

Here's Reprint Of Magazine Article On Cowee Ruby Digging

WRITER TELLS OF SUCCESSFUL VENTURE HERE

Story Includes Picture Layout On Activities In The 'Ruby Valley'

Here's a reprint of "Rubies for the Digging", an article on the Cowee Ruby Mines which appears in this month's (March) issue of Woman's Day.

Written by Russell A. Bell, the story also had a three-picture layout; one of a young Tennessee girl who found a 25 carat rough ruby last summer; a shot of Carroll Gibson talking to a young man at the side of his slab-board ruby "headquarters"; and a third picturing rock hound washing gravel at the Holbrook mine.

The story: We carried the rock and gravel to the little stream and let the water wash through, sieving out the sand and dirt. In the gravel that remained, there was a red crystal, so neatly formed as to look manufactured. It was dull, but when cut and polished, it would be a red like no other in the world, a living red, like solidified light. There was no mistaking it; this was a ruby. And there would likely be more where this one came from.

That was the pleasant answer to a question that had been puzzling us ever since we planned this trip. On hearing that there are ruby mines open to the public, mines where anyone may dig, your natural tendency is to wonder what the catch is.

Rubies, after all, are the most precious of precious stones. A ruby of any real size and quality is worth considerably more than

a diamond. And the public doesn't get invited to browse in the diamond mines, any more than it gets invited to go souvenir hunting in Tiffany's show windows.

So perhaps the strangest thing about ruby hunting in North Carolina's Cowee Valley, the only spot in the United States where rubies of this caliber are known to exist, is that there is no catch to it.

The mines are there, and they are not worked out, as you might reasonably suspect. The only hitch in the thing works to the amateur's benefit. For, if the pickings were just a little better, these mines would most certainly be surrounded by high fences and guards.

To make a remarkable situation even more so, you can move a few miles from the "ruby valley" and hunt for emeralds. There are only four truly precious gems, and here in a small area, you can hunt for two of the four. It's one of nature's better bargains.

Reports of this happy hunting ground in the western section of North Carolina led us to try a gem-hunting vacation last August. The ruby mines are located just south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which gave us a good choice of camp sites to stay in. (There are many other kinds of accommodations nearby, too.) We pitched our tents at one site, called Smokefont, on the silvery Oconaluftee River. Even if we had come back empty-handed, the scenery would have repaid us for the trip. The first gems you see on an expedition like this are gems of views.

A short drive, the next morning, took us to the village of West's Mill, where we bought lunch supplies in the general store. This, it turned out, is a good move. For invariably, along with your supplies, you get useful information. People go out of their way, down here, to make sure you find what you are after.

Just who discovered this excit-

A mile or so beyond the village, we turned off the blacktop onto a gravel road, which would be passable in all weather. Two miles up this road, we found a slab-board building bearing the sign: Gibson's Ruby Mine.

The Gibson brothers, Weaver and Carroll, opened their mine to the public in 1950. That came about because a rock hound searched them out and offered \$5 to be allowed to spend a day looking for rubies. "Too much," said the Gibsons and set the price at \$1. Which is characteristic of the attitude toward money in these parts.

Weaver Gibson made us welcome. It happened that the six of us, two adults and four children, had the place to ourselves. The owners make no effort to attract business, another striking change from the situation tourists usually encounter. And the \$1 a day per person, including the loan of tools, still stands.

The little valley runs for about six miles and consists of farmland and meadows. The ruby mines are strip mines; the meadow has been cut away in small sections to reveal the reddish-brown soil, which is studded with rocks and boulders. So you waste no time digging in soil that can't contain rubies.

At Gibson's, it's a tossup: You dig either beside the road, where bigger stones are, or near a stream for stones that are more plentiful, though smaller.

Rubies are found in only a few localities in the world. Siam has some, so has Ceylon; but the best—of the tint called "pigeon blood"—were long supposed to be peculiar to a region in Burma. Until the mid-nineteenth century, it was not even known that rubies existed anywhere in North America. Yet, there are specimens here as fine as the best Burma can produce.

Just who discovered this excit-

ing fact, or when, no one knows. Local legend says it was a resident of the valley who had gone up on the ridge to visit a moonshiner's still. Coming down, he fell, passed out, and came out of it to find himself staring at a ruby in a rock. So they say.

In any event, in the early days of this century, extensive mining operations were conducted here. But the operation was an expensive hand process. And there were not quite enough big flawless rubies to make commercial mining profitable. That is the stalemate from which today's amateur gem hunters benefit.

The possibility of recognizing rubies, including star stones, is heightened if you know a little about the stone.

You are after a variety of the mineral corundum. When blue, it is called a sapphire; when red, a ruby. This difference is an important one. Sapphires are much admired. But rubies—they're royalty.

You are digging in alluvium—the sand, gravel, and rock deposited by streams that vanished many ages ago. The rock dissolves and washes away as the centuries wear on. The corundum remains because it is next to diamonds in hardness. Pure corundum is colorless and of no interest. But when it contains a small amount of metallic oxide, it takes on the glowing, almost living colors that so fascinate mankind.

However, you don't need to know mineralogy to dig gem stones here. All corundum crystals have relatively sharp edges. Just remember this, save them all, and the owners of the mine will help you make a further sorting.

Another excellent source of information is the new State Mineral Museum on the Blue Ridge Parkway, at Gillespie Gap, North Carolina. This is operated jointly by the state and The National Park Service.

It's not an elaborate operation, this kind of mining. All you need are a pick and shovel, a bucket, and a screen. The best procedure seems to be to select a good-size stone or boulder and pry it loose. On the underside, there will be clay and soil and gravel. Scrape every bit of this off and put it in your bucket.

When the bucket is full, you carry it to the stream and pour the contents into your screen. Now you let water spill in and wash the gravel. You are watching for that exciting glint of red.

Toting buckets of gravel is work but rewarding. Some folks have averaged one ruby in every bucket. Should you like to rough it smoothly, you can hire a helper to dig the gravel, wash it, and provide you with expert advice, as well.

Washing the gravel, you may find many other stones. Bits of amethyst, perhaps, shiny black rutile, quartz crystals, banded agate, small blades of cyanite.

Take any unusual stones you find to the Museum, or ask fellow gem hunters about them. Gem hunting hereabouts is especially pleasant in that everyone seems happy to help the uninitiated.

Our next stop was at the Will Holbrook mine, just around a bend in the road. Here the mine is atop a hill, and the fee is \$3 per day per person, because water for screening has to be pumped uphill. But the screens are on stands about 40 inches high, which is easier than working in a creek bed, and you can screen more gravel. A man and wife working together—the man digging, the wife screening—can develop a pretty efficient operation.

A good many of the rubies hereabouts have flaws—but not all. And they aren't universally small, either.

About a month after our visit, Miss Lucille Smith, thirteen-year-old daughter of a Nashville, Ten-

nessee, doctor, tried her luck in the Cowee Valley gravel. She found a ruby that, in the rough, was the size of a small marble—about 26 carats, by local report. That should "cut out" to 12 or 15 carats. Estimates of the value range from \$3,000 to \$12,000 or \$15,000, or possibly more, depending on whether the pigeon-blood color holds throughout.

On our way home, up the Blue Ridge Parkway, we had a go at emerald hunting. Near the town of Little Switzerland, about thirty-five miles northeast of Asheville, as the crow flies, is the old Big Crabtree Emerald Mine. This, too, was once operated commercially. Now amateurs crack rocks in search of anything good the professional miners overlooked. This is rough country—too rough unless you are an enthusiast. But we were rewarded by the genuine thrill of finding some specks of that matchless green.

Gem hunting in these parts is a fine experience. You are screening material never touched by the hand of man. The possibility that you will turn up a really superb stone is as good today as it ever was. One of our fellow hunters told us that on his first day, in 1954, he found a ruby that when cut, was appraised at \$350, which is a pleasant start. Fine rubies are worth perhaps \$1,000 a carat, sometimes even more; so there's real excitement about this kind of prospecting.

Then, there is the moment when you look into the wet screen and

see that glint of red which means you have found a ruby. It's hard to imagine anyone who wouldn't get a charge out of this.

We had a whale of a time and came back bearing pill bottles and cigar boxes full of loot. Until you cut a stone and a window into it, it is impossible to tell exactly what you have. But we brought back about four dozen rubies of one quality or another.

One star stone can be made into a ring; another beautiful ring can be made from smaller stones arranged in a circle or square. Other stones can be wrapped in gold or silver wire and used in their natural form; you merely emphasize their beauty with the wire. These may end up as bracelet dangles or a necklace.

We also brought back golden beryl, black tourmaline, some chatoyant white feldspar I think can be polished into a beautiful white stone, and some garnets.

We were skeptical when we set out, but we came back enthusiastic. My hobby is collecting gemstone material and cutting gem stones, and I brought home enough material to occupy me enjoyably for months to come. What's more, I don't know where you can have more fun in the outdoors among nicer people.

We want to go back, and next time we won't confine ourselves to rubies, emeralds, and the like. Before gold was struck in California, by the forty-niners, North Carolina was one of the nation's chief sources. That's gold in them hills, as well as rubies in the valley. Next time, we plan to mine ourselves a spot of gold.

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