

## ROCKS IN MY HEAD

By  
Jim Richards

I suppose I got my love of rocks from summer living in road camps throughout Arizona and New Mexico in what is known as the Land of Enchantment. My father built highways throughout the west when I was young, and when school was out, we would live in trailers along side of those roads, many of which were blasted out of the rugged terrain that always seemed to surround us. Gazing at the amazing structures in the road cuts and examining the debris that fell out of the ever present rock crusher, I was fascinated by the different types of this material that was lying just about everywhere. My mother would take us hiking across outcrops and would always be looking for unusual shapes of the rocks that were always present under foot. She would sit and tell me stories about all the wonderful shapes and colors that could be found on the earth's surface in that wonderful part of the western landscape. As a child I vividly remember looking up at the sometimes-grotesque formations that were present in cliff faces and be afraid as the drifting sun changed the appearance of features that sometimes resembled goblins. I was afraid but fascinated at the same time. A lot of the local Indian superstitions about rock formations were told to me stimulating my imagination about what caused all this to happen. My memory always goes back to the Chiricahua Mountains, which were known as Cochise's stronghold. My dad built the precarious first highway through those rugged mountains and it was easy to identify one big peak which today is still called Cochise's' head. (Many long years after that highway was completed I was able to take my father back to the exact spot where he had blasted the way through a particular resilient formation and photographed him alongside of those old dynamite holes that were still present).

Often, the highways would suddenly be cut into an Indian mound where, pottery shards, arrowheads and other artifacts would be uncovered, and I was fascinated by what creations the naturally occurring turquoise minerals could be fashioned into. In many of these camps I would gallantly ride my stick horse across the terrain always looking for unusual things on the ground. Living near the mining towns of Clifton and Morenci Arizona, I would marvel at the huge trucks and shovels that were stripping away the earth in great chunks to find the valuable copper that always gave off a blue or greenish color in the sidewalls. Rocks and minerals were always plentiful on the old gold and silver mine tailings and often I would come home with pockets stuffed full of wonderful colorful treasures. Climbing high onto a ridge, I would often find seashells, which I know were fossils and wondered how these got so far from the sea and were found at such as great heights. There were mysteries all around and I wanted to know more about them, but I was probably only 7 or 8 years old, but my time would come.

When my family went from building highways to farming, the rocks around me turned to sand and soil. Looking at sand through a microscope however showed tiny grains of different colored minerals. Basic geology teaches that rocks are made of minerals and minerals are made of elements. I could still do some collecting in the Franklin Mountains at El Paso, The Hueco tanks formation to the east or the Cornudas Mountains near the grand Guadalupe Peak, which is the highest mountain in Texas. My uncle had purchased a ranch in the Cornudas area which included the Sierra Tinaja Pinta range and a sharp mountain we called Dog Tooth Mountain. At various times I would stay at the ranch and foray into the hills to look for interesting things on the ground. My cousin was the ranch custodian and he had covered just about every foot of the place and had told us about an old Apache Indian fortress that overlooked much of the terrain all the way to Guadalupe Peak. Up on a magnificent bluff the fortress was strewn with all kinds of arrowheads, pottery and Indian writing on the back wall. This area served as rounding up place for sheep and goats and we always referred to it as "the goat camp." and could only be reached after some effort across washed out gulleys and sharp angular rocks along a precarious trail. Once on the site however, one was well rewarded by the magnificent view. Nearby, the family found what appeared to be an old Indian grave with all kinds of artifacts nearby. An old rifle was found leaning against a rock with the stock worn off and a number of turquoise beads and conchos were found. It is surmised that the Apaches stood on the

overlook while watching for the Butterfield Stage to come by. The old Butterfield Stage route ran right through these mountains and when the coach was spotted, the marauding Indians would probably attack the stagecoach and take whatever was of value. The goat camp was always a mysterious place to me and I returned to it as much as possible to look for the chert and flint spearheads and arrowheads that could still be found. About 5 years ago, several of us made another trek to the Sierra Tinaja Pintas and attempted to reach the site, but the terrain was so rugged that only a well-tired 4-wheel vehicle would make the journey and we were saddled with only a pickup at the time. Having 4 flat tires in this remote area at dusk was not an appealing option. As far as I know, this area is little visited by outsiders as it is on private property. I am not sure that the present owners even know about this secret place. All east west flight paths cross directly over the site and I never fail to peer out of the window to look down to that mysterious place of my youth.

My brother Jack had come home from the Navy and had enrolled at Texas College of Mines in El Paso (Now UTEP) to study geology. The campus in El Paso was famous for mining geology at the time, so having a member of the family in the profession probably influenced my later decision to become a geologist myself. While in high school and college I spent many summer jobs working in the oil exploration business, mainly as a “jug hustler” on a doodle bug crew. To the uninformed, a doodlebugger was a person associated with geophysical exploration companies that shot seismic surveys both onshore and offshore and “jugs” are seismometers. Although the geophysical profession is directly related to geology, I had little time to gather rock samples while holding 12 heavy “jugs” and pulling out a cumbersome cable up and down the picturesque cliffs of Palo Duro Canyon. But the money was good and my individual effort to continue collecting samples could wait.

I am beginning my fifty first year in petroleum geology, but am still mesmerized by the different colors and shapes of rocks and minerals I come across at gem and mineral shows. When approaching a building, I often take a close look at the construction material for a brief closer look to see what the stuff is made of by breaking out my trusty hand lens. I suppose few have looked closely at the Texas State Capitol to see the beauty of the mineralization of the Town Mountain Granite or look at the fossil impressions in the limestone and marble facades of Houston’s Shell Buildings. When in Austin I often roamed onion creek to pick up the huge pelecypod fossils there, or to jump down to Waller Creek on the UT campus to pick out the shiny marcasite nodules encased by the Cretaceous limestone in the creek bed. When walking into the Kilauea eruption site on the Big Island of Hawaii, I was awed by the earth’s magnificent ability to instantly create brand new rocks and land forms. While rafting in the Grand Canyon, I could not help myself by making a great unconformity sandwich of rocks composed of the very old Pre Cambrian Vishnu Schist, the intermediate gravel bed in between and the much younger deposit above where thousands of years of deposition are missing.

Rocks in my head? I guess it will never end. Why even when we all passed through the age of CB Radios my good buddy handle on the Katy Freeway was known as “Rockhound”. After all these years I guess I am still filling my pockets with all kinds of rocks. I have a small-encased collection in my Houston office, but in various hidden places in garages and storerooms there are mysterious samples of collected specimens yet to be identified. At a recent reunion dinner with an old college roommate, he mentioned that what he remembered most about me was that I was always bringing rocks into the dorm room. They actually did come in handy as paperweights, bookends, and doorstops however.

A geologist can always say that as long as he is standing on the planet earth, he is standing in his laboratory. His office is always at his feet, and in many cases below his feet at great depths.....I continue to study these rocks and they have been good to me over the years...how, you ask? Its very simple... because some of these rocks contain some pretty nice quantities of that very old smelly stuff we call oil and gas.

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