

Rocks, not riches

Prospecting is its own reward

By **JIM GERSBACH**
Of the Emerald

Paul Vollum doesn't own a burro, but he's been to more goldfields than many an old sourdough prospector. He's even struck paydirt.

Vollum, a geologist with the Willamette Science and Technology Center, came across his big find in the Mojave Desert.

After a storm he noticed some crystals in a clump of bushes. They proved to be lead sulphite, a silver-bearing ore. Vollum started digging and ran across a vein of silver.

But striking it rich has never preoccupied Vollum, who dresses in worn jeans and mud-spattered tennis shoes.

"Like a lot of people who are into prospecting, I'm not really into possessions," he says, "nor have I any desire to accumulate great quantities of gold."

Searching for the metal is its own reward, he says.

Vollum will teach others how to seek elusive metals as part of a WISTEC science class beginning the third week of January. Call 484-9027 for registration information.

Originally from northern Minnesota's mining region, Vollum came to the University in 1966. But he didn't become interested in Oregon's geologic riches until two years later when a friend offered to take him to an old gold mining area near the Bohemias, 35 miles east of Cottage Grove.

Vollum went for the exercise but became fascinated by the minerals he found.

"I took to rocks like a duck takes to water," he says of the outing.

Vollum spent the next several days in the University science library reading about rocks.

After graduating in 1972, Vollum prospected for a time on a claim he'd staked out in Alaska. While prospecting

for precious stones in a remote section of the Yukon a year later, he made his most exciting mineral find — a topaz in flawless smoky quartz crystals the size of a thumb.

"I couldn't bring myself to take them out, even though they would be worth quite a lot of money as specimens," Vollum says of his decision to leave the rare find intact.

Vollum describes himself as "environmentally sensitive." Despite the outcry over mining's impact on the environment, he sees mining as less destructive than logging.

"I don't characterize miners as ecological rats."

Mining's poor image comes from the highly visible devastation strip mining causes, he says. But unlike strip-mined land, many areas of intense gold mining have reverted to forest without expensive restoration, he says.

Oregon's geology is particularly rich, Vollum says with a characteristic flourish of his hands.

"I don't think there's a place in Oregon where you can't find something interesting."

Near the southern Oregon town of Riddle, for example, is the only operating nickel mine in the United States. Agates can be found throughout much of the state, and both Eastern Oregon and the Cascade foothills contain volcanic rocks and gold. The Willamette Valley holds fossils, quartz and gas cavities containing jaspers and agates.

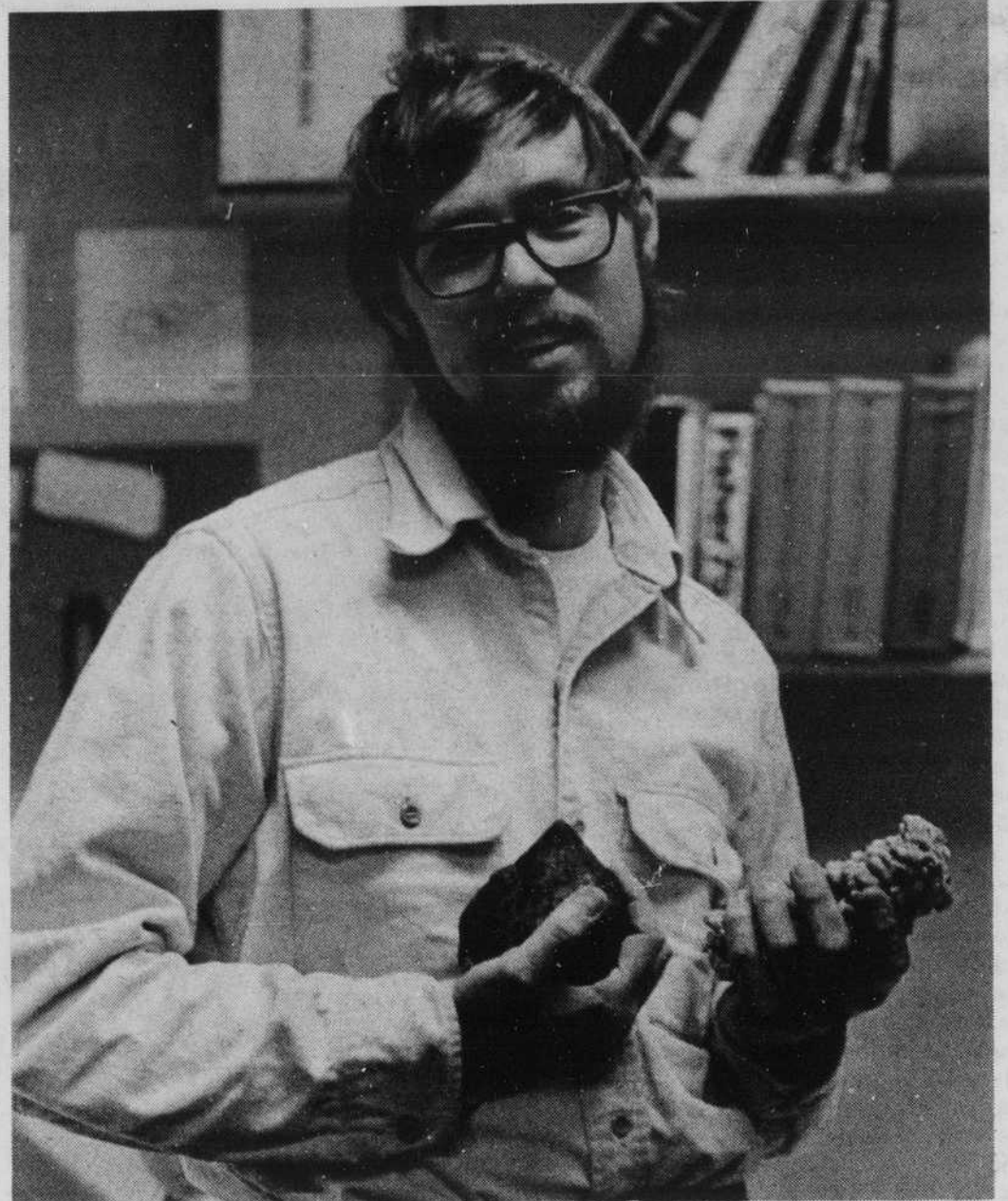
That variety explains Oregonians' generally high level of interest in geology, Vollum says.

"A lot of people here have a box of rocks they drag out and are proud of."

For many Oregon rockhounds, including Vollum, prospecting for minerals is a chance to get closer to nature.

"You can't fail to notice the greenery and plants. It's sort of a gestaltic activity, more than people realize."

"A lot of people use hunting for rocks as an excuse to go out into the woods



Paul Vollum

Photo by Debby Abe

and then find they get a lot out of just going."

Vollum also finds pleasure in the aesthetics of rocks and the millennial processes that formed them. He's especially taken with one formation on a mountainside in the Wallowas of northeastern Oregon.

Ages ago a dark layer of rock was bent into curves by upward pressure. Eons later, lava flowed over the curves. Erosion later exposed the rock layers that now resemble a giant snake etched on the cliff.

"It looks like some giant temple," he says.

Vollum, who holds a degree in philosophy, describes himself as a believer

in the mystical. Rocks definitely do have a certain magic, he says.

"I've been in some places in the Yukon where you can see 80 miles in each direction. The wind's whistling around you and you're sitting on a mountain made up of granite rocks as big as a planetarium and the feeling is wwwooo."

After the recent Voyager trip to Jupiter's moons a friend asked Vollum if he would go to outer space to study the geology of other worlds, even if it meant never returning.

"Sure," replied Vollum.

Would he miss Earth?

"Sure, but it would be worth it. I would do it for the awe."

Illegal crews cut out treeplanting co-ops

By **STEPHEN KNIGHT**
Of the Emerald

Undocumented Mexican workers are creating heavy financial burdens for treeplanting co-ops in the Northwest.

Northwest Forest Workers representative Rick Coven told about 30 people at the Emerald Baptist Church Thursday night that many co-ops are going bankrupt because they can't compete with low-paid —

Feds limit loans

A new law will prohibit the state Veteran's Affairs Board from making some home and farm loans.

The 97th Congress amended a housing bond bill to prevent the VAB from refinancing mortgages, land contracts or farm loans held by institutions other than the veteran's board.

The law, which went into effect Jan. 1, applies to all uncompleted loans, regardless of whether applications were filed before that date.

The new law limits the uses to which receipts from tax-exempt bonds may be put. In the past Oregon's veteran affairs department has used receipts from tax-exempt bonds to finance home and farm purchases by thousands of veterans who live in the state.

However, agency officials say they can foresee little trouble because of the law.

"It will work to everyone's advantage," says Don Meyers of the VAB. "There will be some delays until they re-tool their program."

Meyers says his office can help any veteran having a problem with a loan.

The law does not prohibit the financing of home purchases or the refinancing of construction loans or mortgages already held by the department.

or in some instances unpaid — undocumented workers.

But Coven blamed "unscrupulous contractors" instead of the undocumented workers, called UWs, for the co-ops' lack of jobs.

Treeplanting jobs are awarded to the lowest bidder. Because contractors using UWs have lower labor costs, they can underbid other contractors, Coven explained.

Coven said treeplanting wages should not drop below \$6.50 per hour, but he charged that UWs aren't even paid minimum wage. In some cases they are deported instead of being paid, he said.

But while UWs are being exploited and a few contractors are making "extraordinary profits," most treeplanting co-ops are having trouble surviving.

Coven said one group of treeplanters, the Home-grown Co-op from Days Creek, lost 40 straight bids last year.

"They ended up taking jobs just so they could feed themselves."

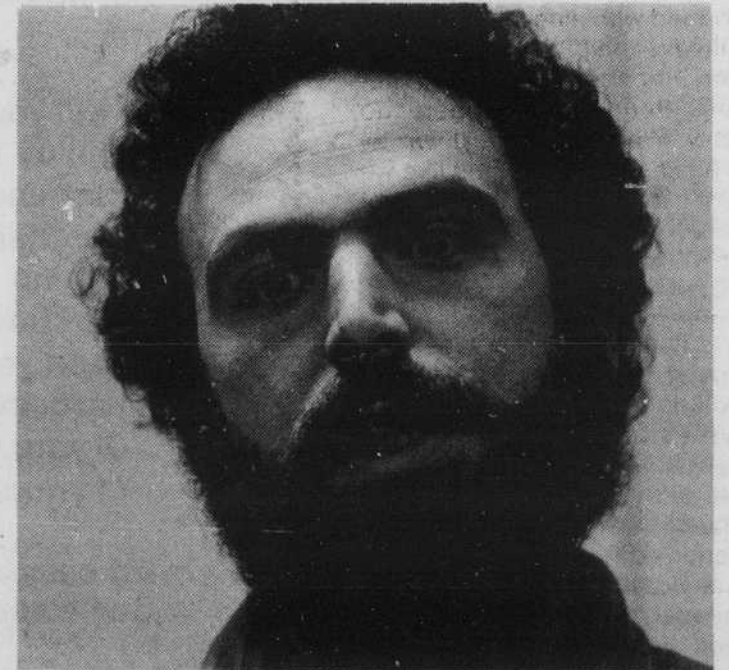
Coven claimed that along with a few dishonest contractors, various government agencies "create an atmosphere where the UWs problem can thrive."

The forest service refuses to investigate suspiciously low bids, he said, describing the agency's philosophy as "the government does not have the right to tell a contractor he can't lose money."

The labor department has the power to stop fraudulent contractors but claims it can't get witnesses, and the Bureau of Land Management lacks the jurisdiction to deal with the problem, Coven explained.

Coven said one forest service official was quoted as saying the reason no one investigates UWs is because "they don't talk back, and they don't take coffee breaks."

Because of the nature of treeplanting, there aren't many clear-cut solutions to the undocumented worker problem, Coven maintained.



Rick Coven

Photo by Hank Trotter

UWs are almost impossible to organize because they live in constant fear of deportation, and any union tactic would be of little use to the UWs, Coven said.

"It's hard to boycott a forest."

However, Coven said he believes a work-card system for UWs, an immediate investigation of extremely low bids and getting the aid of Oregon's congressmen in the matter would help the co-ops survive.

Meanwhile, "we've circled up the wagons," he said. "We have enough supplies to last about a year."

Coven's appearance was sponsored by Clergy and Laity Concerned.