

Gene's Rock Stories



by Gene Mueller, The Gem Shop, Cedarburg, Wisconsin, USA

Part 1: Morrisonite Jasper Story 5: A Remote Destination

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the most used way to get to the Christine Marie claim area was on a road built by Jim Morrison, whom the jasper is named for. He owned a ranch on the Owyhee River, and this road started on his ranch and followed a canyon up close to the mining area.



This aerial view shows the road from the upper cabins, down the canyon, to the Christine Marie claim.

After the ranch became the property of Marty Rust, no one was allowed to use the road so collectors found ways to get to the area from the top of the canyon rim. This was a walk of about a thousand feet down, and then a climb of about a thousand feet back out (carrying any rock you chose to keep). Is it any wonder this rock is so highly regarded? When the decision was made to make the dozer tracks to the Christine Marie area a passable road for a vehicle, all my efforts were directed toward that goal so that mining could occur more efficiently. It took two mining seasons, or about 8 weeks, with my D4 dozer to do the work. After the road was finished, it was still very treacherous to drive because of the road's steepness, even with a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

In the 8 years after I finished the road, I only had two vehicles drive on it to the Christine Marie mine. Once was with Hans Gamma, who wanted to see the operation and write about it. The other was with Stuart Porteous who was interested in buying it. He drove to the area on the road from the river.

Agate and Jasper mining is financially risky in the extreme. There is no way to measure or predetermine the quality (value) of the material before it is extracted. A gold deposit can be measured and assayed to estimate the value that could be produced. This value can be compared with the estimated cost of mining and a profit projected. This is not possible with an agate or jasper deposit. For this reason, most agate and jasper mining operations are conducted with minimal investment and lots of ingenuity, persistence, and the necessity to solve problems with what you have.

Building the road down the canyon to the Christine Marie claim following the old cat track took me two years -- or two mining seasons (about 2 months). It could have been done faster, but I was ignorant and inexperienced both with the intricacies of running my new-old D-4 dozer and working on such steep terrain.

Making the switchbacks was difficult because of the amount of material necessary to push out of the rock slides to make a turn wide enough for a vehicle. In some cases, there just wasn't enough rock available to create a smooth turn.

On one descending stretch between switchbacks, I saw the opportunity to lessen the steepness of the descent by extending the length of a section and making the next switchback up against the cliff on the far side. I started pushing rock onto the old cut slowly, raising the new road above the old one. I was encountering many large rocks, and I moved the Dozer over one that just so happened to fit right between the tracks of the machine. Beyond it, the ground was softer, and as the Dozer moved it slipped down into the soft ground, allowing the rock underneath to crush the oil pan: which promptly drained its contents.

The dozer was tilted downward about 25 degrees -- the slope of the road. The left track was against the rockslide, and the blade had a pile of rock in front of it. The whole machine was in a hole of sorts with big rocks behind it that I had just traveled over. There was no access to the undercarriage.

Jake was working a few switchbacks above me, so I walked up to consult with him. After looking over the situation, he wryly suggested I could hire a helicopter to lift the dozer out of the hole and put it up on top where I could work on it!

I have always been amazed and comforted by Jake's ability to suggest multiple solutions to any mining problem. He approaches mining problems with optimism, enthusiasm, and the widest range of possibility. Many times ridiculous or impractical solutions clarify what needs to be done and moves the mind away from a negative situation to a more positive direction.

I dug out the Dozer with a pick and shovel until I could crawl under it. I then carried my tools down from the cabin (600 ft. above) and removed the oil pan. I carried it up to the cabins, cleaned it, and JB-welded it together. Once the epoxy was set, I reinstalled it, put in new oil, got the machine running, and went back to work on the road (about a three day process altogether).

A quick note on mining supplies: duct tape, wire, JB weld, and some rubber - which in my case is old inner tube, because you never know when you might need to make a new seal - should always be close by...



This picture shows the dozer resting before another rough day of road building.



This picture shows two of the switchbacks on the improved road.

To be continued...