

## Blue Barite from the Wide Open Spaces of Colorado by Dave Lines



Sometimes we are fortunate enough to be able to travel to different areas. And sometimes we are even more fortunate to be able to fit a rock hounding adventure into those travels. This story is about one of the latter.



During the middle of September 2018, my wife and I flew to Colorado for my niece's wedding. Yes, it was about the time that Hurricane Florence was threatening to hit the East coast and we did a lot of last minute preparations to protect things on the farm before the storm. But we managed to get away. We landed in Denver early on a Wednesday morning, picked up our rental car and drove south to Colorado Springs, then west about 50 miles to stay with a longtime friend and mentor --- Saralee --- at her cabin. About 23 years ago, she was responsible for introducing our son Jeff and me to the world of rocks and minerals. Saralee's cabin is in a great location. The scenery is beautiful --- the front of the cabin has a full view (framed by large pines) of the western side of Pike's Peak. And it is near lots of great places to find rocks --- amazonite, smoky quartz, topaz, agate, jasper, petrified wood, gold, turquoise, galena, garnets and more.



The first afternoon, we relaxed and caught up with the news about our families and did little things to help our host. Because I had read an article about Hartsel blue barite in the December 2017 issue of *Rock and Gem* magazine, I had already planned to go rock hounding the next day. I had packed some tools --- a rock hammer, a rubber pad to kneel on, a garden scratcher, a canvas collecting bag and a couple of empty soda flats. Also, I called the owners of the mine and set up a visit their shop to sign a waiver and pay the fee (\$10).

The next morning, I had a good breakfast and was on the road early. The trip to Hartsel was about 45 minutes of driving time, but I stopped several times along the way to take pictures. It truly is the land "where the deer and the antelope play" --- and I have pictures to prove it. I even spotted an old buffalo grazing out in one of the fields. The aspen were just beginning to turn yellow and a few places were gorgeous. The roads went through rolling hills dotted with patches of pine forest, which eventually gave way to wide open prairie and grasslands which stretched as far as the eye could see. It is big country. Much different from Southern Maryland. Low humidity, cold in the mornings (it was 40 degrees at the cabin), sunny and warm during the day.



Hartsel is located near the center of the state on Colorado Route 24. It is a tiny town nestled behind a small mountain which gives it some protection from the winter winds. I had told the owners – Dave and Lark --- that I would be at their shop “The Trading Post” when they opened at 9:00 a.m.. So when I arrived a few minutes early, Dave came out to meet me. We went inside the shop and chatted while I signed the liability waiver and reviewed their rules. The shop had a lot of interesting stuff --- both new and old --- objects of turned wood, hand crafts, rocks, knick knacks, souvenirs, etc. I explained that my son and I had visited the mine in 1997 and had found clusters of blue barite. Dave suggested the best areas of the mine for me to dig. I asked when they closed the shop – 5:00 p.m. --- and said I would try to get back by then to let them know I was okay.



The road to the mine was only a few miles away and I turned off the highway, stopped and opened (then closed behind me) the first of two gates. The second gate was about a half mile further along the dirt road. I was glad it was dry weather as the road had some deep ruts that might have been a problem driving my little Nissan rental car. Past the second gate the road headed up through a wide shallow valley and in about another mile or so, I came to the diggings of the barite mine. The mine was just below the crest of a gently sloping hill and covered about one acre. There were 2 main trenches about 20 feet wide, 8 to 10 feet deep and 100 feet long. The trenches or cuts had sloping sides due to erosion. They was another shorter trench nearby that held less promise. There was a small pond of water at the lower end of the two trenches. There were also several small areas on the south side that had been scooped out in years past with a dozer. There were large amounts of old tailings covering the ground. I say "old" because the tailing piles had small bushes and grass growing on them. The dirt was mostly red clay containing some gravel which consisted of mostly plain white to clear translucent agates.



It was sunny and bright when I arrived and the sparkle and glint of crystals when looking on the ground toward the sun immediately caught my eye. Small blue barite crystals were everywhere! I stopped the car, got out an empty soda flat and started picking up barite from the surface as I scouted the entire area of the mine. Barite is heavy and within 30 minutes, I had picked up several pounds plus a few agate (or chalcedony) nodules. I kept searching hoping to locate an area of "bluer" crystals --- but it was a relative thing --- some were definitely a deeper blue but most of them on the surface were at least a gray blue. I finally selected an area and started scratching and digging away the dirt --- many more were under the surface -- and some small clusters up to the size of an egg.



This mine is certainly productive because in every place I chose to dig, I found barite. I dug for several hours, then took about 30 minutes to eat lunch and rehydrate. There were no trees and no shade at the mine, so I turned the car toward the sun and opened the trunk and sat on a 5 gallon bucket behind the car in the shadow of the trunk lid. It worked. After that much need break, I resumed digging --- trying a new location every 30 minutes or so. I kept trying to find virgin dirt or a seam of the clusters, but no luck. Still, I found lots of barite. My largest crystal blades were about 2 by 2 inches across and about ½ inch thick. My largest cluster was between a golf ball and a tennis ball. Overall, I easily collected my daily weight allowance of 20 pounds of barite.



I decided to call it quits about 4:30 p.m. and headed back to the “Trading Post” to check out with the owners. I showed them some of my better specimens, thanked them and left about 5 p.m.. The trip back to the cabin was uneventful, but the pretty scenery along the way made for an enjoyable drive.



The next morning at the cabin, I “rough cleaned” the loose dirt from the crystals in plain water with a scrub brush, and, after air drying them, packed them in zip lock plastic bags for the return trip to Maryland. Several days later, when we

were coming back from a visit to Rocky Mountain National park, we stopped at "Dick's Rock Shop" on the roadside in Estes Park. Most of his material was from elsewhere in the world. Yet he had a steady flow of customers while I was there with many buying \$20 to \$40 worth of rocks. Amazing.

His Colorado material was mediocre at best. I did spot a few pieces of Stoneham (CO) blue barite the size of matchsticks --- literally --- that were priced at \$1 each. Wow! I talked with him (Dick) for a few minutes and asked if he collected any local material --- basically, no, although he knew of the several places I mentioned. He did have a patented rose quartz mine in South Dakota and had some rough there for viewing. He said about 20% would star if cut and polished. I thanked him for his time and left. Then I went out to our car and dug into my bags and got out a large handful of the barite blades and went back into the store and handed them to Dick while explaining where they came from. He asked how much I wanted for them. "Nothing, they are free. Enjoy." He was elated as he put them into a plastic bag --- with a label.

Hope you can go out there someday and take advantage of some of Colorado's great rockhounding.