

FIELD TRIP

TICK CANYON HOWLITE

WHEN YOU FIND THAT THE HOWLITE'S
STILL THERE, YOU'LL WANT TO DYE

by W.R.C. SHEDENHELM

Accurate information on the conditions at the old borate mine in Tick Canyon, north of Los Angeles, is difficult to pin down. In his *California Gem Trails*, published 27 years ago, Darold Henry predicted that the Tick Canyon howlite would last "another decade." For *ROCK & GEM's* Volume 1 Number 2, dated May-June 1971, 14 years after Henry's prediction, Advertising Manager Lee Martin, now retired, made a field trip there and still found howlite. As the yet-to-be Editor, I visited the site a few years later, and found plenty of howlite.

During the decade since my last visit I had heard many rumors about Tick Canyon: It's all housing projects; they've bulldozed over the tailing heaps; there simply is no more howlite, and similar discouragements. Well, sir, they are simply not true! A few weeks ago we were driving down what we have always called "Mint Canyon Road," but is now officially "Sierra Highway," north of Solemint Junction (so named as the junction of Soledad Canyon

Road and Mint Canyon Road), when we recognized a grouping of large, corrugated iron buildings on a sideroad corner. The howlite turnoff, hey, hey! Sure enough. Memories intensified: It must be Davenport Road, and it was. When Henry wrote of it almost 30 years ago this was an unnamed dirt road which ended at a pungent goat ranch. While there are no housing projects along Davenport Road yet, the ten years since I was last there has added quite a few separate "ranch houses" to what used to be empty hillsides.

Davenport Road is paved past the howlite location in both directions, from Mint Canyon Road to Agua Dulce Road, so any automobile can reach it. From the Mint Canyon-Sierra Highway side you will first see the black tailings on the right or down canyon side of the asphalt road, then the whiter tailings a short ways up the canyon on your left. There is a large bulldozed parking area on the left, and an obvious usage trail overlooking the minor creek below in Tick Canyon.

A hundred yards north on the trail and you are on the flat top of the nearest tailings, with many large nodules of howlite

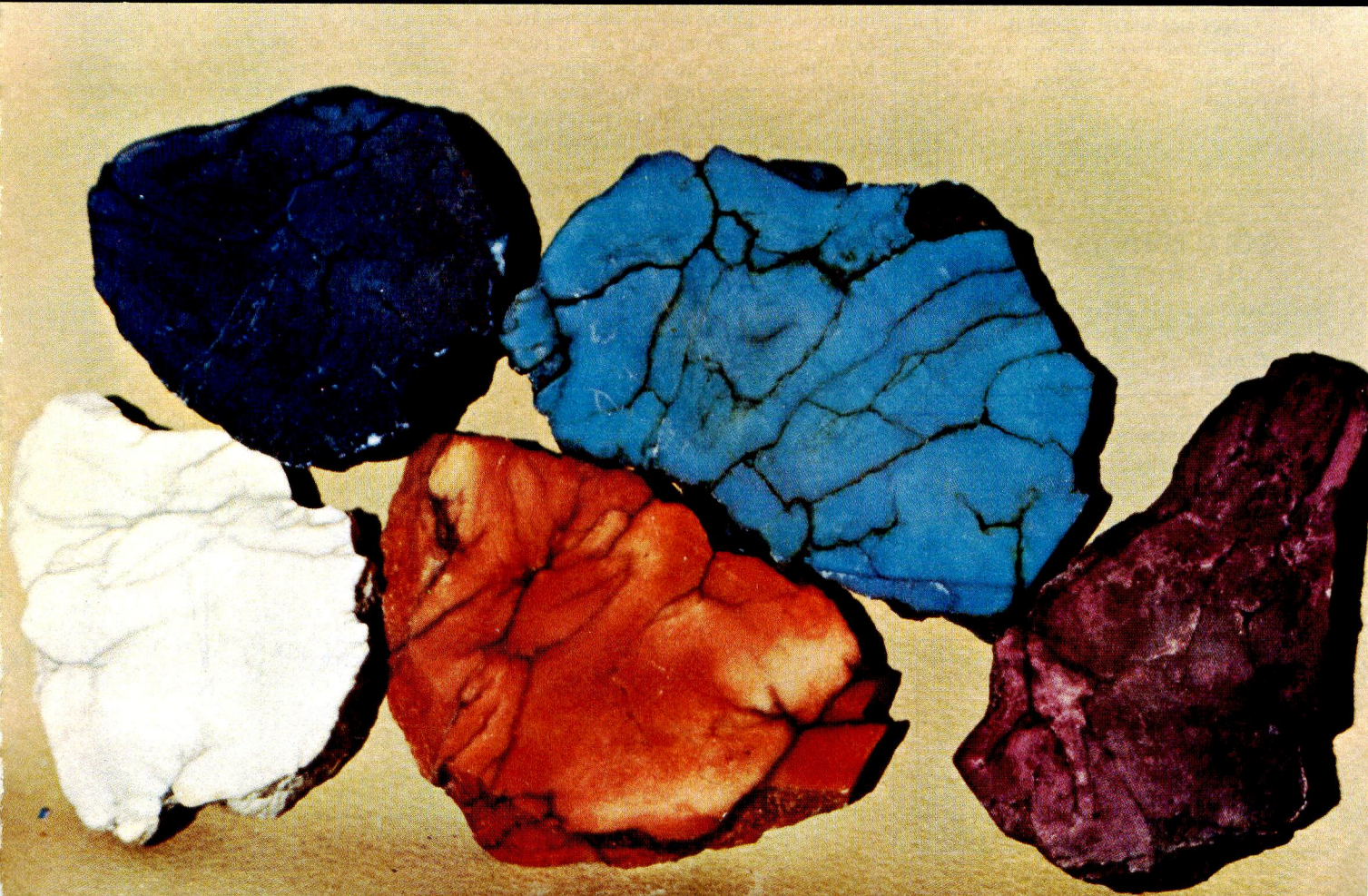
scattered over the surface. The standard description is that they look "like" dirty cauliflower, and the more-typical examples certainly do. The only problem would seem to be that of selecting chunks of howlite that best suit one's particular needs. It can be a flawless milk-white, and it can have a spiderweb of brownish to black veining. Now, if you are collecting the howlite to dye it, usually as imitation turquoise or lapis lazuli, the veining will make the finished product more "realistic."

The howlite itself is not terribly attractive as a mineral. It is a calcium boron silicate, thrown out when the mine was for colemanite and other borates which were easier to process. It has a hardness of about 3.5, which is not very hard for a gemstone mineral, but the structure is that

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Below, looking up Tick Canyon from across Davenport Road, with the VW van parked in some dark tailings, and the lighter-colored howlite tailing a short distance off. At right, concrete foundations are all that remain of the borax mine's buildings. Standard dilution of rock dyes from Grieger gave howlite intense colors, clockwise from the undyed slab: lapis lazuli, turquoise, amethyst, carnelian.





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This is the top of the tailings heap nearest to the paved road, and all the white rocks are pieces of howlite in various grades of purity. Much of it came from the shallow digging shown here.

TICK CANYON

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of long interlocking fibers which give howlite quite a bit of strength. It takes an excellent polish, with John Sinkankas in his book *Gem Cutting* recommending tin oxide on felt or Linde A on leather, avoiding cerium oxide and chrome oxide, which will stain the howlite.

For lapidary uses, this last brings up howlites particular attraction. It is quite permeable. It will soak up liquids, which means it should be sawed with a water-based coolant rather than an oil-based one. But, after you have tumbled pieces of howlite, or made them into cabochons, you can put these finished products into any of a dozen shades of alcohol-based rock dye and add vivid colors in a few minutes. Indeed, the colors obtained by using the rock dye as normally diluted are far too intense for most lapidary use. We are now doing the shop work on an article on nothing but dying rocks. We'll experi-

ment with varying dilutions of the standard rock dyes, with the effects of oven-drying the rocks to add to the porosity, and of varying periods of time in the dyes. We have heard that howlite soaked in Ty-D-bol achieves a nice turquoise color. We'll try that. How about laundry bluing? Water-based dyes? We know that standard rock dyes work on Mexican Crazy Lace Agate, as well as howlite, but what other rocks have the necessary microporosity as absorb dyes? We'll try to find out, and we'll let you know.

This is one of the easiest field trips in Southern California, with a paved road to the mine areas' very door, and then perhaps a hundred yards of fairly level trail to the collecting area. There are other tailings around for those you enjoy climbing hill-sides and searching less-touched sources, but it's not currently necessary to be a mountain goat. Maybe in a decade or so, as Mr. Henry stated almost three decades ago, but not yet; not by a long shot!

