

The Opal Express

American Opal Society
 P.O. Box 4875
 Garden Grove, CA 92842-4875



Member

Member



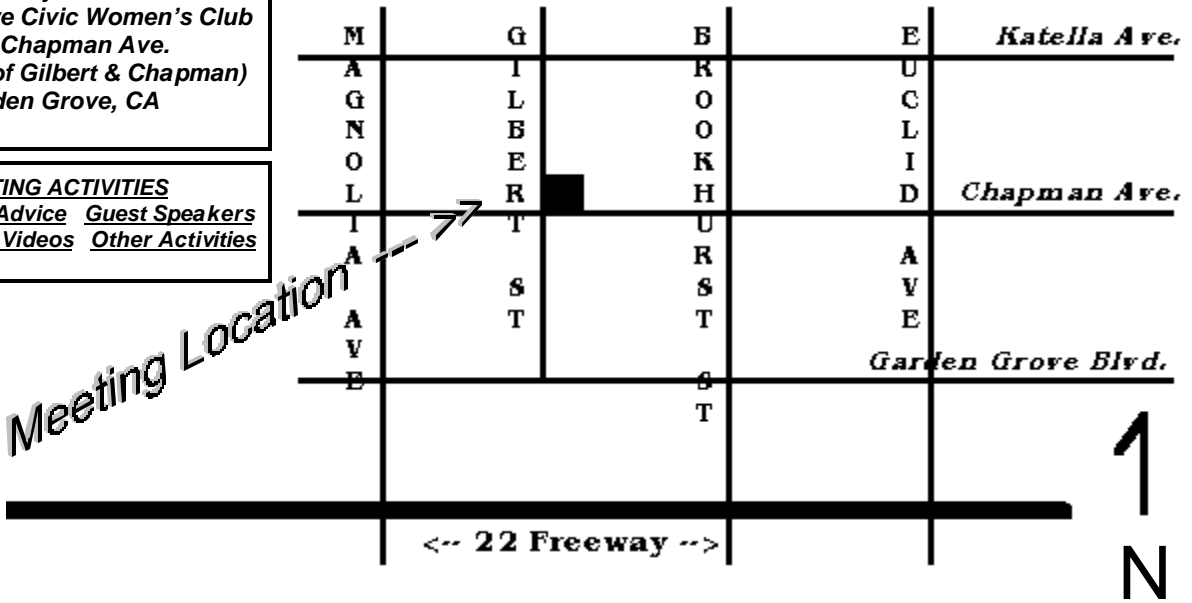
Volume #32 Issue #06 month 2000

**General meeting Thursday
 June 8th 7PM**

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) 951-1402	email bova@bovagems.com
Mike Kowalsky	Vice Pres.	(714) 761-4876	email mykowalsky@aol.com
Allen 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
American Opal Society website		http://www.opalsociety.org	

AUSTRALIAN OPAL AT ITS BEST by Barb Whyre

(We'd like to say a big thanks to Barbara Moritz for submitting these entertaining and educational articles! Now let us enjoy this twelfth and final part in this very interesting series which has presented background on several of the exceptional opals

After 1930, fewer new name stones were recorded. The following list is in alphabetical order. With luck, the odd one will bring to mind an indelible picture of a brilliant opal and the exhilaration of the attached adventure.

Of course these few stones represent the tiniest portion of the magnificent opal to come out of the Lightning Ridge and Grawin Opalfields. How many worthy pieces are never even mentioned, especially in these uncertain times?

The past 11 issues of The Opal Express have presented accounts of discovery as researched by Barbara Moritz, Secretary of the Ridge Historical Society, in her quest to unravel the early history of the black opalfields in New South Wales, Australia. Should you have any constructive information on any of

Aurora Australia		Otto's Stone	15 carats
Bird of Paradise	21 carats	Queen of Alexandra	75 carats
Fireball	22 carats	Rajah Silent Jim's 600	
Galloping 60		Sydney Queen	43 carats
Gem Orchid		Big Ben	21 lb.!
Green Goddess		* Devonshire Opal	100 carats
Opera House		** Forest Fire	66.6 carats
Gem of the West		Phoenix	
Grawin Rainbow	505 carats	Rainbow Stone	28 carats
Haley's Comet	2020 carats	Rising Sun	14 carats
Orient Queen	170 carats	Star of Australia	

these Namestone Opals, please send email: to barbeemitz@yahoo.com or write to Box 1, L/R 2834 Australia.

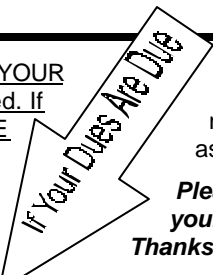
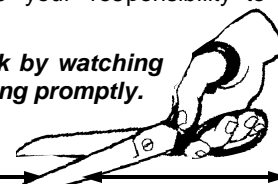
* also known as Queen of Australia

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\news\forms\dues_due.pub



American Opal Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 4875
Garden Grove CA 92842-4875

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)

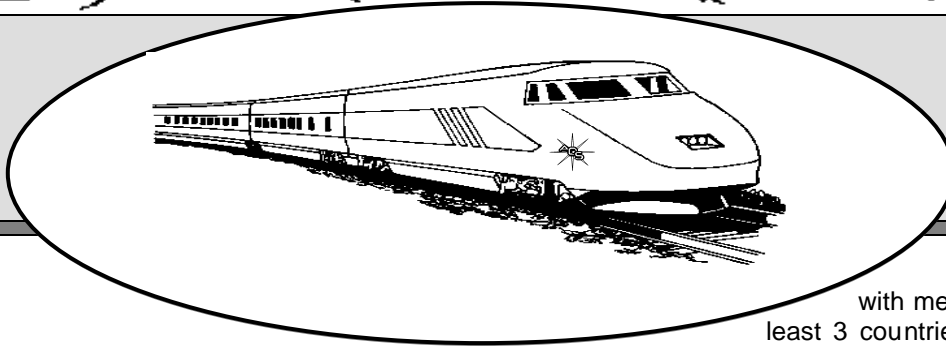
PLEASE PRINT NAME AS YOU WISH IT TO APPEAR ON YOUR BADGE using up to two (2) lines of text for your name, nickname or name of your opal related business.

The Opal Express

NOV 2000

Published monthly by the American Opal Society

Volume 32, Issue 6



President's Message from Carol Bova

June already! This year is flying by! **Only 5 months to Opal Show Time!**

I was in touch with a number of opal people in the past few weeks. Among them, **Len Toelk** from Brooklyn called to talk about coming out for the Opal Show in November, and the new book and video on cutting black opal. (Len's an expert on books, particularly those on opal.) AOS is already working on acquiring the book and video for the library, and the segment of the video we saw at a recent program was outstanding!

I saw **AJ** and **Claudia** from the Spencer Idaho opal mine at the show in Lancaster. It's always fun to run into AOS members at these shows. We had talked about the mine opening to the public again for fee digging, and then I read **Gail Clark's** trip report on the internet just last week about the mine (reprinted by Gail's permission below). I think it's important to share our experiences in visiting collecting areas, so if you have made an opal collecting trip recently, or have info on re-opened mines, write it up and send it in to share through the *Opal Express*.

Also online, I saw some notes from **David Lippman** on the McKay's Opal List. It's really great to see how active AOS members are in the world at large! I know there were several other AOS members posting to online lists recently, but my memory fails me at the moment. The important thing is that we as individuals are reaching out to the world-wide community and sharing information on opal.

Opal Bob Halahan has been corresponding

with me and a number of other people, in at least 3 countries, online and off, sharing info and insights into some exciting research on opal growth and formation. It will be very interesting to see how this research develops!

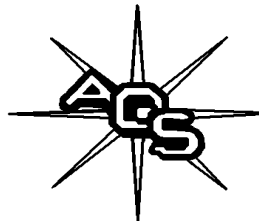
So, it looks like the phrase of the month is sharing and communicating!

We'll look forward to hearing from more of you this month,

Carol

PS Opal Show Motel Rooms: Don't forget to reserve your room at the Quality Hotel early. They only hold a small number of rooms for us at the special discounted rate, and they have released unreserved rooms early to other

(Continued on page 5)



DATES TO REMEMBER

Gen Mtg 7PM
Thurs June 8th

Board Mtg 7PM
Mon June 5

AOS
Opal & Gem Show
Nov 4th & 5th

Work Shop Information...

The LOCATION for the Opal Society workshop 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. ☼

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Dues Renewal	1	Safety Report	3	McCondra Report	3	Book Review	8
Australian Opal At Its Best	1	Itemization	3	Workshop Information	5	General Meeting News	8
President's Message	2	Showdates	3	Lightning Ridge "In a Nobby"	6	Notes from Lightning Ridge	9

The McCondra Report

(While not authored by Barbara McCondra herself, this item appeared in Lapidary Digest #276 [continued in #277] and because Barbara was instrumental both by guiding the Australian opalfield tour and by making available her laptop for transmitting the article from the Australian outback, it seems fitting to deem this item from Margaret Malm a "McCondra Report". Lap Digest editor, Hale Sweeney, offers a few thoughts by way of introduction)

...One of our Associate Editors, Margaret Malm, is away touring the opal fields of Australia with Barbara McCondra's tour group. Thanks to Barbara's generosity, Margaret has been allowed to use Barbara's laptop to write trip reports about opal fields she has visited and her wonderful adventures.

The first of her reports appear below. (LapDigest now has a foreign correspondent!! Move over, Edward R. Murorow!!!) She describes her stay at Lightning Ridge in this issue, and then they are off to Yowah....hale

Field Trip to Australian Opal Country

(Or: An American in Paradise, Part 1)

Man coming down stairs at hotel: "G'day!"

Me: "G'day!". With perfect Australian accent, of course!

Yes! Yes! Yes! I'm in Australia with Barbara McCondra's Outback Gems Australia opal tour.

The "characters" in this epic are:

..Leigh Miller, from Nevada; an opal cutter-polisher, and fellow Lapidary Digest subscriber.

..Jane Thornton, from Tucson; a retired nurse specializing in babies.

..June Humphrey, also from Tucson and Jane's friend; a retired Mechanical Engineer.

..Dick and Marilyn Rodenburg, from Denver. Marilyn is a facetor.

..Margaret Malm (me); retired Kodak chemist and now a sometimes seasonal Park Ranger at Zion NP Opalhollic, and one of the Associate Editors of Lapidary Digest.

..Barbara McCondra; our Fearless Leader; tall and sturdy,



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. ❄

arranger extraordinary, and a really exceptional lady. Barbara is known more commonly (actually famed) in this area as "Eskimo Nell", as she spent some time in Alaska working on the Alaska Pipeline. Formerly a teacher, until she got Opal Fever.

..Ron Vil, Barbara's son; our chauffeur, shepherd, and general arranger.

..Michael with the unspellable name (a Swede turned Aussie), who is Ron's assistant and driver of the "Ute", a sort of special Aussie pickup truck that hauled our baggage. In the area where we were heading it's always good to have two vehicles, in case of trouble.

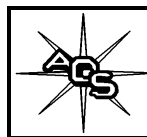
We found out before we even left Los Angeles that our trip was going to be something special -- they had had so much rain in the (Bush) in Australia that the road into Yowah, which was to have been our first stop, was flooded, and that we would be going to Lightning Ridge, home of the fabulous black opals, first. Okay, we can do that!

Lightning Ridge is a bustling town in New South Wales, just south of the border with Queensland. I was surprised at two things: First, it was a larger town than I had expected. Second, the country around there is not nearly as stark and treeless as Coober Pedy, which I had visited a few years ago and which I had mentally pictured "The Ridge" as resembling.

It has modern conveniences such as a grocery store, bank, many many opal dealers, and -- a gambling casino!

The casino is actually the Lightning Ridge Bowling Club. Bowling in the English sense of "lawn bowling", not our type. It has a cafeteria-type restaurant where we ate dinner one night, as well as a room full of slot machines - "Pokies" to them, and a place to play Keno. It is owned by the Mayor, who also just happens to be the owner of the "station" where the first opal discovery was made. He essentially donated that land to the cause, as he charges no rent to the miners. But he has a good income from the

(Continued on page 7)



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.

The Opal Express is published monthly by
The American Opal Society.
Copyright 2000. All rights reserved.
NON-COMMERCIAL REPRINT PERMISSION GRANTED
UNLESS OTHERWISE RESERVED
Editor---Russ Madsen
Please address all inquiries to:
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)

Safety Report by Cathy Gaber

Breathe Easy

(While working with opal, I prefer to use water as a lubricant, but for those of you who use other lubricants, please take note of the following article. -Cathy)

We all have an idea of what pneumonia is. Medically, it is described as an inflammation of the lung. However, you may not know some of the things that can cause it. Pneumonia can be caused by a virus or bacteria, as you probably know. It can actually be caused by over thirty different things, pretty much anything that gets into the lung that is not supposed to be there.

Chemical pneumonia is caused by the inhalation of a liquid or gas. Some common chemicals notorious for causing this malady include mineral oils and kerosene. Others include formaldehyde, swimming pool chemicals, bug sprays, gasoline, many organic solvents or any irritant gas, fume or vapor. People have also gotten chemical pneumonia from aspirating vomit when throwing up. If the pneumonia is caused by aspirating a hydrocarbon, such as kerosene or a solvent, it may also be called hydrocarbon pneumonia. Inhalation of some of these chemicals can also lead to a build-up of fibrous tissue in the lungs, which can reduce your lung capacity. In many cases, aspiration into the lungs occurs when someone who has swallowed one of these chemicals throws up. For this reason, vomiting is never induced in someone who has ingested an organic chemical unless advised to do so by a doctor.

The pneumonia does not commence for hours or even days after aspiration. Symptoms may include any or all of the following: coughing, choking, gagging, breathing difficulties, rapid heartbeat, vomiting, diarrhea, convulsions, fatigue, dizziness and difficulty walking. Depending upon the severity, hospitalization may be required. Of course, the worst case scenario results in death.

Of concern to us lapidaries is the possibility of inhaling cutting oils from saws. The rotating blade can put a fine mist in the air which, if inhaled, can lead to the disease. Water based cutting fluids are less likely to cause a problem than a hydrocarbon base. A good blade guard will do much to reduce this mist. Common sense will also aid in reducing the danger. A dust, mist and fume respirator may also be a good idea. They are inexpensive, often available from Wal-Mart or other discount or hardware stores, and not uncomfortable to use.

By the way, a comment was made in a previous posting that a new fluid being used smelled better and was probably therefore safer. Please don't let a pretty smell lull you into assuming that odor relates to danger. Some pretty safe stuff can smell awful, while a nice smell can be deadly. Many of the organic solvents, such as toluene, actually smell rather pleasant. As another example, carbon monoxide is completely odorless. There are several chemicals that smell absolutely dreadful, but my mind has gone blank and I can't think of a single one!! The new fluid, "Aqua-Oil" is cut with water, and probably is safer for now. Play safe.

Sam Todara, Lapidary Digest ☼

(permission granted for reprinting with credit)

What's happening???

Calendar of Upcoming Events Dates and Locations of Shows

June 3 10AM-6PM June 4 10AM-4PM Glendora Gems, Goddard Middle School, 859 E. Sierra Madre, Glendora, CA

June 3 - 4 10AM-5PM Rockatomics Gem and Mineral Soc, Boeing Recreation Center, 8500 Fallbrook Ave., West Hills, CA

July 8 10AM-6PM July 9 10AM-5PM Culver City Rock & Mineral Club, Culver City Veterans Memorial Complex, 4117 Overland Ave., Culver City, CA

Aug 4 - 6 CFMS Gold & Gem Show, hosted by Valley Prospectors, Riverside Convention Center, Riverside, CA

☼ **Nov 4 10AM-7PM Nov 5 10AM-4PM** ☼

AOS Opal & Gem Show

Quality Hotel 616 Convention Way,
Anaheim, CA

ITEMIZATION

ITEM: DOOR PRIZE for May was won by **Cliff Coan**. Cliff took home a nice set of a variety of Exacto knives. There were two **RAFFLE PRIZES**. First was a set of diamond Dremel bits and eye goggles won by **Pete Goetz**, then **Bob Olinskas** continued his streak by taking home the set of three nice Chrysoprase cabs.

Way to go folks. Congratulations to all the winners! ☼

ITEM: NEW PO BOX REMINDER our new PO Box is open for mailings — American Opal Society, Inc., P.O. Box 4875, Garden Grove, CA 92842-4875. Once again, we are keeping the former box for a few months. ☼

ITEM: Anglic Gemcutter, a monthly magazine "Of, For & About Gemcutters Interests; may our Global Tribe prosper". (503) 632-4826 Ph/FAX/Mess. information; DISCOVER/Visa/MC accepted by telephone/FAX/letter. Editor Rick

President's Message (cont)

(Continued from page 2)

groups coming in for conventions at the same time as the show. If the reservations desk doesn't know about the special rate, ask for the Catering Dept. manager, who should!

Trip Report on the Spencer Opal Mine

I had the opportunity of spending last Saturday (May 20th) at the Spencer, Idaho opal mine. Though this is not my first time there, I was again so impressed, I thought I might briefly share some thoughts about it.

First of all, you'll find no better people to work with than Gary Dodson, his wife Marnie (the artisan for their shop) and AJ who can usually be found up at the mine. They are all utterly friendly, helpful, and genuinely want you to succeed in finding opal. (Interesting historical material pertaining to the mine can be found in volumes two and three of John Sinkankas Gemstones of North America, as well as in Alan Eckert's fascinating book, The World of Opals.)

The mine is about six miles from the shop (located in the tiny town of Spencer); four of those miles are on gravel and the last couple on a rutted mountain road which is easy in a pickup, and can be traversed in the family car with reasonable care. The mine is very near the summit of a dozed mountain-side with overburden removed and the opal-producing rock pushed out in neat, bulldozed rows that are easy to walk along while you look for opal. The wall from which the rock is dozed is off limits due to insurance requirements. The mountainside looks down on the Arco desert and the scenery is impressive. I always see antelope in that area and when your neck and back are tired from picking up opal, you can straighten up and watch red-tailed hawks soar over the mine. Spring arrives late on the mountain and wildflowers add to the scenery.

Bring a spray bottle and water, lunch, hat and/or sun screen, rock hammer and a bucket or other containers for holding your treasures. The weather at higher elevation can change rapidly so bring extra clothing. Occasionally you'll see fellow diggers with sledges and pry bars for the huge boulders that are strewn about, but these are not in any way required for success.

The entry fee of \$25.00 entitles you to five pounds of rough, which you clean before weighing. Any extra pounds are four dollars each. The mine is not open the entire summer. Instead, there are specific open dates on which the public can dig. There is now a web site for the mine at: <http://www.spenceropalmines.com> and you can get the dates there.

Finally, I am in no way connected with the mine or its owners, nor do I have any reason to write this except that if you like opal and have the chance to visit, I think you'll have a great time!

Gail Clark

Pocatello, Idaho ☼

====

Workshop schedule

Be sure to check here for workshop schedule updates. The dates listed below are those available to the AOS in our 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 2000

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

Please see calendar above 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.

LIGHTNING RIDGE.... "In a Nobby!"

by Barbara Moritz

On the Lightning Ridge Fields, opal occurs in nodules as well as in seams. This formation in opal is unique in the world and can produce precious black opal.

Almost as elusive as the top quality black opal is the history of Lightning Ridge, and precious are the few remnants – the structures built before 1940 – of the early days on the opal fields. Akin to the proverbial "nutshell", the following present a concise history – "in a nobby"!

Ironstone ridges, probably the islands of the inland sea as it receded, rise out of the black soil plains around Lightning Ridge in northern New South Wales. They say the best opal occurs on these ridges, but one thing's sure, they attract lightning, as the name of the place suggests.

Opal at Lightning Ridge was found at the turn of the Century by Jack Murray, a boundary rider on Dunumbral Run, Bundinbarrina Station. His grandson remembers the story of those first "floaters" of opal being found whilst out setting rabbit traps for dog meat.

At this time, the world market was based on light opal. White Cliffs, the premier opalfield in NSW, was the main source. And it is thanks to former Cliff's' miner, Charlie Nettleton, also a gold prospector, that the black opal was brought to the attention of the world as early as it was.

In 1902, Nettleton was passing through Lightning Ridge district, enroute to Goodooga looking for gold, when he was shown opal nobbies and agreed to sink a shaft for a local syndicate. Although it proved to be a "duffer", he subsequently mined with Jack Murray. The first parcel of black opal was returned from Sydney with a measly offer.

In late 1903, Murray and Nettleton walked the 450km to White Cliffs to sell this parcel. E. F. Murphy, buyer for T. C. Wollaston in Adelaide, took the plunge in buying this unusual nodular black opal. Within 5 years, he moved to the Ridge as resident buyer, following many White Cliffs' miners who made the move as production fell on the western opal fields.

The first opal rush was in 1905 at the beginning of the long ridge, near Wallangulla Tank, hence the official name Wallangulla Opalfields. In 1907, A. W. Mullen, Surveyor, had recorded the probable meaning of Wallangulla as "hidden firestick" in the local Aboriginal dialects – a lightning bolt? (Aboriginal, an unwritten language, allows for slight variations in spelling.)

Indeed there had been a tremendous lightning strike at a break in the ridge in the 1870s. It is recorded that the shepherd, his dog, even the sheep were struck dead. Known locally as Lightning Ridge, the name was finally altered in 1963. It was about this time that permanent water became available.

The opal buyer Murphy lived in the original Wallangulla settlement of bark huts, formed 1906, at the base of the same

ridge. The two communities supplied at least 2,000 people until WW I. Women were few on the Fields. Lack of water was always a problem.

The town, Lightning Ridge, as we know it today, was surveyed 1907, sited on ground least likely to be opal bearing. The Imperial Hotel was built in 1909, and the two settlement schools consolidated in 1912. The original Wallangulla was thereafter known as "Old Town".

Into the 1920's, "New Town" continued to develop with opal mining three sides on the ridges. During the Depression, a government scheme paid a shilling a foot to sink shafts. The 1940s and 50s were fairly quiet, and then the artesian bore was sunk. Lightning Ridge never looked back!

Because opal nobbies are deposited in pockets in a clay level under sandstone, they could easily be missed by handminers not going that inch far enough. Also on the mullock heaps, opal nobbies began appearing through years of erosion.

It was realized that the old timers were missing 40% of the opal, even with the women and children often noodling the dumps whilst the men worked underground. When a syndicate of grazers sank an artesian bore in the sixties, opal mining was revolutionized.

Having permanent water allowed the miners to wash old dumps, and to remove and wash the clay level, an expensive process. By the way, just 50 miles southwest of the Ridge at the Grawin Opalfields, there are no nobbies, only seam opal. There, dry mining is much cheaper and can still produce quality black opal, the most precious of gemstones.

Lightning Ridge achieved town status in 1980, and today, the community shows signs of prosperity that other outback towns lack. 1750 mining claims on preserved opalfields around the town are now residential – the suburbs!

Serious opal mining is concentrated 20 miles west in vi rgin country. Some miners commute, others live on their claims, true to early mining. Prospecting continues, opening new fields to the west. Opal is patchy, and although mechanized, the modern mining companies remain small-time, and miners are fiercely independent. To date, no big companies have managed to intrude.

On the Lightning Ridge Opalfields, every man has an equal chance to strike it rich, whether he has an education/can speak English or not. More than 50 nationalities live harmoniously in the community of approximately 6,000 people. We do see signs of city regulations and a normality that undermines the atmosphere of earlier days.

As it becomes a tourist destination, the few remnants of yesteryear are precious, and visitors, drawn by the lure of a name Lightning Ridge, as much as the fascination for opal, expect to "step back in time". The realization of the value of local history and preserving it, will carry us into The New Millennium with the unique combination of black opal in the captivating setting conjured up by the name – Lightning Ridge – a must in your travels! ❁

Field Trip to Australian Opal Country

(Or: An American in Paradise, Part 1)

(Continued from page 3)

club; they recently completed a new addition with a sort of "rec room" for the miners; the million plus dollar mortgage was paid off quite quickly -- out of the income from the pokies! Miners are great gamblers; to be expected, I guess, as mining opals is also a great gamble.

The town itself is sited on the first original claims, now reclaimed and no longer mined. They use a lot of tin in their construction (including siding and fences) as the white ants (termites) are quite voracious and quickly eat up any wood except pine, which is thus quite rare and expensive.

Most of this wide area is rather heavily wooded; Box trees, and other species of Eucalyptus -- there are something like 220 different species of Eucalyptus trees in Australia, and they seem to be in the great majority. As you approach, the mines, although not far from the highway in most places, are pretty well hidden in the trees. The Ridge is growing, and they are expecting, through the promotion of tourism, that their yearly visitation will rise from 80,000 to one half million!

We got to go down into one mine there, -- and NOT the "tourist" walk-in mine, either! -- Barbara had arranged with Jimmy Burgh and Mats Ericsson to go out to Jimmy's mine at "Wyoming", one of the major areas along the Ridge. It is in many ways a typical mine, in that it is fairly shallow. While there is opal to be found at several depths, they tend nowadays to mine only the upper level(s), as it is just too costly to do the deeper ones. And since they figure that only about 15 percent of the opal along the Ridge has been mined as yet, they can easily afford to do the easier stuff first. We all clambered down a hanging ladder 17 feet to the bottom of the shaft, and watched as Jimmy worked his neat (home-made) excavator, which chewed up the "opal dirt" in short order, even though it is a bit harder than most right here. The material his excavator gouged out was sucked by a vacuum into a good-sized pipe (I would guess about 9 inches diameter) and up to the surface, where it was deposited in a truck.

After they had chewed up a fair amount, their truck was full. "Oh," said Jimmy. "I had figured we would probably find a 'nobbie' for you to see. Oh, well. We have some 'potch' over here that you can 'mine' by hand." So Mats got out a small pick and pointed at a small bit of gray showing on the wall. I carefully excavated it and found -- a small bit of gray "potch". Then June tried her luck with another bit. "You can dig it out and keep it for a souvenir", said Mats. Suddenly, as she gingerly excavated around it, she saw a bit of color! Hey! As she carefully exposed it, it fell out into her hand. As Mats saw it come out, he said, "Oh, my, I think that one is too good to let you keep!" Further examination showed a beautiful "Red on black" nobbie

that they thought might be worth as much as \$10,000! (They took it down and had it cut; turned out to be "only" \$2000, and June bought it from them). It is an absolutely gorgeous black opal, showing a full range of colors.

After the truck was full, they took it over to a water source for washing and "tailing out". There actually is lots of water in Lightning Ridge, as it is poised over a huge Artesian basin. Their well goes down 3400 meters; and there is enough water there for 2500 years. But only enough pressure to force it naturally to the surface for 50 years, so they will eventually be faced with pumping it. They do not waste what they have; for instance, the sewer water is reprocessed to be used for watering lawns.

The material from the mine is put on a conveyer belt which takes it up into what resembles a large cement mixer. Water is added and it is tumbled for awhile. Then it comes out the spout (again, just like a cement mixer) into a long shallow tray, where it is "tailed out", i.e. gone over and the opal picked out. We got to help with that. I found one piece that they thought deserved further investigation, and several that showed "color" but not enough to do anything with, and those I got to keep. The first piece cut a matched pair of very nice opals that they priced at \$400 each. The others are great souvenirs!

Most of the miners live on or near their claims. Their housing is required by law to be "temporary" and moveable. Thus most of them live in definitely primitive conditions.

While Lightning Ridge has power, the fields do not -- they use generators, or solar power -- as the power lines would get in their way. And of course, no piped-in water. Most have tanks in which they collect rainwater, but this is not enough for their needs, as the area averages only about 18 inches of rain per year.

We have also visited a number of people here, including Len Cram, the man who has found out how to grow precious opal, which I will tell you about later, and some dealer/cutters from whom we bought some fine opals (both rough and cabbed) at bargain prices; again thanks to "Eskimo Nell" and her encyclopedic knowledge of all things around here. And a short session with one of the local opal cutters who lives in an old historic mud house on how to cut opals.

As the time to head out to Yowah, home of the famous "Yowah Nuts" approaches, we are wondering if we will get there, as the water is still being reported about 4.5 meters over the Paroo River bridge. But we are heading out tomorrow, and while we may have to take the "flood boat", or -- if the water comes down a bit, maybe ride across on the flood truck, we are determined to get there! ❁

(To be continued)

Margaret Malm

(from Lapidary Digest #276 05/21/00)

BOOK review

by former AOS member Ross Whipple

MASTER GEM POLISHING by G. Wykoff (© 1994)

Spring '98, +16°C. Weather here is warming nicely. It got freezing the other day and startled all of us. Easier to go out to the mailbox; did so, and sure enough, there was a book. Horrors — Polishing! If ever there's a battlefield in the gem world it is polishing. No matter what's said, results in smiles, sneers, horrified looks and someone in the corner shaking his head, muttering, "copper and diamond", "copper and diamond".

The line is drawn, the glove is thrown and everyone warms up with expletives like, "H doesn't know what he's talking about." Or, on the other side of the globe, "Gracious, the poor laddie is daft."

I've actually seen a room full of cutters at a polishing lecture (Australia) get up and mill about seeking mutual support for their pet methods.

With raw throats people finally calm, but with their minds changed not one bit. People return to seats, but the "colloidals", suspended together; "copper and diamonds", still muttering. The "Vaselines" have been stomped by "Teflon supers" and a typical "discussion" of polishing has ended.

So, here I have to comment on a polishing manual, and do it in print, too. And, yes, it is Jerry Wykoff's latest in his Master series, a massive book of 294 pages plus indices and appendices (I went to school).

ISBN says it is "a comprehensive overview of techniques, tools and knowledge." (Jerry wrote it) and that is truly what it is.

First line admits polishing is the most vexing and most rewarding challenge. That's something we can all agree on! He defines the Beilby layer and scratch theories and claims they are both discredited. He says, quite reasonably, the important thing is to get a good polish. A pragmatic approach, and a good one.

The book is not sectioned, but is an ever-changing mixture of items relating to theories, polishes, techniques, equipment, and, for me, in my isolation, this is the most valuable part of the book. He covers buffing wheels, diamond paste, mini-wheels, polariscope, laps, polishing strips and adhesives. The book's "General Section" covering what did not fit elsewhere is very interesting and covers wax laps, casting resin, frictional heat, bleaching and dying, high production and safety. A very instructive and interesting section.

The rest of the book is grouped in fine potpourri fashion so the book does not lose interest as you go along. There is a fair bit of repetition in the book, yes, but something worth knowing is something worth repeating, especially if you don't read cover to cover.

I talked with Mr. Wykoff and he said, "This book is a 30-year project. The point is, when you purchase this book you get the actual experiences of many people over many years — The endless research it would take any of us, has been done for us. All we have to do is absorb it."

General Meeting News

At our last meeting we enjoyed a videotape stroll into the history of the CCC camps at the Virgin Valley, Nevada. This film by Bob Halahan expands with picture and word on the articles recounting his VV adventures. We then continued by watching some of the presentation of Bob's interview with Keith Hodson.

Our planned guest speakers for June (the Two Roses) have suffered a calendar conflict and their presentation has been postponed. We now plan to continue with the Virgin Valley video instead as it includes considerable interesting footage of what it's like and what can be found in the region.

I believe in the old saying, "If it works for me don't change it." No problem there. But, when it doesn't work, this book will instruct me in half a dozen other methods. Jerry doesn't waste my time, your time, paper or print.

He doesn't mutter "copper and diamond" either. Jerry is no MugWump, sitting on a fence with his Mug on one side and his Wump on the other. Those who remain uncommitted and say nothing when it is time to stand up and speak out, are life's greatest wastes.

Jerry, rather, leaves the battle, the argument and the glove on the floor. He simply makes available a wide supply of methods for achieving knowledge and experience, as he promised on page one.

Do I recommend this book? Sure: if you're alone, like me; if you like to learn; especially if you haven't quite gotten the polish you've striven for.

Me? My method? Well, I'm a "copper and diamond" man.

That's it. Let us know if you're coming, we'll leave the light on. Easy to get here. We are due east of yellow knife in the Yukon, not White Horse. Let me know when, I'm almost out of taco sauce.

(from *Anglic Gemcutter* 07/98)

COLLOIDAL SILICA IS OUTSTANDING POLISH...↔

(excerpted from **Master Gem Polishing** by Gerald Wykoff, ©1994)

"...Colloidal Silica, thanks to a lack of marketing effort, is still largely unknown in the lapidary trade. Such unfamiliarity is a tragedy because the chemical is one of the best gemstone polishes available. It will bring up a fine, even polish on any gemstone short of diamond."

That's saying a lot, but CS will actually perform that well. About a year ago, *American Gemcutter* magazine introduced the chemical to gem cutters...

(the article goes on to note that the high pH [9.8+] of CS requires some precautions by those with sensitive skin)

(from *Anglic Gemcutter* 07/98)

Notes From Lightning Ridge

Hi, at long last I am back online. our local isp was bought by a larger company, the transition is now complete and my outgoing email works again.

Machinery at the ridge ranges from the humble pick and shovel up to fully mechanized equipment costing \$250k for a plant.

Hobby miners usually work with an electric or air hammer, (air is much faster) a rickshaw, (special wheel barrow) a self tipping hoist, and small generator around 5 kva for lights, hammer and hoist. A Caldwell bucket drill will put a 1 meter diameter shaft in for \$10/ foot. You can get into mining at this level for around \$4k-\$8k.

If that is too much, you can skimp a little and use an air hammer to start mining for as little as \$2k. You can get a contractor to pick up and wash this dirt in an agitator, a full size cement mixer for around \$100 a load. you can fit in about 2 days worth of dirt/ load. If you find opal, you will want to buy your own trucks and agitator. Cost about \$12k. With this purchase, you are a professional and should have some mechanical aptitude for the frequent breakdowns that occur.

You will also have muscles on your muscles coz the air hammer has a mind of it's own. A new wardrobe or several sets of belts or suspenders will also be required to hold up your trousers as you will be slim by now.

The next step up is a hydraulic digger and bogger (self loading/unloading barrow). You can shift a lot of dirt with this rig, and muscles are not required. Now that you can shift so much dirt, you probably want a super hoist as your old one starts looking like a bottle neck.

If you are a great mechanic, rich, and machinery mad, a blower will be purchased to suck up the dirt that your digger knocks down. Most people find by this point that they have 2 sets of gear, hammer, hoist, and bogger in their first plant; digger and super hoist or blower for the second. So then you need 2 teams to keep the gear busy.

With all these guys working on percentage for you, increased prospecting activity will be required to keep your teams busy, so a 9" prospecting drill will be purchased or leased, and eventually possibly a Caldwell drill, front end loader, and light plane to keep an eye on the dozen or so percentage workers using the huge accumulation of gear which is constantly breaking down and costing hundreds a day in fuel alone.

Lightning Ridge breeds megalomania in miners. It is not surprising that black opal is expensive. It often sells for less than the production costs.

The alternative is to prospect carefully, gouge out some good trace by hand, and whistle up a team of pros to do the job on percentage. They will pay expenses and give you 30% of the gross. This is common practice here, but be sure you deal with honest men.

The season is winding down now, not so many people on the streets now the weather is warming up. Summer is uncomfortable but a good time for business as those fortunate miners on opal are afraid to leave their mines to the ratters. Good quality

opal is available during the hot weather as the major buyers do not visit so much at this time. Last February my thermometer read 111 F at 2300 hrs. Impossible to sleep unless you wet your sheets down. You only get a few days like this in a row, and perhaps a total of 2 weeks in the summer.

With every year warmer than the previous world wide over the past 5 years, we are betting on climate change locally. There has been good rain for the past 5 years and this country is producing beautiful wheat and sunflower crops on the black soil (gumbo in your lingo). A far cry from the semi desert conditions in the drought.

If you are interested in some comments about cracky opal go to www.lightningridgeopal.com/4sale My jewelry studio is all set up now with rolling mill and lots of other fancy stuff. Gotta run off and use it now.

cheers, James

jdumar@turboweb.net.au ☼



Remember When?

(These excerpts are from an article in the June 12, 1933 Los Angeles Times. Special thanks to "Opal Bob" Halahan for sending us this glimpse into the past of the Virgin Valley, NV opal mines.)

"Septuagenarian Off To Hills"

There is luck in the heart fire of the opal and health and joy in old age and wealth in the search for it, for a Los Angeles woman, well up in her seventies, who this week for the sixteenth year, will go into the desert country of Northern Nevada to work her jewel claims of which she owns twelve, in one of the few spots in the United States where opals are found.

She is Mrs. Flora Haines Loughead, mother of Allan Loughead, inventor of the Lockheed airplane, and of Malcom Loughead, hydraulic brake inventor, and herself author of several novels and a former San Francisco newspaper woman...she made ready yesterday for her yearly trip to the north, where for the next two or three months she will work her claims.

OPAL COUNTRY

The opals are found near the Oregon-Nevada border line and the nearest town is Denio, OR (*actually Denio, NV -ed*). In this country of volcanic action where tablelands are cut and slashed with dead gulch and canyon, one finds olive-green patches on hillsides. If the finder is lucky he will find opal-bearing rock there – but he is not always lucky. Qpals, according to Mrs. Loughead, are believed to have been formed in the bottom of lakes and are of silicon and water. Twig replacements of opal are common as are streaks of the jewel in petrified wood.

Mrs. Loughead first became interested in the opal mines in 1916...

...FASCINATING JEWELS

"There is a tremendous fascination in these jewels. They are so beautiful and glorious and when we do find them it is that much more beauty added to the world..."

"In the twelve claims which I own, some of them separated by ten miles or more, the findings are spotty at times, but we are drifting deeper and some day hope to have the thrill of a tremendous opal strike..." ☼

(from the Los Angeles Times June 12, 1933)