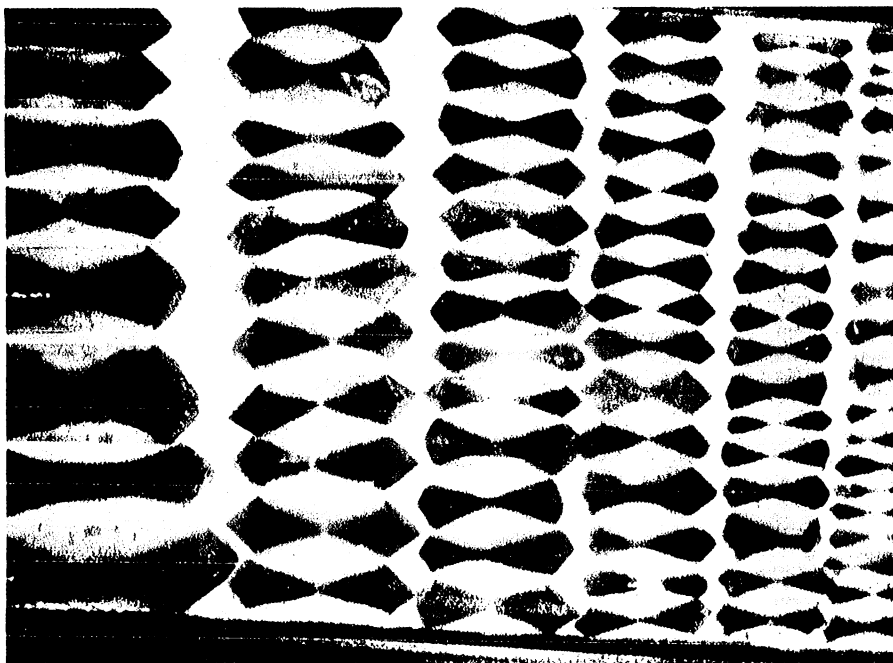


Tick Canyon is a popular location where mineral specimens and gem materials may be collected.

In 1906, Henry Sheperd and Louis Ebbenger were searching for gold northeast of Los Angeles, when they came upon an unusual chalky outcrop. Closer examination, and a few strikes with a prospector's pick, revealed numerous colemanite crystals, which indicated the presence of high grade borax. It took nothing more for the twosome to temporarily lose interest in gold and concentrate their efforts on staking claims to this most promising location, soon to be called the Sterling Mine.

The deposit proved to be massive, and Sheperd and Ebbenger, who had no experience in mining borax, sold their Tick Canyon prospect to Thomas Thorkildson for approximately \$80,000. Thorkildson had experience with borax and formed the Sterling Borax Company, with full scale mining getting underway soon thereafter. A town grew nearby, boasting a population of nearly 1,000 people, 300 of whom worked at the mine.

HOWLITE and other minerals in Tick Canyon



HOURGLASS CRYSTALS in a National Natural Landmark

Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, Alfalfa County, Oklahoma, is one of five sites named by former Secretary of the Interior James Watt as a National Natural Landmark. Also designated were the Hudson Palisades, Salyer's Ridge Natural Area in North Carolina, Cattfish Creek in Texas and Eureka Dunes in California. This is from a news release of the U.S. Department of the Interior, June 16, 1983.

The National Registry of Natural Landmarks now recognizes 548 carefully evaluated sites. To be named to the Registry, a site must meet scientific criteria qualifying it as a nationally significant example of ecological or geological features representing America's natural heritage. The sites are identified through studies conducted by the U.S. Interior's National Park Service. Further evaluations are made by scientific specialists.

Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge provides a stopping place in its 31,996 acres for 75% of the migrating whooping cranes. It is also a wintering area for bald eagles and golden eagles, and a nesting site for the Mississippi kite.

By Frances Vickers Johnson

Enid Gem and Mineral Society

A few years later, the property was purchased by the Pacific Coast Borax Company, which increased production steadily, until 1922. At that time, they decided to concentrate all corporate efforts on their Death Valley mines and the Sterling was closed. Since then, there has been no mining on the premises, and, according to U.S. Borax (successor to Pacific Coast Borax), there are no plans to open it in the future.

Of interest to the collector are the numerous borax ores that can still be found on the decaying dumps. These include colemanite, ulexite and, most importantly, howlite. If a group is interested in visiting this famous site, they must first secure permission from U.S. Borax. Write to J. M. Colvin, Jr., U.S. Borax, Land Department, 3075 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90010. He needs to know when your group will be there. All visitors must adhere to certain specific conditions, and they are required to sign a hold harmless clause.

Once you have taken care of the preliminary paperwork, which doesn't amount to very much, it is time to head out. As mentioned, this location is to the northeast of Los Angeles, California (and a few miles to the southeast of Palmdale). To get there



A few of the minerals found in Tick Canyon

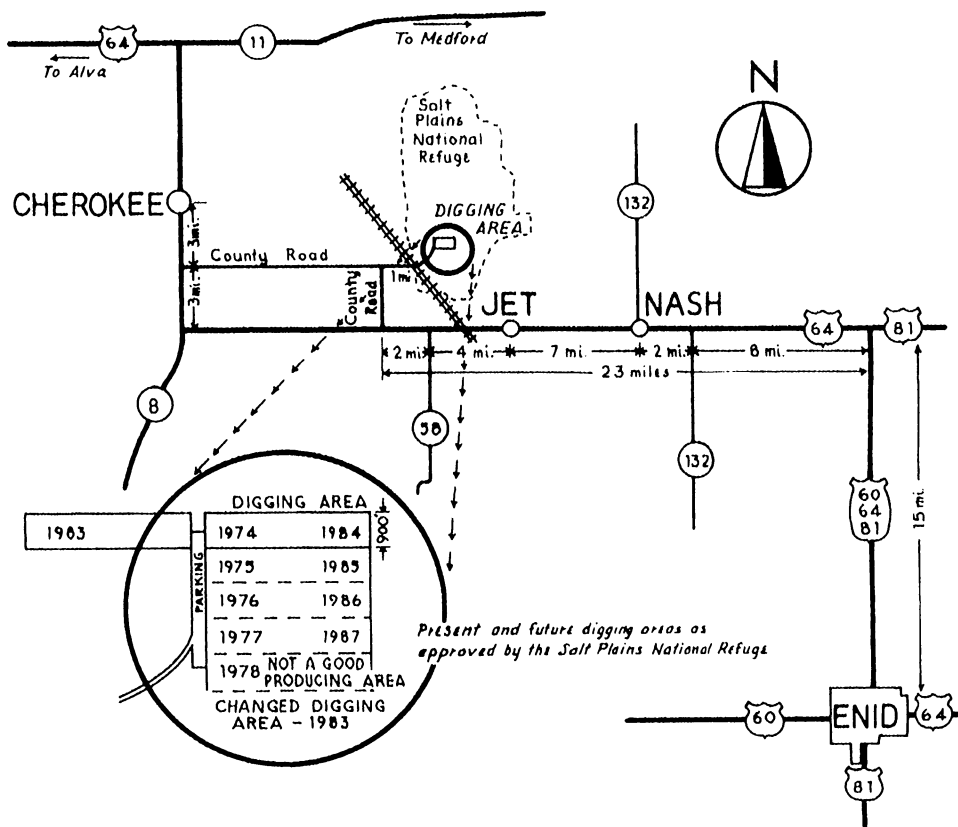
continued on page 18

Fall populations of 90,000 ducks and 30,000 geese are not uncommon with some 3 million Franklin's gulls stopping during the season. White pelicans also use this site, the largest inland saline basin in the central lowlands and one of the lowland's few remaining habitats for the inland least tern, snowy plover, avocet and Canada goose. Among the 30 mammal residents are the badger, coyote, black-tailed jackrabbit, Eastern cottontail, and Ord's kangaroo rat. The site is a center for research on the unique hourglass-shaped selenite crystals formed just below the salt plains surface.

Since the ancient sea beds deposited great depths of salt, man and beast alike have shared this mineral of the Plains. This was the source of supply for pioneer settlers. With pitchforks they loaded their wagons with chunks of salt for livestock, meat preservation, table use and as a trading item.

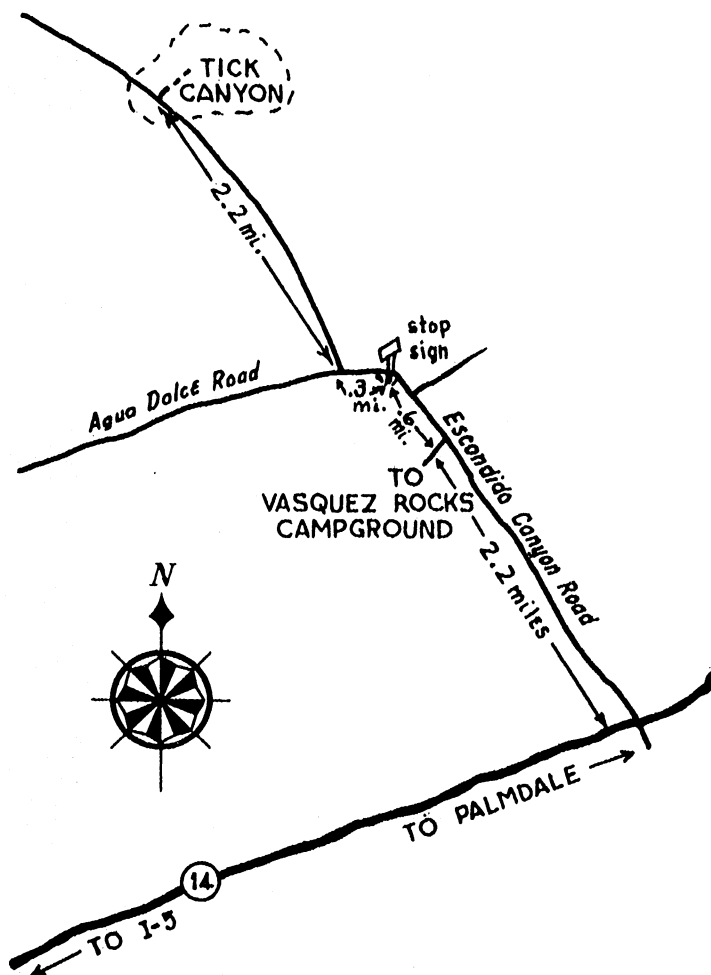
In June 1811 the first white man known to have visited the site was Major George Sibley, an Indian agent at Ft. Osage, Missouri, who led an expedition of some 15 people. In his diary he called the salt plains the Grand Saline. "They glistened like a brilliant field of snow on a summer's day."

continued on page 22





Looking for specimens on one of the dumps of the old borax mine



Howlite . . . continued from page 17

(see map), take Interstate 14 northeast from where it meets Interstate 5, approximately 16½ miles, to Escondido Canyon Road. Go left 2.8 miles to the stop sign, then left again, onto Agua Dulce Road, going .3 mile further. At that point, turn right and proceed 2.2 miles to where the road actually cuts right through the lower dumps of the old Sterling Borax Mine.

Pull off the pavement and hike north to the main workings, which can easily be seen from the road. As you walk, keep an eye to the ground for specimens of ulexite, colemanite, selenite and, on the upper hillsides, jasper and agate. The borax ores are fairly easy to spot, being vivid white, contrasting markedly against the grey soil making up the dumps. I have never discovered any huge specimens here, but lots of smaller pieces can be found.

The colemanite is beautiful, if you are lucky enough to find some good specimens. Those, however, are tough to locate. I suggest splitting boulders in hopes of opening an otherwise hidden crystal bearing cavity. This is tough work, but the rewards are

potentially great, since the sparkling, tabular crystals are beautiful, being real prizes for any mineral collection. (Be sure to wear eye and hand protection when cracking and splitting rocks.)

It might be necessary to do some digging in the soft dumps to find good specimens of the other borax minerals, but that presents only a minor difficulty. It seems that the deeper you go, the better your chances are of finding the finer pieces. There may be some confusion differentiating between ulexite and selenite, both of which occur here and look very much the same. Close comparison of the two minerals shows the ulexite to be more dense and solid, while the selenite is fragile and possess a more coarse texture.

On the hills overlooking the dumps, and, to some extent, in the valley below, will be found lots of nice agate and jasper. The jasper occurs in shades of red, green and brown, while the agate is found in wide range of types, featuring a spectacular red plume variety. Even though the jasper and agate are not the prime collectables here, they certainly do add to the desirability of the location. Most is of good quality and will take a great

polish. Be sure to explore the area for these other prize gems, also. You won't regret it.

The mineral of primary interest in Tick Canyon is not the ulexite, colemanite, selenite, agate or jasper, but the cauliflower-like nodules of howlite, which, at one time, were so abundant here. The mineral was named after a Canadian Professor, Henry How, who first described it. It is a hydrated calcium silico-borate, has a hardness of 3.5 and is only rarely found in crystallized form. To find the howlite nodules in worthwhile sizes, one must again do some digging. It comes with dimensions ranging from that of pebbles to huge boulders, sometimes weighing more than 100 pounds.

Howlite is popular because of its ability to easily accept dyes. When colored blue, in fact, it makes a rather convincing substitute for turquoise. That which contains black stringers, produces a beautiful imitation of spiderweb turquoise. Slabs of the durable mineral also make excellent backgrounds for paintings, because of the plain white color and its amazing ability to absorb paint. I have seen some beautiful artwork done on such howlite slabs. It should also be mentioned that much of the howlite found

in Tick Canyon fluoresces bright sky blue, especially under long wave ultraviolet.

The nodules form when rain waters leach the dumps, causing the mineral to concentrate, generally many feet below the surface. Try to locate a place which, for one reason or another, shows something of promise. Since so many people have collected here over the years, it will probably be necessary to dig quite a bit, but the soil is relatively soft, and some good pick and shovel work should move quite a lot of dirt in a relatively short amount of time.

Try to guess which portions of the dumps appear to have undergone the least amount of rockhound excavation over the years, and concentrate your efforts in those spots. Your chances are much better, obviously, at places where there is as much original, untouched dump material as possible. I suggest working in pairs, with one person doing the digging, while the other sifts through the freshly turned soil. A bucket of water is also very helpful, since the grey dirt often clings to specimens, making it tough to ascertain their true nature. A quick dipping will reveal each stone's quality and aid greatly in sorting.

The Tick Canyon borax deposit has been a popular collecting site for years, and the surface is fairly well depleted, even though rains do uncover new material from time to time. The agate and jasper, found on the highlands, are more recent discoveries, and few collectors even know they are there. Don't forget to write for permission before your trip, allowing a few weeks for the mail to travel back and forth, and be sure to take along some digging tools. If you do that, I am certain you will find this to be a most enjoyable and productive collecting site, even though it is so close to populous Los Angeles.

Note: This location is in desert country. It is not advised for summer days when temperatures are high. If you are not familiar with the desert, there are a few common-sense safety precautions which can be learned from experienced rockhounds. You can also find a discussion of desert safety in the book, Desert Gem Trails by Mary Frances Strong which is available at rock shops and from mail-order suppliers. ☆

Steve: "Is it true that the law of gravity keeps us on our planet?"

Mike: "Yep."

Steve: "What did we do before the law was passed?" — *Mamasota Chats & Chips via Breccia*

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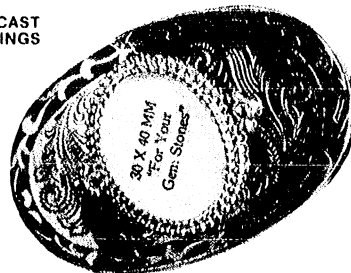
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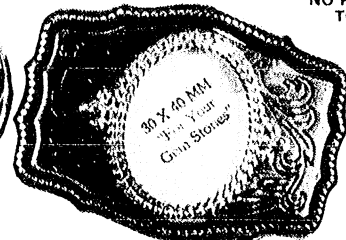
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