

A Wild Goose, Black Jade and Colorful Unakite by Dave Lines



Nothing looked familiar. We had hiked nearly an hour and a half and I was beginning to worry. The trail was becoming a faint track through thick stands of mountain laurel. I was in trouble. I was supposed to be leading 12 other rockhounds to the old Dixie Mine --- but I had missed the turn off.

At about 11:00 a.m., I told the 5 or 6 folks nearest me to stay put while I walked ahead to check out the trail. The trail became a very narrow path that went straight up the ridge. And judging from a large pile of bear scat in front of me, it was getting more remote. I went another half mile. This definitely was NOT the right way. I checked my cell phone for reception. WOW! It had two bars on it --- probably due to the increased elevation. I immediately called a local friend Dean H. He answered the phone with: “Hi Dave. How are you doing?” I quickly explained that I was lost and had missed the turn off to the mine. (I had showed him the mine about 9 years before and he had been there several times since, but I had not returned until now.) He laughed and told me to turn around and go back to the stream crossing and look for a big tree on the right with 3 old blaze marks. Okay!

I thanked him, then returned to the group and explained my error and asked for their forgiveness. Amazingly everyone accepted my mistake and we all turned around and headed back to find the turn off. Along the way, we enjoyed the spectacular early spring scenery.



The weather was perfect --- sunny and about 65 degrees. The stream was crystal clear with many little waterfalls splashing over moss covered rocks. Pristine beauty in the woods.

About 30 minutes later, I found the tree --- and the turn off. I asked the lady who had kept up with me to remain there while I checked the way to the mine. I suggested that she tell the others to stay there, eat lunch and rest until I returned.

The Dixie Mine was an iron mine operated from the mid 1800's to the early 1900's. Now abandoned and part of the George Washington National Forest, the mine itself was underground and followed an orebody which (according to Mindat) varied from 4 to 25 feet thick, was 1,200 feet long and went to 175 feet deep. The main entrance to the mine is an open and dangerously deep hole that we had no intention of going anywhere near. We were primarily interested in a small mine dump area about 300 to 400 yards from the entrance because it was safe and contained rockbridgeite and brecciated jasper suitable for lapidary purposes.

Our group had 13 people total with five (Orion, Aby, Joe, Tim F. and me) from our Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club and eight from the Shenandoah Valley Gem and Mineral Society. Scott from SVGMS had done the legwork of finding a place for us to meet, another place to park and getting permission to cross over private property to reach the National Forest. I had contacted the National Forest people and obtained permission both by telephone and email for us to collect specimens. I had also prepared a detailed Trip Info guide for all participants.

We had rendezvoused in a church parking lot in “downtown” Vesuvius, Virginia at 8:30 that morning, where we had held a safety brief, reviewed the National Forest rules about collecting specimens, reminded everyone to leave no trash and studied different specimens that we were going to search for. While there, our SMRMC members (since we were from “out of the area”) were also invited by Gary (a generous SVGMS member) to collect some unakite on his property later that day after our trip. At 9:00 a.m., we all caravanned a couple of miles to the trailhead nearer the mine. At that location, we posed for our group picture --- all decked out in our brightly colored safety vests due to it being the first day of Spring Wild Turkey Gobbler season for Young Hunters.

We started our hike toward the mine about 9:30 with me in the lead marking the trail with surveyor tape so people could come and go at their own pace. The first thing we noticed was the remnant of a large forest fire that had blackened much of the area the previous summer. Where the fire had burned, there was almost no underbrush and there were trees fallen helter skelter all over. The trail we were following had been used by hikers and hunters, but had not been maintained. There were several trees across our path that we had to climb over or under or walk around. Despite the charred logs and tree trunks, it was great weather for a hike and the wetness from the showers during the previous night was drying up nicely.

When I returned, all had eaten lunch and were ready to tackle the new trail. I explained that we were going to follow the old road as far as we could, then cut across the side of the ridge to another trail and follow it to the mine dump. I explained that it was going to be easy hiking at first, then steep and difficult for a short way, then easy going again. We promised to help anyone who needed assistance. I had already marked the new trail with surveyor tape. Everyone started up the trail, but when we reached the difficult portion, four people decided to go no further. Despite my assurances that this steep part only lasted a short distance, they decided to turn back. I felt bad for them because they had invested so much effort up to that point and had found nothing.

At the end of the trail was a small mine dump area which had been created during mining by digging an adit (a horizontal tunnel) to the main orebody in order to remove an undesired type of ore which contained phosphate that made the smelted iron too brittle.



The iron phosphate which had been discarded by the miners was exactly what we were looking for --- rockbridgeite. It takes a wonderful deep polish like black jade and makes beautiful cabochons. The dump also contained two types of jasper --- yellow and brecciated --- which also can be polished.



We spread out across the rather steep hillside dump and soon everyone began finding small pieces of both rockbridgeite and jasper. The rough rockbridgeite was flat black in color, but much of the iron ore was also black --- the key difference being that the rockbridgeite showed a pea green color where scratched, while the iron ore (mostly hematite) showed a red or orange scratch. The dump itself was just a pile of rocks ranging from tiny to fist sized and, due to the fire, was well exposed. There were also some blackened charred logs laying across the dump as well as all along the hillside, so most of us got quite dirty.

An interesting thing occurred during the afternoon when one of the older gentlemen from the other club announced that he had finished collecting and he offered a handful of rockbridgeite pieces to several of us searching the dump. I suggested that he give it to the two ladies who were there, which he did. They were very appreciative of his generous gift. I noticed that his specimens (about 2 inches or more across) were much larger than anything I had found, so I asked where he had found them. He replied that he had found them under a log nearby. We thanked him and everyone went back to searching.





Everyone except our young Aby. Being more perceptive than the rest of us, she began asking the gentleman *exactly where*. He directed her to the base of a tree about 15 yards away which had an old, partially rotten log (now about 8 to 10 inches in diameter and 30 feet long) laying alongside it. Aby and her father Orion moved over there and began searching carefully. Within a few minutes, Aby and Orion announced that they had found the mother lode and held up several nice chunks of rockbridgeite. Wow! Several of us jumped up and went straight to the log to join in the search. Lo and behold, we continued to find more nice sized specimens of rockbridgeite. It was amazing. They were all located in the first couple inches of leaf litter under the log --- no deeper. I surmised that someone in many years past had found more than they could carry and had cached their extras under that particular log which was well away from the rest of the dump area. But he or she had never returned. It was mere luck --- or perhaps fate --- that the gentleman had rediscovered those pieces hidden all these years. And it was a thing of beauty having Aby quietly inquiring and gaining the full support of that gentleman as to where exactly to look for more. Otherwise, no one else would have pursued the matter. Well done Aby! You made our day!

We had originally planned to also look for micro minerals (seen best under magnification) during the afternoon. But I was just too tired to lead those interested on another trek up the ridge to that location and return --- after all, I had already hiked at least a mile and a half further than everyone else. That part of our venture will have to wait for another trip.

The group began to thin out around 2 p.m. when several folks decided to leave. The rest of us --- Scott and those of us from SMRMC --- scattered old leaves and sticks over the

entire area to make sure that there was no exposed soil from our searching and walking all over the dump. At 3 o'clock, we started our return hike while removing all our surveyor tape. Along the way back, we also collected a few pieces of the plentiful local quartzite. It was fine grained in the colors of white, pink or gray with contrasting black stripes of ancient tube worm trace fossil burrows (skolithos). Handsome lapidary material.



By 4 p.m., we had reached the vicinity of the Kelly Bank Mine --- a former manganese mine now fully reclaimed with trees growing over the entire old mining area. Those of us remaining crossed the stream and searched along the bottom edge of a large hill which was the old mine dumps. There were many pieces of cryptomelane or psilomelane all along there --- some too large to move. Some of us also briefly searched the hillside of the dump in places where there was little or no ground cover and found several small specimens of nicely formed botryoidal manganese ore.



We all returned to our vehicles around 4:30 p.m. and Scott led us in a caravan to Gary's property to find some unakite. It was a gorgeous farm --- very picturesque with pretty pastures and Black Angus cattle nestled in a hidden valley surrounded by hardwood forest. Gary met us shortly after we had parked along the edge of his gravel driveway. He then led us into the nearby woods. Unakite of all sizes was laying exposed everywhere. It was a beautifully colored mix of deep green epidote, bright orange red feldspar and gray blue quartz. Very nice lapidary material. Gary urged us to take as much as we wanted. It was incredible. He said he gives it free to rockhounds, but charges dealers \$6 per pound. Wow – we were some lucky folks!



After 20 or 30 minutes of collecting, we thanked Gary --- and Scott --- profusely and decided to begin our 200 mile trip back to Maryland. Although our day had started with a less-than-stellar wild goose chase, we had collected some excellent specimens, met new friends and had enjoyed some wonderful springtime weather in the woods. It doesn't get much better than that.