National Limestone Middleburg and Mount Pleasant Mills, PA - by Dave Lines

It was a long drive north from Southern Maryland --- 3-1/2 hours --- but worth it. We (Rich and I) arrived at the Middleburg quarry office at 8:45 am --- before anyone else. The next to arrive were a couple from Ohio --- I am thinking "huh?". I set up this trip first for our club and, when we did not get enough people (10) to sign up, we invited 2 more clubs – Montgomery County (MD) club and Delaware Mineral Society (DMS) --- hoping to get a total of about 30 attendees. I chatted with the couple from Ohio --- turns out they belonged to the "Friends of Mineralogy Pennsylvania Chapter". And they (FMPA) had also been invited. What? After 2 more vehicles arrived --- both with FMPA invitees --- I was getting a bit concerned that our trip would be overwhelmed with "unintentionally invited guests". But no worries --- it turned out that a total of 28 people showed up, which was fine.

At 9:20 am, the owner arrived and let us into the office. Several people gave the quarry owner various specimens of different minerals for his collection. Eventually everyone squeezed inside, and we took a group picture. Then the owner gave his personal Christian testimony --- his "price of admission" to collect rocks in his quarries. His talk was bold, sincere and a bit emotional --- he definitely had our attention --- and respect. And he gave a DVD video titled "America's Last Warning" to all those who wanted to take one. The owner advised us that they were going to have a new shot on the following Monday, so there would be no new material today. However, the Mount Pleasant Mills (MPM) quarry had a recent shot and specimens should be more plentiful. With that info in mind, I announced that we would stay at Middleburg quarry until 11:30 am and then all caravan in a group to Mount Pleasant Mills.

Rich with travertine in Middleburg quarry

Sam holding travertine

At 9:45 am, we drove into the Middleburg quarry and spread out to search for specimens. Rich and I headed to the area where there were some large boulders of travertine (cave formations) that had been set aside for collectors. We also collected some deep purple fluorite embedded in massive seams of white calcite. Very attractive specimens. I helped a couple who were newbies get started. I showed them what to look for, where to collect, how to collect it and areas to avoid (due to safety considerations). Then I started a slow walk around the edges of the quarry along the berms looking for specimens. I found a few items of interest, but not much worth taking home. Rich eventually drove his truck closer to me and I put a large chunk of massive calcite which had an orange coating over what looked to be water worn botryoidal crystals (?) into the truck. [Later back home, I hosed off and soaked some of this material in Iron Out. It had a strange, but visually striking pattern of calcite --- somewhat like miniature canyons carved out by water. Different.] We found more fluorite, but no calcite crystals worth collecting. Sam found some nice travertine florets that had very little damage.

Purple fluorite in massive calcite at Middleburg

At the very far end of the quarry, there were several people collecting purple fluorite. I walked past them up the road over a small rise and discovered a problem.

A lady, alone, was sitting on the ground pounding with her rock hammer on a chisel trying very hard (she was perspiring profusely) to remove some fluorite in calcite from a large rock. The problem was that she was not wearing a hardhat, nor safety glasses, nor steel toed boots. I gently but firmly told her to stop and to get inside of her car until we could find some safety gear for her. I explained that she was jeopardizing herself safety wise and the future of everyone ever being able to collect in this quarry again. The gravity of her situation began to dawn upon her. She had arrived very late, missed the talk in the office, had not signed the waiver and had driven into the quarry alone to this location. She said she had never been in a quarry before, and this was her first field trip. Incredible. Through the generosity of Tim S., who gave her a hardhat and some safety glasses, we started her doing things in a safer way. She did have some steel toed shoes in her car which she then put on. I spent a few minutes showing her how to extract the fluorite. I told her to follow us to the next quarry and we would show her what to look for and how to collect it.

At 11:30 am, we all left in a group and caravanned five miles to the Mount Pleasant Mills quarry. Rich and I in the lead vehicle headed straight to the far end of the main pit. We parked next to a large rock pile where I spotted some “vuggy” limestone that looked like it would have calcite crystals inside. Rich began collecting calcite crystals from the vuggy rock. I got out the truck and walked about 30 yards past the rock pile and found three (3) fairly large limestone rocks virtually laced on all sides with cavities full of calcite crystals up

to ¾ inches long. I placed some pieces of old newspaper over each rock to claim them and briefly returned to the truck for more tools, more newspaper, and more containers.

The lady who had been without the safety gear in the previous quarry showed up and I proceeded to show her how to disassemble one of the rocks that was about 2’ x 2’ x 1’. I spent the next 2+ hours carefully taking apart those three rocks. I had several visitors that came to observe what I was doing, and one even videoed me when I opened a vug that contained some nice blue celestite dog-tooth habit crystals growing on calcite crystals. I worked about 20 minutes to remove the cluster of blue celestite and, with Tim S.’s help, it came out damage-free. Those celestite crystals made my day because celestite is fairly rare at that location. About 2:00 pm the clouds thickened and threatened to rain. When we heard a distant rumble of thunder, I began frantically wrapping my finds with newspaper to protect them for the ride home. Unfortunately, I got soaked with a heavy shower before I finished. It was well worth it as I collected eight (8) flats plus two (2) deeper boxes of crystal clusters. The minerals were mostly calcite crystals, but later I found numerous small clear and white crystals of celestite on several clusters of calcite. There was also tiny white snowball shaped crystals strontianite in some of the calcite clusters. On two of the larger plates of calcite crystals, I found bright yellow powdered elemental sulfur --- another first for me at MPM.

clear blue celestite crystals from MPM

large strontianite crystals from MPM

I never had a chance to look elsewhere at MPM, but most of the other folks found some calcite crystals. Jim and Michelle K collected some beautiful specimens of very clear blue celestite crystals up to ½ inch. They also collected some larger crystals of strontianite to ¾ inch long. Tim and Lorna S. and those who went to the backside of the ridge at MPM collected some nice specimens of wavellite, too.

Rich and I left the quarry around 2:45 pm and changed into dry clothes before our return drive home. Most of the attendees had departed around 1:30 pm and many headed to a gentleman’s home about 20 minutes away. He had contacted me a few days before the field trip and generously offered to give everyone fluorescent rocks from New Jersey. Several of the attendees said they went to his house and happily took home some fluorescent material. Bernie mentioned to me at our April club meeting, that he had filled his whole living room back in La Plata with brightly colored “glow-in-UV-light” fluorescents.

We are very fortunate to be able to collect at these National Limestone quarries – especially nowadays when most quarries forbid any mineral collecting because of liability. In fact, we only have 3 quarries left who will currently let us in to collect specimens. So, the next time we have a trip to a commercial quarry, be sure to express your appreciation by personally thanking the quarry representative for letting us be there. Take care and be sure to label all your specimens.

Calcite clusters from MPM

Calcite single from MPM

Nice Calcite cluster with many celestite xls in vugs