

The Opal Express

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



Member

Member



Volume #31 Issue #06 June 1999

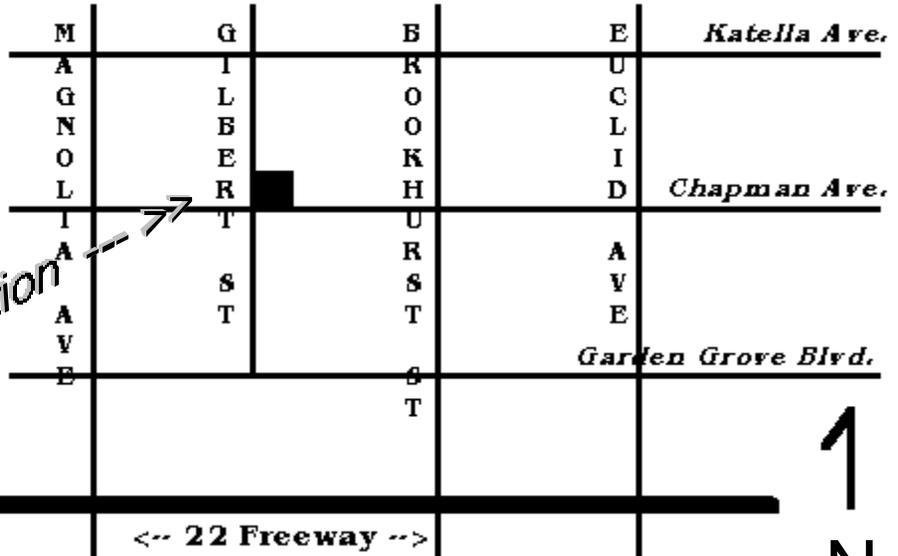


TO:

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

Meeting Location →



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
Alan Farquer	Treasurer	(714) 537-0556	email nnf@earthlink.net
Jim Pisani	Secretary	(562) 948-6374	email vulajim@gte.net
Russ Madsen	Editor	(562) 425-9788	email 76550.1366@compuserve.com

"Diamond Jubilee of Gems"

CFMS 60th Annual  Show & Convention

June 18, 19, 20, 1999

CHECK OUT THE CFMS
SHOW WEB SITE

WWW.BELL21.COM/
MOTHERLOAD

Do you have any plans for the middle of June in 1999? A suggestion and an invitation to the 60th Annual Show and Convention of the California Federation of Mineralogical Societies is tendered by the hosts, the Mother Lode Mineral Society.

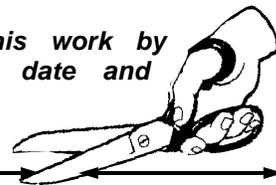
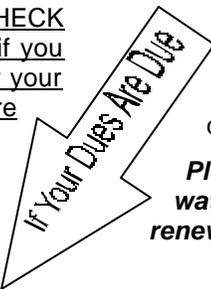
FOR APPLICATIONS FOR ADVANCED REGISTRATION FORM REGARDING
RV CAMPING, ACCOMMODATIONS, MAPS, BANQUET AND EDITORS' BREAKFAST
& MEETING: CONTACT YOUR FEDERATION DIRECTOR or
Bill Meadows, 308 San Juan Dr., Modesto, CA 95354 (209) 848-2709

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
(addresses in Los Angeles, Orange, & Riverside counties)
- 2) CALIFORNIA & USA \$20.00
(all addresses outside local area counties)
- 3) FOREIGN \$30.00
(all addresses outside USA)

** \$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)

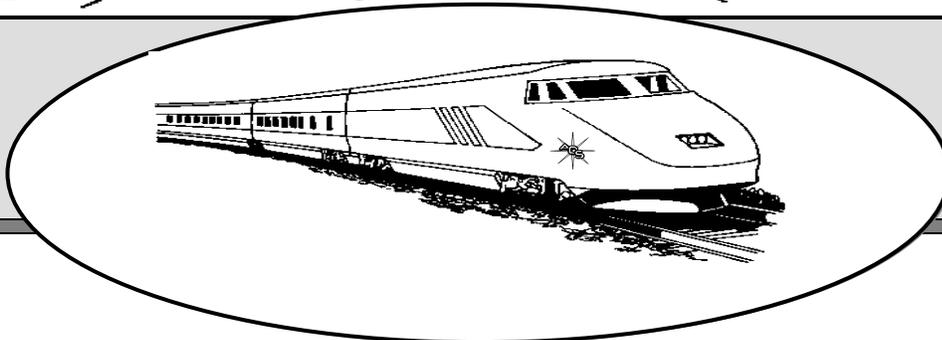
PLEASE PRINT NAME AS YOU WISH IT TO APPEAR ON YOUR BADGE using up to two (2) lines of text for your name, nickname or name of your opal related business.

The Opal Express

JUNE 1999

Published monthly by the American Opal Society

Volume 31, Issue 6



AOS Website Information
By Jim Pisani

President's Message from Carol Bova

A lot is always happening within the American Opal Society and May was no exception!

Bob Dixon provided a wonderful video on intarsia in May. It went into great detail and showed how to create this intriguing art form. Remember to look for Bob every month at our meetings in his role as our Librarian. The American Opal Society has a wide range of books, magazines, reprints and videos on opal and other gem and jewelry topics. Many AOS programs have been videoed by Russ Madsen and Mike Kowalsky, so you can learn from a presentation given months or years ago.

Our June program speaker will be Bill Burns on Virgin Valley Opal. Bill and his lovely wife Isabella will bring examples of VV opal and have a slide program for us. Bring your own VV opal along to show and discuss after the program!

The workshop is up and running, so don't forget to call Stan and let him know when you are planning to attend! (Monday and Wednesday evenings at Walker Jr. High School)

Mike Kowalsky, our Vice President has been busy on many fronts lately! The project to work with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to raise awareness of opal and share the AOS's collective knowledge with the community is coming along well. A program will be prepared for an evening presentation to the Gem & Mineral Council of the L.A.C.M.N.H. in the fall. If it goes well, more will be arranged.

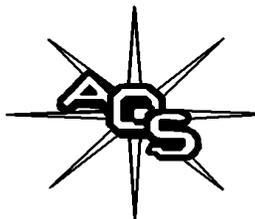
Mike has been instrumental in arranging that

(Continued on page 3)

The American Opal Society now has a website on the Internet! Its location is <http://opalsociety.hypermart.net>. The AOS site's purpose is to let the world know who the AOS is, provide a presence, and provide opal information to anyone interested. Also, it can provide a forum to disseminate special information to regular members (articles, discussion groups, etc.). It should also encourage new membership.

The site has an open Opal Discussion Forum. Please feel free to start a discussion on any subject concerning opals.

The site is still under construction and needs work, so feel free to send email to the Webmaster any ideas, improvements, problems, etc. for the site. The Webmaster is Jim Pisani, e-mail: vulajim@gte.net. A real domain name is being considered. We would appreciate any suggestions.



DATES TO REMEMBER

General Meeting
Thurs June 10th 7PM

Board of Directors Meeting
Mon June 7th 7PM

AOS Opal & Gem Show
Nov 6th & 7th

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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President's Message

(Continued from page 2)

copies of the Opal Express are available to our opal friends in Australia. **So greetings to all you opal folk Down Under!** We'll look forward to hearing from you and if anyone wants to share a story, a cutting tip, or opal news via the Opal Express, please send it our way!

Outreach is an important facet of AOS activities. Every time you talk to someone about opal, every time you show an interesting piece of rough or show a stone you've cut, you're spreading the word about opal! Don't forget to offer information about our 1999 Show too! From early reports, it sounds like folks are planning to attend from all over this year!

(Vendors, please send in your 1999 Opal Show space reservation info now so we know how much space to set aside for you before offering space to new dealers!)

To reach even more people across the U.S. and the world, **the website committee has created an online connection to the AOS.** It can be found at: <http://opalsociety.hypermart.net>. Please stop by and send your suggestions to Jim Pisani so he and the committee can fine tune the site!

Questions about the **California Federation of Mineralogical Societies insurance coverage** have not been answered yet, so our representative, Harold Anderson will convey our concerns at their June meeting. The coverage through CFMS for our show and workshop is essential to those aspects of our operation. We regret not having an answer yet on the field trip coverage and exclusions, and hope to share solid answers next month.

Regardless what insurance coverage is available to the Society, each individual must take every safety precaution possible. Do not venture into new areas without thoroughly researching the region's possible hazards and preparing for them, or preparing to avoid them. Ask local residents whenever possible about conditions that might not be obvious. Do not go into underground spaces... the air may be bad, timbers may be rotten, overhangs may be unstable. No specimen is worth your life or health!! In the shop, use safety goggles, pay attention to what you're doing when you use saws and other equipment. Remove all jewelry before using equipment. Keep water away from electrical components. You know the routine -- follow it!

Keep safe, be well and have fun with an opal today!

Carol

Send comments and suggestions to:

Carol J. Bova at bova@bovagems.com or to:
P.O. Box 5388 Glendale, CA 91221-5388 USA



Name Badges...

Price per badge is \$5 which includes the badge itself and engraving of up to two lines of text: one line for your first and last name and, if you wish, a second line for nickname or if applicable, your opal related business name. These engraving options give members flexibility to include many types of identification.

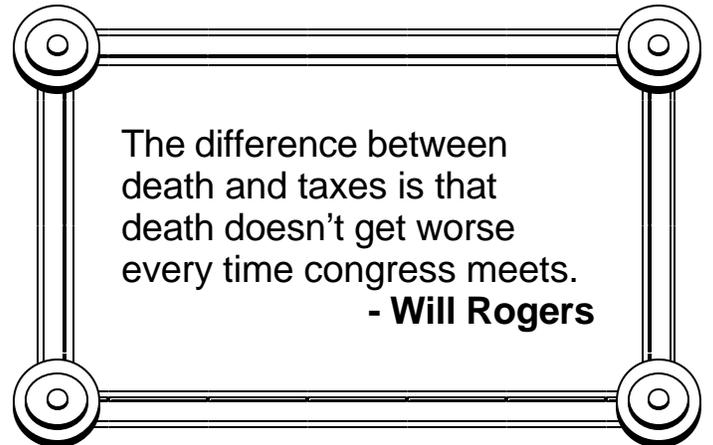
Please allow 3 to 4 weeks for completion of engraving. ✨

Today's Stock Market Report

By Chell Cottier

- Helium was up, feathers were down.
- Paper was stationary.
- Fluorescent tubing was dimmed in light trading.
- Knives were up sharply.
- Cows steered into a bull market.
- Pencils lost a few points.
- Hiking equipment was trailing.
- Elevators rose, while escalators continued their slow decline.
- Weights were up in heavy trading.
- Light switches were off.
- Mining equipment hit rock bottom.
- Diapers remained unchanged.
- Shipping lines stayed at an even keel.
- The market for raisins dried up.
- Coca Cola fizzled.
- Caterpillar stock inched up a bit.
- Sun peaked at midday.
- Balloon prices were inflated.
- Scott Tissue touched a new bottom.

(from Blue Ribbon Coalition Magazine 3/99 www.sharetrails.org)



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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The Opal Express, P.O. Box 382, Anaheim, CA 92815-0382
E-mail 76550.1366@compuserve.com
(Deadline for items: 15th of the month prior to each issue)

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

None this month



Membership Roster Changes/Additions

Changes - Edward Zutaut 979 Stanley Ave. Los Altos, CA 94024 (650) 961-1599 Member # 9645

ITEMIZATION

ITEM: Shop Hint – Stabilizing Porous Stones – If you (want) to try your luck at stabilizing porous stone, (e.g.) turquoise, so it can be cut and polished, the Silvery Colorado Rock Club offers this: take a jar with a lid and add one pint of acetone. To this add the complete contents of both the resin and hardener tubes of epoxy glue. Mix well. Add well-dried stones. Cover the jar and let it sit for at least four days. Remove the stones and allow a week for them to dry. They should now be stabilized and ready to work. ✿
(From Conglomerate via PVGMS Tumbler 5/99)

ITEM: Gem Tours in AUSTRALIA
(rec'd this item via email 12/12/98 and while it is a commercial offering it has obvious "opalholic appeal" -rgm)

Hi gem friends,

I would like to introduce myself to you.

My name is Murray Wilkes, I was a bit of a fossicker as a youngster and have a small collection of gem stones that I found on trips with father.

I now operate an air charter business on the beautiful tropical east coast of Australia. I specialize in tourist flights ranging from day trips to extended tours of over a week.

I have become friendly with an opal miner from western Queensland, Uwe Barfuss. He owns the mine at Yowah, where the "Great Australian Opal" and "The Angel of Yowah" were found. He has had a long standing involvement with the Queensland Opal Corporation.

Uwe also owns a RUBY mine in the Northern Territory (part of Australia).

A little bit of information.

There are many different types of opal. The ones found at Yowah are unique. The tours that I conduct to Uwe's mine take visitors to a REAL WORKING COMMERCIAL MINE. Here you get to look for opal in fresh ground, not somebody else's discarded trash. This is NOT a tourist trap type mine.

You get to keep up to about AUD \$20000 worth of opal that you find. I also have exclusive access rights to Uwe's RUBY MINE. It is only one of a couple in the world that are safe to visit. Here you also get to look for and keep up to AUD \$20000 worth of RUBY in a REAL COMMERCIAL MINE. The ruby mine is located about 3000ft amsl in a very spectacular range in central Australia (a short flight from Ayres Rock). We also visit a Sapphire mine at a town called Sapphire in central Queensland.

You could visit Yowah by car, but it is very remote, and about 2 days drive in remote featureless countryside from the nearest Jet serviced city. We can fly you there in comfort in less than 3 hours. If you wish to visit the ruby mine, well you have to come with me. Uwe and I have agreed that the only way people will be allowed access there is by air. It has a landing strip at the mine.

I can provide via email a sample itinerary for a 9 day tour that I offer. Please read it (Microsoft word doc) and feel free to request changes to both duration of stay at various locations, and destinations themselves. This tour not only visits quality gem sites, but also gives the visitor a wonderful holiday at some of the greatest natural wonders of the world, including Ayres rock and the Great Barrier Reef.

We operate all year round and look forward to enjoying a holiday with you and your friends.

Please also visit my web site at www.goldenair.com.au. It contains some of the short tours that I offer. Many other offerings also exist in our portfolio.

We currently operate an executive 400 series Cessna twin and generally take 4 passengers on each trip. The plane has 8 seats, but for comfort on a long trip, myself and 4 pax is great. I have catered for the needs of people such as Elle Macpherson, and am sure that I will provide you with a memorable Aussie experience. ✿

Kind regards, Murray Wilkes.

You could visit Yowah by car, but it is very remote, and about 2 days drive in remote featureless countryside from the nearest Jet serviced city. We can fly you there in comfort in less than 3 hours.



AFMS/CFMS NEWS

INSURANCE

You ALL know the Federation has had some major problems with our insurance. Your Federation Officers **have** been working on it and you will hear all about it at the Directors' Meeting on Saturday, June 19th, at Turlock. I am urging all the clubs/societies to have their Federation Director or Alternate attend this meeting. We need your ideas and input because **you are the Federation.** (Page 5-CFMS Newsletter 6/99)

CAMP PARADISE

September 12 – 19, 1999 CFMS Earth Science Seminar in northern California approximately 45 miles northeast of Marysville. Lectures on local flora and fauna, field trips for sightseeing and (some) collecting, and workshops in a variety of lapidary and jewelry arts. Cost is \$190 per person and includes instruction, workshops, field trips, rooms, and 3 meals a day for a total of seven days. Small additional fees for materials may apply.

Deadline to submit application and payment is August 1, 1999 so don't hesitate if you plan to attend. ☼

Send payment made out to CFMS with application form to: Florence Meisenheimer

101 N. Wake Forest Ave.
Ventura, CA 93003-2246
(805) 642-3155



What's

Calendar of Upcoming Events Dates and Locations of Shows

Jun 5 10AM-7:30PM Jun 6 10AM-4PM Glendora Gems, Goddard Middle School, 859 Sierra Madre,

Jun 5 – 6 10AM-5PM Rockatomics Gem & Min Club Boeing Rec Cntr, 8500 Fallbrook Ave, **West**

Jun 5 – 6 10AM-5PM San Diego Lapidary Society, Inc. Al Bahr Temple, 5440 Kearny Mesa Rd., **San**

? **Jun 18 – 19 10AM-6PM Jun 20 10AM-5PM 60th ANNUAL CFMS SHOW & CONVENTION** Mother Lode Min Soc, Stanislaus County Fairgrounds, 900 N Broadway, **Turlock, CA**

Jun 19 – 20 Veterans Mem'l Bldg, Ocean Ave. at Cayucos Pier, **Cayucos, CA**

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.**

June 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			

= 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.
- 5) Shop usage fees: effective immediately...
SHOP USAGE FEE IS \$3 PER SESSION.
- 6) 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.

We have learned how to enter the opal marketplace; have gained background on what equipment to employ with a variety of types of opal; and learned techniques for using various types of equipment. We begin now with step by step cutting of a stone from a piece of opal rough.

Step One – Clean up the edges

Grind away thin edges, any cracks, potch and anything else that clearly will not be part of your finished stone. Completing this step at the outset will make orienting much easier.

Step Two – Orientation

Determine which side will be the top. This may involve grinding away surface areas to better view the color bars.

RULE: Saw cuts and grinding should be in the same plane as the color bars.

Step Three – Flatten the bottom

Remember more material can be removed from bottom later.

Step Four – Finish shaping the stone

If using a template mark the bottom and always follow these marks while cutting the bottom to shape.

Step Five – Finish (round off) the bottom edges

Step Six – Dopping

Heat the opal first to get a good attachment with dop wax. Cliff advises using green dop wax. Apply heat gradually throughout whole stone until it is quite warm. Cliff mentioned occasionally leaving stones on the dop pot until they were so hot they made blisters on his fingers with no ill effects.

When applying the stone to the dop, make sure the color bar (top of stone) is absolutely level and centered with thickest part of stone over the dop stick.

Dopping tip: leave one side of the dop wax not fully adhered. Then when the stone is finished pop it off with a single edge razor slipped between the weak side of the wax and the stone (see arrow – Fig. 1). Use the razor to clean off any remaining wax. Cliff doesn't recommend using the technique of putting stones in the freezer as this takes much too long when cutting a lot of stones.

Step Seven – Cutting

Now the stone is fully preformed, the edge is essentially vertical, and the dop holds the opal centered. The first cut goes around the entire perimeter of the rough at an angle (Fig. 2).

Cliff cautions: your preliminary cutting work will determine the quality of the final result.

Be sure the first angle cut is completed so that it is uniform all the way around the stone.

If the dome is particularly high it may be necessary to complete another angle cut before final shaping.

Final shaping is a process of "rounding off" the preliminary angle cut/s. This is accomplished with a series of overlapping twirling motions. The result should be a smooth uniform surface (Fig. 3).

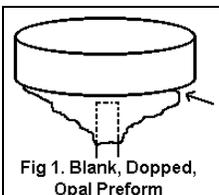


Fig 1. Blank, Dopped, Opal Preform

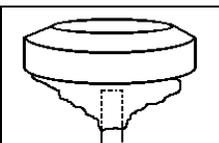


Fig 2. First Cut Completed

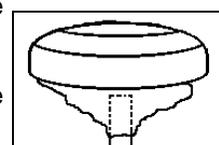


Fig 3. Cab domed, ready for sanding-polishing

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.



Step Eight – Polishing (and Prepolishing)

With the same twirling motion, use a progression of finer grits as with any other lapidary work. Cliff suggests using a prepolish of 8,000, maybe 14,000 grit diamond, to get a good polish. Of course be careful to wipe off all grits and contaminants often, especially between grits. For final polish Cliff states **cerium oxide** on leather is his choice for the polish on opal.

Speaking of "the" opal polish, Cliff told the group about

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

presenting a set of finished stones to a manufacturing jeweler only to be advised the polish was too fine. The buyer said the superior polish made the stones so slippery his bench workers would be dropping them all day long. The batch of excellent stones was rejected!

In any event, once the opal is polished to your satisfaction, pop it off the dop with the razor blade as previously mentioned. Then scrape and sand off any wax or marked cutting pattern lines with a worn 600 grit belt.

Re-smooth and round the bottom edge as needed.

Polishing Hints:

While Cliff states he prefers the short-napped side of a leather buff, he notes it is possible to polish with felt but be careful because felt can leave lines on the opal's surface.

Proper preparation of the buff is important. To begin, apply cerium paste with a brush and let it dry. Then turn on the machine and hold a hacksaw blade gently against the surface. This raises the nap. Give it one spray of water and it will be correctly wetted and ready to work.

Don't get the buff too wet, and don't have the cerium paste applied too thick.

A better polish will be achieved with a little more pressure on a slower wheel. This will heat up and fuse the surface of the opal.

Cliff offers an insiders tip: if a stone is giving you trouble reaching a polish, try using crocus as a pre-polish then go to the cerium.

[Crocus = dark red powdered variety of iron oxide, Fe₂O₃, used as an abrasive for polishing. From American Heritage Dictionary 1994 edition]

Problems:

Sometimes, a person will end up with a very flat top while trying to preserve the quantity of valuable opal. However, there are at least two problems with this approach. First, it is very hard to get a good polish on a flat surface. Second, **one of the most important principles of opal cutting is "LIGHT IN – COLOR OUT"**. A cabochon dome has more area than a flat top for a given diameter of stone. More surface area means more light enters; therefore better color will be emitted to the eye of the beholder.

On Cutting Efficiently:

Cliff says, "Some people can sit and play with one stone forever. I can't do that. I like to cut it, polish it, and get it over with. And **THEN sit back and admire it.**"

Cliff kindly offered to receive phone calls from AOS members with opal cutting questions, or who might be seeking advice, or who have an interest in receiving a critique of their work on a particular stone Days (714) 991-4190 / Eves (714) 539-8394 Thanks for this Cliff!

The Opal Society is pleased to welcome Cliff Coan as a returning member. As a gesture of our appreciation for Cliff's two talks and recognition of his obvious love for the Queen of Gems, Cliff has been given a one year honorary membership in the AOS.

Thank you Cliff...your talks provided us a treasure trove of Real World, no nonsense, opal cutting information. ✨

The McCondra Report

By Barbara McCondra

"OPAL MINING HAS MANY FACES"

My 10 years in Lightning Ridge, N.S.W.,
Australia showed me that
opal mining means moving dirt.

That was accomplished by whatever means I had available, the mettle of partner I had, and the type of dirt we wanted to move.

BT refers to before truck. Without a large tip truck (dump truck in Yank lingo) I had to rely on a borrowed 5-ft. by 5-ft. trailer that I hitched to my \$300 car. I recall that I had a shaft drilled in opal bearing country thanks to my father who wanted to be my partner once he found out what his daughter was up to. He paid for the Caldwell bucket auger to drill the shaft. From then on it was up to me as his travel visa was up. I borrowed a hoist of sorts (it was a real rickety contraption) on the promise of ten percent of the opal if and when I found it. My lights underground were candles held high in the wall by "spiders" metal curlicues that were stuck into the clay sedimentary layer that was considered to be the opal bearing level.

To break the clay level out of the wall I had a pick. An automatic hoist pulls your buckets of dirt to the top via an old differential from a car, motor, cable, and the sides of the ladder as the track for the wheels on the bucket. The dirt I let drop into a borrowed truck that was suddenly needed elsewhere, so all my hard won opal level was dumped into a heap on the ground and from there I had to shovel it into the trailer and make a number of trips to the puddling site and reshovel it into the washing machine like puddling machine that slurried away the clay and left nobbies. Of opal. Correction, I'd hoped there were nobbies but alas, there were none.

After I obtained the use of a \$600 tip truck, I shifted some old top dirt that was piled around where my partner had many years previously gotten good opal. All the dirt that had slipped from the bucket as it tipped into his truck had heaped up into piles around where the differential of the hoist was. Nice plan but there were so many shafts and we had no tractor with bucket. Instead we used old empty grease buckets and shovels. I shoveled into the buckets then hefted them up into the truck. This was a seven-yard tip truck and it was a tall sucker. The payoff was a handful of sandy nobbies, potch only and two black nobbies with sunflash. That discouraged me enough to try the old "Surprise, you've dropped down to prospect in a collapsing mine" trick again.

This means using hanging ladders and a gouging pick to shave and chip away at the face of old drives to gouge out lost and missed beauties that the old-timers didn't get. I should have known what to expect by the look of the mine-shaft. The 36-inch in diameter hole had been logged and tinned over then buried partially under a heap of rocks. My partner had cleared a 12-inch slit to fit us and the ladders through. I felt like a bulky envelope being forced through a mail slot. Rocks rained down from above as I clambered

The McCondra Report (cont)

(Continued from page 7)

down the hanging ladders that had a rung or two missing. (Good thing for my tall size legs) To cut a long story short, not only was the roof falling but so was the floor, collapsing into a lower mining level. My heart pounding with fear, we crawled on our bellies under hanging sandstone fault roofs, leaped over yawning holes in the floor and with opal fever high and out of control, we gouged and prayed, and gouged. All for about \$200 worth of potch and color. Not worth it, never again...unless I see a little red on black.

The easy times were with loaders and trucks and big agitators with conveyor belts and I thought I'd joined the big boys. That was working old heaps where I'd found gem trace when noodling around looking for just such indications. There was a \$14,000 payoff there but after the owner of the loader got his fifty percent, the cutter his two percent, and the fuel expenses were deducted, and my partner took his twenty five percent, I was left with enough to pay for my ticket to Australia and back with nothing left in my pocket. Oh yes I forgot, we were almost fined for not having registered the claim so we had to do that, another \$200 which now made us responsible for back-filling to make safe the other 14 shafts that other miners before us had left. Did I mention the blustering angry little man who took us to the mining warden and wanted a portion as he said that was his old dirt from years before (the piles were on no man's land and had been for 15 years) That cost us too, a couple hundred, but the warden said he legally had no claim. So actually I didn't cover my ticket expenses over.

One day I had all the gear and a third partner with a blower. That was state of the art at that time as a blower is like a huge vacuum that sucks the dirt out of the mine and up the shaft into the truck. No shoveling and wheel-barrowing forty feet to meet the bucket every 60 seconds. No shoveling I say still in amazement at the ease of mining even if there still was jackhammer work (I never did get to use an underground digger). Tears rolled down my eyes as I stared in disbelief at the ease in handling a blower. I just had to use a pelican pick (one half the size of a shovel) to direct the flow of dirt to the mouth of the blower pipe. This ease was short-lived as that day we broke into the biggest ballroom I'd ever seen. Others had been here before and with a vengeance and they didn't believe in props so once again my world and Chicken Little's were one.

Windlassing is the way the old-timers moved dirt to the surface. They had gouged the dirt, shoveled it behind them in several stages, filled several buckets, climbed the ladders or primitive gouged steps in the walls of the hand dug shaft up to the surface where they swung a rope with a grappling hook on it to hook on the buckets one at a time and windlass up. They used mirrors and the sun to see down into the shaft and eyeball the buckets' big looped handles. My windlass (winching) experience ended in a fight and a near partnership dissolution. We were cleaning out a filled in shaft. It had years to settle and many rains had cemented the dirt in tightly. The man down the hole used a pick to break up the dirt and used the bucket to scoop it up. It was my job topside to crank the windlass once he'd hooked the bucket onto the hook. Now

the SAFE way to do this is to have the man in the hole retreat behind the ladder so as to protect him from being killed if the bucket let go and crashed 30 feet to his head. My deathwish obsessed partner refused to get behind the ladder. My windlass was an ancient job with no safety ratchet to hold the barrel in position while I wrestled with the full bucket. I say wrestle, as you need to remember that I was leaning over a 30 foot shaft with my feet on a crumbly dirt edge trying to swing the weighty, cumbersome bucket toward me. All the while I was controlling the handle of the winch to put tension on the cable and then swing the cable to me and release some tension so I could uncouple the line from the bucket. One empty bucket crashed below bopping his shoulder a good one. I refused to pull more dirt if he wouldn't get behind the rungs of the ladder for protection. Remember it is only a 3-foot wide tube at the bottom. He refused and I refused. I did not want to live with the guilt if I killed him. It was the first time I had walked away from a mining operation. His replacement bloke had too hard a time with the heavy buckets (after all this was the modern days and there weren't many who would work this way). He walked too. Project shaft was abandoned.

While all these various mining ventures were in operation, I had claims pegged in my name that were being worked by others who were to pay me 20 percent of the opal after expenses. This was the least profitable of all my mining endeavors. This is not to cast aspersions on their honesty only on their luck.

A new rush was on, we had a high possibility claim pegged and all the gear was running. This included a great compressor, a working truck and an excellent hoist (I'd bought a new one), good motors, and a wonderful washing plant complete with lots of water from a bore (well). Water supplies were usually dependent upon rainwater stored in a dirt dam (big pond) and this was a high drought area. Everything worked, that is except my Aussie partner who was on one of his infamous binges. I went hermit, alone on the claim and with the drama of a nearly mystical lightning and thunderstorm in torrential rain (a whole other story) my partner sobered up and we mined for the first time in a long time in safe, virgin, opal bearing, country. I, to this day, remain eternally grateful for that hard core, steady, dirt moving, treasure unearthing, long-term mining venture.

Now that I am open cut mining in Queensland, I find another way to work. Old dirt and new dirt are ripped up with giant excavators. Well, not giant, but they look pretty big compared to a jackhammer and a rickshaw. Once the old back stow from the 1800s has been piled into stockpiles, a loader dumps the dirt into a dry rumbler or trummel to sieve in quantity the dirt and separate out the ironstone hopefully, opal bearing boulder nuts. Some days I sift with hand sieve, some days with a tiny trummel and shovel. No matter how it gets sieved, it has to then be washed, processed by sorting, and sawed or cracked with a hatchet to find the illusive matrix opal of Queensland. As I initially stated, opal mining is dirt moving and I mean moving lots of it. That's why you can enter any pub in the opal bearing country and hear someone say "Opal. There's an awful lot of dirt mixed with it!"

Mineral Prices: Why So High?

By John Betts

I am a part time mineral dealer. I get many questions about the prices of collectible mineral specimens. Novices are the most confused because they have yet to understand the factors that affect mineral values. The following is a chronology of prices and events of a typical mineral specimen.

The Beginning

All minerals start in the ground. A specimen is not worthless (because collectors may still lust after the undiscovered specimen) but it does not yet have a price tag. It will lay there undisturbed, as it has for millions of years, until one of two things happen. Either it will erode from the solid rock, work its way into a sedimentary deposit and start another cycle of rock formation, OR, man will intervene and do something with it. It could go to a smelter to be refined into a commercial / industrial resource. Or it could become a collectible mineral specimen. I am going to focus solely on this latter path.

Price Evolution

A collector digs it up and stores it wrapped in newspaper in his basement. It typically will remain in this state for two or three years, until his wife threatens to toss out all of the "junk" in the basement. Price = **\$ 0.00**

The collector washes it off for the first time and decides it is still worth keeping even though most of the other material he collected should have been left in the ground. He trades it at a swap along with ten other pieces to a collector that can see through the iron staining and dried pocket clay. He gets an amethyst from Brazil in exchange. Price = **\$.50**

The experienced, new owner dissolves the pocket clay and iron staining in acid to reveal the real beauty of the crystals. It is now clean and lustrous. Price = **\$ 5.00**

The specimen is donated to the local mineral club for their fund raising auction. **It sells for \$12.**

The new owner trades it away at a local swap to a savvy collector who knows the location has just been closed and no more specimens will ever be found. New owner values it at **\$25.**

Years later, *Mineralogical Record* runs an article on the lost location. The author identifies a rare left-handed twin crystal form as unique to the location. The owner doubles the price to **\$50.** The owner dies leaving most of his collection unlabelled. His heirs have no idea of what to do with the collection. A local mineral dealer calls the widow and offers **\$1,800** for the whole collection and will not charge her extra for moving it. The price paid for each specimen approximately **\$.50.**

Now the mineral, unlabelled, is misidentified by the dealer as originating in Austria and a **\$50** price is assigned along with the "classic" location notation.

The specimen does not sell for two years. The small-time dealer discovers there is no money in selling mineral specimens. Decides to sell wire wrapped amethyst pyramids instead. Sells his whole stock for 20% the labeled prices. The

specimen goes for **\$10.** The new owner is more knowledgeable and recognizes the true origin of the specimen. He re-researches the location and makes a Xerox copy of the article in *Mineralogical Record* as a sales prop and prices it at **\$100.**

An "instant" collector, who has just started collecting minerals again, now that he makes enough money at age 35 after giving up collecting in high school, buys the specimen for **\$90.** He is happy. He got 10% off!

Meanwhile, there is so much demand for minerals from the old location that prices climb. Brian Wayne Lees-Thompson reopens the mine attracting attention to the location again. Because of savvy marketing and the perceived shortage of specimens prices are set at numbers that look like long distance telephone numbers (though the small specimens are only priced at numbers that resemble zip codes).

After two years the market is saturated. (After all, how many people are there in the world that will pay over \$10K for a mineral specimen, 500?) Mr. Lees-Thompson can't give them away. Prices drop to 10% of post-reopening prices. The minerals from the mine become a commodity worth about as much as Uruguayan Amethyst. Meanwhile our specimen is sold to a new owner for **\$150.**

He shows the specimen to an experienced collector who owns a microscope. They spot rare inclusions of **baloneyium.** They write an abstract that is accepted for presentation at the Rochester Mineralogical Symposium. They give a 15 minute presentation. It is offered for sale for **\$500.**

It sells immediately to a locality collector who specializes in only that location. It is placed in a position of honor in his collection. The abstract is published in *Rocks and Minerals* magazine. The collector is offered **\$1,000** for it and he refuses.

As the owner's age goes up, so does the mineral's value in the owner's mind. But he also knows that he can't take it with him when he passes on. He offers it to a local museum for **\$5,000.** The museum has an annual acquisition budget of **\$1,000.** They try to find a donor to purchase the specimen for donation to the museum. In the meantime the owner dies. The heirs know nothing about the collection - they just want to move into the house. So everything is hauled away by the trash hauler. The mineral specimen ends up in the local landfill and starts the rock-forming cycle anew.

So what is a mineral really worth?

This silly chronology illustrates that the price is determined in varying parts by aesthetics, rarity, location, associations, uniqueness, marketing, and scholarly study. As in art, the value increases with knowledge of the subject. There is no absolute value. As a result there are no hard and fast rules. (Adler, 1981) If there were not mishaps along the way the greater fool theory would prevail. Each owner would buy it and sell it to a greater fool that will pay more. Eventually it works its way up the price ladder until it reaches a practical limit. As a collector, all that matters is whether there is a bigger fool out there to pay more than we did. And there is. ♣
References Adler, Mortimer J., 1981, Six Great Ideas, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York

(From Bob's Rock Shop at www.rockhounds.com)

via Rockhound Notes 5/99)