a trickle of water coming from that canyon behind me. I had read in one of my army magazines that the way to get more water was to set off a high explosive charge. But when you do this, you have a 50-50 chance of getting more water. I had nothing to lose. There was only a trickle coming from the spring. I was going to use the same 'stuff' that I now use to blow up the mountain for opal mining - nitrate fertilizer and dynamite. Well let me tell you, I put three 50 lb. sacks and about ten sticks of dynamite and let-er go. I figured that I had one chance at it and I was going to give it my best "shot." It was a "Biggy" all right. I was told later that they heard the explosion way down in Gerlach which is 40 miles due south as the crow flies. The water completely shut down for a week. I figured that I had lost her. Then one day she began to flow like an oil gusher. Prettiest sight I had ever seen. Not only more water, but it was 49 degrees. Do you know what a luxury it is to have 49 degree water out here where the temperature will get up to 110 degrees? I felt like I had struck it rich."

I got to talking to him about his cabin. "Well, years ago, this whole area here used to be a sheep ranch owned by the Basque. They never really owned anything on the Black Rock, they just sort of took it over. Who was there to stop them?"

"They came from somewhere around Spain. That was in the 20's and 30's. They built this shack here that I now live in. It was kind of small, so I added another room onto it. I had completely forgotten about having a stove until it got cold one night. Then I knew that I had a problem. I had forgotten to cut a hole in the ceiling for the stove pipe. I didn't have a saw. So I put my desert thinking to use. All that I had was a double barreled shotgun. Then it came to me. I loaded both barrels, laid down on the floor, and aimed at a spot in the ceiling where I thought the hole should be. I pulled both barrels at once. My shoulder was a little sore for a week or so but the sunlight shining through the hole in the ceiling made me forget all about it." ❁