



TREKKING INTO **TICK CANYON**

A ROCKHOUND HUNT FOR HOWLITE

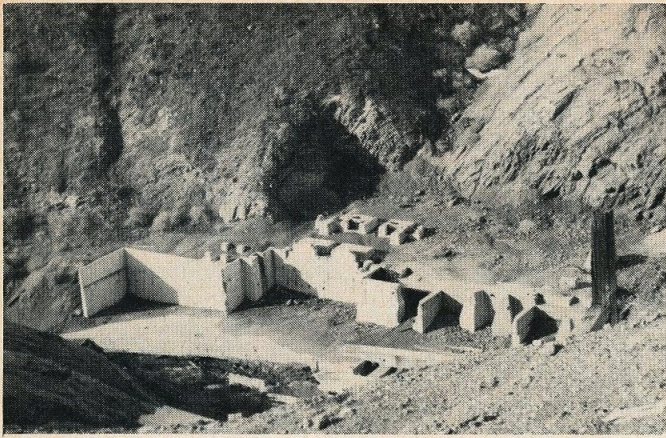
by LEE MARTIN

What the heck am I doing here? The question was unnecessary for I knew exactly what I was doing and that was holding on for dear life about half way up a mountain that made the Alps look like a molehill! Perhaps I am exaggerating "slightly" but for a rank amateur whose sole exercise in the past year has been a trip to the refrigerator, the unusual mountain climbing event was a shocker. It all began in a moment of weakness when I nodded a slightly stunned "yes" to the question of "How would you like to go on a rock hunting trip?" Perhaps I thought of rock in the music sense or possibly rock meant a chance to see what the attraction was for so many enthusiasts but in any case, the nod of acceptance had brought me to a strange place and an even stranger position.

Beginners should always have a guide to show them the proper search techniques and equally important what NOT to do. In my eagerness to get to the target area, I decided to take a shortcut. It's odd how a few rocks piled on each other can look like a small hill when you are looking up and like a dangerous cliff when you are

A howlite dig - Doug Rector, Dan Shaw and Chuck Shaw began finding the mineral at the four foot level, but continued on down to seven feet. Above is intrepid author with camera and bag loaded with "pretty" rocks.





The former Tick Canyon resident - a borax mine that operated from 1908 to 1922. Now howlite, a creamy white gemstone with grey-black webs, is king of the mountain. At right is the top of tick canyon - author notes that telephoto lens diminished distance from roadway to top of dig area.

being alerted by three huge metal buildings on the corner of Sierra and Davenport road, we made our last paved road turn and drove on Davenport Road for 2.1 miles to the entrance to Tick Canyon. This is a small

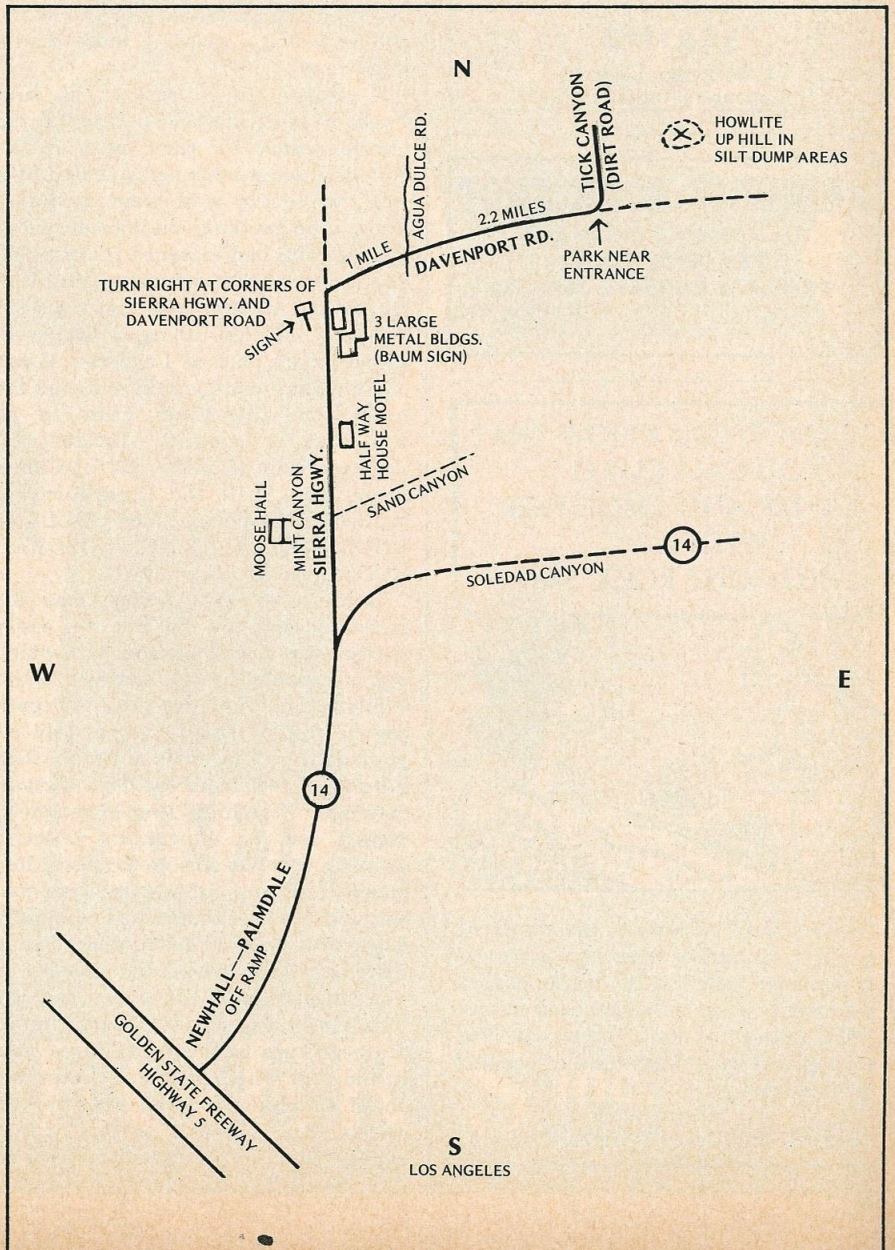
dirt road esconced between a large canyon entrance. The mine dump area is apparent by the condition of some soil which appears to be silt-like in texture.

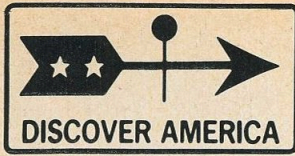
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halfway up and looking down. There are techniques to climbing and going straight up with a heavy pack, slippery shoes and trepidation is not one of the recommended methods.

Doris and Chuck Shaw are owners of a lapidary supply shop and also dedicated hobbyists who enjoy the week end trips as much as any novice. Because of the Los Angeles County locale, Tick Canyon was selected as a fine place to visit. Tick Canyon offered lucky searchers agate, actinilite, borax and howlite. The latter is a very special mineral with a unique spider web pattern threading its way through an opaque white surface. Howlite from Tick Canyon has an appeal all its own and cab cutters relish the completed piece. The project promised a lot of finds and a lot of fun.

It began one sleepy morning at four a.m. when our caravan consisting of the Shaw's Jeep and our city driving automobile headed for the Antelope Valley Freeway number 14. Although various maps indicate different ways of arriving at Tick Canyon area, our group took the Golden State Freeway (highway No. 5) to the Newhall - Palmdale cutoff on highway No. 14. We passed Soledad Canyon and continued onto the Sierra Highway which is best reached by making no extreme turns and following highway 14 until it turns; at that point, the straight road forks away from 14 and becomes the Sierra Highway. Using an approximate 3 miles as the indication to turn but





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TICK CANYON

Continued from page 53

Once in Tick Canyon you can find float all over the place but most finds are discards by those who have high graded their packs. The left over "cabbages" are generally softer than acceptable or very white and lacking the spider web texture so highly sought after. A stroll to the end of the dirt road will reveal the cement foundation of the old mine company. It was at this point that the trip began to change its character for myself and the two spouses who decided to take a shortcut to the digging area. At the end of the road several small finds were carefully placed into a pack and, accompanied by Doris Shaw and my better half, three not so intrepid adventurers began a climb up a hill. The first few strides were easy and it was not until about one third of the way up that a sudden look to the rear disclosed the probability of this shortcut becoming something more than a short stroll.

I don't know why the term "weaker sex" is used to describe the female gender for they went up the cliff like two rabbits being chased by a wolf, while the wolf went up like a timid lobo walking on banana peels. Recent rains had loosened rocks which disengaged at the slightest touch. Adding to the hazards was the constant discovery of colorful rocks that were added to my pack as I climbed. It was not until my complexion matched the rocks that the climb came to its wheezing conclusion. Incidentally, after meeting with the trio of Chuck Shaw, Dan Shaw and Doug Rector I learned one important fact. COLLECT YOUR INTERESTING COLORED ROCKS...on the way DOWN.

Adding to my dismay was the discovery that the dig area was easily reached by a well traveled path which was accessible by an indirect climb involving minimum exertion. This path can be found almost immediately on your right as you enter not more than a hundred feet from the Tick Canyon entrance. Watching the experienced diggers was an education. Selective scrutiny was responsible for discarding many "cabbages" of howlite. One man emptied the bags of dirt from a rapidly deepening hole while another used a trenching tool to locate specimens. The third man in the group had the "fun" task of hauling knapsacks full of the best finds to the Jeep. Three trips to the four wheel drive rock toter was about all anyone wanted and approximately three hundred pounds of first quality howlite joined other finds of

agate and actinilite in the "loot" container.

As for the "first time rock hounds", it ended in a very pleasant mood created by adequate snacks, a restful atmosphere (created by watching someone else dig), and an easy trip down to the car. A laughing Chuck Shaw introduced me to the famed "Leverite" mineral. This is simply the examination of beginner finds and the elimination of most of the rocks gathered because they were pretty. "LEAVE 'ER 'ITE there" is the common phrase used to lighten a pack and darken hopes for a fantastic find.

Looking back on the trip one finds the pleasurable hours outweigh the few worrisome moments. At times I was sure Tick Canyon received its name from the speeding heartbeat or from its "tick" lish shortcuts but miners probably named it for the pestiferous ticks that haunted that area during the era when borax was king and howlite only the jester.

TOOLS REQUIRED...Howlite of the better grades rests below the surface so a trenching tool, shovel, chisels, bag for dirt disposal and pick would be practical. The Shaws dug to a seven foot depth but began finding howlite at the four foot level.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE HOWLITE... Howlite is generally found in cabbage type nodules, grey outer surface but a good whack will disclose a white or white interlaced with black webs area. It is a borate material with a hardness of 3.5. Despite this relatively soft feature, it is very popular and can be carved with steel tools using files to smooth and judicious use of sandpaper adds much to the final work.

Some of the finest cabs have been cut on regular silicon carbide wheels with care exercised to avoid undercutting. Tin Oxide is the most popular polishing agent as its white texture eliminates the staining problem encountered with cerium oxide. Howlite has various types of webbing and some hobbyists have utilized single webs as tree pictures or other picture rock designs. Slabbing is easy on the saw and the beginner will find this material not too difficult to convert to a fine cabochon if he, or she, does not hurry and understands the black veining is somewhat softer than the whiter areas.

A final word for all visitors to the area. Howlite is available but it must be carried some distance as cars can only park near the Canyon's entrance. At no time was the term heard, "howlite" it is; so take what you can use and as for the balance.... "leaverite" there. (R&G)