

The (Almost) Hidden Monster by Dave Lines



Rich and I were exploring a tiny stream in the woods looking for petrified wood. Since almost all of the ground itself was covered with verdant springtime vegetation, any patches of bare soil were great places to concentrate our efforts. Rich had gone in one direction and I had turned the other way. So far, during our 30 minutes of searching, we had each found several decent pieces of wood ranging from tiny to hand sized. I was walking in the stream itself when I spotted a narrow deer trail going up the stream bank. Because the trail offered some bare ground where the deer hooves had dug in, I decided to follow the worn path in hopes of picking up a few more specimens.

But first, a little background. Rich and I (as well as Alton who drove separately) had decided just the evening before to participate in the semi-annual event called “The John Wolf Memorial

Trip” in honor of a deceased beloved member of the Calvert Marine Museum Fossil Club. Hosted by the fossil club each spring before crop planting and again following harvest on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, this field trip has become a favorite of many local rock hounds. The host has generously invited all those regional rock clubs interested in fossils from Maryland, northern Virginia, Delaware and Pennsylvania since the location (a large farm in Odessa, Delaware) provides plenty of parking. Somehow, the trip announcement for this trip had not been emailed to me as the Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club field trip chairman. But a friend who is the Trip Coordinator for the Delaware Mineral Society forwarded the trip info to me at the very last minute --- on Friday afternoon --- just the day before the scheduled trip on May 1st. After some scrambling to get the “short notice” trip announcement emailed to our club members, I called all those who had signed up to attend the trip previously planned for March 21, 2020 --- over a year before. Because of the initial unknowns of the covid pandemic --- transmission methods? contagiousness? a 2.5 hour drive with stops at public gas stations and restrooms? --- they had all elected to not attend the 2020 event. So I contacted those club members first to see if they could go on this trip --- most could not due to previous plans.

The meeting time for this trip was set at the farm at 10:00 a.m. --- with a request to not to begin looking in the fields before that time. However, Rich drove for us and he likes to get on the road early. We had set a time to meet at my house at 6:30 a.m., but Rich always arrives early, so we were pulling out my drive by 6:30. Bottom line is that we arrived in Odessa a full hour early. What to do? Not ones to waste precious rock hounding time, there was no question about it --- we decided to look somewhere else for an hour before going to the designated farm. Since this was not our first trip to this area, we went to one of several undisclosed alternate locations that we knew about.

Before I go back into further detail about that part of our adventure, let’s jump ahead to 10:00 when we arrived at the farm. There were already at least 30 cars parked along the long farm road so I called Alton on my cell to see if he had arrived. Yes --- his truck was the first one at the far end of the line of vehicles. Since this was his first try at finding petrified wood, I asked him to join us so we could show him what to look for. While waiting for him, I talked with several other folks and showed one lady (her first time there) how to spot the wood. She caught on quickly and was happy to get some tips. When Alton arrived, I did the same with him and within a few minutes, he had picked up several pieces. In fact, he needed no more help because he found a nice double fist sized hunk of petrified wood right away.

The field had produced a crop of soybeans last year and the remaining winter weeds had been treated with herbicide about a month ago, so the cover was very thin and it was easy to see the ground. On top of that, the rainy wet weather last Fall had obviously left the field soil very soft and muddy in spots because there were numerous areas throughout the fields where the large combine tires had created deep ruts when the beans were harvested. All this meant more bare ground and better conditions for us to find petrified wood. And judging from our buckets, find it we did. Rich, Alton and I all found some pretty good pieces. Additionally, we picked up quite a few interesting rocks which ---surprisingly --- were very plentiful in some areas of the fields. I think of Delaware as being flat with sandy soil. These fields were fairly flat, but the soil here was very rocky on some portions of the farm. And the rocks were of all sizes --- some being as large as basketballs with rounded edges like those in Southern Maryland. I even found a baseball sized piece of pegmatite laced with mica crystals in smoky quartz. Red and yellow jasper were also fairly common. I also saw some clear smoky quartz and some rocks that looked like Patuxent River Stone. I kept an eye out for native American artifacts but I did not

find any this time. I did see a perfect white quartz atlatl point about 1-1/2 inches long that Ross of the Delaware Club had found. Very nice.

In the early afternoon, Alton decided to call it a day. That lady who I had helped at the beginning took a picture of the three of us from SMRMC. Alton declared that he had had a great time and he left at about 2 p.m. Rich and I looked at each other and decided to return to our other alternate location as it seemed to have more potential. We returned and found more wood – especially in the small gulleys and bare areas in the woods.



Back to beginning of the story when I was followed the deer trail --- little did I know that this would turn out to be a very fortuitous decision. I went up the stream bank and picked up a small piece of petrified wood about 2 inches long laying right in the trail. The trail lead along the edge of a pile of rocks that had been dumped there many years ago by some farmer who had been clearing his field. At this point, the deer trail sort of faded away into the green vegetation. I turned to go back when I spotted what looked like a small 3 inch piece of petrified wood poking out from under the bottom edge of one of the rocks in the pile. I stopped and moved one medium sized rock out of the way and reached down to pull out the piece of wood. But it would not budge. I called out --- “Hey Rich. Come here! Quick!!” He came right away and immediately tried to use his garden scratcher to pull out the piece. No luck. It would not move. Whoa! We began to move several other rocks out of the way and I used my

little rock pick (the smallest size they make) to dig away the dirt along one side. At first, I assumed it was just a slightly larger chunk buried in the dirt. But I could not find the edge. I dug down about 6 inches and removed a goodly pile of dirt --- fortunately, it was soft loam --- and then I removed another large rock to the left of the protruding wood. Whoa --- there was another piece of petrified wood showing about 2 feet away. Then it dawned on us --- this was all one piece. Holy moly! We cleared away more dirt and more rocks as it went down into the ground at least a foot. We tried to pull it out several more times but a large grapevine which had grown across the left end held it firmly in place. We had no way to cut the grape vine, so we concentrated on the right side and kept digging away more dirt and big rocks. Finally, we pulled the piece out from under the vine but the sucker was hard to move. We pushed and rolled it out toward the uphill side. It was a monster!!

Trouble is we only had about 15 minutes left before we needed to meet at the farm field and it was a hundred yards back to Rich's truck. I tried to pick it up. It was very heavy and about all I could do to carry it just 10 yards. Rich took his turn and carried it another 15 yards. Amazing that he went further than me. We decided that we needed to try something different. We returned to the truck and Rich got out a couple of nylon tie down ratchet straps which we took back to the petrified wood and tied each around it. Then we both grabbed a strap and together pulled it over the ground back to where we could load it into the truck. Together, we picked it up and put it into the back seat. We agreed not to tell anyone at the field trip because of the commotion it would cause.



So it remained there for the rest of the trip until we returned to La Plata. Back home, Rich suggested we weigh it. Okay, I could do that quickly with a large galvanized tub, some rope, a

250 pound scale and my electric hoist in the shop. Within minutes, we had it in the tub and hoisted up. Beforehand, Rich had estimated 60 to 70 pounds. The scale showed it was 120 pounds! Incredible that us two old guys had each picked it up. I washed it off the next day and it showed beautiful tight grain and a lot of character with small knots and an area where the straight tree trunk flared out at the bottom of the tree. It is definitely a find of a lifetime, but way too large and heavy to display on a shelf in my rock room. It will look great as a focal point out in the flower bed in our backyard. The chipmunk will love it. And just think, it had almost been totally hidden.

