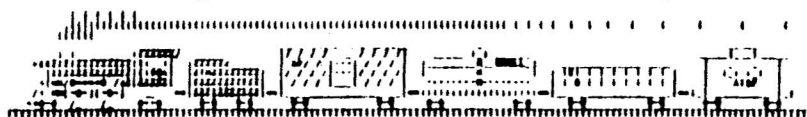




The OPAL EXPRESS

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THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

JUNE HAPPENINGS... We were honored with a superbly-put-together program by one of the trade's most esteemed faceters. Bob Kleppe's fine presentation of the world of colored stones from the point of view of a faceter of gems, was delightful, educational and inspiring. (He made it seem so EASY, and perhaps it is when done correctly.) We would like to thank Mr. Kleppe for sharing his expertise and knowledge with us. He not only is a fine faceter, but an eloquent speaker as well. I have a faceting machine which I have used occasionally; however, now I am eager to find time to facet some of that opal I have been stashing away in my "someday-I'll-do-it" closet.

* * *

WHAT'S POPPIN' IN JULY... We have been fortunate to be able to procure for the education of you opalophiles of the founding chapter of the American Opal Society, an expert opal cutter who will instruct you in the mysteries of cutting and polishing the world's most beautiful gemstone. Many of you have seen his own beautifully finished opals. This is Brian Franks. He will impart to you some techniques it took YEARS to learn, shortcuts, secrets to perfection. Plan to NOT miss the July meeting. It promises to be an educational MUST for everyone, from beginner to expert. Mark your calendar. Draw a circle around JULY 11. That's at 7:30, at 8211 E. Firestone Blvd., in Downey. (See the map on address side of your Newsletter.) Cool, air-conditioned comfort; delicious goodies; and a chance to win a stone are just some of the added fringe benefits of the evening.

* * *

RECENTLY IN OUR TRAVELS... Dorothea and I had the pleasure of meeting two of our far-away members--Paul and Bobbi Downing of Majestic Gems & Carvings in Tallahassee, Florida--at the Santa Monica Wholesale Show. We have corresponded frequently with the Downings, and as you will recall, Paul Downing is the author of "Opal Cutting Made Easy." He is also co-editor, along with his wife, Bobbi, of OPALHOLICS. We are enclosing a copy of this interesting and informative publication with this month's OPAL EXPRESS. If you are interested in getting your name on the OPALHOLICS mailing list, or in purchasing a copy of "Opal Cutting Made Easy," please write to the Downings at the address on their newsletter.

FIELD TRIP

OPAL NEAR RED ROCK CANYON

by JAMES R. MITCHELL

When asked to name places where precious opal can be found, most people will mention the fabulous opal fields of Coober Pedy and Lightning Ridge, both in Australia, but few even consider the United States as having candidates for such a list. There are a number of places in this country, however, where beautiful precious opal is found, some as spectacular as any from Australia. One of these American locations is in the western part of California's El Paso Mountains, near Red Rock Canyon, north of Los Angeles.

The first opal claim in the region was staked in 1946 by the Cowden family. After working it for only a short time, though, they discovered that the tough basalt wouldn't yield sufficient quantities of the gems to justify the labor. They constructed a shaft and spent considerable effort trying to make the mine profitable, but there just wasn't enough quality material to make it pay off. Leo Nowak took over the claims a number of years later, and soon thereafter opened them to collectors, on a fee basis. The mines have changed ownership a number of times in recent years, with the Barnett family currently owning the lower half, and a group of investors holding title to the upper portions. Rockhounds are currently allowed to dig at both mines, for a fee.

To get to this most interesting locale, simply take Highway 14 north from Mojave a little over 20 miles to where the Redrock-Randsburg Road branches off to the right. Continue from there another 7½ miles to the 3000-foot elevation sign on the right side of the highway. From that landmark, the turn is exactly one mile further. There is a sign, on the east, designating where to leave the pavement for "Opal Canyon." Turn onto the sandy rut, paying close attention to all signs as you go. You should proceed east three-tenths of a mile, bearing right at the fork, and then turn right, traveling another one and one-half miles. At that point go left one and one-tenth miles, staying right at the forks. The given mileage will place you in front of a group of signs pointing the way to the two opal mines.

The mine on the left is the "Nowak," and that to the right is the "Barnett." These two prospects are actually on opposite sides of one massive opal-bearing basalt dike. To get to the Nowak, proceed about seven-tenths of a mile down the hill and check in at the trailers on the left. It is open to collectors seven days a week, and there is always someone on duty to answer questions. The Barnett Lower Claim, originally known as the Cowden Mine, is about one mile along the right fork from the signposts. The rut winds around the mountain, so it is essential you pay close attention to the markers as you go. The Barnett is only open on weekends, and they also have people on duty to assist rockhounds.

On my last visit, the fee at the Nowak was \$2.00 per day per person and, at the Barnett, it was \$1.00 per day, or \$2.00, if planning to spend the night. Be sure to take some hard-rock equipment, since the opal is concealed in very tough basalt, and is difficult to remove. A good sledge hammer, some gads, chisels, tough gloves, goggles, as well as pry bars are essential, if you want to be successful. This, I must warn you, is not a collecting site where material is just lying all over the ground. It takes considerable effort to find good specimens, and, in addition, a good deal of luck. Don't become disenchanted, though. Once you see some samples of the beautiful material that can be found here, the labor becomes somewhat inconsequential, and it will be easy to understand why this is such a popular Southern California digging location. The most abundant material to be found here, according to the caretaker at the Nowak, is the honey-yellow opal, some of which contains beautiful red, orange, and blue fire. There is also the more traditional white opal, with blue, red and orange fire, most of which is quite brittle and small, however. This precious white opal is very nice and looks similar to that found in Australia.

In addition to what has already been mentioned, there are additional hues of jelly opal and even some magnificent black fire opal, this being the most prized material to be found in the Red Rock Canyon area.

*From August 1984 edition of Rock & Gem.
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James R. Mitchell, and with permission
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Generally, the opal is stable and solid, not being susceptible to cracking when exposed to dry air, as is the case with so much of that found in Nevada and Idaho. Most, though, is small, occurring as artygdules no more than one-quarter of an inch across. More sizeable pieces are found from time to time, however, and, on my last visit, the woman next to me cracked open a piece of the grey basalt to expose a chunk of fire-filled honey opal with dimensions exceeding two inches. It was quite a specimen, and made my comparably smaller chips and fragments look undernourished. The two most famous stones having come from the Red Rock Canyon sites were the "Mojave Opal," which weighed 4.5 carats and displayed spectacular red, green, and blue flashes of fire, and the "Mojave Flame," with a reported value approaching \$50,000.

Collecting at the Nowak is done on the hill opposite the trailers, as is also the case at the Barnett. Be sure to first check in with the caretaker, at whichever mine you visit, and pay the fee. I have found the employees at both locations friendly and helpful. Be sure to also request seeing a selection of specimens in the host rock, so you will know exactly what to look for.

After checking in and examining the samples, it is time to start work. There are two methods frequently employed here to locate the opals. One is to split boulders lying on the hillside, hoping to expose gems that were overlooked by previous rockhounds, and the other is to attack the virgin basalt, still in place on the hill itself. Obviously, the latter is the most strenuous, but, as you might suspect, it also affords the greatest opportunity for finding more sizeable pieces.

Either choice requires the commitment to do some very hard, blister-generating work. Splitting rocks in the dumps with a heavy sledge hammer isn't easy, but when you must remove the hard basalt directly from its place in the hill, the work is exhausting. Be sure to bring lots of water, both for drinking, as well as cleaning specimens, and don't visit during the hot summer months, when temperatures can

soar well above 100 degrees. I suggest spring and fall, since the winter nights can get very cold. Camping is allowed at both mines, if the caretaker is on duty, and each also has an outhouse. Water and other supplies, however, must be brought with you, so be prepared.

I have discovered, when working directly in the side of the mountain, that once a chunk of opal is found, whether it be common, jelly or precious, more is usually nearby. One can hammer, dig, and pry for hours and hours with out finding a thing, and, then, all of a sudden, there will be opal, and frequently lots of it. I obviously can't guarantee it will contain fire, but,

even if not, it is usually nice, and worth keeping. If you find any type opal, always look closely for more in the same or neighboring rock, since common and gem quality frequently are found right next to each other.

A particularly interesting phenomenon displayed by much of the precious white and honey opal found in Red Rock Canyon is that of reverse hydrophane. This is the phenomenon where the stone will display better fire when dry, rather than wet, as one might expect. Because of this unusual property, it is advisable to keep all you find, whether it shows a play of colors or not. It may, upon drying, in a few hours or even days, contain fire after all.

The scenery near the opal diggings is impressive, especially to the south, in Red Rock Canyon. Plan to take some time to explore the region, off the pavement. A number of western movies have been filmed there because of the rugged "Western" scenery.

I am certain you will enjoy your trip whether or not you actually find much gem quality opal. Just having the opportunity to visit such a location is worth the trip. There are very few places in the United States where one can even have a chance to find such gemstones, and this is one of those few.

NOTE: On the weekend of June 1 and 2, some dedicated and ambitious opal-
philes from the Society trekked to the Nowak Opal Mine in search of...
ADVENTURE. And found it! In addition to the sheer excitement of "romancing
the stone" in the daylight hours, evenings were enjoyed under the stars in
a fantastic get-away-from-it-all setting. It was a truly enjoyable outing.

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The following news article is from the Columbus Citizen-Journal, April 26, 1985.
Submitted by Lee J. Bregenzler of Columbus.

A 15-pound opal is truly royal gem

By THOMAS HOLDEN
C-J Staff Writer

Wesley Mantor was nearly speechless.

He cast his eyes upon the world's largest opal. His opal.

He looked up at the crowd of reporters who had gathered. He squinted under the hot glare of television lights and listened to the whirr and click of cameras.

"Unbelievable," he said, at last. "It's beautiful."

At 11,028 carats, about 15 pounds, the gem, called "The Queen's Favor," arrived yesterday under armed guard. The gem sparkles greens and blues and browns and golds.

It was promptly locked up in the vault of BancOhio National Bank,

155 E. Broad St., after Mantor and Robert Stainbrook had a chance to see their most recent purchase.

Stainbrook, the owner of Stainbrook Gemological Corp., and Mantor, a realtor, purchased the huge stone from an Australian gem dealer. The quartzite opal was discovered in 1981 by miners at Stevens Creek in the Andamooka Opal Fields of south Australia.

According to Paul Cory, an opal specialist present when the gem was uncrated, "Any time you get a piece this large and where the color is this clear is unusual. To find a stone like this would only happen once every 10 or 20 years."

Cory said the average size for an opal is between four and five carats.

The owners plan to have the awkwardly-shaped stone carved by a

West German firm. It may take three months just to plan the carving. Second and third opinions may be sought before actual work begins.

The carving itself may take three months and will reduce the weight of the stone by roughly 2,000 to 3,000 carats.

Though they would not say how much it cost, the owners set the gem's value at between \$150,000 and \$400,000, depending on how well the carving is done.

The original stone was even larger. But it broke in two, Stainbrook said. The larger piece will be used in the carving while the smaller one will be retained by the original owner.

"We've made some large purchases, but nothing of this magnitude before," Stainbrook said.

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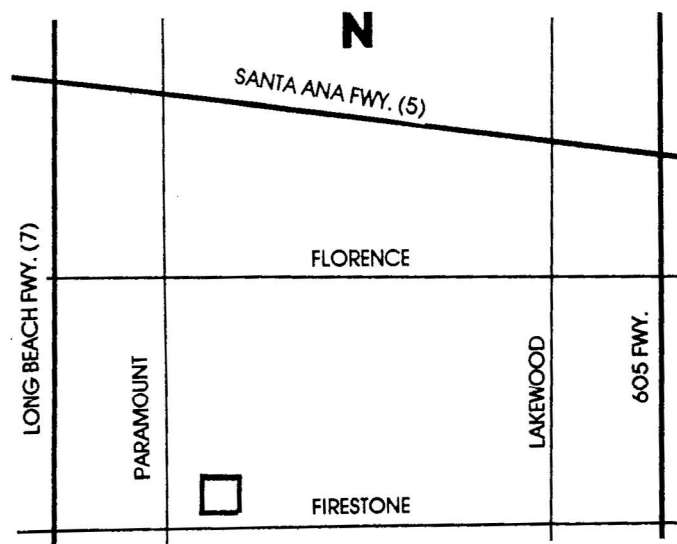
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