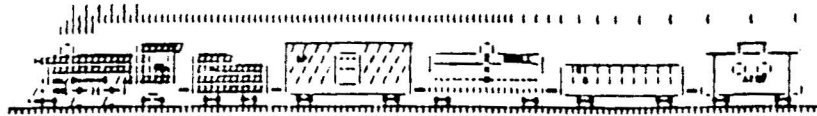




The OPAL EXPRESS

Published monthly by the
American Opal Society...



Vol. 22 No. 12
December 1990

FROM THE PREZ!

The Holidays are upon us, with Turkey Day just past. My best for the Christams Holidays and a Happy New Year.

Thanks so much for your unexcelled help to make the November show a success. We broke even and with advanced advertising for the next show, either the end of October or the first part of November, the date to be definite some time this month, we should do much better. We plan on starting advertising sometime in January or February.

At the Board Meeting, with a bare minimum for a quarum, it was decided to have the Board meeting for 15-30 minutes prior to the General Meeting with all invited to set and listen.

If you don't want to just sit and listen, step forward with your name to be put up for a position as Board Member. We need your help here as much as we did at the show.

After the first of the year Meetings will be every other month, with notice of time and place to be advertised in The Opal Express.

Those Board Members duly elected, that have not attended any meetings this year, will be dropped from the Board and new Members appointed.

If no new members volunteer or are appointed to the Board and some extra help given freely, there will be no American Opal Society, Inc. after the end of this next year (1991). Read the letter from the Board printed in this issue for our needs.

A work shop will be continued on an appointment basis only, due to limited space. Work shop will be held for those who are interested in quality instruction. This will be available twice monthly, only to members whose dues is current. For more information contact the office (213) 869-0527, Monday through Friday 8:00 am - 4:00 pm.

Dick Koch, President



American Opal Society, Inc.

P.O. Box 1384
South Gate, California 90280

1991

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____ APT.#: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

TELEPHONE: (_____) _____ - _____

MEMBER NUMBER (IF KNOWN): _____

RENEWAL FEES:	CHAPTER	\$ 26.00
	(OVER 65)	21.00
	MEMBER-AT-LARGE	20.00
	(OVER 65)	15.00
	FOREIGN	25.00

AMOUNT ENCLOSED:\$ _____ CHECK NUMBER: _____

Please make your check or money order out in the proper amount, payable to The American Opal Society, Inc. and mail to the above address as soon as possible to avoid being dropped from the mailing list.

Thank you for continuing to support your American Opal Society.

Please remember to include this form with your check.

WHITE CLIFFS AND THE LURE OF OPALS

By Patsy Kovac

293 Wattletree Road, East Malvern, Victoria 3145, Australia

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

There's no policeman in the Australian opal town of White Cliffs. "If anyone starts any trouble we shove a shotgun up their backside," jokes opal miner Peter Thompson. Despite the unorthodox law enforcement tactics, White Cliffs is a great place to visit.

If you insist on four star accommodation with all the trimmings you can forget White Cliffs. But if you want to taste the excitement of an Australian outback mining town, then White Cliffs is for you.

Almost a century of small scale mining has left the landscape around the opal township dotted with thousands of opal dumps. Visitors are welcome to fossick on the old dumps, and if you're lucky you could find a good piece of opal. Even if you don't strike it rich, the warmth of the outback sun, fresh air and wide open spaces will make you feel like a million dollars.

White Cliffs is situated in the far west of New South Wales. Many of the residents are former city dwellers who quit the rat race. The thought that White Cliffs is 671 miles west of Sydney and 720 miles north of Melbourne, is comforting to the miners who dislike the pressures of city life.

Because of the fierce summer heat, when the mercury often soars to 120°F, most of the miners live in dugout homes, burrowed into the hard rock of the low hillsides. The dugouts are cool in summer and warm in winter, and most White Cliffs residents are justly proud of their unusual homes. There are about 130 dugouts on the field, and a number of these are open for inspection, and also serve as showrooms where opal is displayed and sold. Visitors can browse through tiny opal chips in phials, reasonably priced triplets, doublets, beautiful opal solids, fine opal jewelry, fossils, paintings by local artists, pottery, leatherwork, and many other interesting items.

The focal point of the township is the White Cliffs Hotel where tourists and miners congregate to swap yarns and quench their thirsts. The pub certainly isn't flashy, but the accommodation is comfortable, and the meals are hearty. Guests can enjoy a bit of fresh air during their walks to the bathroom and toilets, situated across the yard from the bedrooms. We stayed at the hotel

and found the friendly atmosphere more than compensated for the lack of frills.

Visitors can also stay at the self-contained Opal View holiday flats, or the caravan park where there are powered sites and some overnight accommodations.

The township consists of a few scattered buildings. There is the well-stocked general store, a take-away food store, community hall, post office, tiny old stone church, and a hospital which is visited regularly by the outback flying doctor service. A short distance away is a gravel airfield used by small planes.

The 150 to 200 permanent residents of White Cliffs are keen to preserve the unspoiled character of their environment. Opal miner Joe Curovich took the problem of disposal of the hotel's thousands of empty beer bottles to heart, and came up with the perfect solution: an opal showroom with walls of beer bottles and cement. Being practical, Joe built his "stubby-bottle opal shop" just 200 yards west of the pub. During the day the sun casts a warm amber hue inside the showroom, and in the evenings, from the outside, the interior lighting gives Joe's place an almost heavenly golden glow. Joe's ten years at White Cliffs have been busy and productive. As he says, "If I stand around for too long doing nothing I might become opalized."

Of all the attractions at White Cliffs, probably the most famous is the opalized plesiosaur skeleton found by local miner Ken Harris in 1976. Ken was sinking a shaft for opal when he discovered the opalized bones at a depth of 25 feet. The 100 million year old marine reptile was carefully excavated and transported to the Australian Museum, Sydney. Ken refused the museum's offer of \$10,000 (Aus.) for the plesiosaur, and took it back to White Cliffs where the ancient creature is now on permanent display. The skeleton is the most complete plesiosaur ever found in Australia although much delicate work remains to be done before its true beauty can be appreciated. Some scientists believe the legendary Loch Ness monster could be a very similar creature.

Of special interest to mineral collectors are the White Cliffs "opal pineapples." These are crystal clusters of

glauconite which have been replaced by opal. The shape and the crystal structure resembles a pineapple, hence the apt name for these unusual specimens. Perfect, precious opal "pineapples" are worth many thousands of dollars, and even less colorful "pineapples" are very valuable and in great demand.

Also popular with collectors are opalized White Cliffs fossils. Most common are opalized shells, with the value dependent on the intensity of the opal colors. Somewhat rarer, are opalized belemnites, referred to by the miners simply as "squid." These torpedo-shaped fossil opals are usually left in their natural shape and polished to make stunning drop pendants.

Chasing Opal

At White Cliffs opal occurs at varying levels from grass roots to more than 40 feet down. The host rock is a hard white clayey sandstone with the opal in thin seams.

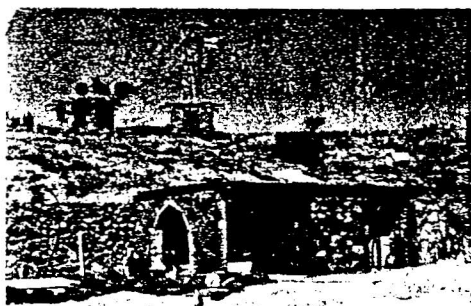
Primitive pick and shovel mining has now mostly given way to more sophisticated gear. At present there are some 16 investigator drills operating in and around White Cliffs. The heavy drilling apparatus is mounted on the back of a truck, and each unit costs about \$50,000 (Aus.). The drills bore nine inch diameter exploratory holes to a depth of 30 feet in ten minutes. The price charged by drill operators is seven holes for \$100 (Aus.).

At present most of the action at White Cliffs is in an area known as the West Field, where a forest of claim pegs mark out the 55 by 55 yard mining leases. Prior to actual mining, the small leases are usually peppered with exploratory drill holes in an orderly pattern to hopefully establish the location of the opal. Once the miner has this vital information a shaft is sunk, usually with the aid of a jackhammer and compressor.

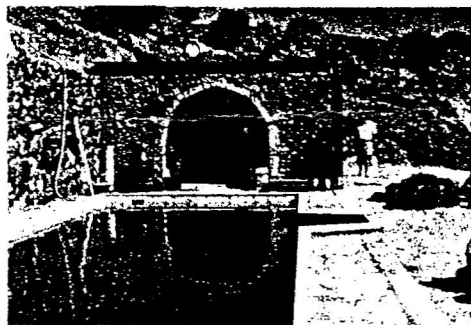
More prospecting is planned in the vast unexplored tracts of land surrounding White Cliffs. In these remote locations, blocks of 500 yards by 500 yards can be held for investigation for 28 days, and then the area must either be abandoned or worked as a claim.

One piece of machinery frowned on at White Cliffs is the bulldozer. In fact the use of bulldozers is banned unless

(Continued on Page 2356)



The unique architectural style of a dugout house.



At White Cliffs, life isn't as tough as it used to be.



Clancy's Hut, built many years ago, is a poignant reminder of the harsh conditions endured by the early opal miners.

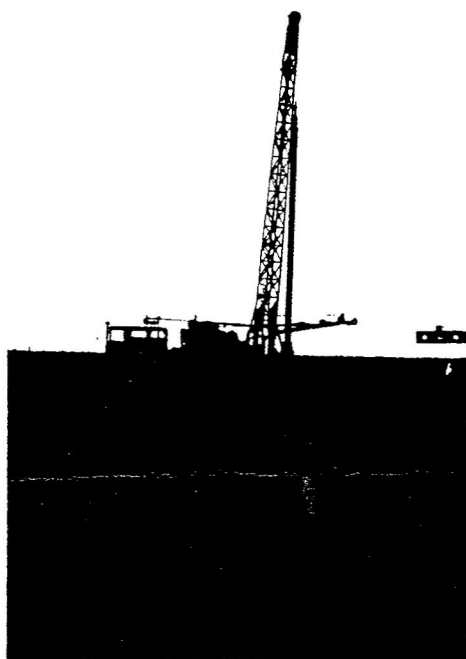


A large opal pineapple owned by Jan Pearce of White Cliffs.

a miner can prove to the Mines Department Inspector that there is absolutely no other way that the claim can be worked. This ban on bulldozers has saved White Cliffs from the ugly scars of large scale, open cut mining.

The First Find

The textbooks disagree on the exact date that opal was first discovered at White Cliffs. It seems to have been some time between 1884 and 1889



Opal investigator drills silhouetted against the setting sun.



The author and son, Cyril, check with a detector around Clancy's Hut for relics.

when two kangaroo shooters noticed a bright flashing stone kicked up by one of their horses.

It's hard to believe now that during White Cliffs' heyday there were some 5,000 residents, numerous business houses and five hotels. White Cliffs can boast of being one of the most productive opal fields in the world.

In 1897 ingenious White Cliffs miners and gemcutters developed a method of using opal which was too thin to cut into solid stones. They made the first known opal doublets by flattening the back of the opal and cementing it to black onyx.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG BANKS, BROKEN HILL, N.S.W.

White Cliffs opal field from the air—one heck of a lot of holes.



An abandoned shaft and windlass with the township in the background.

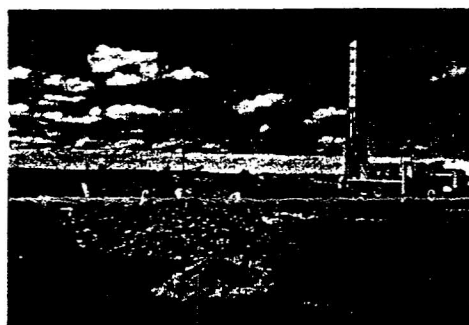


PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG BANKS, BROKEN HILL, N.S.W.

To find opal you need patience, sharp eyes and good luck.



There are thousands of old dumps around White Cliffs waiting for the fossicker.

The township began to slide into decline in 1904. Those who could afford the fifteen shillings coach fare to Broken Hill left the opal fields. However, many didn't have the fare and had to struggle to survive as best they could. Dwindling production was abruptly halted with the outbreak of the First World War and the withdrawal of Germany as a major overseas market.

WHITE CLIFFS continued

Today, one of the best reminders of the early days at White Cliffs is Clancy's Hut, a tiny semidugout of saplings and stone preserved in near-perfect condition a few miles from the town ship. Clancy's Hut is regarded as historically significant, and it serves as a living reminder of the harsh and primitive conditions endured by the early opal miners.

THE FUTURE

For many years the White Cliffs opal field was considered to be worked out. But today things have changed, and there is a feeling of optimism among the miners following recent good opal discoveries. As miner Denis Smith puts it, "The old timers knew where the opal was all right, but with their primitive tools they just couldn't get it."

It seems the hopes of the present-day miners are shared by the state government, who have funded the building of one of Australia's first solar power stations at White Cliffs. During our visit in May, 1981, the power station was almost completed, and ready to begin supplying electricity to eleven houses. Larger establishments in the town like the hotel and general store will continue to use diesel generators to produce their own electricity. Leader of the solar energy project, Professor Stephen Kaneff, believes the White Cliffs power station could become a prototype for others in inland Australian communities.

A planned extension of the power station is a solar desalination plant and bore, estimated to cost \$400,000 (Aus.). When completed this will help ease acute water shortages at White Cliffs.

Whichever route you travel to White Cliffs, it's a long way. Traveling from Wilcannia or Broken Hill, the last 60 miles is an unfinished road although the surface is usually quite good.

White Cliffs is not on the main tourist route, so it doesn't receive the busloads of visitors that arrive daily at the South Australian town of Coober Pedy. Perhaps that's why the people at White Cliffs are so friendly and helpful. They are genuinely pleased to meet visitors and help them enjoy their stay.

The lure of opal is strong. For a century the fascination of this fiery gemstone has drawn fortune seekers from many countries to Australia's arid interior. Who knows, maybe the magic of opal is calling you, thousands of miles away across the Pacific.

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" D O N ' T F O R G E T "

***** VERY IMPORTANT *****

Our December 13, 1990 General Meeting is ""P O T L U C K"". Don't miss it. Remember to bring your own place setting, also, if you have any spare or favorite little decorations, they might pick up spirits a little.

I was hoping to be able to put the menu in this issue, but most are being very secretive about what they are bringing. I do know that there will be an Oriental Chicken Salad and a Cornbread. I don't what it is, but just the thought of all those goodies makes my mouth water.

S E E Y O U A L L T H E R E

=====

W I S H I N G Y O U & Y O U R S
A V E R Y M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S
and
H A P P Y N E W Y E A R



American Opal Society, Inc.

P.O. Box 1384
South Gate, California 90280

November 29, 1990

Dear Members;

It is with great sadness that we write this letter.

Here it is, the end of another year and we find that the Nominating Committee cannot find enough active members to even form a Ballot, therefore if we are to continue functioning we will have to have volunteers for the following positions on the Board:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| 1. President | 6. Board Member |
| 2. 1st Vice-President | 7. Board Member |
| 3. 2nd Vice-President | 8. Board Member |
| 4. Treasurer | 9. Board Member |
| 5. Board Member | 10. Board Member |

In addition to the above, we will also need a volunteer to take over the duties as Editor of our newsletter, The Opal Express. The secretary said she could handle it for a couple of months, but not indefinitely.

Further, if we are to be able to continue financially, all membership dues will have to be renewed before the first of March.

In order for us to grow, a great many of the members are going to have to become Good Will Ambassadors and get out to other clubs and try to recruit new members, our membership is dwindling rapidly.

The time is here right now, either we get together as a single unit and fight to stay alive, or continue as we have with just a few doing all of the work and let The American Opals Society, Inc. die a very sad and lonely death.

It is up to you, The Body of this organization, to decide its fate.

Very sincerely,

The Board of Directors, 1990

THE OPAL EXPRESS
ADVERTISING RATES

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\$ 10.00 PER MONTH

BUSINESS CARD SIZE

\$ 5.00 PER MONTH

HALF PAGE

\$ 20.00 PER MONTH

FULL PAGE

\$ 40.00 PER MONTH

(Size of outside line)

Copy should reach the P.O. Box by the 25th of the month preceding issue. Camera ready copy is not necessary unless artwork is required. Checks should be made out to American Opal Society, Inc.

AMERICAN OPAL SOCIETY, INC.

P.O. BOX 1384
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(213) 869-0527

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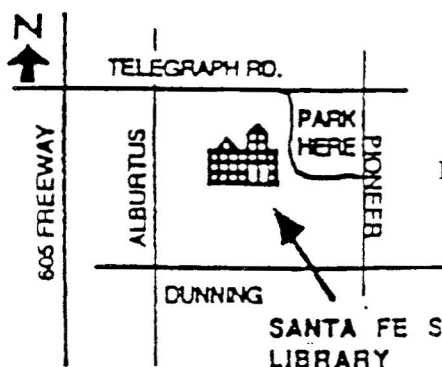
American Opal Society Inc.

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MEETS HERE ON THE SECOND THURSDAY
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