

Willis Mountain Fun by Dave Lines - Pictures by Kim Jurkowski



Twelve members (Rich, Leo, Sondra, Orion, Kim, Arion, Aby, Asher, Emily, Noah, Isaac and Dave) of the Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club joined about 80 other rockhounds from various clubs from Delaware, Maryland and Virginia for our annual field trip to Willis Mountain Kyanite Mine near Dillwyn, Virginia on Saturday September 23, 2017. The weather was beautiful --- sunny and pleasant with a high temperature about 80 degrees --- perfect for an early autumn field trip.



About 8:30 a.m., we gathered in the office parking lot of the Kyanite Mining Corporation for our safety brief. First we heard from Dave Callahan --- overall trip leader and organizer of this event. Dave reminded us of the importance of adhering to various safety requirements to collect mineral specimens on this property. Our unblemished safety record here has certainly contributed to the

owners inviting us back every year and we all want that to continue --- especially in light of the many local mines for which are closed to field trips. Next, Mike Morris, our host from the Kyanite Corporation, carefully reviewed a thorough checklist of safety do's and don'ts --- often elaborating with specific instances which reinforced the consequences and importance of following the safety rules at all times. For example, he not only told us to stay away from the safety berms and why, but told us that a MSHA inspector would question even the presence of "foot prints" on a berm. So we all felt a sincere sense of responsibility and confidence that we would do the right thing before we left the parking area.



Following Mike's vehicle, the group caravanned up to the top of the mountain about 9:00 a.m. where everyone spread out to search for specimens. Each year, we are amazed at how much change has occurred in the mine since our last visit. And there was ample evidence that the Kyanite Mining Corporation had spent a lot of effort preparing for our visit --- the roads were clear and bulldozed flat with no large rocks sticking up, the berms were freshly refurbished everywhere and blocked the areas near all highwalls and there was flagging that noted various areas to remain clear of. They had done an excellent job with safety in mind for everyone.



Our group from SMRMC had many novices --- in fact, five (5) of us had never been in a mine and this was their very first field trip and another three (3) had been on only one other field trip. So those of us who had been here before spent our time assisting our new folks enjoy their adventure. Rich was especially helpful in getting them comfortable in their new surroundings while making sure they found something worthwhile. I checked out the perimeter of the area near, but not on, the very top of the mountain. As I walked around, I made a mental note of several areas which looked good for collecting later. Early in my walk, I came across a lady who sitting on a very large boulder which she “claimed”. After quickly noticing that it was laced with small pockets of iridescent hematite, I had a conversation with her about how she was going to extract the specimens. She said her husband was getting a sledge hammer to break it apart. This boulder was BIG --- at least 6 feet long, 4 feet wide and 3 feet thick --- so she needed a really big sledge. I waited until her husband returned with a sledge weighing about 10 pounds. I told her that I had a bigger sledge – a 20 pounder --- and if she wanted me to, I would help break it up. She gave me a small, colorful specimen and thanked me. I said I would check back with them later.



I checked on our new rockhounds and gave the specimen of iridescent hematite to Noah (one of our new members), then eventually worked my way to the truck. There I picked up my big sledge, a 6 foot pry bar, a couple of good steel chisels and a small 4 pound hammer and headed back toward the lady on the rock. She was still sitting on that rock when I arrived about a half hour after I first met her. And her husband was not having much luck

breaking the rock apart. I showed him my big sledge and he accepted my offer to help. So the lady got up, moved and sit nearby while I checked out the boulder. It was a great looking rock --- covered with small vugs of brightly colored hematite. Along the way, an acquaintance named David tagged along because he sensed that I knew something. He was right. Now “we” studied the boulder to determine the best way to break it up while protecting the specimens. My first few whacks with the 20 pounder were decisive and we quickly had enough material for the original “claimers” ---- they were very happy and declared that they had plenty and gave me the rest of the boulder.



Of course, by this time, our activity had attracted several other rockhounds --- all of who wanted some of the action. And so it went for the next 2 hours as “we” dissected that rock into many smaller specimens. In fact, everyone else was using my big sledge and chisels more than I was --- but it was okay, I am not as

young as I used to be, and besides, Tom Sawyer had a good plan. ☺ We even got our new rockhounds to join us as well and they learned about wrapping their specimens with old newspaper to protect them. We worked on that boulder until it was about half its original size. In fact, Asher finally split the remaining portion of it completely in half. Everyone that came around got some of that boulder.

As has happened on other occasions, time ran out on us and we had to leave the mine before we finished collecting. But the boulder is still there --- with lots of brightly colored iridescent hematite exposed on several sides. It would make a spectacular yard rock --- if you could lift it ---- and then figure out how to transport it back home. It still weighs two tons.

As for what was found, I saw iridescent hematite, iridescent hematite on kyanite crystals, kyanite crystals (grey, blue and clear), quartz, pyrite in kyanite and quartz, rutilated biotite mica (pinkish red colored) and malachite in white quartz. Of course, there were many specimens that I did not see.

It was great to see old (and young) rockhound friends from other clubs. Some sad news – Mr. Dixon – longtime owner of the Kyanite Mine, passed away recently. He was a very generous friend of rockhounds. “Thanks, Mr. Dixon for letting us enjoy your mine all these years.”