

**“Dixie and the Worm Tracks”** by Dave Lines



The wild trout were clearly visible in the deep pool of the stream --- after all, the water was crystal clear. And this was just two days after a big rain. No sediment. This mountain stream was not large --- only 10 to 15 feet across --- but it was gorgeous. The water tumbling over boulders and fallen logs made pleasant splashing sounds. Mountain laurel and blueberry bushes growing under an open canopy of white pine, tulip poplar and oak trees --- and if you looked very closely --- small red teaberries. A perfect early morning setting as we hiked alongside up toward the Dixie Iron Mine.

Four intrepid rock hounds(\* Dave L., Steve L., David K. and his daughter Samantha) from the Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club joined another four (\* Dean, Scott G., Bob F. and Eleanor) from the Shenandoah Valley Gem and Mineral Society for this adventure near Vesuvius, Virginia. We had rendezvoused earlier at the Burger King beside White’s Truck Stop, then caravanned to an old field on private property where we parked with permission near the trail head. Then we hiked up the mountain for over a mile and reached the first workings of the long abandoned iron mine around 11 a.m..

Once at the mine, Dean gave a great impromptu tour for the group and explained how the miners had followed the vein of iron ore both on the surface and down into the mountain using only hand drills and sledgehammers and black powder. This mountain top mine was long --- crossing two hollows and going into three ridges --- and deep --- the visible shafts went down 180 feet according to Dean. During the safety brief, he cautioned that if we fell in, we would be dead before anyone could reach us. A dangerous --- stay-well-away-from --- kind of place. That is why no kids were allowed on this trip.



The mine area we chose to explore contained the dumps on the east end --- a steep hollow with lots of surface rock and a mine opening that was slowly caving in. We remained well outside of the danger areas and concentrated our efforts looking for lapidary material. The prize was “rockbridgeite” --- an iron phosphate ore that --- according to Dean --- made the smelted iron too brittle, so the miners discarded it. Good for us though because it takes a high polish --- a rich deep luster like black jade.

Another (and more plentiful) material found there was jasper. It came mostly in variations of a deep mustard yellow color. Also, there was a brecciated type where it appeared as though a light tan colored rock had cracked into smaller angular pieces and was surrounded by the yellow jasper. This type sometimes had veins and lines of a black material --- perhaps an iron ore. Additionally, some of the jasper contained small white jasper spots. The more solid pieces of this jasper will all polish nicely.

It took awhile for most of us to get our eyes calibrated to find what we were looking for -- especially since there was a great deal of rock everywhere. From the outside, rockbridgeite looks much like the rest of the rock there --- dark brown or black --- but with a key difference --- it shows a “pea green” streak if scratched with a knife. Slowly, we all began to concentrate our efforts around one particular rock dump area where we found several pieces of rockbridgeite on the surface. We soon found that we could scratch through this dump material and --- with persistence --- find rockbridgeite in chunks up to 2-½ inches thick, although the typical size was one to two inches. Brecciated jasper, with its many variations, was also found in this same dump. By 2 p.m., we had enough specimen material and we decided to head back down the mountain toward our vehicles.

The hike back took almost 1-½ hours --- iron ore is heavy! Along the way, we kept noticing rocks of a handsome fine grained quartzite with bold, black stripes running through it. The quartzite came in several colors --- pink, maroon, tan and ivory. The black stripes were fossil skolithos “tube worm” burrows --- dating from ancient Cambrian (500 million years ago) tidal flats, according to several sources I looked up on the internet. At any rate, this material will polish, too. It should make fine bookends or spheres. Trouble is, it is heavy. So we passed on picking any up. About a half mile from my van, I gave in --- and put one ten pound chunk in my backpack. It is a pinkish-maroon piece with strong black stripes. I like it.

When we reached the parking area, Steve met us with a big smile. He had returned a bit earlier than the rest of us and had been picking up “worm tracks” as he called the

skolithos. Steve had several great chunks of it. So several of us spent some time picking up a few more worm tracks from the stream and the surrounding area. It is abundant.

Another Shenandoah Valley Club member, Mary L. D. , of Charlottesville, had arrived at the parking area while we were at the Dixie and she had been searching the dumps of another mine --- the Fauver. It had been a manganese mine and, despite being fully reclaimed, many signs of the old mine were visible --- large, terraced dumps of clay --- all tree covered, but still recognizable as man made piles. In addition to the Fauver , there



was another manganese mine there --- the Kelley Bank Mine --- although the exact location of each mine is somewhat undetermined. Five of us then decided to cross the stream and search one of the large dump piles for manganese ore nodules --- cryptomelane and, perhaps, psilomelane. We were interested in collecting the botryoidally shaped nodules of these minerals. Around the lower edges of the dump piles, we scratched through the fallen leaves and found several decent specimens, although many pieces that we found were too large to take home. (This material also responds well to polishing as I lightly buffed a piece the next day at home and its surface became a shiny metallic black.)

All in all, our day in the mountains near Vesuvius was both pleasant and productive. We found rockbrigeite, brecciated jasper, cryptomelane, and “worm tracks” while enjoying the company of the members of another club in a beautiful natural setting along with near perfect early Spring weather --- a combination that is hard to beat. This is why rock hounding is so much fun. Hope you will join us next time.