

A Connection between Virginia Kyanite and Arkansas Quartz?

by Dave Lines



Willis Mountain near Dillwyn, Virginia is the world's largest kyanite mine. According to Mike Morris --- Kyanite Corporation's Safety manager --- kyanite has the unique physical property of volume stability after it is heated to 2750 degrees Fahrenheit --- which makes it very useful --- and valuable --- to the refractory industry. Several years ago, he told me that their kyanite sold for \$225 per ton --- which may not sound like much, but compare that to \$12 per ton for road rock from Rockville Quarry or \$25 per ton for coal from West Virginia. And they are always searching for more uses of this valuable mineral.



Witness the beautiful giant slab of polished kyanite propped up outside their office building. It is designed for uses such as countertops --- and compares very favorably to the huge slab of Italian granite propped next to it.



Despite a previous day and night of rain, the weather on this Saturday morning looked like it was going to clear. Our five Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club attendees (* Dave, Polly, Lorna, Ralph G. and Mary) were part of a group of about 80 or so Virginia and Maryland rock hounds participating in the annual event organized by Dave Callahan of the Lynchburg Club.



While waiting for the Company representative to arrive, several folks (who had been here before) began finding glass marbles in the nearby woods. About one inch in diameter and a clear Coke bottle green color, the marbles had been dumped (so went the story) by a trucker who was there to pickup a load of kyanite. I figured (correctly) that the grandkids back home would love them. Many of the group collected some --- kind of fun.

Safety is a huge concern on every field trip --- and especially here. We had two (2) safety briefs --- first by Dave Callahan and then by Mike Morris. Both went over in extensive detail the safe practices expected of us on this trip --- full safety gear --- hardhats, boots, safety glasses --- stay away from all high walls at least the distance equal to the height of the high wall; watch out for other rock hounds --- especially, the less experienced ones; use vehicle seatbelts on company property; etc.. Additionally, each club designated one or more experienced Safety Observers readily seen wearing bright



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On this day, the East Ridge plant would not be visited due to muddy conditions, so about 9:45 we started caravanning up the gravel roads toward our first stop on Willis Mountain. A great deal of mining had occurred since our last visit in September 2010. Three (3) large benches had been carved out from extensive mining near the top of the mountain. Kyanite --- mostly massive --- was everywhere in all sizes from fine dust (mud) to huge truck sized boulders. The predominant colors were light gray and red. Closer examination revealed dark brown and black hematite coatings --- some showing iridescent colors of green, pink, blue and red.

Other minerals included pyrite --- mostly small crystals --- disseminated in massive kyanite or in a mix of kyanite, mica and quartz. These specimens were very flashy and showy. I kept watching for apatite and rutile crystals, but found none this trip.



Later in the morning I walked up to the top bench and there found Polly and Lorna. By then, the earlier fog and clouds had given way to a brighter day with spectacular views. I snapped a great picture of Lorna --- high above the surrounding countryside.

While on that top bench, another rockhound offered to share his discovery of some beautiful pyrite in kyanite. It was plentiful. A short while later, I was able to return the favor when I shared a boulder of white bladed kyanite crystals with this same fellow. He picked up a huge chunk of it (50 pounds, at least) --- together with his already full bucket of pyrite --- and started back toward his car down below. I was amazed at his strength all the while being a bit concerned for his back --- and said as much. He assured me that he was okay and that *his wife* would carry the large rock herself. "Incredible!", I thought to myself. A little while later we passed this guy and his wife --- sure enough, she was putting the large chunk into a bag to carry down. What a gal!



When we reached the area where the vehicles were parked, I found Mike Morris and asked if I could take a group over to the other (older) side of Willis Mountain to look for some blue kyanite. He agreed and suggested that all of the group might go along with me. Just before driving to this second area, I spotted the gal from the top of the mountain carrying that big chunk of kyanite, so I invited her and her husband to follow us and drew a map on the ground of how to get there.



About 10 to 15 cars and trucks followed Lorna and me. Upon arrival, I spotted a large (200 pound) chunk of kyanite with nice blue crystals all over the face. Ted Carver from the Northern Virginia club helped me carry that big rock to my van --- thanks Ted. Blue kyanite crystals which had weathered out were visible on the ground all over this area and, with careful looking, one could collect a lot of them. The source seemed to be where a heavily rutted dirt road crossed and cut through a vein of the blue kyanite. Some of the crystals were small and some were larger. With persistence, most folks found all they wanted.

Here's where the story takes an interesting twist.

While showing Dave Callahan where to find the blue kyanite, he mentioned that he had just met a young couple who owned two (2) quartz mines in Mt. Ida, Arkansas. WOW! That got my attention since I planned to go to Mt. Ida in a few weeks for the World Championship Quartz Crystal Dig.

A few minutes later, Dave introduced me to this couple --- it was the *same* fellow with the pyrite that I had met on the top bench --- and his wife who carried big rocks! David and Jessica Suit. I spent the next half hour talking with them about Mt. Ida and their crystal mines. As it turned out, they had recently purchased the Arrowhead Mine (where several of our club members had dug in 2008) and renamed it the "Avatar Mine". Additionally, they had purchase 18 acres between Wegner's Blue Phantom Mine and the

Arrowhead --- and there was a house on it which was rented to someone at the moment, but would soon be where David and Jessica would live. They knew all the miners in Mt. Ida and knew Maureen Walther at the Chamber of Commerce --- in fact, Maureen had been trying to persuade them to open their mine this year for the contest. And --- Bobby Fecho was going to work for them and operate the equipment --- Bobby is my friend from the 2005 contest at Fiddler's Ridge Mine. They also bought another private mine.

Turns out that they also are planning to open a mining/slucce operation for recreational mining in Virginia. I mentioned that the Morefield Mine was for sale --- and they said they had already tried (unsuccessfully) to buy it from Sam and Sharon.

Anyway, we traded email addresses and promised to stay in touch. David and Jessica also offered to let us stay at their place if we come to future contests --- a very kind and generous offer. Time will tell --- I certainly hope to see them again.

It is a *small world* --- who would have thought that a field trip for kyanite at Willis Mountain in Virginia would yield new friends who owned a quartz crystal mine in Mt. Ida, Arkansas?