

Gene's Rock Stories



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Part 1: Morrisonite Jasper Story 6: Three Days ...

While building the road down the canyon that leads to the Christine Marie claim, I lived in the east cabin on Sheepshead Ridge for a number of years. Jake built this cabin in the mid-1970s, at the same time that Tom Caldwell built the first cabin when he and Jake worked together to start the Big Hole mine.

All the cabins built in the Morrisonite area have their beds constructed up off the floor of the cabin for safety against the night animals that are present. The pack rat, also called wood rat or trade rat, can have a tremendous desire for a particular object. That desire can be as strong as a human's desire to mine a piece of jasper stuck in the ground.



This photo shows our camp setup with Jake and Bev's travel trailer and the east cabin where I stayed. My old 'Scout' vehicle, used for getting up and down the canyon, is also shown.

It was late spring and Jake and I were anxious to get back mining Morrisonite. We had been making plans for weeks and decided to make the trip out to the mine together. I arrived in Homedale, Idaho after 3 days driving from Wisconsin. We spent several days making final preparations — water, food, propane, and diesel fuel were packed everywhere. I was pulling my black trailer, and Jake and Bev were pulling their small house trailer.

Sunday's weather forecast warned of a big storm coming over the mountains with colder temperatures on the way, but we had planned on leaving the next morning to arrive at the mine by Monday afternoon. Monday morning came with a low gray sky but no precipitation, so we left. Our desire to get out there trumped our trepidations about the weather. The turn off onto Jordon Creators road is about 60 miles south of Homedale and about 1300 ft higher in elevation. When we turned onto the dirt road, the lower sky was spitting a mixture of sleet and rain. I suppose we could have turned around, but we were on our way - we were determined to get there. The first 10 miles of dirt road are not a problem even if it is raining a little. After that there would be no turning back, especially with both of us pulling trailers.

At the 10-mile split, the rain let up a little and we just kept on going. The road deteriorated fast and we both started sliding in the mud, but we kept moving. The rain came back with a great deal of force but we persisted up the low hill to the flats on the far south west end of the Mahogany Mountains. There are some long stretches of soft ground here, and it was not long before we were stuck. Jake's trailer was half in the ditch and tilted at about 20 degrees. My truck and trailer were in similar positions a little further back. We got out, looked around, and decided we were not moving until the ground dried out enough to get some traction. The ground here contains some Bentonite clay which makes the mud greasy and practically impossible to drive through even with 4-wheel drive. We spent the rest of the day in Jake's trailer listening to the wind and occasional rain. Even sitting was a little uncomfortable because of the slant. That night we slept on tilted beds, hoping for a better tomorrow.

The morning broke gray and windy and with no rain. This was encouraging because the wind dries things out fast in this treeless country. We dug a few drainage ditches from around the wheels of our vehicles, put some rocks in the mud for traction, and waited. The sky was threatening rain again, but it did not rain, and about noon we decided to try again. After a couple of adjustments we were moving. The road improved some with rocky stretches between mud holes. Mud holes are not too hard to get through as long as there is hard ground on the other side — although, it is somewhat trickier when you are pulling something. The technique is to have the proper momentum and still allow for maximum traction. We made it to the corral and were feeling optimistic that we could make the last 4 miles, when it started to rain again. The road from the corral to the rim is so rocky that speed cannot be used to your advantage in the mud. The only way to drive this part of the road is slow - whatever the conditions.

After we went through the gate, we made it up the little rise, down a shallow draw, and around onto the side of a gently sloping hill where Jake's truck and trailer slowly slid off the road and got stuck. I was a little further back and still had some traction. I saw a place where I could get off the road and pulled up in the sagebrush to disconnect my trailer. I maneuvered my truck in front of Jake's rig, chained our trucks together, and to no avail proceeded to throw mud everywhere with our spinning tires. After some consideration we resolved to spend another night in the mud and hope, again, for a better tomorrow.

The next morning broke like the last - gray and windy with no rain. About noon we tried again and were moving. We both found that with a little more speed we could keep from getting stuck. This meant we were traveling a little too fast to safely negotiate the rocks and were skipping, sliding, and bouncing down the road like rubber balls rolling over gravel. I noticed that one storage compartment door on Jake's trailer had flopped open going over a rock. A few minutes later a white grocery bag full of something popped out into the mud alongside the road. Neither one of us dared to stop. A couple of more bumps and another white grocery bag plopped out onto a rock. More bumps, more grocery bags. We made it to the rim, carefully descended to the cabins, and started to set up camp. Three days to go 27 miles.

A couple of days later after things dried out, we drove back up the hill to retrieve our food - which was still in the white plastic bags evenly distributed along the side of the road for a mile or so. Nothing was ruined or lost. It was a much better tomorrow.

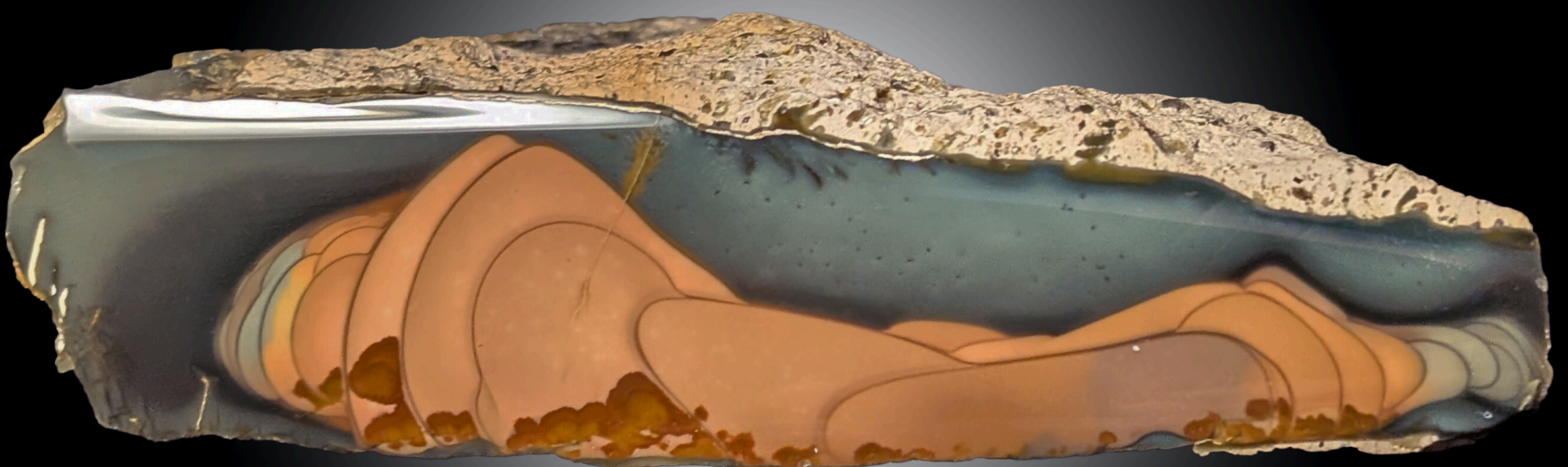


This photo shows where we were stuck for the second time on the trip into the mine. This area is on the lava plateau a mile or so before the canyon rim. Note the road is not more than two tire tracks across the landscape.



This picture was taken in the late 1980s and shows the east cabin with my truck parked to the left. It should be noted that both cabins have very little flat level space inside but are still nice places to get out of the rain, snow, and especially the wind.

The picture below shows a small seam of Christine Marie Morrisonite. It is a little more than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in thickness. It took me over 2 years of work on the road before I was able to mine any of this material and take it home to polish.



To be continued...