

# THE BEST HOWLITE, ANYWHERE - - TICK CANYON, PAST AND PRESENT

By Ron Wood

Few rock and mineral collectors in Southern California, have passed up a week-end effort in Tick Canyon, which offers a rather extensive list of minerals and lapidary materials as the primary cause.

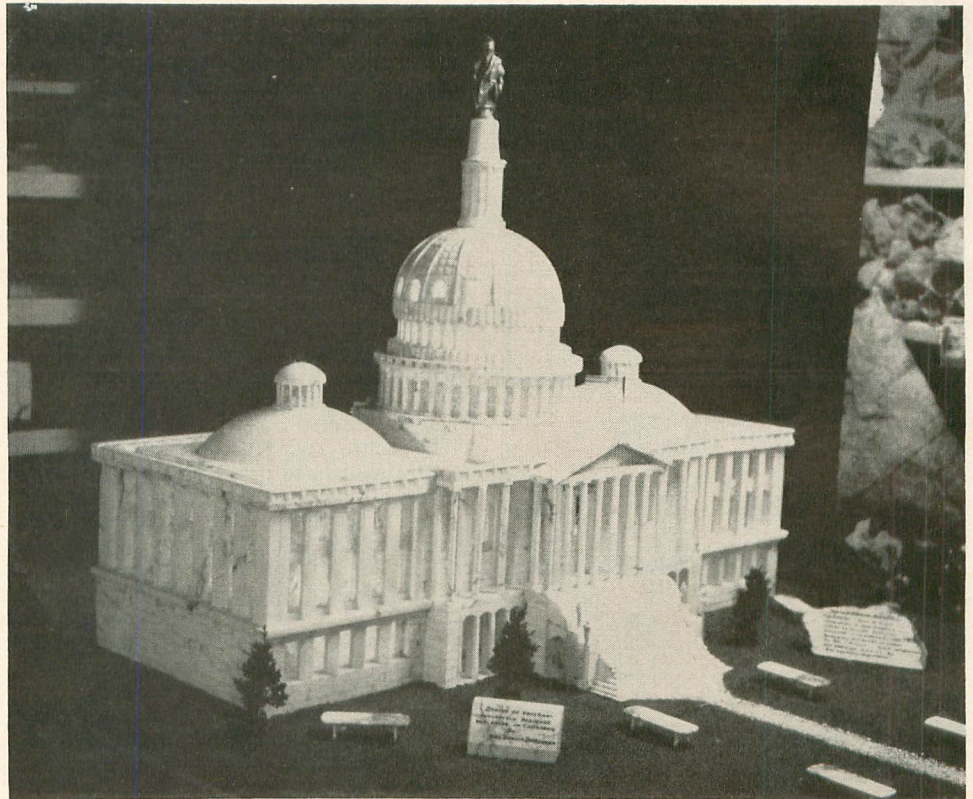
Many indeed, are those who treasure a fine nodule of spiderweb howlite, (Dana: "a Silica Borate of Calcium  $H_5Ca_2B_5SiO_{14}$ "), and/or a set of book-ends, a cabochon display, or other lapidary works of this famous mineral. With Tick Canyon probably the most eminent locale for howlite known to date (other occurrences: Nova Scotia, San Bernardino County), it is indeed fortunate that both the canyon, and the minerals, have been kept available to the general public, through the generous public relations policies of the U. S. Borax Corporation.

Being only 45 minutes by freeway from Los Angeles, Tick Canyon has afforded that couple of hours of recreational "treasure hunting" on a Sunday afternoon, that has released the writer, and many, many friends, from the world of tension in which we live today. Finding a howlite nodule, an outstanding sample of ulexite, or a beautiful piece of agate, has certainly elevated spirits, furnished many a "bragging rock," and caused many a heartfelt thanks for the spark of appreciation that the area never fails to inspire.

It is quite probable that many a collector, as I have, working the old mine dumps—or an agate seam in adjacent hills, have reflected a bit on the Tick Canyon of yesterday. No one can tell the story better than Harry P. Gower, writing in the U. S. Borax Company organ, "The Pioneer," in November 1961. A pioneer himself, he narrates the past in "Lang—the Suburban Borax Mine." His words: "If you are as fascinated by California history as I am, don't miss this little detour the next time you travel along the Mint Canyon Road on your way to Boron or other Antelope Valley points. Turn east on Davenport Road at a point four miles north of the Solomint junction and take a few leisurely minutes to inspect one of the most historical and romantic spots in Southern California, less than 40 miles from the Los Angeles City Hall.

Along a three mile stretch of this newly-paved county road you will see old Spanish gold mines, spasmodically operated even to this day; the Agua Dulce fishing ponds and recreation areas, once a Borax Company farm where hay and pasturage were provided for teams engaged in the transport of borax from the mine to the railroad; Vasques Rocks, the scenic and rock-bound hideout of the famous early-day bandit Tibericio Vasques; and last—and of particular interest to this story—the abandoned Lang Borax mine, mill and townsite that prospered between 1907 and 1923.

Even in those pre-Ford days when roads were poor or nonexistent and when auto-



Roy Austin's replica, in howlite, of the United States Capital building in the 1800's. To be shown at the South Bay Show at Lomita, Oct. 2nd and 3rd, 1965.

mobiles were rarely seen in this mine's rugged setting, the title "Suburban Mine" was quite appropriate. They didn't actually have commuters to and from the city, but the monotony of the mining camp could easily be relieved by the evening train of the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad, which in an hour's time could put one in Los Angeles in time for the theatre or other diversions.

Borax was discovered at the Lang mine one day in 1906 by Henry Shephard and Louis Ebbenger as they trudged up and down Tick Canyon from Lang Station on the railroad to the old Spanish gold mines from which they were trying to wrest a living, even as some are still trying. For a time they paid but little attention to the limy, light-colored formation extending east and west across the canyon trail.

Finally, however, they were overcome with curiosity, and they drove a short tunnel into the stuff. To their surprise, some crystals of colemanite turned up, and it was the richest borate ore then known in commercial production. As a result, the two oldtimers really hit the jackpot when they sold the property for something like \$80,000.

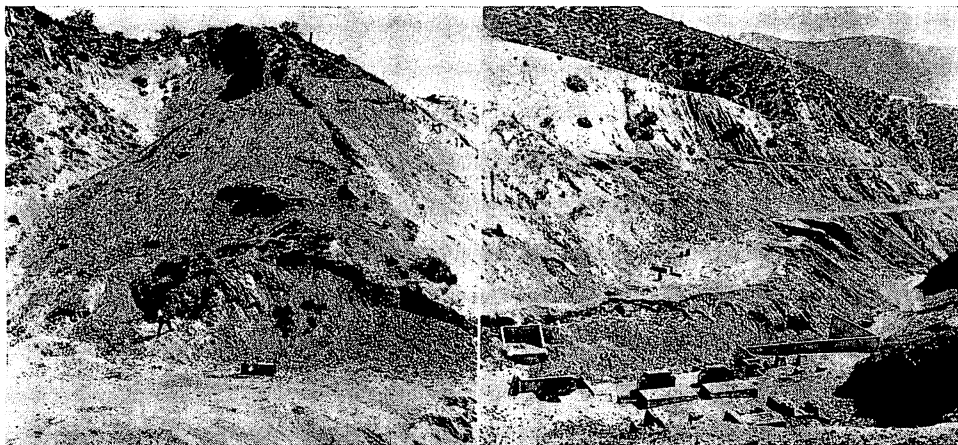
With their newly acquired fortune, these shrewd and alert miners left the picture, and the buyer—Thomas Thorkildson, a rugged individualist and former employee of the Pacific Coast Borax Company—strode onto the scene. He organized the Sterling Borax Company (with principal offices in Chicago) and developed the mining property with shafts and tunnels.

Thorkildson also added a calcining and screening plant, replaced wagon transportation with five steep miles of three-foot-gauge railroad that led down the canyon to Lang Station, built up a little town and mining community and went on himself to live conspicuously in a famous Hollywood mansion. It wasn't long until he became known as the "Borax King."

Although Pacific Coast Borax Co. eventually bought into the Sterling Company, Thorkildson remained on for a number of years as General Manager. His top men, Superintendent Roy Osborne and Master Mechanic Norman Ross, also continued working until the mine was shut down in 1922. Roy then migrated to South America to head some Borax Company explorations in Argentina, while Norman remained on through 1923 to dismantle the mill and mine equipment and to transfer it, along with himself and family to the Borax operations in Death Valley, California. (At that time Death Valley was the site of the world's largest borax operations.)

Today, U. S. Borax still owns the 500-odd acres of mineral lands which surround the Lang mine. Except for a few old scars, however, along with the great waste dumps on the hillside and the foundations of the mill and mine structures, little remains at the Lang site to remind one of the busy days of 50 years ago. Geology classes from several Southern California colleges congregate there to study the formations exposed on the barren hillsides, while rockhounds flock there by the hun-





Mr. Gower studies rock specimen at site of original borax outcropping in Tick Canyon.

Ruins of the Lang mine are mute evidence of past activities.

dreds to dig for borate specimens in the dumps and abandoned workings.

One of the duties of our Land Department is to keep our abandoned and unused properties in a condition that guarantees public safety. It isn't an easy job for a few geologists to keep closed what 500 or more rockhounds are just as diligently trying to keep open. The main shaft, where fences melt away and metal coverings disappear into thin air, presents a particular headache. Lately a steel-mesh, barbed-wire-topped fence was erected on two-inch pipe posts set in concrete. Two months later the posts had been

sawed off at ground level and the whole thing carted away. The Land Department boys have now placed slabs of concrete weighing several tons over the shaft, and they think they have the intruders licked. (It would be a very good idea if those involved take the hint; otherwise, the property could be closed to all hunting—Ed.)

The little townsite that once housed some 300 Lang miners has been dissolved into the desert landscape, and hardly a trace remains of the railroad which in the palmier days moved the daily 80-ton production of high grade calcines down to

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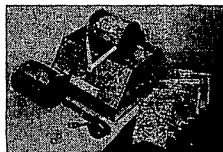
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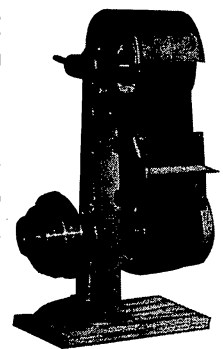
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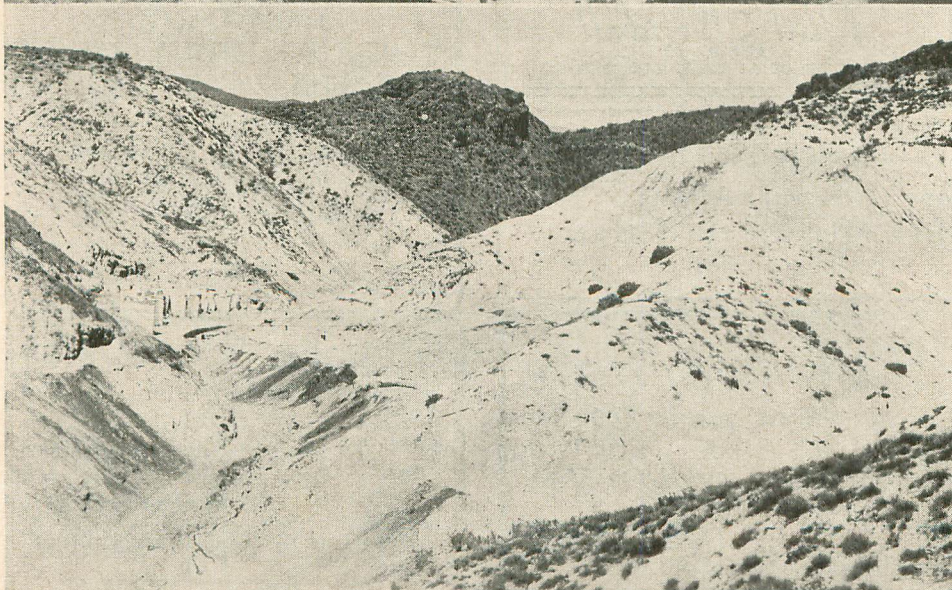
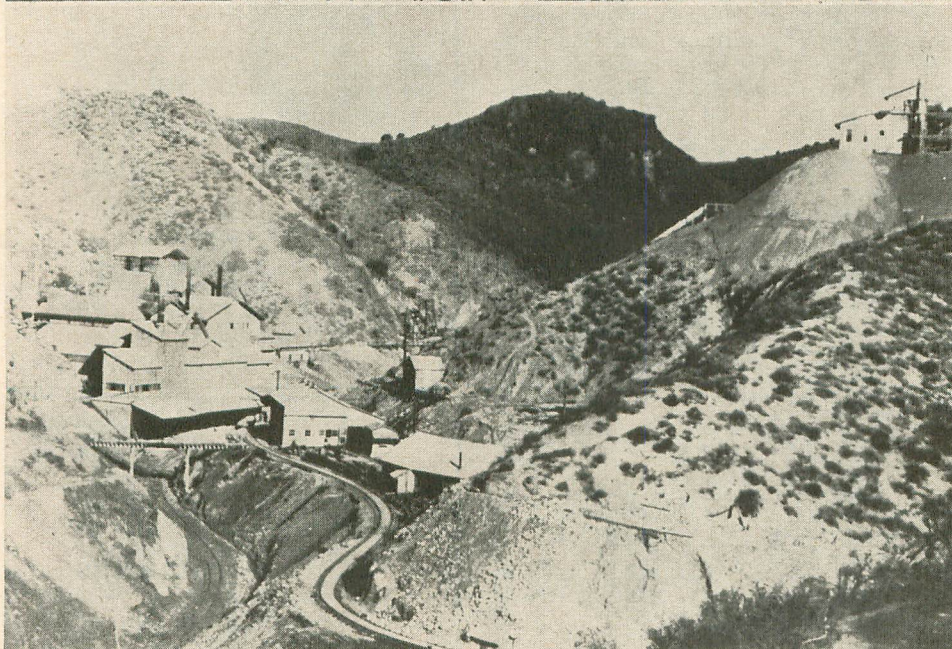
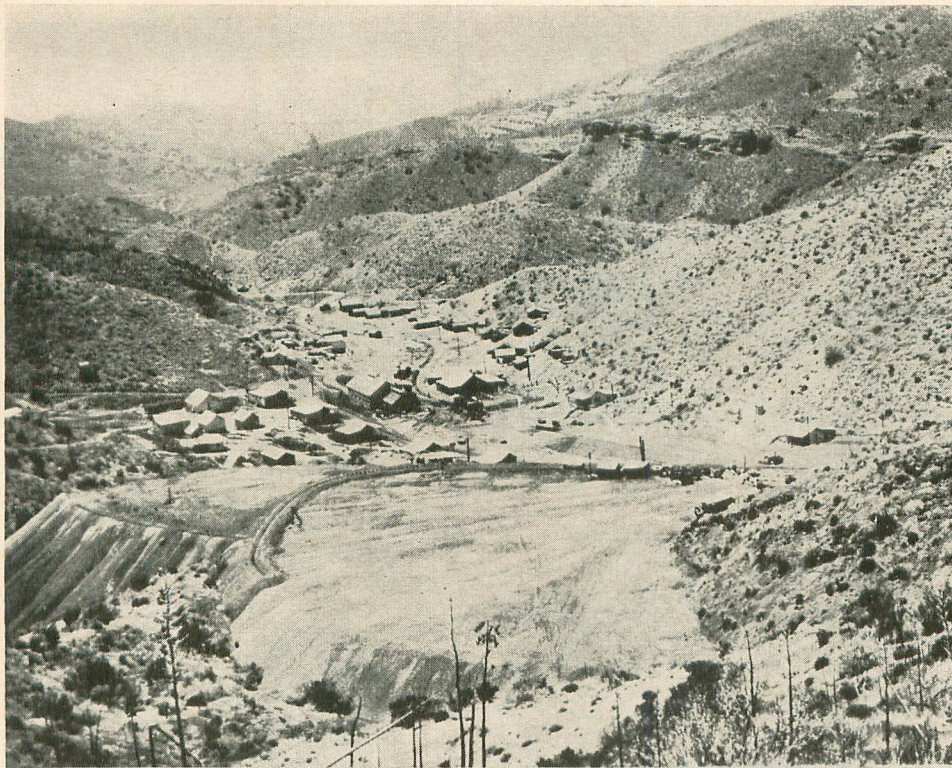
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the main line and which provided free transportation to those who would otherwise have had to walk five miles to catch the Los Angeles train. As mentioned, the line was steep, and runaway engines or even runaway trains of cars were not unknown. Some of these outlaws turned over as they sped down the track and ended up in the junk pile, while others were brought under control on the level track near the terminus. Osborne once pulled my leg with the tale of an engine and loaded car which got out of control and bounded down the track at a frightful pace.

"The brakes failed entirely," Osborne told me, "and the panicked crew set the engine in reverse and jumped out into the flitting sagebrush. The reverse eventually slowed the outfit down and brought it to a stop. But so help me, the engine slowly began going backwards towards camp. It picked up speed, passed the amazed crew on the way, and dang it all, Harry," he concluded, "the bell was even ringing when she pulled into camp."

I had to buy the beer.

And so the Tick Canyon of yesterday becomes an interesting page of history, and a memory for those who wrested borates from nature's treasures. Since that day, as Mr. Gower states, rockhounds and nature lovers have enjoyed the bounties of the area, too numerous to count.

What of today? Not many rockhounds now. To be sure, each week-end usually finds a few digging for howlite in the old mine dumps, but not too many hike the hills and ravines for surface material. There isn't too much agate and jasper lying on top of the ground.

However, during the school season, scarcely a week-end passes but what a bus load or two of high school students from all over the state, are conducted through the area to study the geological features that unfold earth science far better than a book.

University students are constantly mapping, surveying, and studying the entire area as part of their geological training. Sun bronzed young men carrying transit and line up basaltic peaks are certainly not strangers to this tranquil scene today.

And tranquil it is. With fewer people visiting the area, old trails are giving way to nature's cover, old man-made scars are covering over, and natural life and beauty are coming back to the fingered canyons around the mine site.

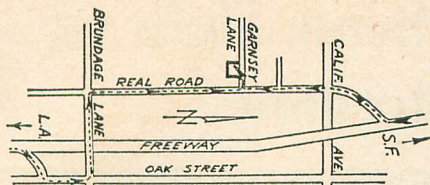
Being less than an hour from Los Angeles, it has become the source of a quick change to tranquility for a few, including this writer. Every month furnishes a new scene, fresh from the hand of nature. April's soft, downy green gives way to May's spectacular Yucca blooms, then to June's blanket bloom of buckwheat with its most delightful spicy frag-

Top—The old Lang mining camp in Tick Canyon.

Center—The Lang mine and mill as it looked over forty years ago. Now abandoned, the operation prospered from 1907 until 1923.

Bottom—The Lang mine and mill as it looks today. U. S. BORAX still owns the land, but except for a few scars, little remains to remind one of the busy mining establishment some fifty years ago.





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George and Dorothy Telford with their display of water color paintings made on slabs of howlite.

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rance.

A squirrel busily exploring a rock, and the dove calling to the morning, seem to take a swarm of bees moving over the canyon as a matter of course. A five foot King snake sunning in the trail seems startled only by man approaching. Then he is a beautiful thing to see as he scurries rapidly away to blend with the brightly colored rock about him.

Yes—there is still material there; agate and very striking jasper, but it must be earned the hard way—with gad, moil, and single jack. Howlite is still available for those who will dig into the old dumps.

Materials from Tick Canyon will be featured at the South Bay Lapidary and Mineral Society annual show, in Lomita, 24410 Eshelman, Lomita, California, October 2nd and 3rd, 1965. The masterpiece created by Roy Austin, of Inglewood, California, (the "National Capital" to scale) in howlite will be featured, along with the exquisite art work on howlite by Mrs. George Telford of Encinitas, California, whose paintings have been featured previously in the *Lapidary Journal*. Blue-dyed howlite is often tumbled into baroque gems and finds a ready market as "imitation turquoise" both in this country and abroad. The simulation is so good many have been fooled by it, but all honest vendors correctly label it for what it is, "dyed howlite," as required by F.T.C. rules.

These two spectacular exhibits will be joined by agate, jasper, and bloodstone "won" in the past year by the writer, plus other excellent lapidary work by society members from the area. While this show will also feature nature's treasures from Arizona and many other places, Tick Canyon, yesterday and today, will be most capably represented. A Saturday afternoon field trip for howlite will be made. We hope to see you then. ⊕



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