

OFFBEAT OREGON HISTORY

State biggest uranium mine was found by amateur rockhound

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
Offbeat Oregon

During the go-go years of the uranium-mining rush of the early 1950s, the character of the uranium prospector became iconic. He was basically the gold-seeking “miner 49er” updated for the atomic age: in lieu of a mule, he rode an Army-surplus Jeep. In place of pick and gold pan, he carried a Geiger counter and ultraviolet flashlight.

For the better part of a decade seekers of “A-metal” deposits (the “A” stood for “Atomic”) prowled all over the public lands of all the Western states, waving their Geiger counters at every promising rock formation. They spent a lot of time getting excited, and a lot of time being disappointed. Oregon has a lot of uranium, much of it in the form of autinite crystals; but it’s very thinly distributed — in most deposits, there is enough to set off a Geiger counter and get a prospector all excited, but not enough to mine.

So it’s ironic, but maybe not surprising, that Oregon’s biggest uranium strike was made by a guy who didn’t even own a Geiger counter.

Lakeview business owner Don Tracy knew almost nothing about rocks and geology until he was in his late 30s. That’s when he stumbled across some stones, multi-colored and obviously semiprecious, that he couldn’t identify. None of his friends could either.

Tracy hit the books, borrowing everything the Lakeview public library had on gemstones and even digging into geology textbooks from Oregon State University.

He also set up a rock shop in his garage with polishing and cutting equipment, and started going out with his family on regular excursions to hunt up new specimens.

He never did find a name for his stones. They were some kind of jasper, but beyond that they apparently were unknown to science. Today they are known as Tracinite.

Tracy was still in the full flush of his new geology hobby when the uranium craze broke out. The first thing he wanted to do was go out and use his newfound knowledge of mineralogy to try to find some.

Tracy didn’t own a Geiger counter, but he knew what uranium oxide crystals looked like — and maybe he remembered seeing something like them on one of his previous rockhounding expeditions. In any case, he closed in on the future site of the White King Mine like a bloodhound on a scent. There, near the edge of the Fremont National Forest, he found a deposit of rocks with promising-looking crystals set in them. He promptly staked a claim around them, naming it the Lucky Day.

Back he went to Lakeview with a sample of the rocks. Because he wasn’t kitted out for uranium mining, he had to borrow an ultraviolet light from a friend to shine at the rocks. Under it, they fluoresced the characteristic chartreuse color of uranium oxide crystals.

To make sure, he sent a sample to the Oregon Department of Geology. The department checked the samples and replied that there was uranium in them — in the form of autinite — but not enough to be worth processing. But they encouraged him to keep looking.

He did, moving afield from his first discovery, looking for rocks more densely packed with autinite crystals. And again, he very quickly found what he was looking for, near the banks of Augur Creek, stuck in the dirt wad of a tree that had blown down in a winter storm a month or two before.

He found two partners and the three of them staked 16 claims covering the “hot” ground in the state forest and on Walter Leehman’s land, and got busy exploiting it. They named the claim cluster “The White King Group.”

While all of this was going on, another group of prospec-



Uranium prospectors Lee Gibson, Allen Berends, and Elden Berends stake a claim in Malheur County in 1954 in this photo made by Harano Studio of Ontario.

tors was hunting across Lake County for the elusive A-metal using a very different technique.

Their names were Don Lindsey, Robert Adams, Clair Smith and Choc Shelton, and the four of them had gotten interested in uranium mining a year earlier, in 1954. They had pooled their resources to purchase an extremely expensive Geiger counter, a Detetron Nucleometer, which was allegedly so sensitive that one could use it to sniff out uranium deposits from low-flying airplane. Adams had a Piper Super Cub, so they used that to try the Nucleometer out.

It didn’t work so great. Many hours of tedious, dangerous treetop hopping later, they had nothing to show for it. So they switched to prospecting the old-fashioned way, or rather the new-old-fashioned way, with a Jeep, using the Nucleometer like a regular Geiger counter.

They were doing that when rumors reached their ears of Tracy’s big strike.

Nobody admitted it. The prospectors said they were put onto the scent when a friend told them he’d seen pickup trucks leaving the Fremont National Forest with their beds full of rocks. But it seems most likely they used the Super Cub to figure out where the mining action was taking place. It wasn’t the kind of activity that one could do by stealth and by night.

However they figured it out, figure it out they did, and prospecting out from the marked claims of the White King group with the help of their overpowered Nucleometer, they soon honed in on a spot that was so hot, the Nucleometer actually couldn’t measure it — there was no sensitivity setting low enough to keep the needle from simply pegging at the high end.

As quickly as possible, they staked and filed a discovery claim and four claims around it, dubbing it the Lucky Lass Mine. And they weren’t a moment too soon. Other prospectors were already arriving. The word, it seemed, was out.

“Talk about excitement!” Clair Smith wrote, in correspondence with author Ruby El Hult. “The next day the discovery ... was in the newspapers, on the radio and TV all across the nation. People came from all over, some from 1,000 miles or more away.”

“The first week after the discovery we estimated 2,000 cars drove by in front of the open cut,” he added. “Of the ore dug and piled by the side of the road, two or three tons must have been carried off piece by piece as souvenirs by sightseers. Our little town (Lakeview) looked like Gold Rush days, with street hawkers on corners selling Geiger counters and scintillators.”

Over that crazy summer of

1955, nearly 10,000 claims were staked in the Fremont National Forest by hopeful prospectors, most of them based on marginal readings from the cheap Geiger counters like the ones hawked on the streets of Lakeview. The area teemed with Army surplus Jeeps and battered pickup trucks. And one or two of them may even have panned out. But, a decade later, only two of them remained in operation: The White King and the Lucky Lass.

No uranium-mining story has a really happy ending. Few of the prospectors and miners who were involved in the industry realized how dangerous uranium ore really was.

But Oregon got off comparatively unscathed, at least by comparison with other Western states.

The White King and the Lucky Lass were open-pit mines, so Lakeview was spared the trauma of losing a generation of underground uranium miners to a pandemic of lung cancer a dozen years later. (The White King did have one underground mine, but most of the work was done in the big pit.)

After the uranium market declined to the point of the mines no longer being profitable, both were closed, and the pits filled with water to form White King Pond and Lucky

Lass Pond (13 acres and five acres, respectively). Left behind were mountainous heaps of radioactive tailings.

Both sites were added to the government’s Superfund cleanup program in 2001. Today, the hottest of the tailings have been hauled away and more-or-less safely buried in a “disposal cell” area nearby, protected by a heavy layer of compacted soil topped with rock. The remaining tailings are buried on site, and the whole area presents the appearance of a peaceful meadowland — although access is restricted due to the lingering radioactivity.

■ Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, *Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon*, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

SOLUTION Sudoku on Page 2

9	4	1	7	2	6	8	3	5
3	5	7	8	1	4	6	2	9
6	8	2	3	5	9	7	4	1
2	7	8	1	6	5	3	9	4
1	9	3	4	7	2	5	6	8
4	6	5	9	3	8	2	1	7
7	2	9	5	4	3	1	8	6
5	3	4	6	8	1	9	7	2
8	1	6	2	9	7	4	5	3

SOLUTION Crossword on Page 2

A	S	T	A	F	O	N	D	E	M	O	T	E					
T	A	R	S	A	M	O	R	N	O	M	A	D					
A	M	O	S	C	A	R	E	T	R	E	N	D					
L	O	U	I	S	A	R	M	S	T	R	O	N	G				
L	A	P	S	E	D	S	H	E	N								
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C	H	E	E	R	O	H	I	O	O	V	A						
H	U	D	D	I	E	L	E	D	B	E	T	T	E	R			
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P	A	T	T	E	R	F	A	T	H	A							
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G	E	L	I	D	T	S	A	R	S	E	S	S					



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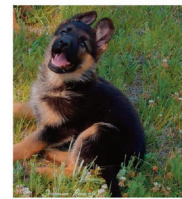
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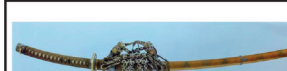
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NOTICE TO INTERESTED PERSONS NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that Colton West Sweden has been appointed personal representative. All persons having claims against the estate are required to present them, with vouchers attached, to the undersigned personal representative through his attorney, Jacklyn L. Richins, at Baxter Harder, LLC, 400 SW Bond St., Ste 200, Bend, OR 97702 within four months after the date of first publication of this notice, or the claims may be barred.

All persons whose rights may be affected by the proceedings may obtain additional information from the records of the Court, the personal representative, or the attorney for the personal representative, Jacklyn L. Richins. Dated and first published on March 23, 2022
Jacklyn L. Richins, OSB #184300
Attorney for Personal Representative

101 Legal Notices

Colton West Sweden 625 N. Hamilton St., #38 Chandler, AZ 85225
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Baxter Harder, LLC
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F: (541) 306-3045
e-mail: jacklyn@baxterharder.com

Legal Notice IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE STATE OF OREGON FOR THE COUNTY OF DESCHUTES

In the Matter of the Estate of: **ISABEL CRUZ ANZORA**, Deceased. Case No. 22PB01179
NOTICE TO INTERESTED PERSONS NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that Juan Francisco Mendez has been appointed personal representative. All persons having claims against the estate are required to present them, with vouchers attached, to the undersigned personal representative through his attorney, Jacklyn L. Richins, at Baxter Harder, LLC, 400 SW Bond St., Ste 200, Bend, OR 97702 within four months after the date of first publication of this notice, or the claims may be barred.

All persons whose rights may be affected by the proceedings may obtain additional information from the records of the Court, the personal representative, or the attorney for the personal representative, Jacklyn L. Richins. Dated and first published on March 23, 2022
Jacklyn L. Richins, OSB #184300
Attorney for Personal Representative
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e-mail: jacklyn@baxterharder.com

102 Public Notices

Legal Notice

The undersigned has been appointed personal representative of the Estate of Marjorie C. Palmer, Deceased, by the Deschutes County Circuit Court of the State of Oregon, probate number 22PB02403. All persons having claims against the estate are required to present the same with proper vouchers within four (4) months after the date of first publication to the undersigned or they may be barred. Additional information may be obtained from the court records, the undersigned or the attorney. Date first published: April 5, 2022
Debbie Palmer
Personal Representative
c/o Steven D. Bryant
Attorney at Law
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