

Gene's Rock Stories

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Part 1: Morrisonite Jasper

Story 2: Rats, Mice, and Snakes: Ancient Evidence

The last 4 miles of road to the edge of the rim overlooking Sheepshead Ridge trends generally north over the lava plateau just east of the Owyhee River Canyon. When travelling this road the scenery changes, creating what seems like three completely different worlds.



This picture was taken from the road near the edge of the canyon rim, just before the road descends into the Owyhee Canyon. This area is known as Sheepshead Ridge. You can see in the middle of the picture the two cabins where Jake and I lived while working here. If you look closely, you can also see a lone tree behind the cabins.

When taking the road along the Canyon's rim and scanning the horizon, only one tree is visible for as far as the eye can see. Once you travel to the ridge to overlook the rim, your eye settles on another lone tree in the vast barren land, closer to the two cabins below. No other trees can be seen for miles except along the river 2000 feet below where the road drops off the plateau onto the ridge.

The Christine Marie mining claim is about half way down the canyon in steep slopes of loose rocks. The welded tuff host rock is shuddered and sliding down hill toward the river. This is both a wonderful and hazardous situation for mining — wonderful, because the rocks are all broken and easy to mine, but hazardous because of the constant potential for rockslides. The jasper found here is the best there is, but there is very little of it. If the rock were not broken up like this, the deposit would not be worth mining. All of the cracks in the rocks are ideal places for rats, mice, and snakes.

While working on the Christine Marie claim, I constantly encountered old rat nests in the cracks in the rocks. It actually became a joke among us miners that working on the Christine Marie meant constantly working in rat shit.

The deeper into the mountain I worked, the larger the cracks between the rocks became, and the bigger the rat nests became. Many times I found bones and skulls of deceased rats. I would place these skulls on the rocks around the area I was working until the mine pit took on a ghoulish appearance. I then stopped.

In one massive nest I found a leg and wing bone of a large bird — probably from a rare occasion where a rat won a battle with a buzzard. Buzzards hunted this ground every morning and evening. I also found twigs and branches of pine wood. I thought nothing of this until one day I realized: there is not a tree anywhere near where I was working! How far would a rat travel to bring a stick of wood back to its nest? The closest tree to the workings on the Christine Marie mine is up 1000 feet near the upper cabin — almost half a mile away. I seriously doubted that a rat would travel that far from home.

I kept some of the sticks of wood and had them tested. They turned out to be 600 years old! I came to the conclusion the rats' nests the sticks were found in were also about that old. It was hard for me to picture the dry Morrisonite area 600 years ago, as a much wetter area with more trees and vegetation.



This picture shows a view of the Christine Marie mine about halfway down the canyon towards the Owyhee River. Note the terrain has rockslides everywhere.

To be continued...