

The Green New York

It began with a quest for diamonds, Herkimer diamonds. Sally Wood-Hoskins helped me prepare mineral kits for Baker College's SCI 352 rock and mineral lab. She had taught Geology for years while I was just finishing the work on curriculum for the new SCI352.

"These are quartz crystals but they look like cut diamonds. That's the way they are found in nature, fully faceted clear crystals. You know the stuff of new agers."

I've forgotten exactly how Sally phrased it, something like "Are you the feely, sensing type person who is into crystal power?"

"No," I replied. I thought she was a new-ager as I looked at the beautiful crystals in her walkout basement. There were two large glassed cases full of different varieties of crystals in matrix.

"We are not that kind of collectors either; although someone once said they 'call to me'."

Sally meant that she had a way of finding where the diamonds would be.

Sally put together the itinerary for a trip to Herkimer, New York. We were going to mine for crystals. Mother's day came and my kids fitted me out with back packs, hammers and chisels. I got together one bag of clothes and toiletries. At 4:30 p.m. on May 22, 2003, I packed some books and egg cartons in the car, threw together some bottles of grapefruit juice, Clif bars and oats, then set out for Sally's house. Sally and I would drive together with T, short for Taylor, her 10 year old grandson. Sally finished packing, said goodbye to her husband John, and we headed for Belleville to pick up T. I tried to get some papers graded but my mind wasn't in that zone.

Taylor was big for his age. He was enamored with Game boy and Pokeman like all boys his age. Sally, the teacher that she is, made sure that Taylor also brought pencil and paper. His task was to journal. I smiled, knowing that I also took to the task of journaling, but also that T would not understand the difficulty of the task ahead.

We were caravanning with Sally's husband, John, and his friend Jeff. We communicated by walkie-talkie. At 7:30 p.m., we met them at McDonalds in Milan, Michigan before proceeding on. We stopped several times at service areas for coffee, food, and gas. This was a relaxed group of people. Clearly Sally was the "leader" with John giving only an occasional, well placed correction.

Around 2:30 in the morning, we slept in our cars at a service area on the I 90 toll road then resumed travel at 5 a.m. We reached the little town of Herkimer and the Inn Towne Motel about 9 in the morning. The motel was old but clean. There were no amenities like free shampoo but the rate was \$45 per night, a cost we split. We checked our bags, plugged in the refrigerator, grabbed brochures and set out for "Treasure Mountain". The sky was overcast and the weather cool, perfect for rock splitting.

We worked for several hours splitting rock, sifting sand and looking for vugs, pockets where the Herkimer diamonds might be. John worked all day on a particular boulder of rock. Jeff and T followed a known find, successfully. Sally picked out some rocks for me and suggested what I might do. I picked a spot on a ledge of rock and attacked it with my 3# crack hammer and a chisel. After a while, a long while, I managed to find a crystal wedged in a pocket. I called for Sally's expertise. She called for John. It required a little more muscle than either of us had. John cut the block out of the rock.

“I’ve never seen rock come out like this before,” he said. The rock was almost a perfectly rectangular block about 8 inches by 4 inches by 6 inches. It wasn’t the hard dolomite that John was working on. It looked almost like sandstone. Tap it and it “sang” like metal. I worked for a couple more hours on that site, not finding anything else. Jeff wanted to go and explore for trilobites and other fossils. I drove.

The road was a rough cut to the quarry we were at. I put the Toyota Camry into 2nd gear and went slow.

“Steer the tires to the high mounds in the road and you won’t scrape bottom,” Jeff suggested.

I prayed for smooth rocks and thanked the Lord for a family who had the sense to pray for my safety.

The shale pit was near the entrance to the property. I found nothing. Jeff tried to educate me about the dating of the shale and how it wasn’t conducive to the fossils we were looking for but I couldn’t tell you now if it was Ordovician, Silurian or Devonian. The shale was a hard, charcoal colored rock. It wasn’t oily like the Carbonale, Pennsylvania shales. This rock cleaved easily into sheets and broke into small fragments. I preferred the softer clay of the Milan shales in Michigan. I didn’t think that much of anything could be found intact in the Herkimer pit. There was standing water at the bottom of the embankment indicating that under our feet was also shale that prevented water from sinking down into soil. I kept praying that if God wanted me to look at a particular spot that He would impress me a little harder, please. He didn’t. We returned to the quarry.

Sally had packed a cooler with bread, lunch meats and mayonnaise, ice and water. I had a bottle of grapefruit juice and a sandwich. I worked for a bit but Sally was mined out and wanted a change of pace. We returned to the shale. Sally found a nice trilobite for me in sandstone. She seemed satisfied just to prove that Jeff was wrong. The trilobite was among the first of the arthropods, a phylum of hard-shelled creatures with multiple body segments and jointed legs. A topnotch website on trilobites is <http://www.aloha.net/%7Esmgon/ordersoftrilobites.htm>.

On the way back to the quarry, I stopped at an outhouse. It was a pleasant surprise – from the smelly ones I remembered in the past, in the days when lime was used.

Jeff and Taylor were working on a sandy spot on the far end of the quarry. We joined them. I stayed at the spot while they ventured on. That’s where I found a 2” smoky quartz, doubly faceted crystal. Later Jeff remarked, they sold a 1.5” scepter like that at auction for \$450 at the gem and mineral show. “Yours is larger.”

“Well, maybe I should lock my car then,” I said sincerely.

I prize that “scepter” but I don’t think it is nearly as valuable as Jeff believed. It was not one perfect crystal but 3 joining imperfectly formed, in-matrix crystals. Yet the smoky color was beautiful and had one spot of iridescence that added to its beauty. I had been bothered by the potential value of the crystal and offered to trade Sally for some lesser valuable pieces, ones I could take to school.

“You don’t want to do that, Lori. You need to keep that one for yourself. I have plenty of nice scepters. People bring me crystals all the time for the auction.”

Sally was referring to the silent auction that the Gem and Mineral show put on, more specifically that Sally and John put on at the Gem and Mineral show. Money was raised for scholarships for students wanting to study in the Earth sciences.

When the day was spent, we returned to the motel, showered and went to Herb Philipson's Army and Navy store. T needed to purchase a couple of souvenirs and the rest of us were looking for something we forgot to bring. I bought a tee shirt and rain pants. We went to dinner at Appleby's. The conversation was wonderful as the three told tales of previous adventures. John, in a slightly Midwestern inflection, "They don't want us back in Kentucky anymore."

It seemed that every time the three of them were in Kentucky, a disaster would occur.

"You know, little things, like tornados," John said.

Three of us were in education and had plenty of stories to trade. Jeff and John did electrical work on the side.

"John can make me anything," Sally would often say.

Sally taught earth science classes and spoke about the things John built such as a volcano and an earthquake simulator. I really got excited when John started talking about building a wave generator with copper pipe, propane and sound.

John talked about his scuba diving days with Jeff Lewis. They were tested in a rock quarry filled with water. An old plane, bus and other debris were deliberately sunk and marked with buoys. Teams of two would go out. One person carried a marker while the other set out underwater to "find" the target. Sand quickly got kicked up making identification difficult. They were given a limited time.

"My ears got so bad I had to quit," said John. He pointed along his neck, "Eustachian tubes are too small. I came up as slow as I could from 40 feet below but my ears were just throbbing."

Jeff joined in with a discussion on the pros and cons of wet versus dry suits. It seems that wet suits trap air and counteract the effect of water pressure. It seemed like Jeff knew a little about a lot of things.

"He's not as bad as he used to be," Sally later said about his conversation.

I had promised Connie I would email her but I got back to the motel and promptly went to sleep; and so it went for the rest of the trip. After a day of "mining", I was too tired to even read my Trigonometry book or do any more preparation for next week's class. Internet would definitely wait. There was no direct access in the motel and only one service area we had been to had access. I didn't touch the laptop at all. I did call home and let my husband Larry know we were safe.

I was awakened at 6:30 a.m. by a telephone ring. No one else heard it.

Outside, the rain was lingering. Sally and I decided we would like to go to Howe's Cavern. John and Jeff were always agreeable. Breakfast at the Waffle house and then we were on our way, this time with Jeff and John leading. They took us off the toll road at exit 29A.

"It's too green. New York is too green. You don't think of New York that way," said Sally. "When I told Kristen and Karl that I wanted Taylor to come they didn't like the idea of taking him to New York. We're going rock hunting! You don't go rock hunting in the city!"

The road, route 10, followed the curves of the Adirondack. It was green. The soft minty green of May apple mottled the roadside, contrasting with the meadow's Kelly green, while the deep emeralds of the pines formed a backdrop and ecotone to the mountains. The meadow was lightly brushed with the yellows and whites of the wildflowers, while cattle and sheep punctuated the hillsides. Missing were the silvery hues of willow trees. Occasionally there was the intrusion of purple lilac, a reminder that this was a populated area. We both agreed on the spectacular beauty of the valley against the mountains. That day, we were ascending into low hanging clouds.

"Stratus clouds." Sally was instructing Taylor about the relationship between clouds and fog.

"It would make a nice entry for your journal, Taylor. We ascended into the clouds," I said dramatically. "T" was lost in his Gameboy.

"Turn that music off," said Sally, several times.

We were treated to the awesome formations inside Howe Cavern; stalactites, stalagmites and flows.

"C tight," said Sally speaking about the difference between stalactites and stalagmites and how to remember the difference, "C for ceiling, sticking to the ceiling tight."

"Oh," I said, "m for mound."

"Mound to the ground. I love it, Lori," Sally replied referring to the "g and m" in stalagmite.

At dinner that night, John would remark that with three teachers, Taylor didn't have a chance.

The guide paused at one point to share a story about a boy scout who brought a pet mouse with him. The mouse got loose and everyone did what they could to catch him but he jumped into the wrong place where he slid down a flow hit the water and jumped back up and he said as he pointed up to a small stalactite, "stuck to the ceiling!" It did look like a mouse hanging from the ceiling.

On the boat trip through the caverns, the guide remarked that there weren't any living things in the cavern except an occasional bat. I could, however, see a mossy growth and occasional small weak vine where the floodlights provided energy for photosynthesis.

Jeff, in his usual way, went on to explain the possibilities of penicillin spores being transported by the lungs of travelers through the caverns. When the tour ended, "Papa" John bought "T" an \$8 bag of sand.

"I don't want pyrite," said T to the salesclerk. "We've got lots of those at home."

"T" took the bag to the sluice and sifted the sand. There was a mineral chart for identification. The bag yielded various mineral specimens such as periodot and garnet and the pyrite, T said he didn't want but seemed pleased to find.

Since the guys had lost our way into the mountains, it was Sally and my job to find our way out. However, we didn't do any better than they and managed to get lost between Cobbleskil and Schohare. We stopped and ate at a restaurant. By this time, we knew to position ourselves so the waiter or waitress wouldn't be confused about the bill. Sally, John and T sat in a row while Jeff and I sat opposite each other. Jeff said that he and John had written a song.

"Sing it for us!" I said.

“Not here!”

We got our bearings and proceeded to Foxinhill Falls at Berne. “Schohare, Schohare...da da de da,” John and Jeff were singing over the walkie-talkie to the tune of Volaré.

“It must have taken an hour for them to write those lyrics!” said Sally.

There were trilobites, echinoderms, and brachiopods at Foxinhill Falls; evidence of an ancient sea. Jeff said it was Devonian and Ordovician rock.

“Platyceras,” said Jeff, “heavy ribs,” as he pointed to a brachiopod, an ancient shell creature.

Taylor got tired of looking. I could hear John trying to teach him how to skip stones across the water. Occasional Sally would lose her temper at T. John would take T aside and when T came back, he would politely apologize.

T was a very polite child. He was, however, a child.

“Lori,” said Sally, “I know what. You’d love Arkona. We’ll schedule a field trip to Arkona. You’ll find lots of trilobites there.”

The rocks were beautiful and some were strange and some were beautifully strange. The gang all helped me carry rock back to the car. On the way to the motel, we stopped for ice cream. Sally was on a hiatus from her diet. She was intent on enjoying her vacation. She had lost 40 pounds. We made our purchases and went outside to eat. Jeff and I both had the peanut butter chocolate chip frozen yogurt.

“Lori, look!”

Sally was motioning to the wall of a bermed area. Dark grey patterns lay locked in stone. “Gastropod,” said Jeff, “and look, that is the thorax of the trilobite.”

It never ceased to amaze me how exciting it was to find a fossil. I asked the ice cream man where the rock came from. He said he just worked there.

The rock could have come from anywhere in New York or adjoining states.

Back at the motel, I thought about doing some work but it wasn’t long before sleep came. I dreamed that I was teaching at Eastern Michigan University. I was late for class and my hair turned patchy white.

The next morning was overcast. Outside, the day had already begun for the workmen who were busy doing repair work on the motel building. It was breakfast at the Waffle house for us and then on to Crystal Grove. We headed East through Little Falls and on to St. Johnsville. There was no sign indicating Highway 114 but luckily we stopped for ice at Stewart’s and saw an advertisement to Crystal Grove. On the way, I quizzed T on his multiplication table and tried to teach him some shortcut math. He wasn’t that enthused.

Crystal Grove had 2 major pits and a gully. I tried the pits but not much luck. I would probably have done better to sift through the sand. I did find a pocket. It was bleeding orange sand next to the spot T and a new found friend had reserved. I dug out some tiny crystals with a \$1 pocket knife but couldn’t get deep into the pocket. Jeff came over with a much larger sledge hammer and cracked the ledge above. I removed enough rock to dig out one larger crystal but none of them were the perfect specimens I hoped for. Quartz had a hardness of 7 and instead of cleaving will shatter. Many of the Herkimer “diamonds” I found had broken off a matrix or been shattered by the hammer blows. Sally had been busy meeting the other rock hunters and let me know that the group next to John had been at it for 3 days. I kept hearing their ejaculations at finding

wonderful specimens. “No rhyme or reason to where they’re at. I think it’s the streambed,” I heard them say.

“I’m glad for them,” said Sally, “I don’t feel badly about it when you know they have been working so hard for so long.”

T disappeared. He had gone back toward the office but failed to return. Sally and I went for a walk to the outhouses. She spied T and followed in pursuit. It seemed that the office was conducting a workshop where anyone could make mineral trees. It occupied T for some time. Brass wire was twisted and glued to a rock to form the trunk and branches of a “tree”. Small peridot stones were glued to the wire to represent the leaves.

Sally and I looked for crystals until four o’clock. I wanted to quit early, while I had daylight, to take pictures. We lost the light on the previous day and I hadn’t gotten the photos I wanted. Sally and I both wanted to retrace our steps to find the road cut at 29A. We stopped on our hunt to take pictures of Beardslee Castle and old bridges. Their old concrete arches were overgrown with vines and crumbling with decay. At one bridge, we found a rock with ancient worm burrows.

“Watch, Lori,” said T as he tried to skip a stone across the river.

Soon, we were back on the road. “Oh no!” said T holding up his mineral tree. “One of the minerals came off.” I took the small stone and wrapped it in Kleenex and put it in my shirt pocket. T, at Sally’s direction, created a nook in the pile of stuff we had on the back seat, and carefully laid his prize creation down.

“They said I didn’t do the wiring very well.”

“Why is that?” Sally and I both asked.

He didn’t quite seem to know why it wasn’t right. Neither did we.

At exit 29A, we paid the toll and pulled over to take our photos. There it was; a spectacular site of thirty foot high walls of shiny, black shale. When we saw it for the first time, it was awe inspiring, perhaps accentuated by the greenness of the rest of New York. I looked at the shale and it seemed too hard and sterile to hold the promise of any ancient life. We took photos and continued on.

Please understand, there is only one place in Jackson, Michigan that has anything close to rock viewing. It is a roadcut on I 94 at the Cooper Street exit. Michigan has hills. They are moraines and eskers left when glaciers retreated and dropped what they were carrying. The only thing I ever found in a Jackson quarry was a torroid. A torroid is sandstone evidence of how the water swirled.

Back at the motel, we showered and then John and Jeff arrived. They had stopped at 29A and collected rocks with tiny trilobites they found in the shale.

“T!” yelled Sally for the third time, “What did I tell you?”

T had been in a hurry to put on his shoes and laid a foot on the railing of the second floor just outside our room. The work crew had unbolted the railing in several places and it was swinging slightly loose from the wall.

I must have said several times that trip, “He’s ten!” as if to say that I understood boys that age had difficulty with behavior.

Sally must have said several times, “T, You need to learn to listen the first time.” This was a trial trip for T and if he didn’t behave, he would not be going again.

“That,” I said to T as I pointed to the railing, “is dangerous.”

We ate at Pizza hut. Sally and Jeff argued as usual.

“It was Custer,” said Sally. Jeff insisted they had one of their adventures elsewhere. Later Sally explained in more detail. I turned to T who was supposed to be writing, “That’s why you need to journal. Everyone forgets details.”

The following morning we watched some news on Iraq while waiting for the men to finish packing. We ate at McDonalds. I drove for about 2 hours. Much as I tried to stay awake, sleep came as an enemy to interfere. I no longer got car sick; I just got sleepy. Sally took over and did most of the driving back to her house in Grass Lake. John kissed Sally and told her he loved her. John took Jeff back and we stopped at Belleville to drop off T. Somewhere, T lost one of his crystals in my car. I cleaned the car when I got home but didn’t find the crystal. I cleaned the rocks and separated out the ones that would serve well as classroom specimens. Using a whiteout pen, I labeled the specimens with the place of origin.

The next day, I took some samples to Baker College and became known as “the rock hound”. The Learning Support Services Center where I worked was less like a computer lab and more comfortable looking with the addition of plants and crystals. I had a request from the massage therapy department for one of the large crystals. It seemed that one of the machines was giving off static charges. The crystal seemed to do the trick – no more static.

At home, I cleaned some stones with SIO and placed them around the backyard pond. They mixed well with the Lake Superior Coral fossils. I downloaded the photos from the Olympus 3030, put them on a CD and made copies for Sally and John, and Jeff. John had an Olympus 4000 and Jeff had an Olympus 4040. Eventually we could probably put together a good slide show.

There is much more to New York than Manhattan Island or Broadway. It was a small reminder of how vast a country we live in, and how beautiful. Places still exist where we can be children again, looking for buried treasure and finding it.