

Gene's Rock Stories

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Part 1: Morrisonite Jasper Story 8: My Second Machine

My friend Jake leased the "Big Hole" claim from Lissa Caldwell. She was the wife of Tom Caldwell, who owned the claim, and Lissa inherited it when he died. Tom worked the claim in the middle 1970s, and my friend Jake had helped him early on...



This is the Case 850 front-end loader that I used to mine the Christine Marie claim.

My friend Jake leased the "Big Hole" claim from Lissa Caldwell. She was the wife of Tom Caldwell, who owned the claim, and Lissa inherited it when he died. Tom worked the claim in the middle 1970s, and my friend Jake had helped him early on. It was originally purchased by Tom's father and given to Tom as encouragement for his mining activities. Tom was known as a very good agate miner and was hired by other claim owners to work their claims.

Before Tom Caldwell decided to try mining Morrisonite, most of the mining had been done by hand. The lay of the deposit on the Big Hole Claim – later renamed "Jake's Place" – on the precarious hillside was pretty well known because of all the previous hand work. Tom decided to ask Jake to help him get started and open up the deposit so that it could be mined more efficiently. Tom owned a CAT 955 track front-end loader, and Jake owned a Case 850 front-end loader. They transported both machines, a compressor, a drill, and explosives out to the saddle above the deposit and set to work. They built the two still-existing cabins back in 1976 on the saddle so they would be safe from vicious weather which often came across the ridge.

Jake and Tom drilled 12-foot holes with Tom's 80 pound hand-held sinker drill, filled the holes with explosives, and broke up the rock. They then used both front-end loaders to push the barren rock over the edge as they worked down the side of the steep hill towards the deposit. They did this over and over for about three weeks before getting any jasper. Eventually, Jake moved back to Idaho to mine Bruneau Jasper, where he knew he could easily produce rock to sell.

The area that Tom and Jake exposed is known as the "South Pit." This area produced some very fine jasper. A piece from the South Pit, now in a private collection, was featured in our 2008 Calendar of Fine Agates & Jaspers during the month of October. Some pieces from this area have gone to the grave with their owners at their request. Now, the South Pit is buried under about 20 feet of overburden from mining the Jake's Place and Veronica Lea claims at the North Pit in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Most of the jasper in the Morrisonite area is found in shattered or cracked rock, in or under steep rockslides. One time, Tom was working in the South Pit with his 955 front-end loader, and a rockslide buried his machine with him in it. He had to dig himself and his machine out by hand, and then got his machine up another 600 feet, back on the saddle. Tom did not mine much Morrisonite after that. Years later, Tom's drill was found rusted and frozen up. I put it in a container with oil for a year in an attempt to salvage it. After it was working again, I ended up taking it to Mexico where it has become responsible for most of the Coyamito Agate in the market today – there is not a deposit on the Coyamito ranch that does not have holes made by this drill.

Tom's front-end loader ended up at Herrington's Rock Shop in Adrian, Oregon. Jake obtained the machine with a lease, did some repairs on it, and moved it back to Morrisonite in 1986. Jake had sold his Case 850 to Glenn Pegrem who used it on some of his claims north of Jordan Valley, about 35 miles from the Morrisonite claims.

Jake watched me build the road to the Christine Marie for two years with my ancient D4 Dozer. He told me that I needed a better machine and said he knew where I could get one that would not cost too much. He introduced me to Glenn, and, one year and \$8,000 later, I had a Case 850 front-end loader – my second machine. I returned it to the Morrisonite area, and it stayed there for eight years.

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The Morrisonite from the area I worked on the Christine Marie claim has some general differences from the Morrisonite mined from the Jake's Place claim (Big Hole I). These two areas are about 1/4 mile apart.

First of all, the jasper is generally smaller. The veins are thinner, and a 2lb piece of Christine Marie Morrisonite is considered a very large piece. Comparatively, there have been 20lb and 30lb pieces of Morrisonite produced from the Big Hole deposit.

Then, there are also some differences in the patterns present. Morrisonite from the Christine Marie claim tends to not have 'streamers' – which is the term for lines or streaks in the jasper that are the result of the jasper cracking and filling in or reforming with newer jasper. This 'streamer' formation causes a beautiful complexity of pattern and color in a cut piece of Morrisonite. Since Christine Marie Jasper does not have any (or very little) of this formation, the egg pattern that can occur is visually very pronounced. The jasper mined here either has this egg pattern or is simply a jasper with some color variation, but not distinct pattern.

This makes the selection process at the mine site much easier, as the jasper either has the egg pattern or is simply discarded. With more pattern diversity at the Big Hole/Jake's Place claim, about 30% of the pieces collected have the egg pattern. More information on the formation of egg patterned jaspers can be found in the Feb. 2008 Rock and Gem Magazine.

To be continued...



This polished piece of Morrisonite shows an abundance of the 'streamer' formation.
Gene Mueller / The Gem Shop collection and photo.