

Cowee Ruby Mines Bring Amazing Increase In Tourists Here

Operators Are Looking To Expansion For 1957

By ROLFE NEILL
In only one year, the Cowee Ruby Mines have brought Macon County an amazing increase in tourists, and the mine operators are preparing for an even larger number of visitors next summer.

Two of the three mines operating will undergo expansion. Plans call for a third to be improved on a lesser scale. A fourth mine may be opened.

Restaurant and motel people, as well as mine owners, agree that the tourist pull of the ruby mines is immense, far greater than they expected.

At first, mine operators were surprised at the great distances tourists traveled to get here—from Mexico, California, Canada—but now it is commonplace.

MONDAYS BEST

July and August were their peak months, and Monday the best day of the week for business.

Owners are reluctant to give paid admissions figures so it is impossible to determine precisely how many tourists came in. Information from a variety of sources, though, indicates that between last spring and this fall at least 8,000 to 10,000 people crowded into Cowee Valley. Some of these were repeaters, people who came twice or oftener during the season.

NO COMPLAINTS

There were virtually no complaints on the part of the diggers, operators say. They attribute this to two things:

1. Visitors found prices to be as advertised (many tourists said they expected the prices to be higher by the time they arrived).

2. The diggers didn't come expecting to find rubies the size of a half dollar lying around ready to be picked up, or for that matter, dug up. If such were here, a piece of publicity noted, the public wouldn't be invited; a high fence would surround them.

Visitors say they enjoy the digging because it is a new kind of vacation. Also, they like the idea of being able to have a vacation and at the same time get physical exercise. Then too, the possibility of getting something for nothing—or almost nothing—always appeals to people.

NEW WORD

There's a new word in many a vocabulary as a result of

this ruby hunting business. The word is "pigeon blood". This is the color of the most valuable stones and occasionally a digger will unearth one.

The road into the Cowee ruby mines is paved only part of the way. It is the mine owners' hopes that it will be black topped. With this idea they appeared before Highway Commissioner Harry Buchanan when he was in Franklin recently. Commissioner Buchanan said no funds were available, so paving will have to wait.

TO FIX ROAD

However, the state has agreed to straighten a few curves on the unpaved part and, if right-of-way signatures can be obtained, this work is expected to begin within several weeks.

From where the road leaves the payment, it is 1.5 miles to the Gibson mine and another three-quarters of a mile to the other mines.

MINES DESCRIBED

Taking the mines in geographical order as a mortorist drives into Cowee Valley, here's a sketch of each.

The mine of Weaver and Carroll Gibson is one of the two featured in the Woman's Day article of last March, which started the ruby hunting boom. Price of mining is \$1 per person, with children under eight allowed in free.

When there are large families, say with three or four children, the Gibsons make a cut-rate price to the group.

Presently, they have a pit just off Cowee Creek with water diverted from the creek into a long sluice box nearby. As with all the mines, the cost of admission includes rent on the necessary tools for the operation; that is, a pick, shovel, bucket, and screening pan.

Their parking area is the



JUST LOOKIN' — Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Glamm and daughter, Margaret, of Scotia, N. Y., are busily scratching through the gravel of Cowee Valley in search of a flash of red that signals "a ruby!" Those aren't rubies in the shaker box of three-year-old Margaret, just rocks. Mr. Glamm is a chemist with Atomic Energy Commission and works at the General Electric plant at Schenectady.

largest of any mine and could handle several hundred cars if necessary.

The Gibsons are planning two new pits next summer. One will be farther up the creek and another in a corn field across the road from the small outbuilding that serves as a field office.

"We've come to be known as the 'dollar mine' and we won't be going up on our rates next summer," says Carroll Gibson. "We don't think it would be fair to the people."

Mr. Gibson's wife acts as secretary for the mine. If you wonder why a secretary is needed ask Mr. Gibson.

"Why, we get letters from all over the United States. One man wanted us to send him a bucketful of dirt from the mine so he could analyze it. Others don't believe what they hear and write to ask us if it's true. Many say they can't come, and will we please send them a sample, which we do."

STAY 10 WEEKS

Weaver Gibson tells of a Danish couple, now making their home in Florida, who arrived last summer in a trailer, along with their six dogs. The couple stayed for nearly 10 weeks. They camped at the edge of the mine.

Many letters come from people after they visit. They tell how much their diggings were worth when appraised by a jeweler, and sometimes the writers send gifts. In this line the Gibsons have received a lawn chair, a subscription to the Sunday editions of all four New York City newspapers, and a 10-gallon hat.

HAS PRIZE RUBY

The second mine up the valley, also featured in the article, belongs to the Holbrook family. It is run by J. F. (Dudge) Holbrook and his sister, Miss Ruth Holbrook.

Prize exhibit from the Holbrook mine is owned by Miss Holbrook. It's a ruby she found one day after a bulldozer had pushed some topsoil back. Archie Jellen, the Highlands gem cutter, rates it at 101 carats. Miss Holbrooks hasn't had it appraised yet.

DECORATED PIES

Like all the folks in Cowee Valley, the Holbrooks knew of the abundance of rubies there but thought little of it until the tourists' interest. "When I was a lit girl, I decorated the top of my mud pies with rubies," says Miss Holbrook.

The Holbrook home stands on the site of a house erected years ago by a company whose name is famous wherever jewels are talked. The name is Tiffany. As will be related further in the story, the Tiffany company played a prominent part in early Cowee ruby mining.

Dudge Holbrook's father worked for the Tiffany people and when the company abandoned mining operations here Mr. Holbrook bought the big two-story house and moved his family into it. When that place burned he built another house on the same spot.

HILLSIDE PIT

Admission price to the Holbrook mine is \$2 per person. Children are allowed free. The setup at Holbrook's varies from the other mines. The pit is located in an hillside. At the top of the hill are hoses for

washing the soil brought up from the pit.

Presently, the Holbrooks have eight hoses. They figure on accommodating two people at each. Next summer they plan to raise the number of hoses to 20. Also, they are planning to open a strip up on the creek itself.

During July and August this year, as many as 10 cars were turned away in a day's time because all hoses were busy they say.

Sediment dumped into Cowee by a mica mine nearby muddies the creek so much that sometimes it's impossible to use the water to wash the ruby soil. So, the Holbrooks installed a 1,400-foot long plastic pipe to bring clear water from up the Cowee to their hoses at all times.

"The cost of the pipe, and daily pumping make it necessary for us to charge \$2 to come out on the thing," says Dudge Holbrook. They plan to keep their price at \$2 for next summer.

CHEWING UP CORN

J. C. Shuler is the owner of the third mine. His price was \$1 a person this year but he plans to go to \$2 next year. "I'm chewing up some awful good corn field so folks can dig and it seems to me it's worth two dollars for a man to come here and hunt for rubies."

The largest number of people Mr. Shuler had on one day was 72.

Mr. Shuler's plans for the summer of 1957 include the clearing of a larger parking and camping area. "I answered the door one morning just after 1 o'clock," he relates. "It was a bus load of Boy Scouts come to hunt rubies and they aimed to be at it at daylight."

Mr. Shuler is the only one of the three that is closed on Sunday.

Bulen Peek's would be the fourth mine if he decides to open it. He has a heavy coating of overburden, that is, soil which must be pushed back to get down to the ruby area. The expense of having this overburden bulldozed off may keep him from opening his mine, Mr. Peek says.

ON ORIGINAL SITE

His is on the site of the original Tiffany mining. A hill behind his house contains several long tunnels into it where mining operations were carried on 60 years ago.

The back side of the hill is completely swept away. Water was pumped from the creek by Tiffany miners and a high pressure stream played onto likely looking ruby-bearing areas.

The hill is known as "in situ hill." It takes its name from the type of mine. Literally, "in situ" means in place. Thus, the rubies are found there in deposit.

The other type is "placer." In this, the rubies have washed out of the in situ deposit and collected elsewhere.

All three mines presently operating are placer-type. If Mr. Peek opens one to the public he plans to use a placer operation also. Digging would take place down the Cowee from "in situ hill" at a spot where the Tiffany miners dumped their washed rock and soil.

Below the hill, a shaft was

having a vacation searching for them.

Mine owners say almost all of the tourists hear about Macon's rubies from this article. Now, of course, many are telling their friends, and articles on individuals and what they found are appearing in hometown newspapers all over the U. S.

The Woman's Day article was the outgrowth of a suggestion by J. P. Brady, news editor of The Press, who realized the potential tourist value in the ruby mines. (It also was his idea to have bumper stickers made to publicize the mines.)

Mr. Brady gave some rubies to a member of the State Advertising Division and suggested that she interest a national magazine in doing a story on them. Woman's Day expressed interest in the piece and a friend of one of the editors spent his vacation here gathering material. Subsequently, the story appeared in the mass circulation magazine with a photograph taken by Mr. Brady.

Extension service home economists say convenient arrangement of work space can save the homemaker 50 miles of walking per year. The 20 to 30 days time saved could be easily used to handle 35 to 85 hens and bring in some cash income, they point out.

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