

Gene's Rock Stories

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Part 1: Morrisonite Jasper Story 4: A Road to Christine Marie

Jake (Darryl Jacobitz) and I mined the Morrisonite Jasper area at the same time. In 1986, I was there as a favor to Larry Butler and Jake had leased the Big Hole claim from Lisa Caldwell after her husband's death. Tom Caldwell and Jake had worked together ten years earlier to open the Big Hole Claim in 1976. The two cabins on Sheephead Ridge were built at that time. They worked an entire month drilling, shooting (using explosives), and pushing host rock away with two front end loaders, exposing all the jasper to be produced. later.



This picture shows the locations of the mines and the road from the cabins down to the Christine Marie claim from about halfway to the Owyhee River. Gene Mueller photo.

The first two years that I worked in the Morrisonite area, I spent creating a drivable road to get down to the Christine Marie claim. The Christine Marie claim in the Morrisonite area was filed in the early 1970s by Ed Brant. The imaginary lines that form the boundaries of the claim draw a 1500 x 600-foot (457 x 183 meters) rectangle over very steep rockslides about halfway down the east slope of the Owyhee River Canyon. This claim is located further down into the canyon than any other of the claims. The canyon rim is about 900 feet (274 meters) above the center of the claim and the Owyhee River is about 1100 feet (335 meters) below. The claim's length runs north and south with its west side boundary about 300 feet (91.5 meters) below its east side boundary line.

In the mid-seventies a small dozer cut a track down the canyon to the north past the Big Hole claim onto the Big Hole II claim, around the cliff below, across the rockslide, back south to the Christine Marie and up towards the Amy Ellen claim. This road was not passable by any vehicle, but it was the beginning of one.

I first visited the Morrisonite area in 1984 at the request of Larry Butler, who told me he had purchased the Christine Marie and Amy Ellen claims from Gene Anthis. Larry was seeking someone to mine the claims and wanted me to look at them and give him a report on what I thought was feasible. I remember being astonished at the difficulty of the terrain. I understood why so little of this marvelous rock had made it out of this remote location. Many of the people who worked the area in the past camped on the edge of the canyon rim 2 / 3 and walked down the nearly 1000 feet (305 meters) to the deposits. This walk could take an hour or two every morning before a miner could start working. The trip back with any rock might take twice as long. The area below the cliffs on the upper end of the Christine Marie claim is known as the "Nasty Hole" by the early miners, probably because it was so difficult to get to.

The jasper on the Christine Marie claim is exceptional, but there is very little of it. Every conceivable method of access for equipment has been considered. We briefly considered building a cable winch system from the top of

the cliffs and flying in equipment with a helicopter, but that was quickly rejected. The only real solution that provided a chance of success, considering the risks, was to build a road down from the top. It was difficult to accept the effort that this would take, but it was the only way to minimize the time required to get equipment, supplies, and rock back up to the canyon rim. The next year I found a man with a sign in his yard that read, "D-6 Dozer for Hire." I took him out to the claims, and we walked the old dozer cuts made years ago. After we climbed back out on top he said to me, "Not me. Not with my machine. It's too dangerous." Another year later, I purchased my own machine—an old D-4 dozer—and found someone who could run it who was a friend of my brother. After working another claim we had in the area, we moved the machine to the canyon rim to start the road down to the Christine Marie claim. My brother's friend took one look at the job and said to me, "Not me. Not with that machine. It's too dangerous."

Two identical responses refusing to do the work, so I decided to find a way to do make the road myself. The following year I started working on the road with the D-4 dozer. It was a good thing I was ignorant and did not know what I was doing, or I never would have done it. It took me two years working about one month each year to build a road that was barely passable with a four-wheel-drive truck down to the deposits on the Christine Marie claim. I followed the old dozer cut down the canyon, creating switchbacks and lessening the steepness of the cut 3 / 3 where possible. Once past the cliff, I constructed an entirely new road below the slide, rather than follow the old route across it. Some days, because the extreme grade of the terrain, limitation of the machine, and roughness of the road, only about ten yards (9 meters) of road was completed. I cannot tell you how excited I was to come back three years after I decided to build the road to swing my hammer into some rock containing jasper.

To be continued...



This satellite photo shows the locations of the mines and the road from the cabins down to the Christine Marie claim.