

The 30th Annual World Championship Quartz Crystal Dig by Dave Lines

“I was hooked the first time I dug a crystal” said the well-spoken man wearing a vest festooned with badges from previous contests. Standing on stage at the Awards Banquet, he related some of his experiences over the years. He was terrific. Regarding the weather, he said: “It was either hot or it rained.” The audience loved him.

Rarely does an annual event that has been held for 30 continuous years have someone who has participated in each of those years. Yet, here he was --- Dale Almond --- a perennial competitor in the World Championship Quartz Crystal Dig held the 2nd weekend in October every year in Mount Ida, Arkansas. Not only did he attend, he was also a very good quartz digger --- as attested to by his earning the highest total score this year and earning the newly created title of “Grand Champion Quartz Crystal Digger” as well as a handsome trophy and a \$250 check. In 30 years, Dale, who is no stranger to winning, has amassed “20 some” trophies for quartz crystal digging. “This is my final year,” he told the audience of 200 “...because I have a bad hip --- and besides, I sold my digging bars”.

Yes, I know. He sold them to me.

I had met Dale originally in 2005 during the first day of the contest at Fiddler’s Ridge Mine. He dug alongside me for about 30 minutes, but moved on when the crystals did not show up as he expected. In retrospect, I should have moved also because I dug in that same trench for 3 days. I found several nice crystals there, but by the end of the contest, Dale had found much better ones elsewhere in the same mine and had won a trophy for the Best Single. Same thing when I attended in 2008 and 2011--- my results were so-so, while Dale looked elsewhere and won more trophies.

Whatever special magic it took to find and extract the best crystals, I did not seem to have, but it was obvious that Dale did. So I told him that I was going to stick closer to him this time.

But it did not work out exactly that way. More on that later.

Planning for the trip had started in early August when I sent in my registration form and a check for \$75.00 to the Chamber of Commerce in Mount Ida, Arkansas. Although I invited everyone else in our Rock Club (Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club), we managed to sign up only 2 other members --- Bill and Debbie Curtin. They turned out to be really great rockhound scouts because they drove down to Arkansas several days early in order to check out both mines that were scheduled to be in the contest. In fact, they actually dug quartz crystals in both mines on the Monday and Tuesday before the Championship Dig (which was held on Friday and Saturday October 13 and 14, 2017). Furthermore, Bill and Debbie found a lot of crystals --- many flats full of great singles and clusters -- before things got crowded. It was an excellent move on their part and took the edge off their anticipation level.

Ann and I spent 3 days driving --- first a day and a half (800 miles) to Birmingham, Alabama to visit my brother for one overnight and then drove another day (500 miles) to Mount Ida via Memphis, Tennessee. If we had driven directly to Mount Ida, it would have been only 2 days and 1,100 miles. On

Thursday the day before the Dig, we arrived in Mount Ida around 4:00 p.m. and dropped off our bags at the little cabin we had rented. Then we drove about 10 miles to the Fairgrounds near “downtown”. I spent about an hour checking out the vendors at the concurrent Rock and Mineral Show.



(phantom xl)

I bought several nice specimens including a beautiful 2-1/2" diameter 4" long mostly clear quartz crystal that had a great phantom inside it. That phantom made the whole trip worthwhile. I talked with several vendors and purchased a few items, but did not find any old friends. Then I took Ann to dinner at the (only) pizza restaurant in Mount Ida. It was a good choice as the pizza was delicious and the staff was very friendly and made us feel very much at home. After supper, we returned to our cabin, unpacked and went to bed early.

The next morning (Friday the 13th) I got up extra early and headed to the Fairgrounds as we were told to be there by 7:30 a.m. for check-in. (Since Ann did not participate in the Dig and did her own thing exploring around Little Rock and Hot Springs for 2 days in our family car, I rented a small car at Hot Springs airport for use during the Dig.) It was pitch dark when I arrived at 6:30 a.m. and I parked right at the Fairgrounds entrance gate and pointed my little car in the “departure direction” in front of the several vehicles already there. [*Experienced Dig participants ALWAYS park closer to the gate than to the Fair buildings and

park “heading out” so they will be near the front of string of vehicles as they drive (race?) behind the Dig Masters to their selected mine.]

Inside the Main Fair building, I was one of the first participants there. While enjoying some of the free donuts and coffee, I began seeing some people I knew --- including Bill and Debbie from our club. They briefly filled me in on finding crystals earlier in the week as well as their adventure to Hot Springs. [Ask Bill to tell you about his “hot bath and massage”.] I greeted Dale Almond when he arrived – it was good to see him. Next, I talked to Brett Bergquist from Wisconsin who was normally accompanied by his brother Brian (a university professor), but not this time. Then a surprise --- David and Jennifer Kneise --- former members of our club who moved to Colorado --- walked in and we had a reunion. Interestingly, David mentioned he was scheduled to have a job interview back in the Washington, D.C. area --- so they might return to Maryland.



(Dave Lines, Jenny and David Kneise, and Bill and Debbie Curtin)

Next, I spotted Bobby Fecho, an old friend. I first met him in Quartzsite, Arizona in January of 2005. From him, I had just purchased an awesome “burr” (a quartz cluster which has crystals protruding on every side) when along came Maureen Walther of the Mount Ida Chamber of Commerce. She invited me to the Crystal Dig and both she and Bobby proceeded to tell me all about it. The result was five of us from the Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club entered the contest that Fall and dug at Fiddler’s Ridge Mine where Bobby was doing the mining for his Dad. Now Bobby and his wife Dixie had their own mine --- Twin Creek Crystal Mine.



(Check-in)

A little after 7:00 a.m., the Dig organizers began signing in people and passing out pre-ordered T-shirts. We also received our Official Dig Badges which we wore in the mines. We also were given bags to put our best crystals in. Each day at the end of the allotted dig time at 3 p.m., participants selected their best “single” and best “cluster” and turned them over to the Dig Masters who transported them back to the Fairgrounds where a team of judges assigned points (or dollar value) to every entry. They had a HUGE job judging the entries from 150 participants. This year, the organizers decided to put everything on a computer. Of course, that plan did not go as well as they had hoped and the judges spent all night getting the results completed. And disappointingly, they did not post total scores for everyone to see – only the top 5 in each category.



(Welcome Ceremony)

Anyway, at about 7:30 a.m., the Master of Ceremonies welcomed everyone. Another fellow said a prayer for the contest participants. The MC reviewed the rules and explained the contest to everyone. There were three main categories

as follows: Best Single, Best Cluster and Young Miners (kids under 18 years old). The prize money awards totaled \$2,500 --- with each category receiving 5 prizes from \$250 for 1st place down to \$50 for 5th place. The top three winners in each category also received trophies which displayed handsome quartz crystals. Additionally, there were some new prizes this year --- one (consisting of 10 free registrations for the 2018 contest) for the Rock and Mineral Club with the “Most Members participating” and another for the Club with the “highest total score” received during the Dig. Also there was a new award for overall “Grand Champion Quartz Crystal Digger”.

By 8:00 a.m., the rockhounds in the room were getting anxious to leave and, as soon as the MC finished, we started to leave the building, but – not too fast – he called us all back inside for a group picture of all the contestants. ☺ Amazing.



(Contestants)

After the group photo, there was near bedlam as everyone rushed out to get into their cars and trucks to head to the mines. It was a bit crazy as everyone took off following their Dig Masters. Bill, Debbie and I all decided to go to the Twin Creek Mine. Since it had not rained in the Mount Ida area for over a month, the ground was very dry. As a result, the dust kicked up by 40 to 50 vehicles racing over the gravel roads enroute to the mine was epic. Visibility was almost zero. Miraculously, everyone arrived safely.

Since I was among the first to reach the mine, I helped Bobby direct the incoming cars as where to park --- it was a bit of a zoo as trying to fit cars between the trees and piles of logs along the edges at the mine. The line of arriving vehicles

was long and slow, but they all finally found a place to park. Everyone signed in and turned in their dig slip and Bobby gave us a Safety talk. He explained that he had spent the last 2 weeks removing the trees from the upper portion of the mine and that he had seen lots of crystals pop out during his excavations. He emphasized that we dig safely and stay hydrated because it was forecast to be a very hot day. As Bobby spoke, I studied the mine --- about 6 acres in size, mostly cleared of vegetation, on the side of a steep hill, surrounded by tall pines. The predominant colors were red-orange clay in the foreground with light tan topsoil in the back upper part of the mine.



*insert pic #57 --view of Twin Creek Mine

When Bobby said to “start”, I took a bucket of tools and headed to the newly cleared upper part. As promised, I saw the glint of quartz crystals everywhere. The quartz veins ran east to west. I selected a 4 foot tall vertical ledge which had crystals exposed in several places. When I dug the dirt away, more crystals began to appear.



*insert pic #65 ---close up of crystals in situ

It was fun. I spent the next 3 hours trying to extract some intact. But the sandstone matrix was harder than I had anticipated. I found smaller crystals up to thumb size and a few small clusters. A couple of diggers near me seemed to be having more success as they pulled out several larger crystals in the 2 inch diameter range.



*insert pic #62 – people digging in hot sun

The sun was intense, so I decided to retreat to the east side of the mine where there was still some shade. While moving to the new location, I picked up several nice crystals peeking out of the dust. Then I began a search of a large 30 foot pile of tree limbs and dirt. Immediately I spotted a nice 2” by 2” crystal laying almost on top. It had 2 points on the very end, so technically it was a “cluster”. I kept looking and decided to sift some of the dry dirt through a screen I had brought along. And sure enough, I began finding crystals --- both singles and small clusters. Some were dinged, but many were just fine. I did that for another 2 hours and then spent some time wrapping the better ones in old newspapers to protect them. When it was nearly 3 o’clock, I turned in a small single and that 2 point cluster.

During the day, the heat did not stop Dale Almond --- he stuck with it out in the broiling sun --- it was nearly 90 degrees --- and he ended up finding a decent single a bit deeper in someone’s previous hole. The crystal he found was good enough to place in the top five the first day. Me? My best single only scored a 3 -- - that is, a value of \$3.00. My best cluster was the point with 2 tips – but it was judged to be worth \$6.00. Dale did not even enter a cluster the first day.

That evening, Ann and I met the Kneises for supper at the Mexican restaurant (next door to the pizza place) in town. We enjoyed another tasty meal and caught up with each other’s lives. Then back to our cabin for some well-deserved sleep. The next morning, I dragged out of bed about 6 a.m., ate a bowl of cold cereal and headed to the fairgrounds for the second day of the contest. There was much discussion among the diggers as to where to go. Sweet Surrender Mine? Or Twin Creek Mine? Whichever one you chose, you had to remain there all day. Curiously, our Dig Master (Bobby) was not there that morning and his wife Dixie was mum. Bill and Debbie from Southern Maryland decided to go to Sweet Surrender. I decided to stick with Twin Creek upper mine. It was a good decision.

After another dusty drive to the mine, everyone parked and made their way to the lower area by the tent to sign a waiver and turn in the dig tickets for the day.



*insert pic # 58 – sign in at trailer

As I looked around the mine, some changes had occurred overnight --- most noticeably, the excavator which had been parked on the upper area of the mine was gone. That got me thinking --- "Maybe they did some digging last night with that machine." I would soon find out.

After the Safety Briefing, Bobby gave everyone some advice: "look for the quartz veins and dig down into them because there are crystal pockets every 4 feet or so." Wow! That was exciting info! When he said to start, I headed straight to the top of the mine. I quickly saw that the excavator had been digging everywhere. There were lots of newly made trenches. Big rocks were laying where the ground had been smooth the day before. [Bobby told me later that he had dug with the excavator until 10 p.m.] Tell-tale sticky red clay was showing all over the place. I began to spot crystals here and there amongst the clay and rocks. Immediately, I made a pile of rocks which had crystals attached to one side and left my tools there to mark them. Then I found a pretty nice cluster of crystals covered with red clay. I started searching the ground everywhere for crystals. I was pumped. In the next half hour, I quickly walked around the mine looking primarily for fresh red clay. My hat and pockets soon filled with as many crystals as I could carry. It was great! Like an Easter egg hunt. Finally, I headed back to the edge of the mine in the shade and gently placed my finds in a pile and covered them with my hat and some tools.

I returned to the stash of rocks I had made earlier and began removing the crystals from the sandstone matrix. I used a sharp chisel and a 3 pound hammer to carefully tap a line about an inch below the back side of the attached crystals. After I made a line around the entire rock, I placed the chisel on the line and gave it a sharp rap with the hammer. Most times the entire crystal cluster popped off intact. Sometimes the rock did not break where I wanted, but that was okay --- I just created more small clusters. This technique was fairly fast and greatly reduced the weight of the rocks I kept.

A lady and her son who were working nearby were also trying to do what I was doing but without much success because they only had a small rock pick and no chisels. They accepted my offer of a larger hammer and a sharp chisel. And after I showed the lady what to do, she was able to remove several clusters from large pieces of matrix. She thanked me profusely. I was glad to help.

When I finished trimming the clusters, I wrapped and moved them and all my tools over to the shady area where I had previously deposited the clay covered crystal clusters. Then I spent the next 2 hours carefully removing some of the red clay and wrapping the clusters in old newspaper and put them in a 5 gallon bucket to protect them.

During this time, I kept hearing someone in the woods a few yards behind me. The person was pounding a chisel with what sounded like a small hammer. Finally, I went over to see what was going on. It was Dale. He was down in a hole about 6 feet deep and 10 feet across. He had located a quartz vein and had found a pocket. He was trying to remove the matrix on one side so he could remove the quartz cluster that he hoped would be inside of the pocket. He was using his rock pick as a hammer. I offered him a bigger hammer and he gladly accepted.

Interestingly, the vein he had found had been discovered long before. Dale pointed out to me that it was in an old trench now about 3 feet deep that had a pine tree about 8 inches in diameter growing from the center of the trench. He reminded me that the pine tree roots were probably growing down into a pocket in the quartz vein. He said the trench had been dug by some old timers way back when crystals were all dug by hand. Dale had been very observant to spot this place. Bobby had seen it, also, as the hole had been recently scooped out to its present size with an excavator.

So I spent the rest of the afternoon with Dale in that hole in the shade. I learned a lot. He had already dug about 15 inches deep and had removed several good singles and some clusters. The pocket was about 6 inches wide at that point and filled with red clay. A few crystals were showing. Dale spent about 30 minutes chiseling away the sandstone matrix along one side of the pocket area. It was slow work. I gave him some water to drink --- all I had with me – I had more in my car. It was getting hot even in the shade. Eventually Dale decided to remove the cluster. He used a steel butter knife and gently hammered it between the matrix and the back of the crystal cluster. But when he pulled out the cluster it had broken off irregularly sometime in the distance past. The cluster still had some nice crystals on it, but he was disappointed that it was not entirely intact.

Dale said he was bushed, still thirsty, might quit and give the hole to me. So I went back to my car to get more water for Dale and returned to find another fellow there who said Dale had given him the hole. Since all my tools as well as Dale's tools were still there, I asked if I could join him and he said yes. It quickly became obvious that this other guy was pretty inexperienced because he started banging directly on the exposed crystals with his rock pick. "Whoa", I told him and showed him how to proceed. He then watched as I showed him the edges of the pocket and explained that, in order to remove crystals from a pocket, we had to remove the matrix on one side so we could pull out the crystals from that side. He seemed amazed.

Time was getting short as the contest ended at 3 p.m. and it was already 2:30. I spent the next 20 minutes with hammer and chisel removing the sandstone matrix down about 10 more inches along the left side of the pocket. Then I carefully pulled away the edge of the pocket --- but --- there was nothing but more sticky red clay. Only a couple of crystals near the top, which I gave to the other guy. There was only 10 minutes left and I used a deer antler (because it will not damage the crystals) to carefully dig out a bit more of the red clay. I could see the "black" face of a clear crystal in the bottom of the pocket. That was what I was looking for, so I quickly chiseled away about 3 inches more of matrix on the left side. With only 5 minutes left, I removed the left side and a nice clear single popped out. Since several ¼ inch diameter pine roots were growing straight down into the pocket clay, there were definitely more crystals remaining in the pocket. But time had run out. Hopefully, someone else will find them.

I quickly trimmed one the crystals for the other fellow (wish I could remember his name) and we left. He helped me carry my two buckets of crystals, my tools and Dale's tools down to my car. I thanked him for his help. Then I went down to the mine trailer and turned in my best single and best cluster.

I saw Dale and brought him back his tools. He thanked me. He seemed a bit nostalgic, so I waited and we talked for a little while. He said that this was definitely his last Dig. His doctor had advised a hip replacement, but Dale did not want one. Then Dale asked me if I wanted to buy his two digging bars. I said I would be honored and paid him the \$15 on the spot. Yes, I am honored --- and proud to know him.



(Waiting for the results)

That evening, the Dig organizers had set up an Awards Banquet at the Fairgrounds with a free meal for all registered contestants --- while additional guests --- like Ann --- paid \$10 each. Actually, it was a great event and the food was good and the program was well designed. In fact it was inspirational to us diggers. During the meal, we were all waiting excitedly to see the results of the contest, but the judges were not finished. There were several interesting “interviews” held on stage with a microphone for the audience to hear. The youngest digger interviewed was only 9 years old but he was very confident. Another youngster was 13 and she explained that she had been in the contest for 4 years. One of the judges who was interviewed was a retired geologist, now a quartz miner. And of course, Dale was interviewed.

Then they finally brought out a stack of paper copies of the Dig results and handed them out to everyone. The results were listed by “Digger number” (rather than in descending order of “total points” awarded). Since most people only knew their own digger number, it was not immediately obvious who had won. So they began a process of announcing each winner in each category --- each of the top five in each of the three categories was announced one at a time, went to the stage, given a check, a trophy, said a few words and had their picture taken. Lots of applause each time.

At the end, the “Grand Champion” was the last to be named and the MC was dragging it out --- no one knew. When the MC said “the Grand Champion was someone we already were familiar with”, I knew it was Dale --- and told him so. Dale, who was sitting next to me, said “no way”, he had not scored high enough and had not even entered a cluster the first day. When the MC called out “Dale Almond”, the whole place burst into loud applause. 30 years of Digging contests! And he was the first ever to be named “Grand Champion Quartz Digger”. A well-deserved honor. Congratulations, Dale!

