

The Gem Mine (a true story)

By John J. Donovan

Sometimes it didn't take much. An obscure reference discovered in an out-of-date field guide, or perhaps a chance conversation with another collector, and there I would be: loading my '64 3/4 ton Dodge truck with hammers, sledges, crow bars, specimen bags and of course the usual camp necessities of beans, beer and steaks for another weekend of mineral collecting out in the middle-of-nowhere, somewhere in the California Coast Ranges.

It really was a great truck, you know, a factory reinforced frame, posi-traction 4.11 rear-end rated at 5600 lbs. capacity with split rim 20" wheels. They don't make them like that anymore, as they say. I've seen newer trucks with sheet metal bodies so thin that you can dent them with your thumb. Instead, this truck had a body of steel plate so thick you could have 2 large guys jump up and down on the hood and never see it flex. Of course it wasn't much in the comfort department : instead of carpeting, it had a utilitarian gray and white steel interior. No air conditioning, tinted glass, power steering, power brakes, power windows or other luxuries here. But when driving through Death Valley in August, this truck could just tool on by all the tourists pulled over with their overheated Cadillacs, while we enjoyed the view, being careful of course not to burn ourselves by touching any part of the all metal interior.

This time, a friend of mine, Buffalo Jefferson, was to be my traveling companion for this excursion. Buffalo who was as tall and thin as a bean pole, had once told me that he had been given the nickname by his brother when he was wider rather than taller. I wasn't sure that I believed him, but in any case the handle seems to have stuck. He and I were going to try and find the type locality for a rare gem mineral called benitoite. This beautiful deep clear blue mineral was found nowhere else in the world except in San Benito county, and in fact, was named after the county (in turn named for Saint Benedict, founder of the Benedictine Order) and it was only found in one remote corner of these Coast Ranges, at the so called Gem Mine.

At 6:00 am we were on the road and loaded for bear: 75 gallons of gas, a garbage can of water strapped to the inside of the truck bed, and of course several large cans of beans, two cases of beer and some thick steaks on ice.

After jumping onto Hwy 80 and zipping past the Emeryville exits we were soon cruising high on top of the then still standing Cypress Freeway. We rolled through the Maze, an insane stack of freeway overpasses, and a still sleepy Oakland, and by the time the sun was fully up over the East Bay Hills, we were past the San Jose freeway tangle (still mostly empty that early on a Saturday morning), and headed south on 101. A couple of hours later we were finally able to exit the freeway and turn east onto the quieter backroads of Central California.

The Gem Mine is located in one of the most geologically bizarre areas of the Coast Ranges which is a part of the Franciscan formation (named for San Francisco, and in turn named for Saint Francis of Assisi), and largely composed of these rocks. The Franciscan formation is unusual enough itself, composed by sediments eroded from the ancestral Sierra Nevada volcanic magmatic arc produced by the now suspended subduction of oceanic floor 100 to 200 million years ago and the subsequent deep water turbidite (underwater landslide) deposition. This much is known from the composition of the sediments themselves and the absence of carbonate shell fossils (carbonate dissolves at depths greater than 10,000 to 15,000 feet and is usually absent in deep sea sedimentary rocks). What is not so clear is what role subduction has played in the production of the ubiquitous and unique high pressure-low temperature minerals found in the Franciscan formation. And nowhere in the Franciscan formation are the minerals more strange than those found around the Gem Mine in San Benito county.

By midday were bumping down Highway 25 east of Hollister (slowly being torn in two by the San Andreas fault and happily named after Colonel W. W. Hollister when a citizen loudly complained of the already lengthy list of saints in the state) and looking for a dirt road turnoff to the Gem Mine.

After following the road in and out of several scenic valleys the land began to rise again. "Any minute now we ought to see something" Buffalo said looking over my USGS San Benito topo map for about the hundredth time (last updated 1956, so therefore only slightly out of date). "There!" he pointed. I hit the brakes, skidding the truck to a halt in front of a poorly defined dirt road as our dust cloud caught up and slowly drifted over us. In fact, what was also there, was a hand lettered sign across the road that plainly stated "Road Out". After a moment or two, I said "They just don't want people to mess with the mine, I bet the road is fine". "We could keep going straight and come around from the north", Buffalo said looking at the map once again. "Yeah, but the map says the shortest way is to turn here", I countered peering over his shoulder. There was another pause while we considered the ancient map. "You know what they say about short cuts", Buffalo warned, but I cut him off "What the hell, we can always turn around" and pulled on the steering wheel to bring us around the sign and onto the barely visible track.

Well, the first fifty yards weren't too bad, I'd been on dirt roads a lot worse, but it was clear that this road hadn't been used in a long time. There were too many small shrubs and saplings in the track that I simply had to drive over. I wasn't worried though, the truck was well protected underneath with quarter inch steel plate that I had bolted on and welded under critical areas. And the old fashioned solid front axle with a kingpin front end and leaf spring suspension could take a lot of punishment. So as the track went from bad to worse, I simply slowed down and concentrated on keeping us on the road as tree branches slapped the front and sides of the truck.

Pretty soon though it was apparent that the road was in the process of becoming a dry river bed. Large boulders loomed up in our path causing the truck to lurch and bounce from side to side while I gripped the steering wheel harder and slowed to a crawl. Buffalo held on to a rubber padded steel bar on the passenger side dashboard with both hands as the truck took another tremendous leap over a two foot boulder and came down with a spine jarring crunch. With the track twisting and turning, it was impossible to see more than a dozen or two feet ahead, but I think that we both hoped that it had to get better "real soon now".

Then, right in front of us, a drop off opened up and I slammed the truck to a stop with the front wheels half over the rocky edge. I set the hand brake and slowly our shaken vision cleared. "Let's take a look at this" I said. We got out, my door only opening a foot before hitting the side of the large boulders forming the stream bed.

We surveyed the scene. "Looks like we're going down a class 5 river with no water", Buffalo said slowly. "Well, it's only a two or three foot drop right here", I said trying to sound more optimistic than I felt. "What about those drop-offs further on?" Buffalo asked pointing further down the so called road. There was a moment of silence. "You stay out here and direct me", I said, "I think we can do it". "There's no way we'll be able to go back up", Buffalo pointed out. I turned around and thought about that while looking the way we'd just come down, "Yeah, but I don't think there's anyway we're going back up even if we could turn around here".

Carefully, I eased the truck over the edge, felt the truck fall with my stomach and heard the sound of tortured metal grinding against unyielding rocks. I vainly tried steering to avoid the worst obstacles but it was like sailing without a rudder. With a mind of it's own, the truck followed the course of the channel by sliding down the rocks on either side, with me holding on to the wheel with all my strength trying to keep from being dashed to pieces against the inside of the truck until, after much creaking, groaning, rending and tearing it came to a halt, the engine still snorting and puffing from the gas spilled down the manifold during the bouncing decent.

I shakily set the hand brake again, got out and looked up hill at Buffalo jumping down the rocks to follow. Altogether, we had lost about 25 feet in elevation in about the same distance and there was no longer any question about going back. We were committed now.

Buffalo bent down to look under the truck, "Hey you've got a leak under here". My mind flashed on the possibilities. What was it, gas, oil, radiator, transmission? I got down and stuck my head under the truck, and sure enough, a pretty steady stream of liquid was dripping from numerous places under the bed. "Damn", I swore, "bet I punctured one of the extra gas tanks". Thinking about fire and explosion, I sniffed the air. No smell. I reached out with my hand and caught a drop on a finger. Rubbed it between two fingers and took a whiff. "It's only water!" I almost yelled with relief from underneath the truck. "Where's it coming from?", Buffalo asked. The answer suddenly struck me, "I know, it must be from the garbage can of water; things must have been really sloshing around back there".

While I was down there I did a quick inspection of the rest of the underside and found some impressive scraps, grooves and scratches but no real damage. As I crawled out from under, I saw Buffalo looking over the side of the truck. I got up and saw parallel gouges, looking like giant claw marks, raggedly extending from the front to the back of the truck along both sides. "Well, it's not like it was a cherry paint job anyway", I said cheerfully. I was happy to be alive with a truck that still ran and no broken axles, at that point. "Not anymore", said Buffalo as we climbed back in to continue the journey.

The road (or what was left of it) wound down into the small valley below us. "By the time we get to the bottom, we should have a decent gravel road that was made for the asbestos mine", Buffalo predicted poring over the map as we lurched onwards. "I think can see it now" I reported trying to keep my eyes on the road.

When we came around the final bend at the creek level we indeed found a beautiful gravel road, unfortunately on the wrong side of a 10 foot high chain link fence stretching as far as the eye can see in both directions between our jeep trail and the graveled road. Stopping the truck, we discussed the situation. We both agreed that ramming the fence would probably get us through, but was probably an action less than prudent. We had no choice but to continue following the jeep trail, which according to the map, went back up to the ridge (in the wrong direction however) and theoretically back to the road we had turned off originally. It seemed to be the safest course.

So we put the truck in gear and slowly ground our way upwards to the ridge. We were now in a region with long abandoned but concentrated mining activity. The ground was mostly soft serpentine rock (chock full of asbestos) that supported little plant life. An occasional stunted manzanita with it's paper thin curly red bark did little to dispel the notion that this was an environment completely inhospitable to life. Mining roads ran in all directions, criss-crossing everywhere and it was impossible to tell if we were even on the road that shown on the map. In this climate, a road not used for 50 years looked as bad as a road recently made to a new mining claim.

About halfway up the ridge we came a significant fork in the road. The right fork ran off a ways and then seemed to descend back to the valley, but we could not find it on the topo map. It must have been made more recently than the map. That should have been a clue for us, but with the heat and glare we weren't really thinking very clearly. The left-hand track seemed to be the road shown on the map and continued in the desired direction and altitude. And would have been an automatic choice were it not for one small matter: someone had dragged a couple of mining timbers across that road and written a sign in crude letters on it which spelled out clearly "NO WAY".

Decision time again. We both agreed that we ought to avoid getting on another bad road but on the other hand, we knew that going back down was not going to be much help. The road out of that side of the valley we already knew we could never get back up.

So we pulled the timbers out of the way and headed up the left fork. The road wound along the side of the ravines staying pretty much at the same elevation. On the right side was a vertical cliff wall that went up to the top of the ridge and on the other side was the edge of a cliff with a drop-off of about 100 feet or more down to a dry creek filled with large boulders. When the road, barely wide enough for a single vehicle, came to a ravine, it always had to cross an eroded washout one or two feet wide that was fairly easy to jump by gunning the motor just as we came to it. The only hard part was that as soon as the truck was across the wash, it was imperative to turn the wheel hard to the left to get back on the road, since the side of the mountain would not be a good thing to run into. Of course the problem was that turning too hard to the left was not exactly a healthy thing either because of the drop-off.

Eventually the washouts got wider and it was more and more dramatic getting across without getting stuck in the wash or running into the rocks on the other side or driving off the edge of the road into the creek far below. Finally as we came upon the next ravine I saw that it was a good ten or twelve feet wide but only about two or three feet deep. "I'm going for it", I announced to no one in particular as I floored the accelerator. The truck seemed to leap forward across the wash, hung in the air, engine racing for moment, before it came down with a shock that stunned us for several seconds.

The only sound was that of the engine racing, but the truck was not moving, so I took my foot off the pedal and turned off the ignition. Silence. We got out, knowing what we were going to see but not really believing it yet. Sure enough, there was the truck, front bumper on the far edge of the wash, rear bumper on the front of the wash and all four wheels off the ground.

"Even four wheel drive wouldn't help much here" said Buffalo. I agreed with his appraisal but instead said somewhat hopefully "I bet if we just build up some rocks under one of the wheels so it could get traction, we could get it out of there". Since the rear wheels of the truck was equipped with posi-traction, this was actually a viable, although not exactly pleasant endeavor as the full force of the midday sun hit us.

Well we didn't have much choice, and so we both started hauling whatever flat rocks we could find and tried to build a platform under one of the rear tires. After we had shoved as much rock under the wheel as we could, I gently tried giving the wheel a little nudge while Buffalo tried to lift the rear bumper with the 6 foot crow bar which I always brought along. Immediately the wheel started to spin and scattered the rocks, that we had so patiently stacked, in all directions. This went on for about three iterations, after which we both sat on the ground and wondered how we were going to get out of here.

Finally I said, "Well, I guess I'd better give the winch a try". For a full 10 seconds Buffalo didn't say anything, then he turned his head and said evenly "You had a winch all this time?". "Well yes, I didn't think we were stuck so bad that we really needed it at first", I said a little defensively. "John, what exactly would you call stuck really bad?", he wanted to know.

Without answering, I opened the back of the truck and crawled in. Things were really tossed around, but otherwise seemed well enough. I first got some beers and then finally made my way to the tool box on the back of the cab and opened it and pulled out the winch and its associated hardware. It was a heavy duty boat winch, non-motorized but quite powerful. It could actually hold the entire weight of the truck, but I hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

The winch bolted to the front of custom bumper I had made for the truck. This bumper was made from 4 inch P, G & E steel gas line and half inch cold rolled steel plate. Very heavy. Probably weighed over 300 lbs. and was attached directly to the frame of the truck. I made it this way for two reasons: the first was normal protection for the truck itself and second to help hold the front wheels on the ground when hauling a heavy load in back. This particular truck has a very short wheel base which made it incredibly maneuverable, but with so much pickup bed hanging out past the rear wheels, one had to be careful to avoid the already mentioned tendency to lift the front wheels when too much of the load was distributed behind the axle.

In about 10 minutes I had the winch attached and in the meantime Buffalo had run the cable out to a large rock on the other side of the ravine. We started cranking and in short time had tension on the cable and the back bumper started scraping. "O.K., I'll keep tightening the winch and you give it a little gas", Buffalo shouted over the sound of the engine. Slowly, like pulling itself out of quicksand, the truck lifted its front end out of the dry wash and seemed to gasp for air as it climbed out.

Just then I noticed that the rear wheels slipping sideways and quickly yelled "Stop!". The rear of the truck was starting to slide down the ravine. I had a vision of the truck as it flipped off the edge and tumbled down the cliff rolling over and over again until it landed on the bottom with a gigantic fireball explosion while we watched helplessly from the top of the cliff. I shook my head, "It's sliding downhill, I'd better get out a "come-a-long" to keep the truck on the road while you winch it forward. After securing the rear bumper to another rock, we winched and pulled until finally the rear wheels hit the bottom of the gully and I was able to start the engine again. In a few more seconds and a shower of stones and dust the truck stood on all four wheels on the other side of the ravine.

After hauling in the cables we were too tired to celebrate, so simply slapped each other on the back and got back in the truck. We didn't get very far however. After jumping a couple more of those small ravines we quite simply came to the end of the line.

It was just gone. Maybe a landslide took it away, maybe the road builders just gave up. In any case there was no more road, just a slight widening of the track and then a cliff that dropped about two hundred feet straight down. Realizing that we were going to have to turn around right here, we both got out and looked at the road. It was about a foot wider than the wheel base of the truck if that. "This isn't going to be easy", I muttered as I got back behind the wheel. Fortunately, even though the truck didn't have power steering, it did have a steering wheel that more properly belonged on a bus. That, along with the short turning radius steering made the impossible possible.

Well it took us about a half an hour and there were a couple of scary moments when the wheels started sliding over the edge of the road, but eventually we were turned around and pointed in the right direction. The direction that we came from in the first place of course. "A classic 200 point turn", I said to Buffalo as he climbed back in the truck. "Let's just hope we don't get stuck again in that damn ravine on the way out", he growled. "Amen to that", I answered.

We quickly came back to the giant ravine. I stopped the truck to survey the situation again. It seemed to look even wider than before. "Now I know what I did wrong the first time, I just needed a little more speed." I pronounced with confidence. "OK, fine, but I'm getting out while you try it" Buffalo said showing that actions speak louder than words.

I backed the truck up a bit and floored it. The truck leaped forward and bounded down the rutted road. As it came to the edge I gave it an extra shot of gas and turned the wheel just before the front tires left the ground. The truck sailed over the ravine engine roaring and then once again it seemed to hang in space until with a CRASH, all four wheels hit the ground and the truck started to skid toward the rock wall on the other side. I slowly, quickly (time has no meaning in these moments) tried to turn into and back out of the skid and was just going to clear the wall when a moderate sized boulder which protruded just a few inches too far into the road came into my vision. No... way... out... and then, a simultaneous BANG-SQUEAK of metal and flying rock dust, told me that irresistible force had met immovable object.

When we got back to the fork in the road we dutifully pulled the timber back across the road and I got a marking pen out of the truck and wrote under words already there: "NO KIDDIN". Buffalo was looking at the bumper. "Impressive" he said as I came around to get a closer look. It wasn't that noticeable from the front of the truck, but looking closer I could see that the three massive pieces of PG&E gas line weren't exactly in a straight line anymore.

Following the other road, we made fairly good time turning up one mining road after another, slowing winding our way up and after 2 or 3 hours reached the top of the ridge just as the sun was setting. There was a camping spot of sorts and we pulled off the road and watched the remainder of the glowing red sun as it sank behind the most unearthly landscape I have ever seen. The disappearing sun lent the torn and jagged hills an rusty orange glow and a thick dusty haze gave the atmosphere a choking, dirty look that would have been more suitable perhaps on

the planet Vulcan, a feeling which was altogether reinforced by the almost total absence of plant life in all directions. What few plants were visible were so twisted and knarled that they seemed positively extra-terrestrial themselves. We seemed to be the only humans for hundreds of miles. What can I say, it was one of the most beautiful landscapes I've ever seen.

Feasting on those steaks, seared over a fire of glowing coals, along with generous baked beans, washed down with tepid beer, we looked at each other, and after careful deliberation, declared it to be "Good".

That night the sky was cold and clear, and as the campfire died, the stars burned brighter like diamonds without a twinkle and the summer Milky Way was a broad band strewn across the sky that wound and twisted around itself as though it were alive. The blackness between the stars was so deep that one felt that the sky had both depth and texture. It was like being suspended in the middle of a sea of lights, floating and turning in time. As I dropped off to sleep, I saw a meteor, burn greenish white across the sky, without a sound.

The next morning was cool and bright, and we wanted to get an early start, but before getting going, we both decided to look a little closer at the old USGS topo map. The first problem was to locate our position on the map. This wasn't as easy as it sounds, because although we knew we were on a ridge, the map showed at least four separate roads crossing the ridge that we were assuming was ours. "Let's just start on down and see if we can tell from the lay of the road which one is the one we're on", I suggested.

On this side of the ridge the ground was steeper and the road was heavily eroded into braided gullies. Each time we came to a fork, we stopped and got out, my friend taking the right fork and myself the left one. We would each go a quarter mile or so to check the road condition and meet back at the fork and compare notes on which way looked the least dangerous. Altogether, it was probably only slightly better than simply flipping a coin. There were so many roads, leading in all directions, all in such bad condition, that at no time did we ever feel confident that we knew where we were.

But the country was spectacular and the geology surrounded us. Without ground cover or even any soil underfoot, the raw earth revealed its twisted, fractured and folded secrets to even the most undiscerning eye in all directions. The bright colors of ore bearing rocks were splashed everywhere like a bad modern art painting of orange hematite, red cinnabar, blue and green serpentine rocks. We often paused to collect particularly splendid pieces of blue jadite and encrustations of green uvarovite garnets on heavy chunks of pure black chromite.

After, four or five hours of slowly winding our way down the side of the mountain, the road got even worse and finally became so steep that it was difficult to keep the truck from simply sliding downhill even with all four wheels locked up. "I hope we don't have to try and get back up this road", I said through gritted teeth. "There's no way we'd get enough traction on this road".

The road was very loose now and a large portion of it was rolling along with us as we plowed through mounds of dry silt and gravel left from the eroded hillsides above us. We came around some large rocks into a dry river channel made mostly of powdery talc and concerned about getting stuck in the soft river bed I picked up speed until we finally popped over the bank and down a small slope onto what seemed to our eyes to be a well maintained gravel road.

Civilization at least! Well sort of. We turned a corner in the road and found, to our surprise, a group of pig hunters with several shiny new 4 X 4's parked around their campsite having a beer or two. We pulled up and got out, "Let's see where we are", I said to Buffalo walking over to them. These guys eyed us curiously as we approached. "Hi", I opened cheerfully, "Could you tell us if this is the road to New Idria?", as I pointed to the east. There was a slight pause, then one of them spoke up "You ought to know, you just came from there", he smirked. "No, we didn't come that way, we came down that road there", I said pointing behind me up the side of the hill across the dry creek. In unison, their heads swiveled to look the way I was pointing, and then, still in concert, they turned slowly to look at our truck parked in the road. For the first time that day I looked at the truck closely. The bumper was bent, the sides of the truck were raked with long jagged grooves and the entire body, normally a fine shade of flat black and red primer, was dusted with white talc from the dry river bed we had just plowed through. It looked like hell.

Finally another of the pig hunters spoke up in a voice with a touch of awe, "Hell, it's been five years since anything came down that road... and it had caterpillar tracks on it!".

We thanked them and got back in the truck. They continued to stare at us while we turned around and until we disappeared around a bend in the road to the New Idria mercury workings. We still had a lot more exploring to do and the day was half over already. Well, we never did get to the Gem Mine that trip, but it did turn out to be lots of fun anyway.

The End