

No Crowds and Lots of Topaz By Dave Lines



The Morefield Mine *on a Tuesday* is a beautiful sight to behold. *The place was nearly deserted!* What a great time of week to make a field trip! The seven souls (* Dave, Steve, Polly, Lorna, Ralph, Mary, Jim) from the Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club had absolutely zero competition when we arrived --- we were the ONLY customers.

When we went into the shop about 10 a.m., Sharon welcomed us with a big smile. Sam was working underground on the 60 foot level so we did not see him until he emerged a couple of hours later. After a group picture with Sharon, we trickled --- one or two at a time --- down into the first dump area to see what we could find in the “leftovers” from the dumps of previous week.



We felt no particular sense of urgency. There was plenty of time to carefully search the ground.

Stuff was easy to see --- the specimens on top had been washed clean from rains over the previous weekend.

Right away, Ralph found a large mica crystal discarded near the sluice, and a few minutes later in the dump area, he scratched out large chunk of amazonite. We all found small pieces of amazonite and smaller mica crystals. "Salted" amethyst pieces and petrified wood (common opal) seemed to be everywhere. Ralph seemed to have a trained eye for the less common specimens --- microlite, tantalite and fluorite --- and began finding and giving them to everyone.



Eventually, a few more customers arrived and joined us in the dump area. Mary from Salem, Oregon was one of these. An older lady --- she was retired and visiting family in Virginia. At first, Mary was unsure what to do, so we (ever friendly rock hounds) came to her rescue and helped her by explaining and showing her how to recognize some of the many different minerals there. As she began finding more specimens, her confidence skyrocketed. She was thrilled that she had "discovered" the Morefield.



Around 11 a.m., a small group of private school kids and their 4th grade science teacher with a couple of parents arrived from Charlottesville. Our solitude instantly became noisy and bustling as the chattering kids fanned out picking up colorful and shiny rocks and digging everywhere. Of course, we helped them, too. It was fun to see their little faces beam when we tossed them a piece of purple amethyst or a shiny quartz crystal.

The second dump area opened soon after the kids came and we spread out to find more goodies. We found many interesting minerals --- did I mention “topaz”? About 30 minutes earlier, I had found a small piece in the first dump area while scratching through some red muddy dirt. It was pure luck. It was heavy, clear, had a classic greasy feel and quartz would not scratch it. I was ecstatic --- my first topaz crystal find in my 16 years of coming to the Morefield. I happily showed it to everyone.



Well, wouldn't you know, I found another one in the second dump area --- laying right on top --- well almost. I was down on my knees scratching through the old material from the previous week, when I spotted a clear and very shiny face of a stone in the ground laying flush with surface. As I flipped it out with my garden scratcher, I looked over and realized that Jim had seen it almost at the same time. We both knew instantly that it was another topaz crystal. It was larger --- about 1 inch long by $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick --- and seemed very clear.

Lorna said it would facet into a nice stone, but I said “Never!!!”

After that, we were all really pumped for finding more topaz. And guess what? That lady from Oregon dug another one up about 10 feet from where I had found mine. It was about the size of mine but was only a corner of a larger crystal --- pretty clear --- a nice specimen. And later, near the end of the day. Jim found another one about 15 feet away from that. His was smaller, but I think it is definitely topaz. Sam was less sure and said it could also be phenakite --- a bit lighter mineral with a higher refractivity index.

About 12:30 or so, Sam started up the dozer and made a fresh dump in the second dump area. Interestingly, I took a picture of the customers awaiting Sam’s “okay” signal. Wow --- only 21 people were lined up. Compare that to some previous Saturdays when several *hundred* people lined up to pounce on each fresh load of material. I could get used to these mid-week trips. Incidentally, I think any club member can call Sharon at the Mine or at home (phone numbers are on the web at www.MorefieldGemMine.com) and if you explain who you are, she would probably let you come down on a weekday --- especially on Tuesdays --- as long as there was room.

The fresh dump was a bit “thin”. There seemed to be less amazonite than in previous years, but it was enough to keep everyone interested. The little school kids did very well and, being quicker than us old folks, did a great job of scooping up the larger specimens of mica and amazonite.

Later when things calmed down, I was talking with Jim and he said that Sam had told him that they were now selling the amazonite from the 60 foot level to a buyer for \$25.00 per pound. Wow --- that just increased the value of our Morefield amazonite collections by a factor of five! Last October, Sam was selling it in the mine store for only \$5.00 a pound. (We should have purchased more!) During mid afternoon, I also noticed that a hired worker was picking out all the larger chunks of amazonite from the stockpile area and setting it aside in buckets. I guess the good old days when Sam spread out everything for the customers are over.

Our new member Steve (my good friend from our UVA college years together) ---despite being a farmer and a retired pharmacist --- has always been interested in rocks and minerals. In fact, he was the person who first showed me where to find blue quartz and unakite over in Madison County back in 1995. Anyway, he had a great first visit to the Morefield enjoying all that it has to offer and took home a nice selection of minerals.



Jim was persistent --- especially in the afternoon when he found a 1 inch by 1 inch section of yellow beryl crystal near the “salted garnet area”. Later he spent quite a while digging a

good sized hole in the middle of the second dump area. He had the whole place to himself when the school kids left about 3 p.m..

And I should mention --- the weather was absolutely perfect. Mostly cloudy and about 65 to 70 degrees. Again, the National Weather Service had been predicting 60 percent chance of rain all day right up to when I left the house that morning. Thanks again, Big Guy in the sky!