

Chestnut Ridge --- An Old Friend Revisited

by Dave Lines with Addendum by Tom Zunino. Pictures by Dave Lines, Tom Zunino, and Wendy Nikolich



That very first glimpse of Chestnut Ridge when it comes into view early in the morning brings a smile and quickens the pulse. We are only 10 minutes from our destination --- or at least 10 minutes from where we park. The real destination --- on top of the mountain -- will be another hour (or more) and many hard won steps away.

It was a chilly 44 degrees when we arrived. The clouds and showers that we encountered when we left Staunton earlier were all gone and the sun was beginning to warm things up. We parked our vehicles in the grown up yard of the old house. Things looked about the same – except for the hand lettered “For Sale By Owner” sign with a phone number nailed on a post out front --- a mute indicator that our future access here may be about to change.



After getting out of our vehicles, stretching and preparing for the “hike” up the mountain, our nine intrepid rockhounds (Joe, Ralph B., Tom Z., Rick, Wendy, Mike, Rich, Dave and *Tom P.) from the Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club (*invited guest from the Delaware Mineral Society) lined up for our traditional “group picture”. (It would be fun to take an “after” picture to compare. ☺). I then

held a safety brief --- no rolling rocks, watch out for snakes and ticks, look out for each other, no trash, cover all holes/bare ground, spread old leaves/sticks over any disturbed area to prevent erosion, National Forest rules, trail will be marked with surveyor tape and I will remove on return hike, be back by 5:00 pm.



Everyone else started up the trail with Joe in the lead, while I detoured to visit the neighbor for a few minutes. Glad I did --- he was on oxygen with nursing care. We talked about the past, the neighborhood, the weather, his kids, grandkids and great grandkids. Nice guy. I bid him farewell and headed up the hill about 10 a.m.. Took about an hour. I marked the trail for others to follow on the way down. Mountain seemed considerably steeper than last year. Maybe just my imagination.

Caught up to Rich along the way --- pointed him to the lower collecting area. Then caught up with Rick and Wendy near the top. The day was warming up nicely with bright sunshine. Just a tee shirt was fine for me. I began scouting the area to make sure everyone was happy and had found a place to find some crystals. Tom P. said he had been the first to arrive. He already had some nice clear ones. Tom Z. was next to him with a big grin and was talking about the beautiful specimens he had found. Mike was sifting the dirt near an old fallen log and had not found much. He covered up his scratchings with some dead leaves and moved to a new spot.



I walked over to our usual area and picked up a couple dozen crystals right on top that were sparkling in the sun. Then I brushed away the leaves in a likely place and began to carefully find more crystals and a few small clusters. Nearby, Rick was just downhill quietly finding crystals when Wendy came by taking a few pictures with her phone. Amazing how quiet it was --- there was very little chatter as the group seemed seriously intent on finding crystals in our relatively limited time up there. We spent the next several hours all within a 50 yard circle.



Joe did a lot of scouting along the top of the ridge without much success. He then decided to head back downhill to join Ralph and Rich in the lower collecting area.

We all found some nice specimens. The weather was beautiful --- warm and sunny with a nice breeze. One of the best days we have ever had up there.





Later in the afternoon, the group on top began to thin as Mike went back. Then Rick and Wendy, then Tom P. Each person did a great job covering up the disturbed areas and one could hardly tell we had ever been there.

Tom Z. and I were the last ones to depart. He told me that this was actually his second trip to Chestnut Ridge --- his first one had been over 40 years before. He remembered paying 50 cents to park in the yard down below. He had collected crystals in the lower area before, so the “top” was new to him. He was really pleased with what he had found on this trip.

Tom Z. and I took turns removing the surveyor tape on our way down and we almost caught up with Tom P. near the bottom. I diverted over to the neighbor’s house again to report that we had all made it down safely and to say goodbye. When I made it back to our vehicles, only the 2 Tom’s and Rich were there. Tom P’s tee shirt was soaking wet -- - seems he had worn his jacket during the descent and that, combined with a heavy backpack, made him pretty hot. He said he was happy and had found some beauties, but it had been a “once in a lifetime trip” for him.

Chestnut Ridge can do that to people. She’s an old friend, with lots to give, but she makes us earn it.



**The following addendum was written by Tom Zunino:

I was at the site about 45 years ago. I was off on my own visiting different collecting sites in Virginia. In hand I had a copy of Gem and Minerals Localities of Southeastern United States by Leon D. Willman. I had visions of striking it rich. I learned about Chestnut Ridge while I was collecting in Amelia County Virginia at the Rutherford Mine. I located the general area on a map and took off on a road trip to find it. I knew the house I was looking for was on Mill Creek Road and was owned by the Loan family. When I got to Churchville I stopped to ask the locals for directions. Later that day I found the place. I recall driving up the hill to the house to ask permission to park and walk up the mountain to the collecting site. There was a \$.50 per day fee and this included general directions to the collecting spot. I wandered up the path and found the spot. The midway point was the hot spot in those days. Most of my collecting was scratching the surface and picking up loose crystals. I recall some very nice finds and lots of crystals.

On this return trip I was surprised by how little things had changed along Mill Creek Road. The Loan house looked familiar, and the path up the mountain was still there. This time out I had more knowledge about the location and the geology, and was with a team of experienced collectors who knew the location very well. Collecting at the top was definitely worth the climb. I uncovered my best specimens digging and finding the sandstone and then the seams. I just couldn't believe the quality and quantity of the crystals at the ridge. The hard part was deciding what specimens to carry back down the mountain. I just knew the descent was going to be hard. All of the tips and advice from the team really helped me get the most out of the day. The best part of the field trip for me was spending time with new and old friends and sharing our passion for rock hunting. It still amazes me today that the crystals I dug out of the ground, saw sunshine for the first time since they were formed. Wow!!

