

EFMLS Wildacres Workshop May 22-28, 2017

By Dave Lines



Ann and I arrived at 5 pm on Monday afternoon on May 22 to check-in for a week of fun, comradery and learning in a beautiful natural setting high atop a mountain in western North Carolina. Our planning had begun in January when we sent in our applications and we had received several emails since then explaining what was about to happen. We were delighted to have our first

choice of classes --- silversmithing basic and intermediate. Regarding class assignment, we could have been assigned to one of our back-up choices if our first choice of classes had been full. We were told later that “first timers” to Wildacres received priority over all others.

The “campus” at Wildacres is beautiful. On the very top of a ridge about one mile down a gravel road from the Blue Ridge Parkway are six wood, stone and glass buildings that blend into the surrounding mature trees with carefully tended plantings of flowers and greenery with small patches of lawn. Between and around the main structures are paths and patios constructed of native rock and wooden planks. Placed in unexpected places around the campus are many delightful surprises like a gazebo,



or a swing, or rocking chairs, or an outdoor amphitheater built of stone, or a large chimney with a fireplace on a wooden deck perched on the side of a hill, or tasteful sculptures. Several hiking trails of various lengths meander through the 1,100 acres of permanently preserved forest. The views are spectacular.

We checked in at the North Lodge --- a building reminiscent of a Frank Lloyd Wright design. We were given a Welcome Packet with a very full schedule of



events – everyone is required to attend all scheduled activities – sort of like summer camp for adults. We took our bags to our assigned room on the top floor of three of the North Lodge. It was paneled in dark wood, contained two twin beds, one bedside lampstand, one lamp, one easy chair, a sink, lighted mirror and a long counter covering some drawers for our clothes, an “open” closet with empty clothes hangers, a ceiling fan (no air conditioning), a baseboard heater and a private bath (tub and toilet only) --- basic, but adequate. Interestingly, there were no room keys. No one locked their rooms the entire time --- what a nice feeling of trust. It set the tone.

We started that evening with dinner at 6:30 pm in the spacious dining hall with windows on two complete walls extending a full two stories tall looking into the forest. Great views. The wood inside the dining hall was natural colored and the walls were adorned with large scenic photos of waterfalls and forest. On the upper floor inside the main entrance, there were display cabinets with



rocks and minerals as well as examples of the many crafts that were taught – like pottery. The meals were all preceded by the sound of a loud farm bell which was rung exactly 10 minutes before mealtime – then again at mealtime. I suspect the bells were rung because we lost track of time. There were no TVs or radios or newspapers and only one computer and intermittent cell phone service.

That first meal, like most lunches and dinners, was served family style. Breakfasts and some lunches were served via a buffet line. I can honestly say that every meal was delicious. The food was really tasty and we ate very well. After supper we gathered in a Meeting Room on the first level of the North Lodge for orientation on the do's and don'ts, what to expect each day and we met our teachers and classmates.

After the meeting, Ann and I decided to get some rest because it had been a long day traveling. We unpacked and went to bed early. The beds were comfortable and we slept well.

The next morning (as every morning) the wake-up bell rang at 7:30 a.m. for late sleepers, but we had been up for an hour or so. Ann found some fresh coffee in the canteen in the lower level of the adjacent South Lodge at 6:30 a.m. --- which turned out to be an every morning tradition for some as they gathered around the coffee pot to shoot the breeze. And precisely at 7:50 a.m., the bell rang again to signal breakfast. Since it was raining and foggy (the weather was cool and wet for the first 2 days), we began walking toward the dining hall (located about a 100 yards from our room) with an umbrella and raincoats. Imagine the scene we encountered --- dozens of people, singly or in small groups, in various stages of “awakeness”, moving slowly and quietly toward the dining hall. It was humorous. At the 8 a.m. breakfast bell, most folks were gathered on the upper level balcony overlooking the dining area --- everyone simply started down the stairs and into the serving line for breakfast --- fresh fruit, scrambled eggs, sausage patties, oatmeal, biscuits, orange juice, coffee, et cetera. People sat at large round tables --- ten chairs per table. The EFMLS (Eastern Federation of Mineral and Lapidary Societies) filled half the room with 6 tables to accommodate the students and instructors. The other side of the dining room was reserved for other Wildacres attendees who were there at the same time --- cello players, pottery makers and a group from Appalachian State University.

At 9 a.m. we returned to the Meeting Room to hear the first of six (6) programs given by the Guest Speaker for the week --- none other than “Bob Jones”, famous author (at least in the world of mineral collectors) and Senior Consulting Editor of *Rock and Gem* magazine. Bob was *THE* main reason I had chosen to attend Wildacres this spring. At 90 years young, Bob is really an amazing fellow who acts 20 years younger than his age. His stamina and enthusiasm are incredible. Needless to say, Bob gave an engaging and very fun presentation with many photos. His general theme throughout the week was to provide talks of his adventures around the world relating to rocks and minerals. He shared plenty of great stories and kept us wanting more.



After his first talk, I stayed down in the Meeting Room and had a nice one-on-one conversation with Bob and explained that I had a request --- for his autograph(s). First, he signed his photo on page 17 of the September 2016 issue of Rock and Gem which was the lead off article of the series of ten entitled “A Rockhound’s 80-year Mineral Odyssey”. Second, since this article described his first encounter with minerals at age 10 on a school field trip to the Yale Peabody Museum fluorescent mineral display, I thought it would be neat for him to autograph a slab of fluorescent calcite (red) and willemite (green) from Franklin, New Jersey. He did sign it and seemed to really enjoy doing so. Bob is a very likeable person and we talked easily about several things including my son Jeff who had previously met both Bob as well as his son Evan Jones.

At 10:10 a.m., I had to leave Bob for our first class in silversmithing. Ann and I arrived at our classroom which contained a double row of benches down the center with tables around three sides of the room and all stacked with supplies and equipment. Our instructor – Richard Meszler --- had taught the class for many years and wasted no time getting us moving. We first inventoried our individual toolbox on our bench. Then we made a “pickle solution” of boric acid and borax in the crockpots – one for every two benches --- and we set up shallow glass trays with water for quenching. Then Richard passed out the silver (sterling) and silver solder for our first project – a small plastic bag containing a tiny bag of silver solder (3 small wires – each with a different bend in the wire at one end – which was code for the type of solder – hard, medium and EZ) and a silver strip and some silver wire.



Two of our 8 students had taken the class previously, but the rest of us were beginners. There was lots of new stuff to learn and we jumped right in. Next, we learned to anneal silver --- annealing softens the metal so it can be more easily bent into a desired shape. First, Richard gathered us all around his bench and he demonstrated the proper technique --- a style of hands-on teaching that he used throughout the course.



(Picture taken by Carolyn Weinberger)

We learned to light the acetylene torches (one at each bench) and to adjust the flames to various temperatures. Instead of annealing my strip of silver, I managed to melt it. Not to worry. Richard was not ruffled --- “there are no mistakes, there are just changes in design” – he simply gave me another piece of silver and --- under his close supervision --- I tried again. Successfully this time.



Our first project was to make a set of earrings by bending a strip of silver into a circle and soldering the ends together --- seamlessly. We first had to drill a hole in each silver strip that would later accommodate a wire. Each end of the strips had to be squared off with a small file and the strips bent into a “D” and perfectly aligned before soldering. Then we “flattened” our “hardest” solder wire using a rolling mill and snipped off some

tiny 1/8” long pieces of solder. Then we used a very small paint brush to apply flux and we placed a piece of solder across the “seam”. The “D” shaped loop was held with a “third hand” during this process and during the soldering. After soldering, we quenched and pickled each piece to clean them, then we filed off the excess solder and buffed and polished each piece inside and out with the various machines including a flex shaft. Then we drilled another hole through the seam we had just soldered together. Then we carefully bent the “D” shaped ring into a circle and re-polished each piece. Then we learned how to make a rounded bead on the end of a piece of silver wire using the torch. After polishing the beaded end of the silver wire, we pushed the other end of the wire through the lower hole, threaded on some beads and pushed the wire through to top hole and made a loop using “flat-round” pliers. Then we made ear wires with pliers and added them to the round loop. Upon polishing everything, we had completed our first project. I have told you all of this detail to give you some appreciation of the amount of effort, time and skill that goes into seemingly simple silver work. What I just described to you took almost all the first day to complete.

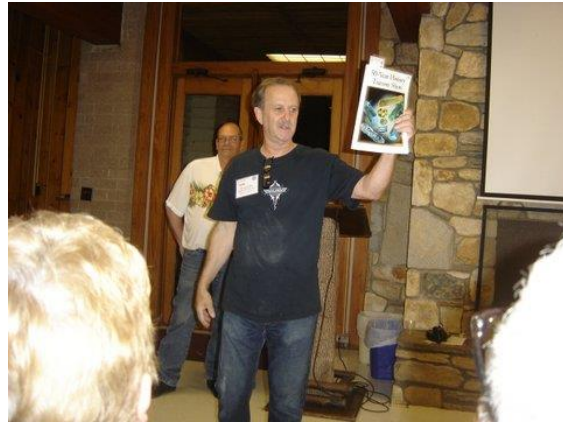
We ate lunch every day at 12:30 and the afternoon class went from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. In the last part of the first afternoon class, Richard introduced us to our second project of creating a prong setting for a cabochon. Suffice to say, this design was more complicated and built upon what we had learned in the first project. After class each day we had "happy hour" --- which, for most folks, was a chance to relax before dinner which started at 6:00 p.m. After dinner we had another interesting presentation at 7:30 p.m. by Bob Jones. Wednesday (our second full day) was a repeat of the first day schedule --- morning and afternoon classes plus morning and evening talks by Bob Jones.

The third full day (Thursday) at Wildacres was a "free" day in which we could choose from a variety of activities --- a group trip to Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute (PARI) about two hours away, go hiking, visit Mt. Mitchell, ditto Biltmore Estate or Grandfather Mountain, or whatever. Ann and I decided to go on our own field trip to Marshall --- I went to the Little Pine Garnet Mine and Ann visited the restored old town of Marshall. We each had a good time --- Ann found a nice place to eat and enjoyed the incredible landscaping of "Blue Ridge Day Lilies" while I found some excellent garnets. We finished in time to be back at Wildacres by 4:00 p.m. for "Tailgating" --- a swap and sale held by Wildacres attendees in the Meeting Room (due to more rain outside). I sold some, bought some and swapped some. And had fun. After dinner, the cello group invited everyone to the auditorium for a concert performed by three cello instructors. It was wonderful --- very professional and enjoyable --- easily one of the highlights of our Wildacres experience.

Friday's schedule had a morning presentation by Bob Jones, then morning and afternoon classes and after dinner a "Good stuff" auction was held for the benefit of future EFMLS Wildacres workshops. We were all encouraged to donate items --- I donated four --- a Bishop, California grossular garnet crystal cluster; a turquoise crystals-on-quartz specimen from Lynch Station, Virginia; a small sphere of rose quartz that had a sharp 6-rayed star; and a double penetrating twin pyrite crystal from Navajun, Spain. The donated items from everyone were displayed throughout the day on tables in our Meeting Room. They were all very interesting items --- minerals specimens, lapidary items like cabs, gem trees and hand carved/polished objects, very nice silver jewelry, weird stuff that had something to do with "moose". People became more excited throughout the day and everyone began looking forward to the auction.



That evening, there were well over 100 lots to bid on and bidding was fast and furious for over two hours. I was tickled that Dr. Mike Wise (Mineralogist at the Smithsonian Museum) got my turquoise crystal specimen --- the only item he bid on all evening. I bid (unsuccessfully) on many items, but I was determined to get one of them --- the **“50-Year History of the Tucson Show”** authored by Bob Jones. Since the auctioneers kept back



that magazine (*Special Supplement to The Mineralogical Record 2004*) almost to the very end, I was wondering if Bob Jones would stick around that late to see who got it --- but he did. After an animated and spirited bidding war, I finally had the high bid! Everyone broke out in loud applause because the price had gone pretty high. And Bob autographed it with a great inscription: “To Dave & Jeff --- Keep collecting. See you in Tucson! Bob Jones 5/17”. Wow! I was thrilled. The auction raised something over \$4,000. The next day, someone added enough to reach \$4,500 and by that evening, another donor raised the total to \$5,000 even. That is a fine tribute to the generosity of rockhounds.

The last day of the Wildacres was as full of activities as all the rest had been. In the morning, we had our final program by Bob Jones --- another great presentation. Then we had morning and afternoon silversmithing classes. Ann and I finished our third and fourth projects. Number three was a 30 mm x 40 mm cabochon with a silver bezel surrounding the cab and a silver backing. It was much more involved than our first two projects as we had to saw and trim a fairly thick flat silver sheet to size as a backing plus we worked with “fine silver” (the bezel) as well as with sterling (the backing). The final product was very handsome silver jewelry --- and we even “stamped” our creations with a tiny “Sterling” mark on the back. Neat.

Our fourth and last project was to design and create an all-metal collage pendant using silver, brass and copper – thus learning how different metals react to silver soldering. Our instructor Richard provided a large amount of scrap pieces of copper and brass to choose from. He pretty much gave us free reign to come up with our own ideas. Ann and I had quite different designs. By the end of the course, all of us were comfortable with the basics --- cleaning, fluxing and soldering silver/non-ferrous metal; using the various machines – flex shafts, buffers/polishers, rolling mill; using the specialized hand tools in our toolboxes; and using a silversmith’s workbench. Thankfully, throughout the course, Richard bailed just about all of us out of various difficulties – he is a very skilled and patient instructor.

That last afternoon toward the end of class, our classmates all chipped in and helped Richard return the classroom to pristine condition. We inventoried all the toolboxes, stacked the firebricks in their storage area, packed the Freedom tools, neutralized/emptied/cleaned the pickle pots, helped Richard organize his tools and items he had loaned us, emptied and cleaned out all the drawers in our benches, swept and cleaned the room, and returned the toolboxes and flex shafts to their storage cabinets upstairs. After we finished everything, our eight

classmates took a picture of our completed third project --- eight hands each holding a silver encased cab.



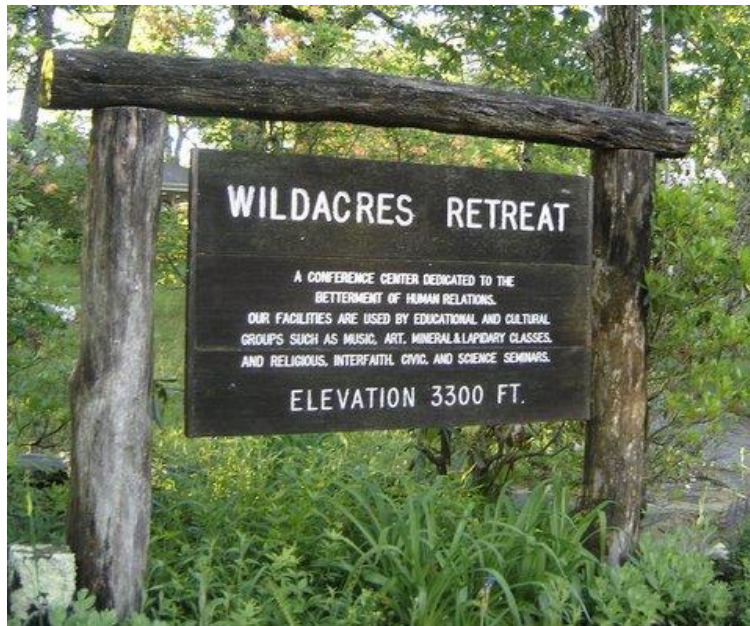
Then off to dinner --- another delicious meal. And after dinner, we all gathered in the Meeting Room for "Show and Tell". Each of the various classes had set up table displays of what they had created during the week. The combined finished products of our silversmithing class was actually quite impressive. Each class elected a representative to explain what they had accomplished. Some of the "show and tells" became skits and were a bit crazy. Two of the classes wrote and sang funny songs about their instructors/classes. As our class rep, I tried to be funny (with mediocre success) while explaining what we did for four days --- all in three minutes of allotted time. Overall, everyone was enormously proud of their efforts and it showed.



(Picture taken by Richard Meszler)

Then we had an emotional farewell for Bob Jones and his wife Carol. Bob, who has been the featured Guest Speaker at the Wildacres workshop a total of nine times, said "I love this place". He received a standing ovation. Then Carolyn Weinberger had a brief slide show of pictures she had taken in the various classes during the week. Lots of nostalgia. We were all invited to an impromptu "party" of combined class leftover wine and snacks on the patio. We were also invited to a concert by the dulcimer group in the auditorium. We were exhausted but chose the dulcimers, and afterward elected to pack up, so we could get an extra early start the next morning because we had to reach our grandson's 9:30 a.m. tournament soccer game somewhere north of Greensboro --- 170 miles away.

During the night, there was a ferocious thunderstorm. At 5:00 a.m. the next morning we quietly crept out of our room so as not to disturb anyone, put our bags in our car and drove away. BUT ALAS, the adventure was not over. About 1 mile from Wildacres, a tree had been blown down across the gravel road by the storm. I got out the car to see if I could move it, but the tree was COVERED in poison ivy vines and was way too large to move anyway. Since the road was too narrow for an attempt to turn around on in the dark, I backed down the mountain for about a quarter mile until I found a place wide enough to turn around. Then we returned to Wildacres and I woke up Pamm Bryant --- bless her --- since she was the Director of the Wildacres workshop. We figured that Pamm needed to contact the Wildacres staff to get the road unblocked and tell the cooks to take another way to reach the campus --- all before 9 a.m. when everyone had to be off the mountain. We finally departed again at 5:30 a.m., drove down another way and reached the soccer field at 9:20 a.m. --- just 10 minutes before the start of the game. Our family --- son-in-law, granddaughter and grandson --- was happy to see us. After the game, we all went out to lunch and held our own "show and tell" of the wonderful silver jewelry we had made at Wildacres. Everyone was amazed.



Wildacres is a great experience and we highly recommend that you put it on your bucket list. Go as soon as possible. You won't regret it.

