

Trip Report Contrary Creek, Mineral, VA by Dave Lines



We all met at the gravel parking lot just south of the U.S. Rt. 522 bridge across Contrary Creek at 8:00 a.m. on Saturday morning July 9th. The weather was predicted to be sunny and hot with a high about 90 degrees. There were 18 rockhounds from 3 clubs --- Southern Maryland, Shenandoah Valley and Virginia Peninsula ranging in age (my guess) from 13 to 75.

After a safety/orientation brief and a review of the rules (this location is the stream itself up to the normal high water mark and the creek banks on both sides are private property), I showed everyone what to look for with 2 flats of specimens from this location. More importantly, I emphasized that every rock would be covered with a rusty orange stain --- so one must chip each with a rock hammer to determine what is inside. There are over 20 minerals recorded from here. This is a very old collecting area since mining has occurred here for well over 150 years. During the American Civil War, sulfur was mined. Later gold was discovered and gold mines and prospect holes cover the area on both sides of the creek both upstream and downstream of the bridge. In fact, the largest gold nugget ever found in Virginia --- 9 pounds --- was found right at Contrary Creek.



Then everyone headed down the steep trail to the stream where we spread out to search for goodies in many different ways. There were gold pans, sluices, motorized gold dredges, rock hammers, buckets, shovels --- tools and equipment of all description. Within a few minutes, folks had settled down into serious work. And before long, John S. --- a long time gold prospector friend and former Southern Maryland club member --- had quietly found 2 nice gold "nuggets" --- right next to where I was digging. Amazing.



I made a couple of trips around to visit people and to make sure they were finding something. The motorized gold dredge brought by Kim and Tom was a pretty neat contraption, however it seemed to have some problems staying running. They patiently started and ran it for a few minutes until it stopped --- and then they repeated the process over and over all morning. The result was some gold -- not much -- but some. Other gold seekers took a different approach. Wayne P. searched the many crevices in the mica schist which was angled perfectly to naturally catch and hold gold particles that past floods had moved downstream. The family of Wayne, Karen and Addison L. employed another technique --- digging and panning in the stream. I dug down in the gravel bar near the bridge, then classified (sifted out the larger rocks) and panned the finer sand and gravel. I did find a nice -- but small (read: barely visible) --- gold particle. It looked much better in the small glass vial that magnified it.



Other folks looked primarily for the almandine garnets. Debbie had excellent results digging and screening the gravel in the creek, while her husband Jimmy explored many different spots in the stream. Several of the others found garnets embedded in schist matrix in rocks. The garnets were dodecahedral (12 sided) in shape --- like little soccer balls. The sizes found ranged from tiny to a little over

½" in diameter. The edges of those found in matrix were nice and sharp. I did not see any larger crystals of magnetite, though massive magnetite was everywhere. There were a lot of actinolite crystals found in matrix. Some of the mica schist found was particularly attractive as it was very pure with a bright silver color. Vinton was sure that her piece of this schist was indeed silver. No, but it was very pretty.

Toward the end of the morning, I was talking with Glenn who asked if I had found any chert. It dawned on me that he was a flint knapper. Since Contrary Creek is primarily an iron sulfide (pyrite) deposit with metamorphic mica schist and quartz, there is no chert or flint. However, there was an old smelting operation at one time in its storied past. As a result, slag from that operation can still be found in the creek. So I took Glenn for a walk up the creek a little ways and showed him what to look for --- chunks of black slag that looked like obsidian. In fact, this material knaps like obsidian. We found a double handful of small pieces for him. I also found the bottom of an old glass bottle which I mentioned to Glenn that could be knapped. But I couldn't resist showing him, so I picked up a smooth rock to use as a hammerstone and proceeded to chip out a decent (at least, recognizable) projectile point. Interestingly, the glass was very old and back home after cleaning it up with Iron Out and it had a nice purple color --- from years in the sun.

Overall, everyone seemed satisfied with their finds and many mentioned that they would definitely come back here again. By early afternoon, we all went home.